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Green designs sought for solar house

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UK launched its second phase of a solar house building competition yesterday, calling for elegant and holistic designs from individual students or teams.

About 40 people gathered in Pence Hall yesterday as project leaders announced the student design competition and went over some of its guidelines. Students of any discipline have until March 21 to register for the competition through e-mail at solarhouse@uky.edu.

As one of 20 university-led teams selected to compete in the week-long U.S. Department of Energy 2009 Solar Decathlon, UK will have until fall 2009 to design, construct and test an attractive, energy-efficient solar-powered home.

Then teams will then take their homes to the National Mall in Washington, D.C., where judges will vote on the best design in 10 areas: architecture, engineering, market viability, communications, comfort zone, appliances, hot water, lighting, energy balance and transportation.

Laurel Christensen, a second-year interior design student, said she considers participating in the design an "opportunity of a lifetime."

"Sustainability is a really big issue, and it's something we just can't ignore," she said. "I'm excited to get more people aware of solar energy and move forward with interesting designs."

The UK Smart Blues team, which is organizing the construction of the selected design, has received more than 100 proposals and ideas, said Gregory Luhan, one of the UK team's lead investigators and the associate dean for research at the College of Design.

The ideas, which are on display on the first floor gallery in Pence Hall through March 7, range from using cardio exercise equipment in home gyms to power lights to using sun pipes and geothermal energy.

Now it's up to students to draw from these ideas and create their own building designs that UK can construct and that also have potential to better the lives of Kentuckians.

Hilary Bryon, another principal investigator on UK's team, challenged students to connect with the environment when designing and to think, "what does it mean to live in a solar house, not just one that has solar stuff attached to it?"

The Smart Blues team will host workshops throughout the competition to educate the community on sustainable design techniques and on building integrated photovoltaics, a method of converting sunlight to electricity. Professors will also incorporate solar decathlon topics with coursework in different disciplines, such as architecture, Luhan said.

Sustainability is one of the moral imperatives in today's world, Luhan said, and this competition is about more than just claiming a title.

"We know that while we're designing this, we have the potential to positively impact Kentucky as well as communities beyond," he said.

More information on the competition is available at the Smart Blues team's Web site, (www.uky.edu/solarhouse).

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