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Cover | Detroit Students Explore Albert Kahn's Belle Isle Landmarks

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Jun 10, 2026





An award-winning educational program brought students face-to-face with Belle Isle history, architecture and career opportunities

It was a first-time visit to two of Belle Isle's historic buildings for most of the students from the Detroit Public Schools Community District. The young people from Duke Ellington Conservatory of Music & Arts at Beckham Academy, John R. King Performing Arts Academy and Spain Elementary-Middle School had close encounters with exotic fish and sea creatures at the Belle Isle Aquarium, as well as the chance to enjoy more than a thousand beautiful plant species at the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory.

The “Day in the City” educational program was conducted by the Albert Kahn Legacy Foundation (AKLF) — its third such outing during the past two years. The idea came from Barbara Cohn, a board member of AKLF and of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan.

When she greeted Detroit high school students at a 2024 educational program in the Fisher Building, “I was shocked to learn that hardly any of them had been to the building before,” she said.



The interior of the aquarium.

So, Cohn, along with DPSCD administrators, local architectural historians, Albert Kahn Associates staff, and Gail Rosenbloom Kaplan, community artist, developed a program to introduce students to some of Detroit's famous historic buildings, learn about historic preservation, and explore careers in architecture and engineering. On May 12 and 13, about 120 students, some enrolled in special public school art and design programs, enjoyed a field trip to two of Albert Kahn's historic local buildings.



The Belle Isle Aquarium

Learning About Albert Kahn



Ann Rosenbloom, Ossie Smith, Amy Emmert (senior director of education and engagement, Belle Isle Conservancy), Gail Rosenbloom Kaplan and Barbara Cohn, in front of the sand containers for the art project.

Kahn was the most famous and innovative industrial architect of the 20th century — the designer of local automotive factories that helped to revolutionize manufacturing, as well as many industrial buildings across the country and overseas. However, many Detroiters are more familiar with his most famous local creation — the beautiful, unique Fisher Building — considered an Art Deco jewel. Some local residents may not be aware that Kahn designed many other famous Detroit structures, such as two of the original Temple Beth El buildings, the Detroit News — then a huge printing facility, the Detroit Athletic Club and beautiful homes for prominent Detroiters.

As the Detroit students learned, the Belle Isle Aquarium, which Kahn designed with George Mason, opened in 1904 and is the oldest aquarium in the continental United States. With a sea green tile ceiling and walls, the building creates a sense of being underwater.

Ossie White, a wildlife biologist with the Belle Isle Conservancy, which operates the aquarium and conservatory, told the students that the fish tanks were framed to look like pictures. Today, there are more than 50 tanks of fresh and saltwater aquatic life. Volunteers from the Belle Isle Conservancy guided the students who sought to answer questions for a scavenger hunt about the aquarium's marine residents.



Terrence Francis, Braxton Dockery, Fefe Asidi and Barbara Cohn

The Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory, adjacent to the aquarium, also opened in 1904. Designed by Albert Kahn, it was reported to have been influenced by Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. It is the oldest continually operating conservatory in the U.S., featuring rare and exotic plants from around the world with lush gardens and a lily pond. Scripps donated her lily collection to the conservatory.

In addition to the tours, the field trip featured a hands-on student art project developed and led by local artist Gail Rosenbloom Kaplan, assisted by her sister Ann Rosenbloom. Kaplan provided students with laser-cut illustrations of the Belle Isle Aquarium exterior, as well as examples of the Conservatory's flowers and plants reproduced on special paper with peel-off adhesive sections. With her

guidance, the students removed the adhesive covering and used colored sand to create their own versions of the Belle Isle Aquarium and the Conservatory's beautiful plants.

Career Education

A key program highlight was the opportunity to hear from engineers and architects about their education, career progression and current jobs at Albert Kahn Associates Inc. Three staff members spoke and answered questions from the students. Fefe Asidi, a junior mechanical engineer, told the young people that she had always loved building and studied architectural engineering at Lawrence Technological University. Asidi explained that she designs HVAC and mechanical systems — she is one of only four women at Albert Kahn Associates and the only African American woman.

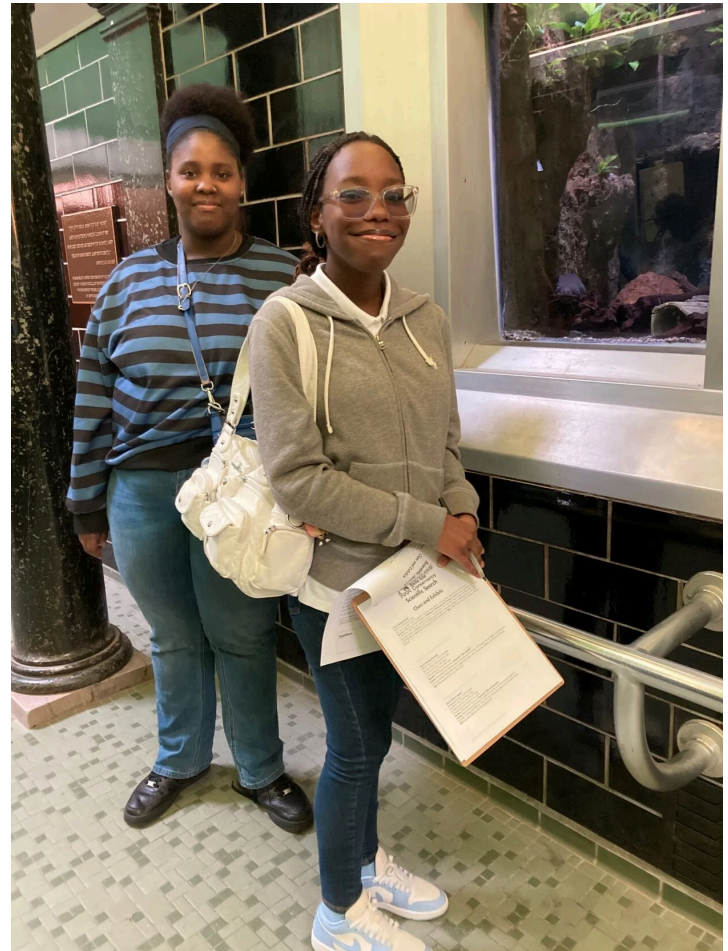
Braxton Dockery, an architect intern at Albert Kahn Associates, graduated from Bowling Green State University and is pursuing a master's degree. Since his father was a contractor, he was exposed to construction early and was very involved in arts programs. For Dockery, architecture is an opportunity to “create something that will last forever with my name on it.”



Josiah Maybin and Mason Spence at the Belle Isle Aquarium

Terrance Francis is an electrical engineer, a graduate of Tuskegee Institute who has worked in Informational Technology design for 30 years. As he explained to the students, this means designing building components for fire alarms, WiFi and cellular networks. He has worked at Albert Kahn for eight years. Students asked how to prepare for engineering and architectural careers; the speakers stressed the importance of a mathematics background.

Students then enjoyed a catered lunch before bus rides back to their schools. Cohn plans to continue the historic architecture trips, which received an Educational Programs 2025 State History Award for “Building the Future; Detroit Students’ Day in the City.” On that trip, young people visited the Michigan Train Station and the adjacent New Lab, formerly a book depository, designed by Albert Kahn. She is grateful for the support of all the partners that helped put on the program, especially the Belle Isle Conservancy educational staff and volunteers.



Kenington Johnson and Mariah Horne
tour the aquarium.

Albert Kahn — Detroit’s Most Famous Architect

In 1889, at the age of 12, Kahn emigrated with his family from Germany to Detroit; his father was a rabbi, and his mother was interested in visual arts and music. As a teenager, he began working as an office boy at the Detroit architectural firm of Mason and Rice where he took every opportunity to read their books about architecture and engineering. Within a year, he had moved to the firm's tracing and drafting department where he observed and learned constantly, according to Mason. By 1895, Kahn began his own architectural practice.

The Albert Kahn Legacy Foundation

The Albert Kahn Legacy Foundation, a nonprofit organization, was established in 2020 to honor the life, innovations and global impact of Albert Kahn. The organization has created exhibits about Kahn's work, offers lectures and other education programs, as well as tours of his buildings. Its board members represent current and retired members of the Albert Kahn Associates firm, additional local architectural experts and historians, as well as several descendants of Albert Kahn. Visit albertkahnlegacy.org for more information.

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