Imagine an exciting learning store where kids can buy or borrow games, puzzles and other supplies and then put them to immediate use in an inviting community lounge and art space located on the floors above. That’s precisely the idea one Chicago Public Schools student envisions for breathing new life into a closed Chinese restaurant in Chicago’s West Lawn neighborhood nearby Midway Airport. Recognizing that the human brain continues its critical development until the age of 22, this out-of-school time communal space is devoted to helping kids apply the big-picture skills they acquire during in-school time—a fun and constructive way to support our next generation of change-makers during such a crucial period of brain growth.

The Chicago Architecture Foundation’s 34th annual Newhouse Architecture + Design Competition invited students to use the design process and critical thinking to create personalized responses to Chicago architecture. In dovetailing with the 50 Designers, 50 Ideas, 50 Wards exhibition, the Newhouse Competition’s Advanced Architecture Division challenged students to identify an empty lot along a major street in their own ward and design a mixed-use building to address a relevant community issue. Optic Thought by Christopher Mena was selected as the Grand Prize winner from more than 300 student entries, as judged by a jury of professional architects, designers and engineers.