

Summer 2003

Oculus

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS NEW YORK CHAPTER VOLUME 65 ISSUE 2 \$10



TEN PROJECTS: LARGE AND SMALL, URBAN AND RURAL, AND ALL HIGHLY ORIGINAL ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
BEST PRACTICES: OWNERSHIP TRANSITION 20-YEAR WATCH: STOREFRONT FOR ART & ARCHITECTURE

Everything New York



From **Sausage Factory** Bronx Charter School for

In a scene from the 1982 Pink Floyd movie, *The Wall*, schoolchildren react to a cruel teacher by uniting in the song, “We Don’t Need No Education!”

The sequence takes a frightening turn when the teacher drops the children through the school’s chimney, and the school door spews out ground meat like a massive sausage grinder. The scene conveys that public education and the schools that house them simply churn out mindless workers for an industrialized city.

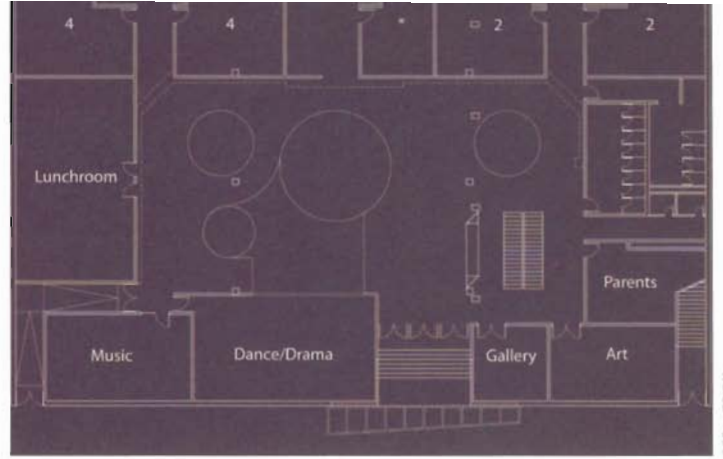
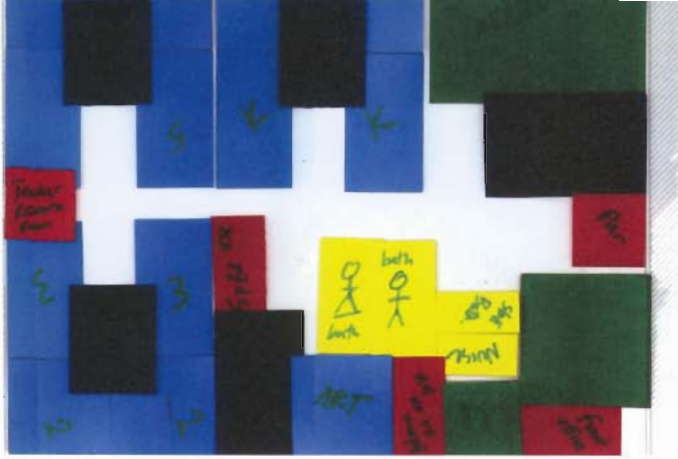
In a happy inversion of this grim depiction of public education and its schools, a project in the Bronx is underway to transform an old sausage factory into a state-of-the-art school building that embodies a progressive educational program. Initiated by the Bronx Charter School for the Arts (known as Bronx Arts), the program was founded on the principle that arts-based education is critical to human development and learning. As a charter school, it will receive city funding on a per pupil basis, but will not receive support for the construction or preparation of a facility. While this lack of facility funding places a heavy burden on a charter school, it also allows the school to operate independently of School Construction Authority and Board of Education requirements.

The conversion of the old factory on Longfellow Avenue, which will be ready in 2004, is one of several recent successful conversions of Hunts Point industrial facilities into educational institutions. The weaving of new educational and community centers into the industrial fabric has played a large role in the area’s current revitalization. The

abandonment of the Hunts Point section of the Bronx in the 1970s, when two-thirds of the population left the area, has been replaced by a growth rate that is among the highest in New York City, though the area is still heavily industrialized. Today, the population growth has catalyzed the need for more schools, new open spaces, and better transit connections. This need has been partly met by Bronx Arts and its partners: Civic Builders, a not-for-profit that provides real estate assistance to educational and community organizations, and The Point, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to youth development and the cultural and economic revitalization of Hunts Point.

With the help of a private foundation grant, Bronx Arts Executive Director Xanthe Jory initiated a facility design process aligned with the community-oriented nature of the school. Under the direction of Sam Schwartz LLC, the Bronx Arts staff and board members, along with community members and Weisz + Yoes, participated in a series of design charrettes. The first of three full-day sessions, entitled “Transforming a Mission Into a Space,” focused on creating a set of design guidelines that would mesh the school’s educational philosophy with spatial proposals, including: classrooms should be clustered around flexible, multi-use spaces; the school gallery should invite in local artists as well as show student work; and school space should incorporate colorful, playful, and textural experiences.

The second session, “Setting Priorities for the Architect,” challenged community members to create potential building plans. Having identified relevant program spaces, the participants worked with blank 1” = 16’-scale plans of the site and a series of colored shapes of pre-determined square footages. The colors represented classrooms, common spaces, specialized art rooms, administrative spaces, restrooms, etc. Of four plans developed, the “Arts First!” scheme envisioned a series of art, theater, and dance studios at the front of the building envelope, to create a first impression of the school’s focus on the arts. “Hot Pods” utilized clusters of four classrooms around a multi-use space, and a large open space in the building’s center for school-wide projects.



to **Community School** the Arts

Jory remarks, “The participatory design process...resulted in a school layout that will perfectly suit our educational plan. The process also forced us to use a different lens to clarify various aspects of our educational approach.” Architects Claire Weisz, AIA, and Mark Yoes integrated the group’s ideas, such as clustering of classrooms, an art classroom “storefront,” and a flexible gallery that could combine with a studio classroom. Mark Yoes stresses that the “architectural concept is to combine the traditional school plan and the open plan, with a hierarchy of spaces from the classroom to the cluster to the open common spaces.”

The proposed progressive design for the school is a counterpart to the progressive Bronx Arts educational program. A mezzanine along the entire façade will give the building a greater street presence, and is reserved for administrative functions and a teachers’ room, creating a vertical separation between student and adult activities. A brightly tiled façade with large storefront windows looking onto the arts classes provides a dynamic introduction to the school. The corrugated roof will be replaced by a “green roof” to reduce heat gain. Clerestories will bring daylight and natural ventilation into the school while keeping out direct solar radiation. The natural light will reduce energy costs, as will photovoltaic panels carried on the slanted south side of the skylights. Materials will be as “green” as possible, with no VOC paint or carpeting, and recycled building products used throughout.

The adaptive reuse scheme offers a positive solution for the emerging small, urban, specialized schools that have struggled to find a building typology that fits their programs and philosophies. The proliferating new small schools, such as the New Century Schools, are currently being housed in large public schools that were built more than 70 years ago. These buildings, designed for programs of over 3,000 students, are now awkwardly “carved up” into multiple small school programs under one roof.

The Bronx Arts building represents an alternative for housing new small schools as well as a model for the transformation of old industrial areas of the city. The conversion is just one in a series of recent re-use projects in Hunts Point that includes the transformation of an

Adaptive reuse in the South Bronx is transforming a neighborhood.

By Adam Lubinsky

old warehouse into The Point, and the American Bank Note Building’s conversion into a center for educational and arts organizations. The relationship between architectural design and educational institutions has been mutually beneficial – while design firms have been turning unused buildings into functional educational spaces, the presence of new institutions has re-invigorated the area.

The City of Learning Strategy proposed in Paterson, New Jersey, offers an interesting example of a coordinated effort to use educational institutions to rebuild unused industrial urban fabric. The strategy, based on architect Roy Strickland’s work, asserts that “recycling empty or under-utilized structures leverages the social economic capital of students, teachers, and parents towards the greater project of urban revitalization.”

Hunts Point offers a similar potential. The Bronx Arts process has created a model of how each building transformation can be done – through its emphasis on grassroots organization, participatory design, and sustainable architectural design.

Adam Lubinsky is an urban designer at Sam Schwartz LLC and led the design charrettes for Bronx Arts.

- Client:** Bronx Charter School for the Arts
- Architectural Design Services:** Weisz + Yoes/CWA
- Participatory Design:** Sam Schwartz LLC
- Developer:** Civic Builders
- Structural/MEP Engineer:** Buro Happold
- Acoustics:** Shen Milsom & Wilke
- Lighting:** Jim Conti
- Community Partner:** The Point Community Development Corporation

The brightly colored tile exterior will give Bronx Arts a festive street presence (left) Clerestories and bright colors will enliven interior spaces (second to left) The school, community, and architects developed the “Hot Pods” scheme (above left) Classrooms will be clustered around a multi-use space (right)