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SCHOOLS FOR CITIES
URBAN STRATEGIES

Sharon Haar editor
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Architect Julie Eizenberg presents the winning design for the North Side site.

Judging the competition entries.

Above:
Larry Gorski speaking at the Chicago Public Schools Design Competition press conference, August 2000. As the director of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, the late Larry Gorski helped form Chicago's mission to become the most accessible city in the nation.

Lessons from the Chicago Public Schools Design Competition

Cindy S. Moelis with Beth Valukas
Business and Professional People for the Public Interest

> Most city schools are too big, and anonymity among students is a pervasive problem....Overcoming anonymity—creating a setting in which every student is known personally by an adult—is one of the most compelling obligations urban schools confront.
>
> —*Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*, 1988

Those concerned with public education know that it is not just how we teach but also the buildings that we teach in that nourish the great potential of students. Can we combine the best design ideas that architects have to offer, while answering the creative dreams of students and teachers? One challenge for government, education, and community leaders is to define the form, scale, and aesthetics of the 21st-century public school. To meet this challenge, it is imperative to bring educators, architects, and community members to the table to discuss the solution. Collaboration "creates real dialogue between architects and educators about how a building can help achieve a pedagogical goal."[1] The Chicago Public Schools Design Competition is a model for such collaboration. By cultivating a high level of engaged, active community input in the design of schools, the final architectural solutions demonstrated that urban school architecture can be at once intimate, innovative, practical, and affordable,

and, as a result, inspire school systems to be more thoughtful and intentional about new school design.

In the fall of 1999, representatives from Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI), Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) (both Chicago organizations that advocate more intimate learning environments), and Mayor Richard M. Daley's Office for People with Disabilities came together.[2] Together, the group ("the sponsors") was looking for creative and feasible ways to design innovative new school buildings that nurture student potential and reflect the communities in which they reside. Research demonstrates that students thrive in smaller learning environments that foster interaction and maximize interaction with the greater community.[3] Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have embraced the development of smaller schools since 1995. At the time of the Chicago Public Schools Design Competition, the rate of new school construction in the United States had reached a peak, surpassing the efforts of every previous generation in history. In 2000, over $21 billion was spent on schools nationwide, with nearly half of those dollars spent on over 700 new school buildings.

It was in the context of this unprecedented boom in new school construction and renovation that the sponsors began to discuss a school design competition to combine the best contemporary ideas in education reform and design for state-of-the-art educational environments. At the start of the competition there were approximately 100 small schools, including 13 charter schools, in Chicago.[4] Yet, CPS had not incorporated small school educational philosophy into their design process for new school prototype construction. Since its beginning in 1996, the Chicago Public Schools Capital Improvement Program has committed more than $2.6 billion towards improving CPS facilities.

The competition was based on a vision that schools should complement their neighborhood communities: that small schools can flourish, even in buildings serving 800 to 900 students; that school buildings should be accessible to all; that innovative, sustainable, and environmentally sensitive designs are possible within the constraints of a public budget. The competition focused on two separate sites, one each on the city's North and South

Sides. CPS officials promised to build the winning design for each site.[5] Each new school would accommodate students from two existing schools for an integrated population of 800 disabled and non-disabled students.

A primary objective of the competition was to engage the entire school community in the design process. Recognizing that schools are at the heart of a community, the competition's sponsors sought to create an approach that would capture input from those individuals and groups that best understood the needs of schools: the people who work, learn, and live in and around them. A steering committee comprising developers, financiers, architects, academics, advocates, educators, and funders was formed to guide the process.[6] The competition was designed as a two-stage process; the first stage featured both "invited" and "open" components. The "invited" component began with a Request for Proposals issued in July 2000 to a national group of architects. Four of these firms were chosen by a panel of architects, educators, and sponsor-representatives to advance to the second round.[7] The four "invited" architects were KoningEizenberg Architecture (Santa Monica), Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects (Atlanta), Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects (New York), and Ross Barney + Jankowski (Chicago). An open call, which was judged by a jury of national architects and community representatives,[8] was made in August 2000 inviting all architects and architecture students from around the world to submit designs and to compete for the four remaining "open" spaces in the competition.[9]

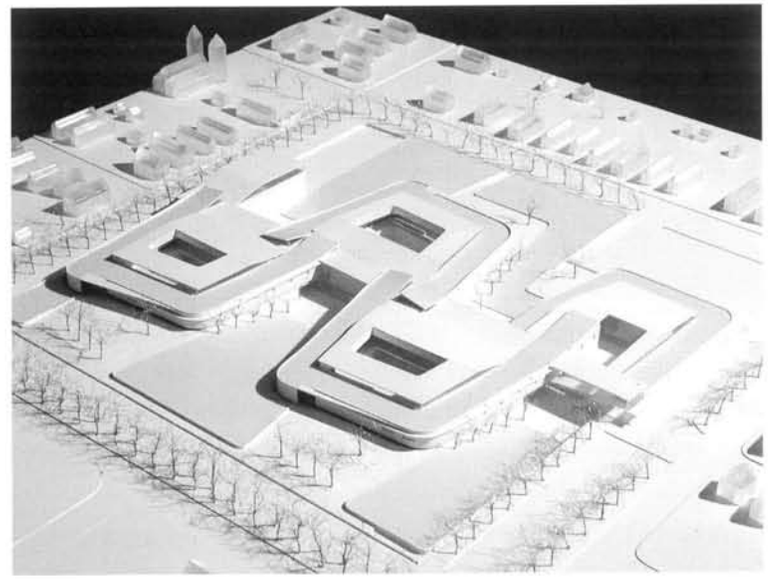
Once the eight finalists were identified, in January 2001, the second round began: an interactive community learning process before the completion of final designs, engaging the school community and the architectural firms in dialogues about architecture and education. Each of the new schools was to offer comprehensive programs that serve developmentally delayed, physically disabled, or otherwise health-impaired children. Architects and educators would need to address questions about the integration of these programs and the implications for both special facilities and classroom activities. In addition, three of the competition's central tenets—small schools, sustainability, and universal design—were new, unfamiliar concepts to the communities and, in some cases, the

architects involved in the competition. The interactive participation of school and neighborhood communities was critical in the development of designs that were sensitive to the individual character of each neighborhood setting.

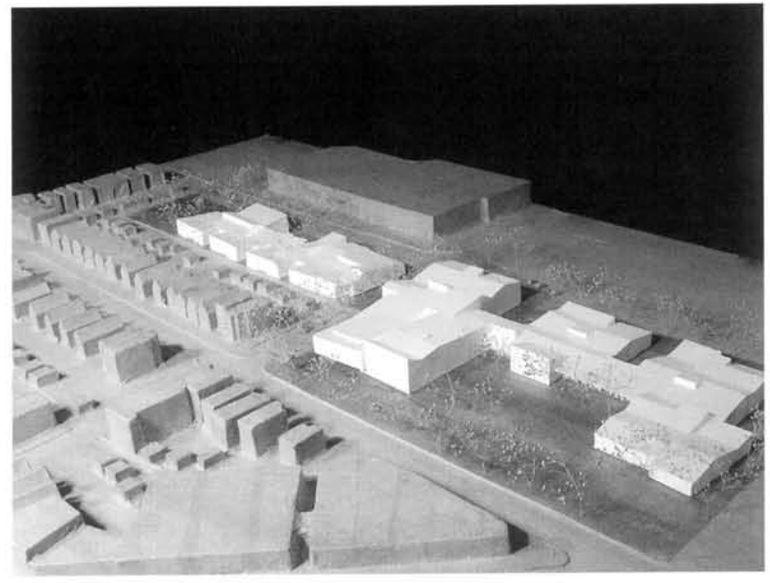
From the beginning, the sponsors solicited community input through school visits, task forces, community forums, and informal meetings, many of which directly involved the competition finalists. Hundreds of community members and architects turned out for these events. Undoubtedly, this approach was instrumental in the creation of strong and innovative designs that actively responded to the unique needs of the local communities. These events also served as catalysts for a greater awareness of sustainable and universal design principles within the larger Chicago architectural community.

The first forum introduced the school communities to the competition's main tenets.[10] The goal of a universal design school is to maximize functionality for all users while maintaining high architectural standards. This community forum also provided an opportunity to introduce small school philosophies and benefits to program participants. The architects were asked to produce designs that could easily facilitate the schools' organization into several small schools-within-schools. Given economies of scale and public building budgets, large urban schools broken into smaller units with shared central facilities are often the most realistic way to achieve intimate learning environments. Later forums enabled more direct interaction between the architects and the schools' constituents. At one forum, advisory panels from the four schools, local historians, and experts in the fields of green design, universal design, and small schools publicly discussed the merits of each design.

The architects who participated in this process felt that community feedback both changed their design ideas for the competition and impacted how they would conceive future work. Laurie Hawkinson of Smith-Miller + Hawkinson commented: "There are things we learned at the community forums—particularly about universal design—that changed us as architects, that changed the way we think about accessibility and that we will bring to our future projects." Architects learned



Marble · Fairbanks Architects' winning design for the South Side site.



KoningEizenberg Architecture's winning design for the North Side site.

Principal Rochelle Riddick meets with architects at the Davis Developmental Center.

Site visit to the Langston Hughes School.

important applications for these new ideas to be integrated into their methods of presentation and their general practice.

Community input prompted a range of changes to the original designs, from the addition of a community garden to energy-saving modifications. One winning team, Marble · Fairbanks Architects (New York), recognized that it would be important for the long-term flexibility and sustainability of the small schools to have direct connections with each other. Throughout the competition, it became clear that the intense level of community participation resulted in stronger, more responsive designs. The competition and numerous stages of discussion and revision encouraged an inclusive approach to the designs. Architects, school administrators, teachers, students, and parents collaborated to develop designs responsive to the needs of the school communities and the cultures of each neighborhood. Each group that participated in the competition had a unique perspective to contribute, and the public process ensured community impact on the final submissions. The superb winning designs, submitted by Marble · Fairbanks Architects and KoningEizenberg Architecture, are convincing evidence that a collaborative, community-focused process can produce stronger design results. The two designs have received national recognition and numerous architectural awards.[11]

Conclusion

> We felt, through the community process and the open nature of the competition, that we really came to view the other finalists as collaborators—not as competitors. And that is the future—not to protect ideas, but to put them out there to grow organically.
>
> —Scott Marble
> *Marble · Fairbanks Architects*

Beyond building two new schools for Chicago, the competition's sponsors sought to create a process that could serve as a model for other architects, educators, and community activists interested in building schools. The community process was an integral part of creating these innovative designs. Chicago Public Schools have promised to begin building the schools by the year 2004. Once built, the schools will truly be community centers, reflective of the neighborhoods in which they exist. The buildings themselves will help inspire and engage the people living in the community, while the teaching will enlighten those inside. Yet the true impact of the competition goes well beyond these two buildings. The work of the architects, who partnered with participating communities, sets a new standard for the community-based planning process for building schools. The competition triggered interest and discourse in the architecture community about the need to bring different voices into the creative process and how to build schools that support educational needs of the 21st century. The competition generated an enormous body of learning on blending educational and design innovation, while creating excitement nationally about the possibilities for public school architecture. Business and Professional People for the Public Interest will capture the lessons learned and highlight the innovative designs created for the competition in a publication to be released in the fall of 2002.[12] It is clear that the competition and the designs produced can serve as models for schools, communities, architects, policymakers, and others committed to thoughtful school design in the United States.