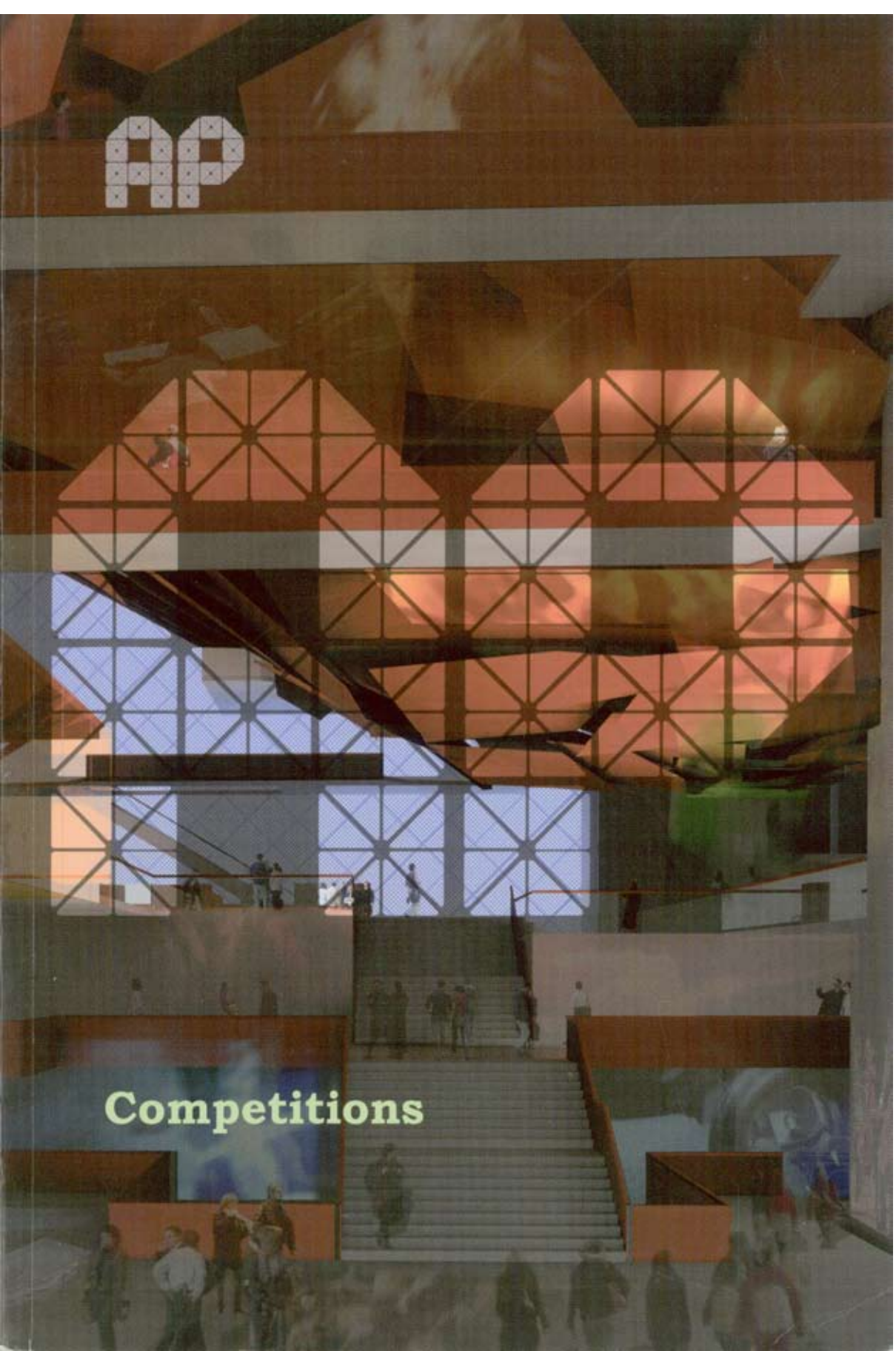




# Competitions



# Chicago Prototype Schools (2001)

G Stanley Collyer

In an era of mergers and consolidation, the small neighbourhood school would seem to be a relic from the past. But recent studies indicate that children perform better in more intimate settings. So how does one avoid 'bigness' with all its problems, an all too common characteristic of the us's present schools? Judging from the entries which were submitted to the 'Big Shoulders, Small Schools' competition held recently in Chicago, it is all about clustering. A medium-sized elementary school organised physically into smaller entities, each almost a school within a school, can aspire to recreating a feeling of 'smallness'. Add to this the fact that at least 20 percent of the students are in some manner handicapped and a budget limit of \$200 per square foot (the average cost in Chicago is \$150 per square foot), you have all the ingredients for a formidable design challenge.

In an effort to relieve overcrowding and improve learning conditions, many school systems have recently embarked on large capital improvement programmes. Whereas Chicago may have been dragging its feet on this issue, various organisations within the city have been focusing attention on it for some time. One of the highest profile non-profit organisations leading this charge has been the Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPPPI). Together with Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) and the Small Schools Coalition (SSC), in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, a national design competition was launched in January 2000 for the design and eventual construction of two prototype schools based on universal principles at two sites in the city – one in the south side Roseland

community, and one in the north side Irving Park community.

The competition, which was hybrid in nature, was supported in part through a new programme initiated by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) under its Director of Design, Mark Robbins. The hybrid feature of the competition resulted from the NEA's insistence that at least four firms of national stature be invited to participate in a second stage with two winners from the first, open stage for each site. The inclusion of invited firms was stipulated to ensure high design quality.

When the entries in the open competition section were unveiled – just under 60 entries a piece for each site – it was clear that the fears of the NEA were hardly justified. From the theoretical to the architecturally exuberant, the entries exhibited a high degree of creativity and professionalism. Arriving at a decision on a winner in the open section was not going to be an easy matter.

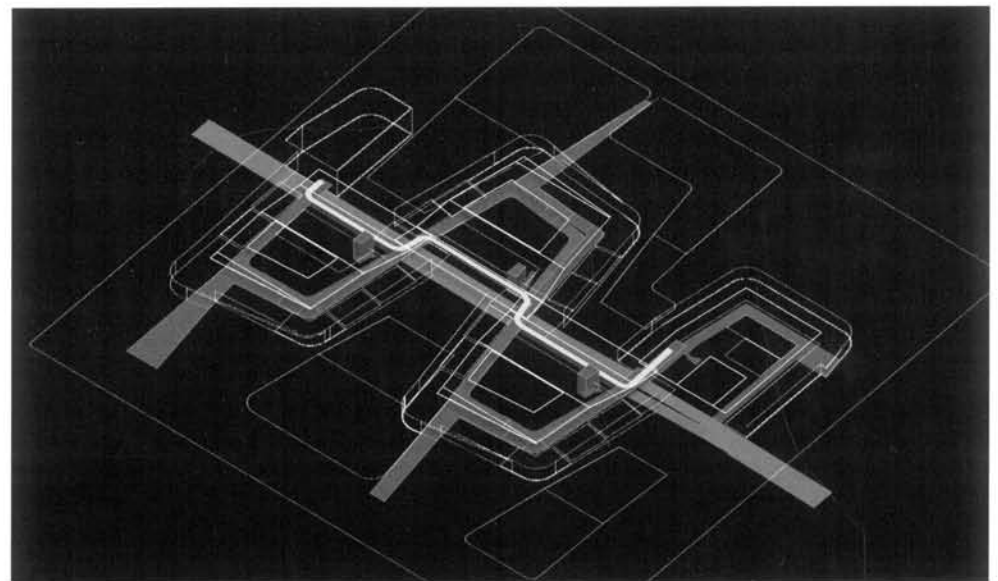
As was the case here, mixing laypersons and design professionals on a jury is often a tricky business. The jury process is slowed somewhat by the inclusion of non-designers, for they often have to go through a learning curve to understand what it is exactly that they are looking at. On the positive side, they are the ones in the community who have to be the advocates for the winning designs after the competition.

Since the two sites were dissimilar – the south side site was square, the other elongated – the architects first had to decide which site best fitted their intended approach. Moreover, the south side site was single level, the north side site two-level. Karen Fairbanks, south side site winner, stated that after

Winning entry  
Southside site,  
Marble Fairbanks Architecture  
(New York, New York, US)

The winning design for this site was chosen from amongst the open entries who made it into the finals, not one of the "invited" and compensated finalists. It prevailed in the first round over 59 other entries.

Right Aerial perspectives  
Bottom Circulation plan





**Finalist**  
**South Side Site**  
**Ground Zero Design Studio**  
 (Open stage winner)  
 Ann Arbor, Michigan

**Below** View from entrance  
**Left** Aerial view of model



looking at both sites, only the south side matched their criteria. This supports the argument that schools, especially in the inner city, can seldom be the result of a standard footprint; each site has its own set of conditions.

The criteria sounded much like those one would find for most competitions, one difference being the strong emphasis placed on handicapped accessibility and sustainability:

- Innovative: bringing architectural creativity and imagination to educational spaces
- Feasible: buildable for approximately \$200 per square foot, which includes soft costs and furniture but not land, utilities, remediation, or medical equipment
- Sensitive to Neighbourhood Context: reflecting the ethnic, geographic and social culture of the neighbourhoods where the schools will be built
- Sensitive to Universal Design: accessible, functional and usable by people of any age, ability or background – including elements of green design and sustainable design
- Sensitive to Small School Design: breaking large structures down into two or more 'schools-within-a-school' to create intimate educational environments

#### The Winning Designs

The Jury picked two winners for each site in the open section.

**South Side Site:**

Ground Zero Design Studio, Ann Arbor, Michigan  
 Marble Fairbanks Architects, New York, New York

**North Side Site:**

Jack L Gordon Architects, New York, New York  
 Lubrano Ciavarra Design, New York, New York

These winners were joined by invited architects.

**South Side Site:**

Mac Scogin Merrill Elam Architects, Atlanta, Georgia  
 Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects, New York, New York

**North Side Site:**

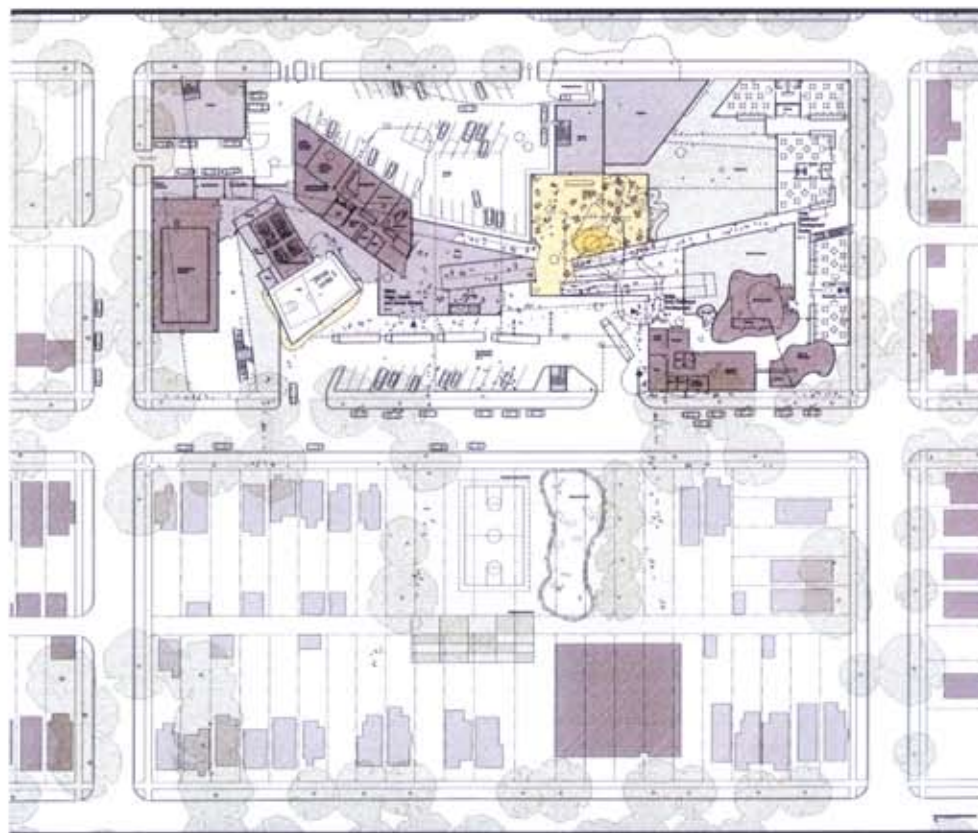
Koning Eizenberg Architecture, Santa Monica, California  
 Ross Barney + Jankowski Architects, Chicago, Illinois

When the open section winners had been selected, preliminary designs from the four invited architects for the two sites were unveiled. The initial impression of the jury, according to several present, was the unenthusiastic response the new designs elicited. This was, of course, before the final stage, which would take place several weeks later. In the interim, architects were to meet with neighbourhood leaders and discuss the community's needs. These forums turned out to be extremely useful for both sides. Karen Fairbanks said, 'We made changes in our design as a result of community feedback, including turning the site around, creating a single entry for the school, creating more gently sloping landscaping and ramping system and increasing the amount of outdoor play space'.

As a result of the final evaluation by the jury, Marble Fairbanks was declared the winner of the south side site and Koning Eizenberg was selected for the north side site. Construction has been put on hold because of budget cuts in education.

**Finalist**  
**South Side Site**  
**Mac Scogin Merrill**  
**ElamArchitects,**  
 Atlanta, Georgia, US

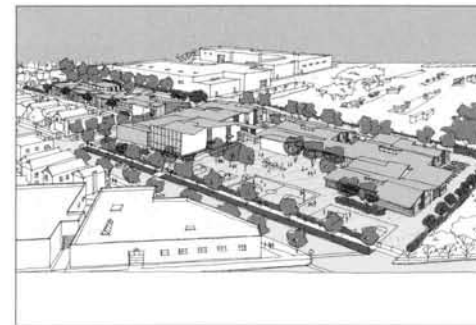
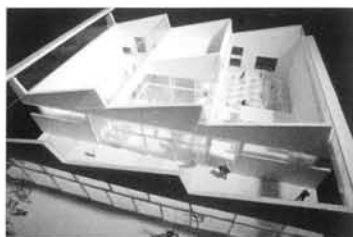
**Right** Corner rendering  
**Below** Aerial perspective model  
**Below, right** Hearth rendering  
**Bottom** Ground floor plan





**Finalist**  
**South Side Site**  
**Smith-Miller + Hawkinson**  
**New York, New York**  
**(Invited Finalist)**

**Left** Aerial perspective of school with view to entrance  
**Below** Model interior  
**Bottom** Elementary school classroom



**Above**  
**Winner**  
**North Side Site**  
**Koning Eizenberg Architecture**  
**Santa Monica, California**  
**(Invited Finalist)**

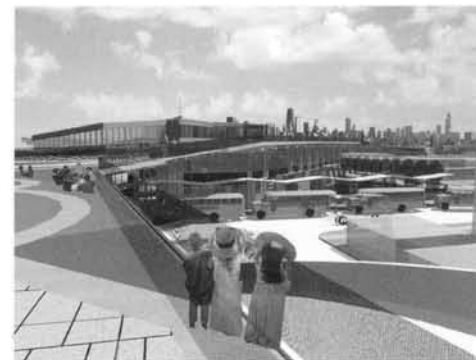
Similar to the winner of the South Side site, Koning Eizenberg chose a cluster approach for their proposal. Their scheme was appropriately labeled, "learning neighborhoods."

**Top** Section  
**Above left** Interior Corridor  
**Above right** Aerial perspective

**Below**  
**Finalist**  
**North Side Site**  
**Ross Barney + Jankowski**  
**Architets**  
**Chicago, Illinois**  
**(Invited Finalist)**

Carol Ross Barney chose to place much in the way of sports activities on the top of the buildings – not so unusual in Chicago

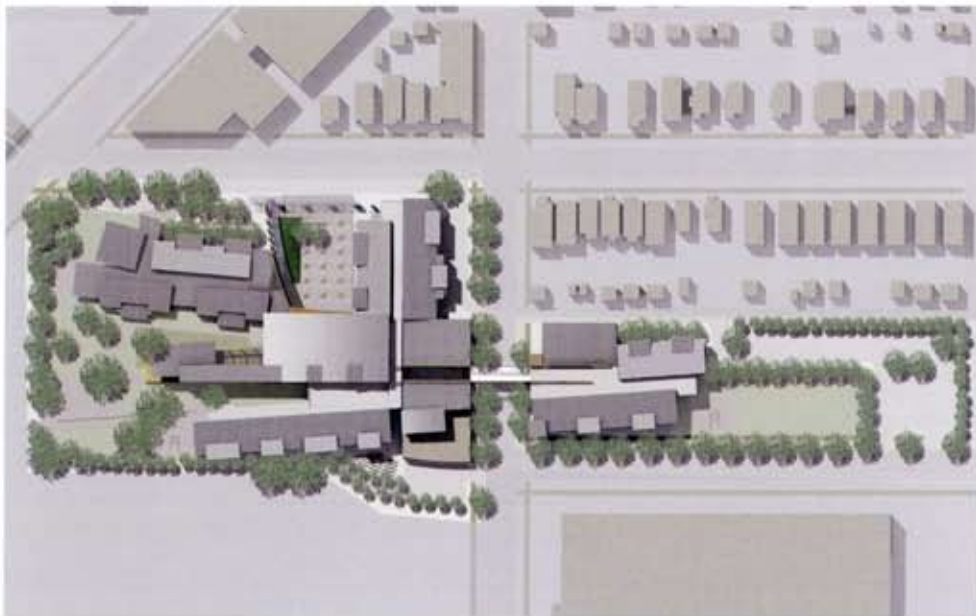
**Bottom left** Aerial perspective  
**Bottom right** View of Chicago skyline from school





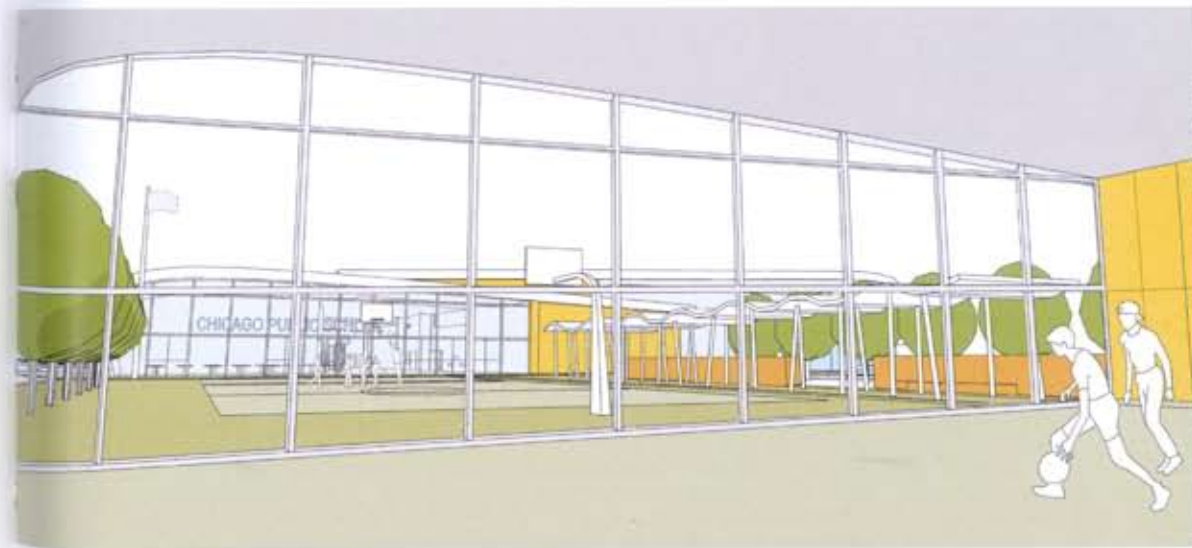
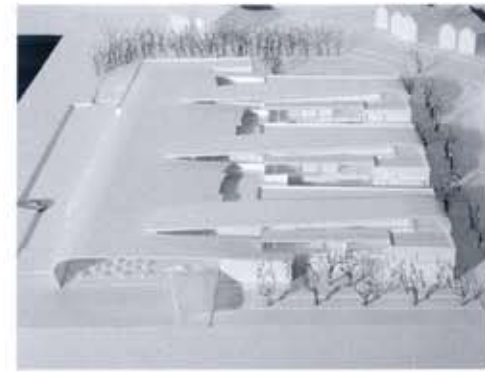
Finalist  
North Side Site  
Jack L. Gordon Architects  
New York, New York  
(Open stage winner)

Left and below Interior and exterior perspectives  
Bottom Birdseye view of site model



Finalist  
North Side Site  
Lubrano Ciavarra Design  
New York, New York  
(Open Stage Winner)

Right Aerial view of model  
Middle Ramping and corridor system  
Bottom View to interior courtyard





morphology allows the school to have both an internal focus and to be permeable to other activities and its neighbours in the Arts District. Allied Works principal Brad Cloepfil described the concept to the jury as a 'city in itself, humming at night' with 'raw interiors' and 'exuding the life of the place'.<sup>1</sup>

#### Carlos Jimenez Studio

The concept proposed by Carlos Jimenez formed a simple, 'figure of eight' circulation scheme around two open courts, the primary court being an exterior amphitheatre. The overall massing was a box-like shell which stepped up from the height of the existing high school towards the adjacent freeway to the north. Lower level classrooms with exterior work courts were provided for ceramics, metalworking and similar activities while upper level spaces were allocated to dance, painting and music, thus invoking a poetic reading of gravity to the concept. Unlike the other three competitors, Jimenez placed the major performance spaces along the east side of the site. This was a result of his saving an existing 1952 structure on the site for reuse which other competitors found no reason to save. His presentation stressed the 'tapestry' of pedestrian paths within the

roof 'tent' topography and its possibilities as a 'talisman' for the district.

#### Mac Scogin Merrill Elam Architects

The Scogin-Elam proposal was predicated on locating a 'non-systemic order' or 'out-of-order order' within the problem. Merrill Elam stated that artists occupy the space between rigour and fantasy and that it was this 'space' for which they were searching. Ribbon-like study models hinted at this attempt to create a 'non-hierarchical space' in which artistic cross-fertilisation would be encouraged. Dual ramp systems rising obliquely from the existing school as an 'entry' were sliced laterally by 'work courts' on their way to activities overlooking the freeway. The original building was emptied of all structure, floors and roof and provided a free form metal scrim-like wall-lining in order to make it the primary presentation and performance space. Their 'exuberant, expressive' scheme 'sprinkled programmatic elements' throughout this complex volumetric network. Scogin noted that the materials were not indicated yet, but that the forms should 'glow'.

#### Charles Rose Architects

Charles Rose presented concepts which, in some aspects, had a much higher degree of resolution those of the other competitors. The scheme included two levels of below-grade parking which was not required in the programme but which Rose had (correctly) determined to be a crucial component of any actual building on the site. He stated that his favourite building in Dallas was Pei's Fountain Place high-rise and that it was his intention to play off the laconic angularity of this structure by making his proposal a horizontal version of this same aesthetic.

Roofs of his scheme were to be sloping, turf-covered exterior courts – a kind of glass-to-grass conversion of the Pei building. The maintenance considerations inherent in this concept caused several questions from the school representatives during the question and answer phase. The Allied Works scheme was also quite clearly phased for construction, and the presentation included the names of preferred consultants as well as other fairly specific information not given by the other firms. It's 'blunt sculpturalism' and hard materials were intended to reinforce the shard-like, almost monolithic geometry of the open courtyard typology.

The jury met formally on the morning of 7 September and, after a relatively short review of the presentations of the day before, voted unanimously for Allied Works. The jury clearly was impressed by the emotional openness of the presentation together with the high regard and attention paid to the life and work of the students.

#### Note

1. All quotes in this essay are from its original publication in *Competitions*, Volume 11, No. 4, Summer 2001.

Opposite  
Winning Entry  
Allied Works – Design  
Principal: Brad Cloepfil  
(Portland, OR, US)

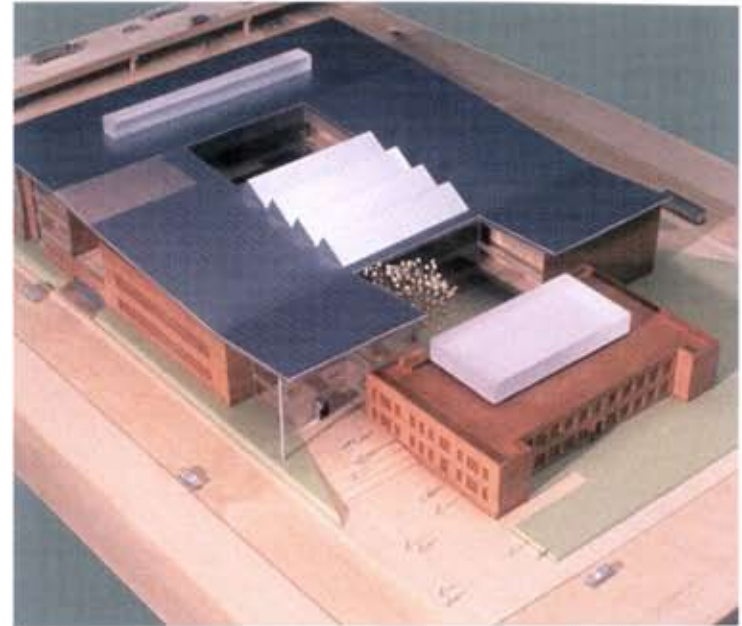
Top Aerial perspective of  
model indicating L-shaped  
configuration of scheme

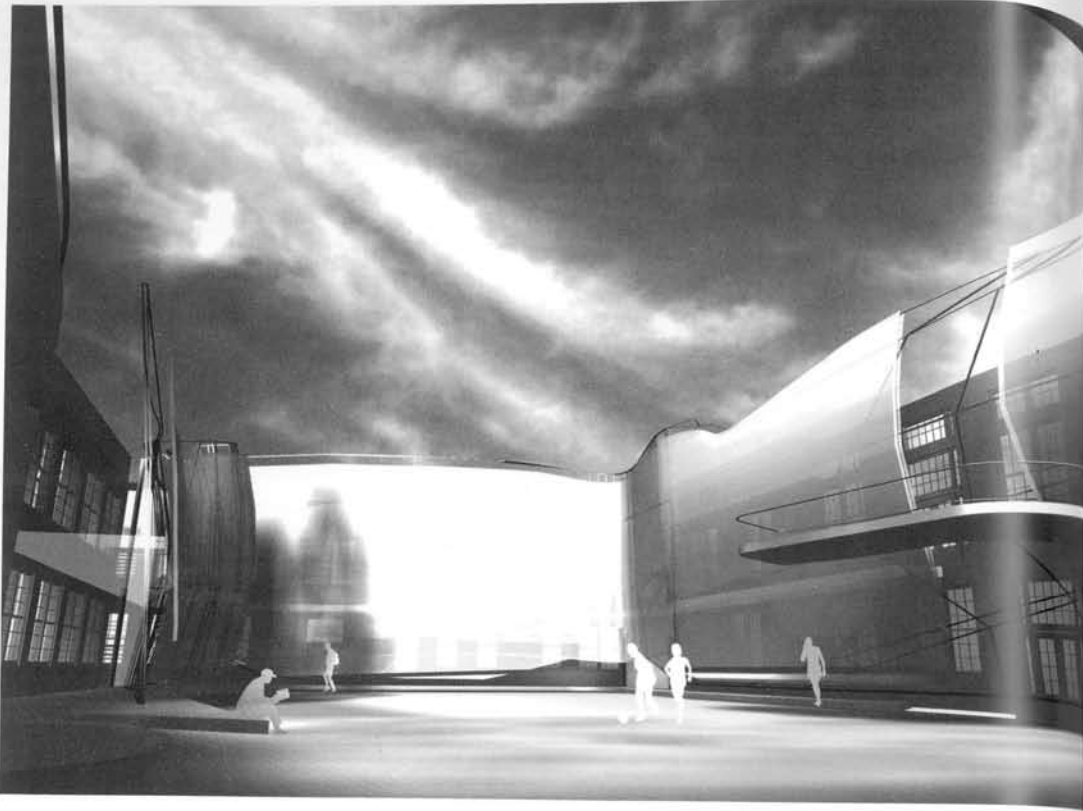
Middle View  
of inner courtyard

Bottom  
Night aerial view of site  
showing existing school  
building at lower right

This page  
Finalist  
Carlos Jimenez Studio  
(Houston, TX, US)

Top Aerial view of model  
Bottom Interior courtyard





Opposite page  
**Finalist**  
 Mac Scogin Merrill Elam  
 Architects  
 (Atlanta, GA, US)

**Top** Courtyard perspective  
**Bottom** Model

**Finalist**  
 Charles Rose Architects  
 (Cambridge, MA, US)

**Top** Aerial view of  
 computerised model  
**Bottom** Section

