

Elementary Analysis

Taft Architects' Houston Independent School District—Rice University Lab School

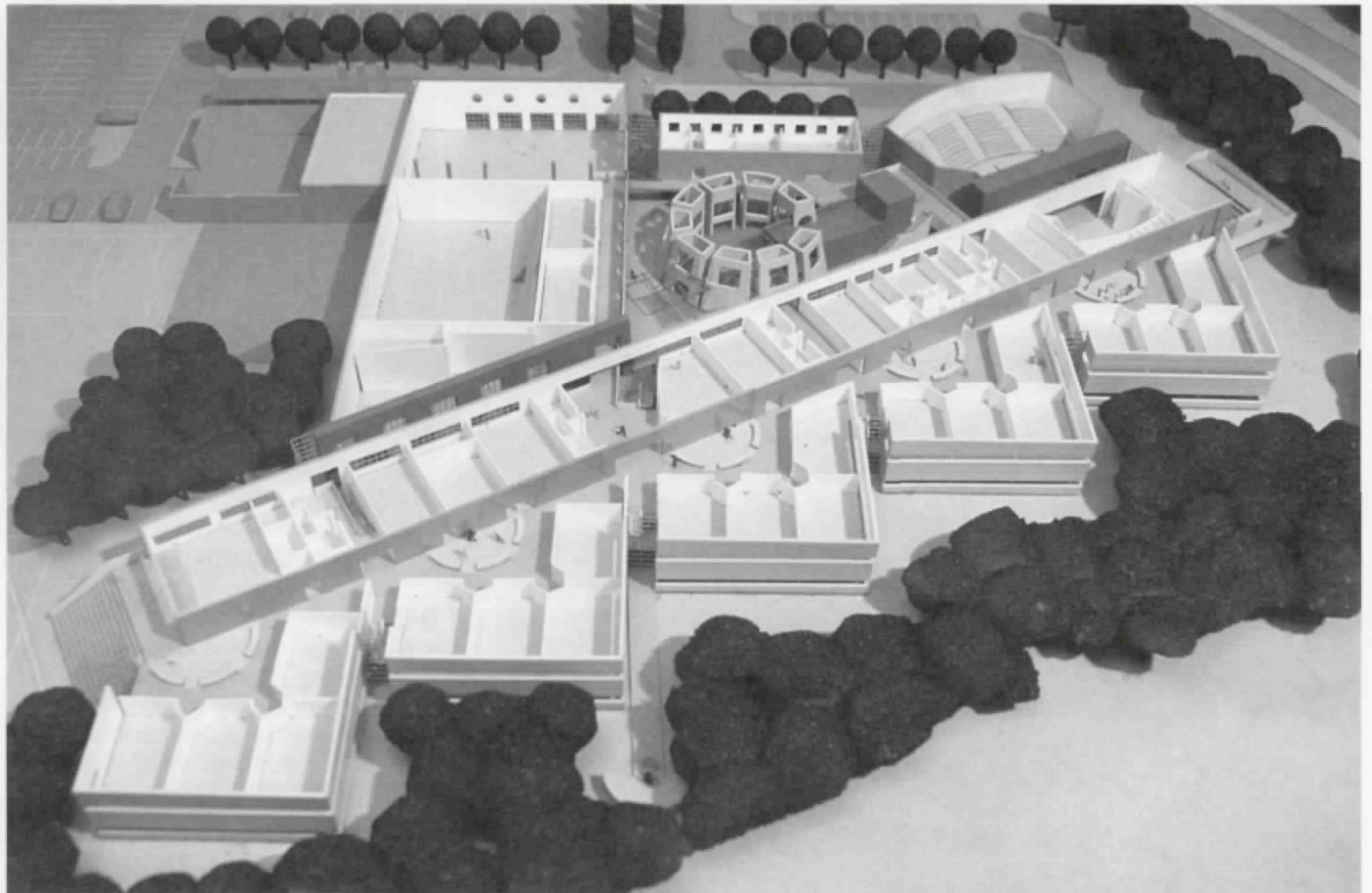
ONE of the Houston Independent School District's most notable "Project Renewal" architectural undertakings is the construction of a new public school on North Braeswood Boulevard, just west of Kirby Drive. The school will relieve overcrowding in elementary and middle schools in the neighborhoods of near southwest Houston. It will also function as a laboratory to develop innovative teaching practices, the result of a collaborative effort between HISD and the Center for Education of Rice University's Department of Education. The first public school to be constructed in this area of Houston since the baby boom days of the 1950s, the building is also an inspiring work of civic architecture and the first opportunity its designers, Taft Architects, have had to design a public building in Houston since the completion of their Metropolitan YWCA complex in 1979.

Like the YWCA, the as-yet-unnamed school will occupy a highly visible but relatively small site along one of the city's bayou parkways. The school is designed to accommodate 1,200 students, of whom 400 will be visitors, transported class by class to take advantage of the new school's special facilities. Therefore the ten-acre site has to make room for the buses that will daily move one-third of the students from and to their home schools. The site also contains a significant natural feature whose preservation is desired, a wooded ravine that stretches along the west edge of the property. The requirements for separating out, yet providing easy access between, the school's various parts for resident and visiting students, who will range from kindergarten through eighth grade, presented a special challenge to the architects.

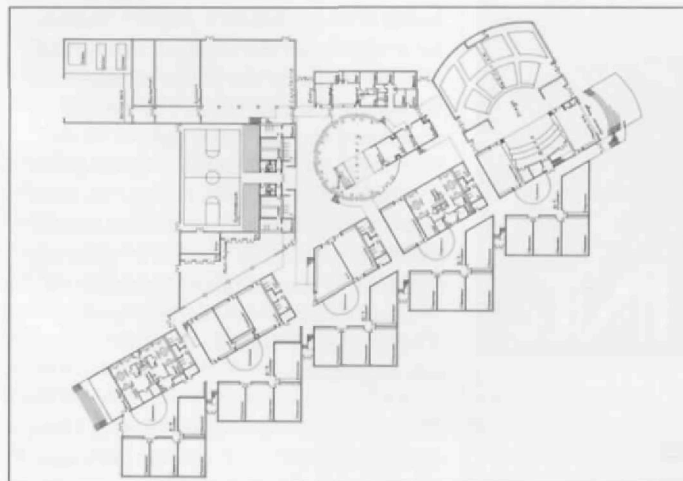
A layered arrangement of public spaces, specialized instructional spaces, and classrooms satisfies functional requirements and responds cleverly to the site's limits. Two-story-high classroom bays follow the line of the wooded ravine in a diagonal array. The resulting clusters of classrooms open to collective spaces, which in turn connect with specialized facilities (music, computer, and science laboratories and art studio spaces), toilets,



Site plan (east up).



Model looking east.



First-floor plan.

and administrative offices for the three subdivisions of the school (kindergarten through second grade, third through fifth grade, and sixth through eighth grade). These specialized facilities are collected in a two-story bar that follows the diagonal alignment of the classroom bays. The principal public spaces of the school – those requiring public access for off-hours use (central administration, gymnasium, and cafeteria) – are configured in a right-angled relationship to the diagonal bar, enclosing a double-volume entrance lobby and a two-story-high circular library. Defined by inward-leaning screen walls, the library has the playful appearance of a building-within-a-building. At the apex of the inverted right triangle that results from the plan diagram is the auditorium. Its distinctive shape is expressed externally. Plans call for a pair of monumental

bleachers at either end of the diagonal bar that can be used as outdoor classrooms.

With didactic clarity, Taft Architects distinguish externally the volumetric organization of the school. They underscore these distinctions with variations in window arrangements and in the color and patterning of the brick facings that promise to make the school a lively presence on North Braeswood.

The intelligence, wit, and skill that Taft Architects have demonstrated in their design will probably be called on to face further challenges. The budget is a modest \$67.34 per square foot (\$11.25 million for 167,000 square feet of area). One architect with experience working on HISD projects predicts that if bids come in above estimates, cost-cutting could well rob the design of many of its distinctive features.



Entrance.

A second challenge involves the way the school will be used: whether its principal purpose is to relieve overcrowding in nearby schools or to serve as a teaching laboratory for the entire district. A parent active in HISD affairs has observed that Taft's design is predicated on the latter premise. If the former prevails, the building may be liable to criticism for not being adaptable to less specialized requirements. Both challenges underscore the reasons that public school architecture in Houston is so uninspired. One hopes that Taft Architects' design will surmount these challenges and fulfill its promise as a center for improvement in public education as well as a demonstration of the wisdom of enlightened architectural patronage. Construction is to be completed in late 1993.

Stephen Fox