

EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES

The Rice School/La Escuela Rice by Taft Architects

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Taft Architects, The Rice School/La Escuela Rice, Kirby at North Braeswood, 1994. Entrance canopy.

Educators and architects have turned “overflow” into innovation with the Houston Independent School District’s recently completed Rice School/La Escuela Rice. Tucked into Project Renewal, the Houston Independent School District’s most recent construction package, this nugget of educational opportunity is officially an overflow K–8 to relieve overenrollment at Pershing Middle School and West University, Poe, and Roberts elementary schools. It will serve as well as a laboratory for teaching investigation by Rice University. Add to these combined impetuses a design process that drew its energy from teachers’ descriptions of how the building should meet the program, and the result is a funky synergy that Taft Architects rode and tamed into one of precious few examples of superb school buildings today.

This does not mean that Taft simply took its design from an inspired group of teachers. Rather the architects, working with their first public building in Houston since the Metropolitan YWCA of 1979, reined in and refined the teachers’ ideas through an interactive design development to create clarity in form and organization from a flexible template of teaching spaces whose uses can shift to match changes in both student population and teaching principles. In this way, the building is a leap ahead of Taft Architects’ formally rigorous but spatially overly specific design for an elementary school in Hope, Indiana, of 1989.

In its plan, the Rice School owes more to the architects’ recent residential work, particularly the Rothwell House in River Oaks, than to Hope Elementary. Spaces are layered across the site from public to private uses, from assembly and administrative spaces to a linear block of workrooms and specialized classrooms to a sawtooth collection of ten classroom clusters on two levels. Like the Rothwell House, too, a central circular pivot – the entry court at the house, the library at this school – anchors two colliding and intermeshed plan grids. These can be extracted as a major plan grid that underlies most spaces and a violating minor grid that slashes across the plan at a 30-degree angle and is expressed mainly through the workroom block. In this school, Taft Architects agree, their evolution away from historically inspired and often symmetrical plans and volumes

toward energetic and abstract geometries has matured.

At the library, the architects’ inspiration is its strongest. Students and teachers first glimpse the library as they emerge from the constricted entry passageway off the grand public portico. Painted the traditional yellow of a number two pencil, its curved stucco walls slope upward toward expansive skylights. Its walls are punctuated by slot windows inserted between U-shaped shelf units, offering shifting views into and out of the library that make the library seem omnipresent to an observer walking through the school. If the school were City Hall, the library would be the council chambers; if a newspaper, it would be the city desk. The library, symbol of Knowledge, is the physical and spiritual hub.

Also at the library, Taft Architects’ subversion of corridors to create community space reaches full flower. As elsewhere in the agitated plan, triangular pockets replace hallways. The classroom blocks, each with five classrooms opening onto a common space, are especially free of “tunnel vision.” Taken as a whole, these anti-halls knit together a necessarily com-



Library interior.

Lisa Carl Hardaway and Paul Hecker, Photographers © 1994

Lisa Carl Hardaway and Paul Hecker, Photographers © 1994

compact plan on the prominent ten-acre site on North Braeswood, west of Kirby Drive.

Outside, the school's geometric assemblage is less apparent, masked along its entry façade by a heroic suspended canopy that runs the length of the red-brick administrative, cafeteria, and gymnasium volume, connecting to the austere, curving buff-brick auditorium façade. Only a hint of the diagonal workroom volume, faced in rust-colored, split-face concrete masonry units, is visible from the street. And the jagged blue stucco classrooms with their ribbon windows are nicely shielded from view by a wooded ravine, now a nature trail, preserved during construction.



Commons area surrounding the library.

Throughout the building, finishes – brick, split-face CMU, terrazzo – are substantial, products of a modest budget in a favorable bid climate, the architects say. The school is a model community anchor, marked by the restrained use of its resonant materials – the little red schoolhouse for 1,300.

As times goes by, happily, architecture will likely be the school's secondary success. First will be its answer to the challenge that Stephen Fox posed in "Elementary Analysis" (*Cite*, Spring 1992): Will the school succeed as a teaching laboratory or simply handle

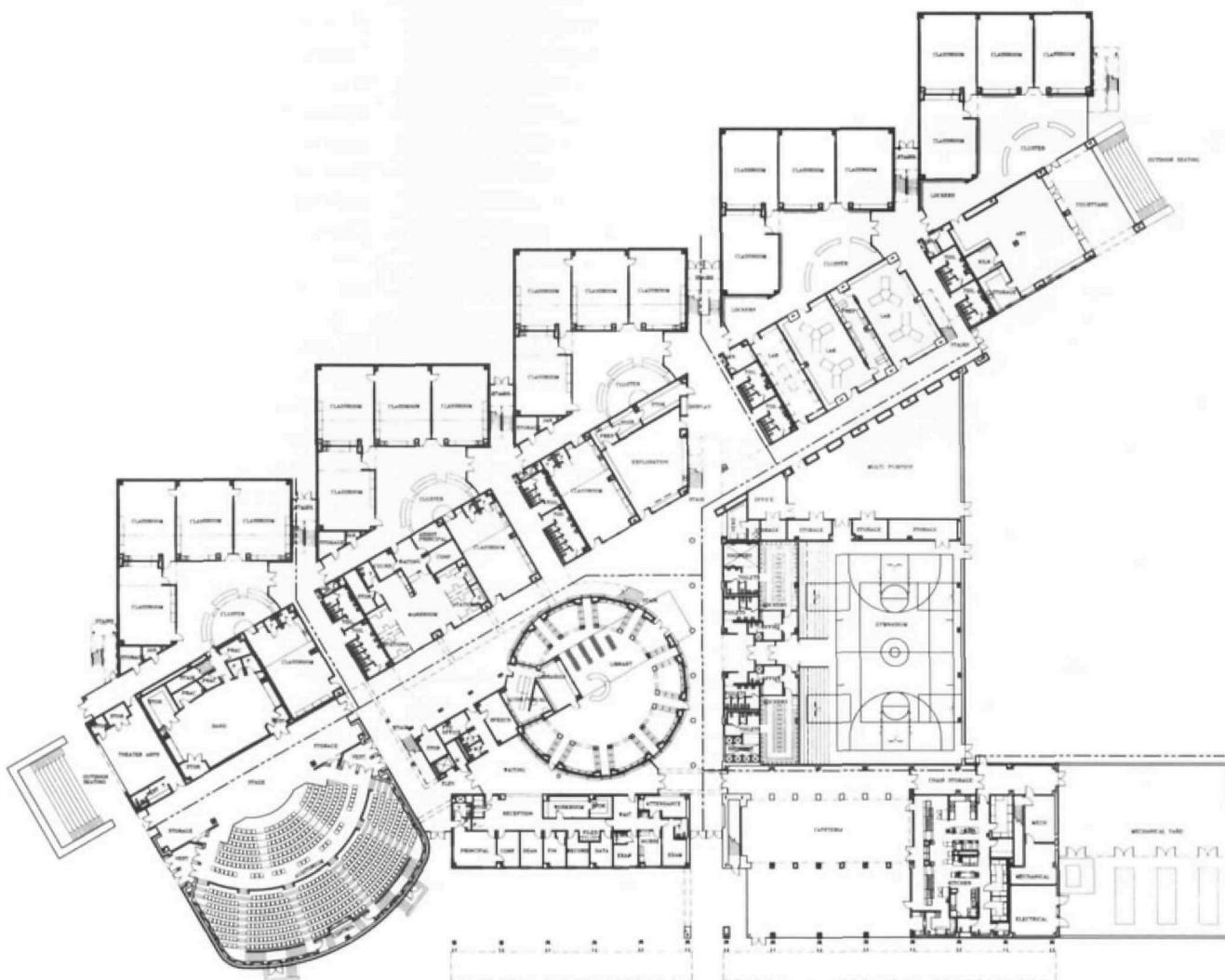
overflow enrollment? The answer, at least in its inaugural year, is that the school is brimming with the drive to experiment with a new paradigm for primary schools.

The first bright light is Kay Stripling, HISD assistant superintendent for staff development, with 30 years' experience in education and a new title: principal. She pushed for an experimental new school and now leads its crucial early implementation. Her task has been enhanced and pressured by advance billing: 7,000 HISD students applied in the districtwide lottery that provided a third of the school's students; 700 teachers nationwide applied for 70 faculty spots. Stripling's promise to them is involvement. Teachers played a major role in determining the school's open-ended design, says Stripling, and they will participate in developing its curriculum and experimenting continually with new teaching approaches.

Among the innovations Stripling points to with pride is the "action lab," a collection of workstations that introduce students to the various careers an information-based society will offer. The action lab is really the old vocational/agricultural shop class reborn, with computers replacing table saws. This school is wired to be full of computers and audio, video, cable, and other technological support.

"Our assumption is that all kids are gifted," says Stripling. "We do not 'track' kids," labeling them early and limiting their options in education and in life. Stripling suggests that the hope for public schools lies in the Rice School's spirit of experimentation, a point borne out by her observation that "many students who applied – at least 1,000 – were from private schools."

If the school lives up to Stripling's expectations, look for more schools like this one. Project Renewal may have included a token nebulous "overflow lab school," but her hope is that the next bond issue, buoyed by HISD administrative and community enthusiasm, will include similar new schools. Thousands are watching to see whether the Rice School is indeed a pearl among the grains of sand in education. ■



FIRST FLOOR
0 25 50 100'
HISD/Rice K-8 School
HOUSTON, TEXAS

First-floor plan.