Judd Fellow Ahti Westphal (not pictured) collaborated with village leaders in central Cambodia to build a library and community center. The Judd Fellowship program, which has supported 184 U of M students in 70 countries, is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

Photo: Derek Stout
Global Outlook, Local Impact

As the U’s largest international fellowship turns 10, one recent recipient shares a project that aims to unify an ancient culture with contemporary design practices.

When Ahti Westphal visited central Cambodia for the first time, he felt like he’d walked into an issue of National Geographic. “The colors, the decorations, the festivals that were very different from anything I’d even seen—it completely blew me away,” says Westphal, a master’s student in sustainable design at the College of Design and one of 15 recipients of a 2011 Walter H. Judd Fellowship.

The fellowship program, celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, supports international internships, study, and research for students in master’s and professional degree programs. Core funding from the Walter H. Judd Fund of The Minneapolis Foundation is matched by the University’s Global Programs and Strategy Alliance, and the program is further supported by gifts from individuals and institutions. Walter H. Judd is a familiar name to many Minnesotans: He represented Minnesota in Congress from 1942 to 1962.

Since the program started, 184 students from 13 U of M colleges have studied, worked, and done research in 70 countries.

With support from the fellowship, Westphal spent 10 weeks in central Cambodia working with the local community to design a library and cultural center to preserve the ancient language of Cham, which is still spoken in the region but is being rapidly displaced by more widely spoken languages such as Vietnamese and Khmer.

Westphal had planned to base the building’s design on ancient Cham architecture, but he soon ran into cultural complications. Cambodia is a mostly Buddhist country that also includes Hindu, animist, and Islamic minorities. The village that will house the community center is Islamic. “All Cham architecture is religious, and it represents different sectarian ideas about what architecture is,” he says.

In order for the community center to be welcoming to Cham people of all religions, it had to be secular in both purpose and design. The design he came up with is inspired by secular Cambodian structures such as schools, mansions, and buildings with central courtyards.

Westphal, who is applying for Ph.D. programs to continue studying the role of culture in sustainable design, says his Judd Fellowship is only the beginning; he plans to raise funds for the project and see it through to completion.

“The U of M has been very generous to me, and I’m very thankful,” he says. “I could not have had more support, better faculty, and better opportunities in terms of fellowships.”