



Above: The courtyard of Avance's school at Browning Elementary. Below: The building plan.

Pre-Fab(ulous)

AVANCE HEAD START PROVES
THAT SCHOOL TEMPORARY BUILDINGS
DON'T HAVE TO BE AWFUL



DESIGNER DOUG OLIVER likes to tell an old teachers' joke: "Nothing is as permanent as a temporary building." The humor hides misery. Teachers hate temporary buildings: The sightlines are awful, and the students approach their education with the respect and dignity you'd expect in a trailer-park ambiance.

Such a dismal outcome was perhaps to be expected when Avance Head Start, a private nonprofit group, erected a new building on the grounds of the Heights-area Robert Browning Elementary School. The usual strictures applied: Avance (pronounced "a-von-say") relies on federal funding, which requires that the Head Start building be "movable"; and the budget for the project — approximately \$435,000 — was modest for a 6,300-square-foot building.

But for the school's three- and four-year-old at-risk students, Avance operations officer Feliciano Gallegos wanted something more inspiring than the usual temporary building. He approached Oliver, who'd worked on a previous plan for another Avance campus, and Oliver teamed up with architect of record Michael Morton of m Architects.

Their design looks and feels very different from the campus's other temporary buildings. To preserve the three tall pine trees on the triangular site, Oliver designed his building in a boomerang shape around them. Two wood-frame pre-fab modules form the parent-services wing, with a meeting room and an office for Avance's family-development worker. Four more modules form the spacious classroom wing. From

the hallway, administrators can quickly glance over low walls into the four classrooms, each with direct access to a bathroom (so important for pre-schoolers). The two wings are linked by a built-on-site administration area, whose large windows look onto Browning's playground. Outside, porch-like "outdoor classrooms" allow messy lessons.

On the external walls, siding is arranged in the Mondrian-like compositions. Oliver originally proposed several vibrant color schemes, but Browning's principal wanted something that would blend better with the 1920s brick school and its existing light-yellow temporary buildings. Gallegos suggested a compromise: dark red and forest green, colors gleaned from the school's playground equipment. "I didn't know they made such drab playground equipment," Oliver laments, "but it was the brightest palette available on the campus."

After its first school year, the building has received both critical acclaim (an AIA Honor Award) and praise from parents and teachers. Gallegos, delighted by the results, has engaged Oliver and Morton to design Avance's next project, a similar low-cost building in Pasadena.

In June, at the Browning site, Gallegos proudly surveyed the brand-new landscape plants in the boomerang's central area — the latest improvement to a building he clearly loves. "Children spend so much of their time in buildings," he said. "So often people design buildings that aren't sensitive to that. It's a missed learning opportunity." — Lisa Gray

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