

FLEXIBILITY OPENNESS SOCIABILITY TRANSPARENCY!

A NEW YORK EXHIBITION DELVES INTO SCHOOLS AS ICONIC ART SPACES, INNER-CITY FORTRESSES, DENS OF COMPUTER GAMING, AND COMMUNITY CENTERS

BY STEVEN THOMSON

An exhibition at New York City’s Center for Architecture, *The Edgeless School*, investigates the issues that HISD and architects must take on as the 2012 bond schools are designed and built. Though the exhibition is heavy on New York schools, it includes K-12 institutions located between each coast that offer inspiration and lessons for Houston’s planners. “Everyone seems to agree that this is a watershed moment for education,” says curator Tom Mellins, “and no one seems to know exactly how or what that really means for design.” Inside the center’s gallery, Mellins has assembled displays of 19 exemplary schools that present both noteworthy architecture and embody the notion of the “edgeless” school. The curator’s definition of “edgeless” is twofold: the acceptance that today’s students have access to unprecedented global flows of information; and realizing schools’ increasing engagement with the community beyond the classroom walls.

> THE INCONIC ART SCHOOL

The inclusion of a downtown site for a new High School for the Performing and Visual Arts on the 2012 HISD bond has generated excitement for its potential to enliven Houston’s core and connect students to our theater district. *Edgeless Schools* offers valuable lessons.

“When organizing the exhibition, we were drawn to a disproportionate amount of institutions that were performing and visual arts schools, and it could just be that the very creative nature of this subject matter is inspiring to architects,” notes Mellins.

The Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas designed by Allied Works Architecture is so dazzling that a digitized representation has been superimposed onto the exhibition’s north interior wall, spanning two stories of display space. HISD can look to the school as a model in terms of its close location to the city’s arts district. The gray brick is rather somber, but the wide corridors, tall atriums, and natural light could serve as a good model for HSPVA.

The Ramón C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts in Los Angeles stands as an exuberant cornerstone of the spectacle-driven, starchitect-studded downtown. Located on the same axis as Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall, Rafael Moneo’s Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, and Arata Isozaki’s Museum of Contemporary Art, the school’s profile includes a steel-clad conical library, porthole windows, and a cantilevered tower with

a ramp spiraling whimsically into the sky. Designed by the Viennese firm of Coop Himmelbau, the school presents an assault of awkward geometries driven not by the best interests of the Los Angeles Unified School District, but by the avant-garde taste of the school’s benefactor—billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad, who pushed policy makers to drop a more modest design in favor of a \$232 million project befitting pre-recession tastes and the opportunity to offer seductive TV location shoots.

Much more successful at delivering an inspired arts-focused educational setting is the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in Astoria, Queens. Instead of succumbing to the pressure of creating an architectural icon, the school naturally benefits from its site across from the American Museum of the Moving Image, visually communicates with the local creative community via sweeping views onto the second story’s rehearsal and studio spaces, and capitalizes on Manhattan skyline views with a rooftop stage that hosts events open to the public.

> FORTRESS OF LEARNING OR NEIGHBORHOOD NEXUS

The Frank R. Conwell School in Jersey City, designed by Gruzen Samdo and IBI Group, is cited in a semi-urban environment that looks similar to the trend towards low-rise, mixed-use development in Houston. The school relates to Jersey City’s scale, articulated as a system of smaller structures that foreground protected outdoor spaces. In effect, the informality of the street that the school faces is ingested into the architecture as a whole.

The Conwell School’s extensive glazing further fosters visual communication between the school and the city. Similarly, back on the Manhattan grid, the East Harlem School negotiates its “gritty urban setting” by offering passersby views onto the lower communal ar-

eas via translucent, etched glass, and cloaking the upper areas for individual and group learning in a pixilated skin of windows and opaque, monochromatic panels. This notion of mediated public and private spaces is mirrored in the teaching methodology, in which group projects downstairs complement the upper floors' classroom sessions, each of which begins and ends with a three-minute personal meditation. Behind the building's panels, individual tutors meet one-on-one with students, collaborating on applications to prestigious high schools.

"This is not designed to be stylistically contextual—it's meant to be a beacon," says Mellins. "But it's also meant to be a haven. There's this theme that emerges of the possibility of violence in our society, both physically or even with the idea of chaotic households, that evidences itself in school architecture."

Despite the lower floor's windows, the façade's styling appears fortress-like, perpetuating the stigma of the neighborhood as dangerous. Moreover, the East Harlem School's sensitivity to the neighborhood's large proportion of "at-risk youth" contrasts with the notion of edgeless schools as operating in a global learning community aided by technology. While the school's pedagogy aims to place its students beyond the area's perceived dangers, this attention to hyper local conditions suggests that contemporary school architecture still requires, so to speak, edges.

> THE INFINITELY FLEXIBLE DIY FUTURE

Because of the broad brief of surveying compelling U.S. school architecture, the exhibition offers less of a critique than a studied approach to how changes in pedagogy are manifesting in design. A series of videos portraying 21st-century pedagogues illuminates new methodologies,

such as Katie Salen's technique of capturing students' interest by disguising assignments in video games at her school, Quest to Learn. Accepting that "game design is this generation's mode of discourse," Salen structures the curriculum along 10-week "missions" with scaffolding challenges designed to empower students.

"Kids are going to have to adapt and learn constantly," remarks Salen, "and that's the type of learner we're looking to graduate."

Featured linguist James Paul Gee also recognizes the potential of computer games for honing problem solving skills in tandem with hands-on "embodied learning"—and eschewing standardized testing altogether. Echoing a common grievance among educators, Gee says, "We're not going to change the paradigm of learning unless we change the test," yet he does not suggest how this sea change could impact architecture.

Instead of defining children on the deficiencies indicated in tests, founding editor and publisher of *Make*, Dale Dougherty, argues for DIY-style (as in Do It Yourself) learning in environments that bring in the local community, saying that the physical barriers from the neighborhood are what makes students so eager to depart at the sound of the bell. Such arguments have already reached realization in places like the L. B. Landry High School in New Orleans, where the firm of Eskew+Dumez+Ripple designed an open, U-shaped campus that incorporates a media center shared with the city, public health facilities, and a vocational training technology center that educates both adolescents and local residents.

In a nod to "embodied learning" curator Mellins notes, "Seeing people taking care of themselves is an educative experience." **C**

1 Frank R. Conwell School 2 + 4 Booker T. Washington High School 3 Ramon T Cortinez School 5 Catalog / The Edgeless School 6 The East Harlem School

