

Less Paving, More Paradise

Designing Schools as Gateways to Community,
Play, and Learning

DRAFT

SPEAKERS



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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Reframe school sites as gateways by prioritizing landscape, outdoor learning, and civic space over default parking and vehicular circulation models.
2. Apply architect-led strategies—including compact massing, vertical organization, and shared-use planning—to reduce site impacts while increasing community value.
3. Translate community and student input into actionable design decisions that influence site planning, outdoor learning integration, and long-term adaptability.
4. Advocate effectively with districts and municipalities to challenge conventional parking, zoning, and site standards in support of people-centered, future-ready school design.

AGENDA

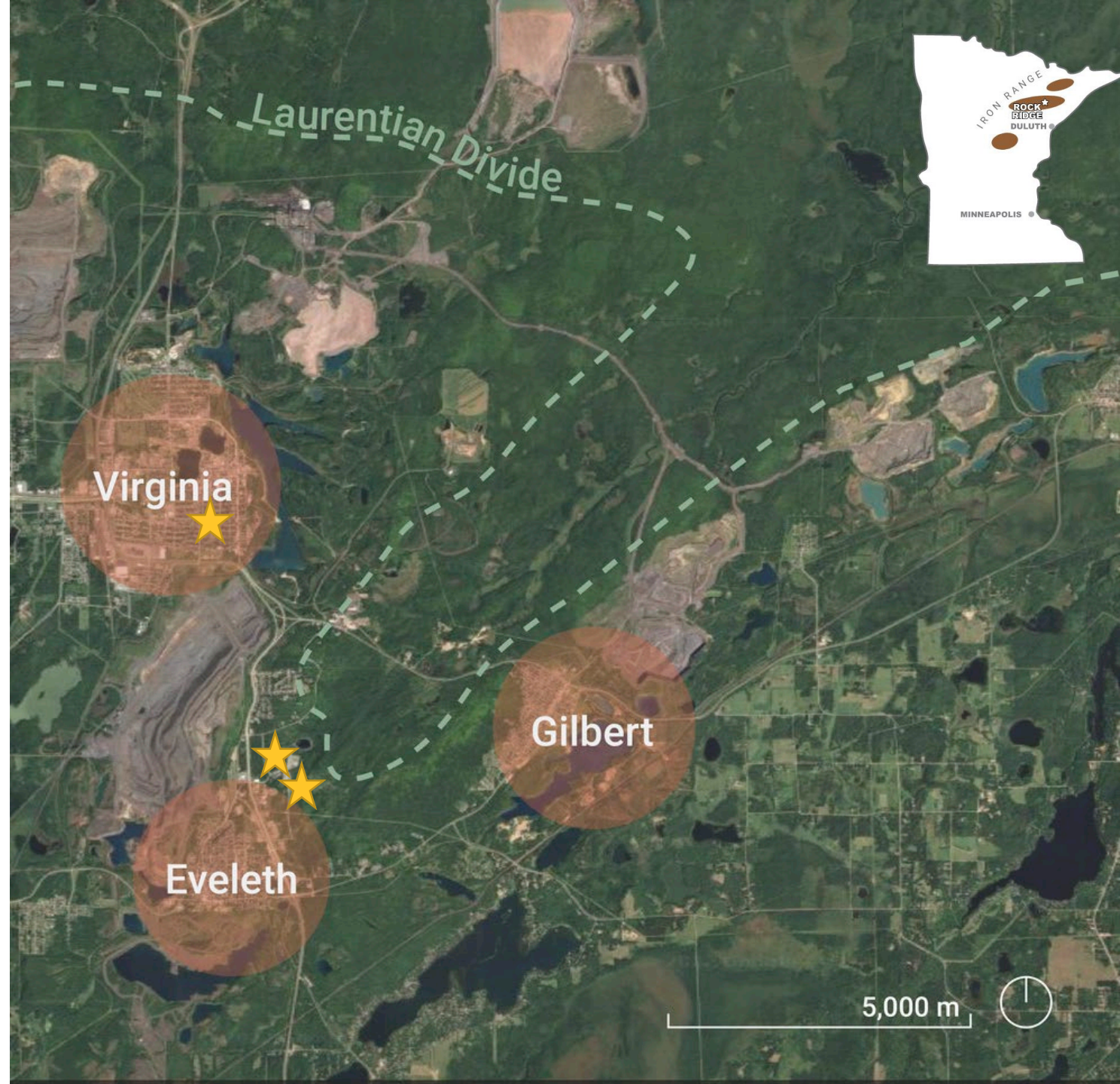
- 01** The Community's Vision
- 02** The Parking Paradigm
- 03** Reclaiming Green Space
- 04** Outcomes



The Community's Vision

District-Wide Challenges

- 2 rival school districts
- Serving 3 communities
- Facing:
 - Declining enrollment
 - Aging infrastructure
 - Escalating utility and maintenance bills



Rock Ridge Public Schools - Fiercely United



RRPS Vision

- An educational environment designed to inspire **passion and joy** for everyone
- **Collaborative educational experiences** with immediate real-world applications
- **Meaningful integration of community** into the daily education of students
- **Adaptable learning spaces** that will continually meet the needs of an ever-changing world



RRPS District



Parkview Elementary
PreK – 2nd Grade



Laurentian Elementary
PreK – 6th Grade



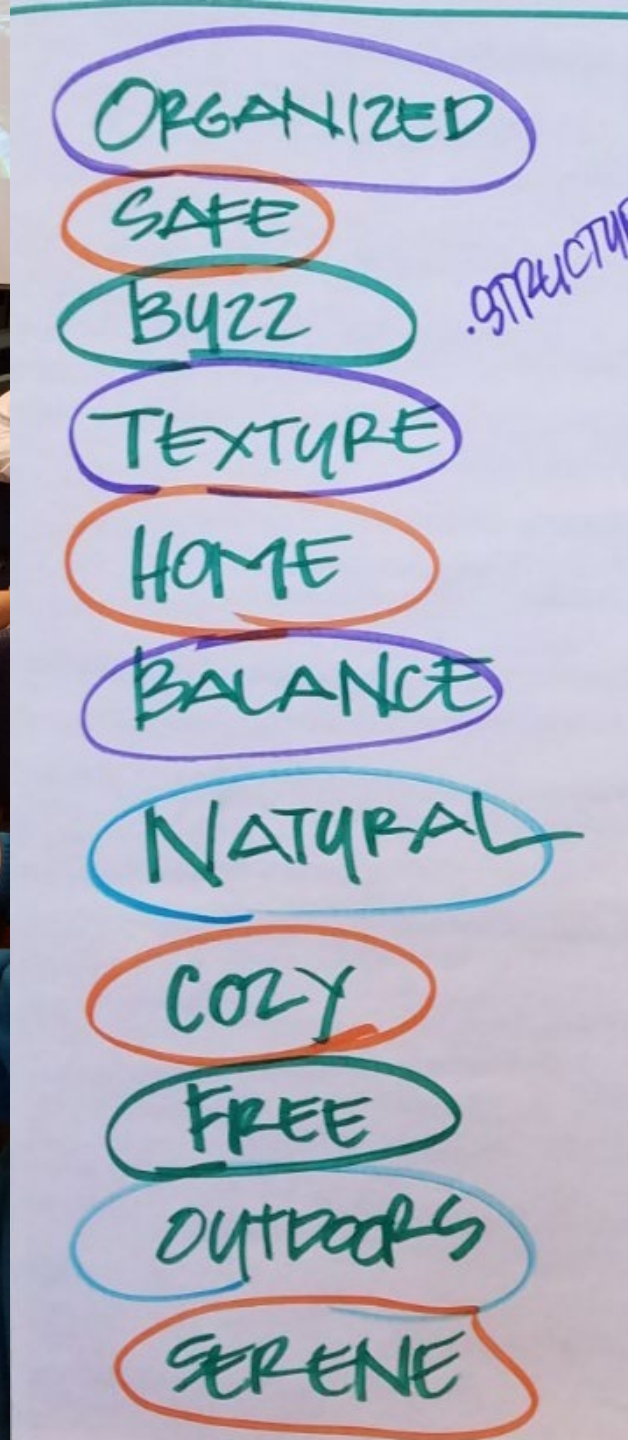
North Star Elementary
3rd – 6th Grade



Rock Ridge High School
6th Grade – 12th Grade

Community Engagement





ORGANIZED

SAFE

BUZZ

STRUCTURE

TEXTURE

HOME

BALANCE

NATURAL

COZY

FREE

OUTDOORS

SERENE

Nature at the heart of Iron Range pride

VIRGINIA THINGS TO DO



MINNESOTA IRON RANGE CROSS COUNTRY SKIING: 170MI OF ADVENTURE

You'll find serenity on our trails and we promise to keep them well-groomed and ready for you! Iron Range winters can be long and snowy, and we've adapted to make...

[LEARN MORE →](#)



THE BEST MINNESOTA SNOWMOBILING: TRAILS, MAPS, AND CONDITIONS

There's no reason not to love the Mesabi snowmobile trails. Northern Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range makes a great hub to explore points east, west and north from sun-up to sundown. Well-groomed and signed, our trails get you away from traffic...

[LEARN MORE →](#)



BEST MINNESOTA MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS: RIDE THE IRON RANGE

Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range is finding its groove with mountain biking. A world-class system of nearly 25 miles at Redhead Mountain Bike Park in Chisholm and an ever-growing resort trail system that includes lift-served gravity trails...

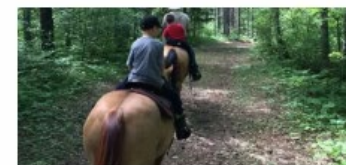
[LEARN MORE →](#)



BEST OHV AND ATV TRAILS IN MINNESOTA – IRON RANGE

The Iron Range in northern Minnesota is a paradise for off-road enthusiasts, offering some of the best ATV and OHV trails in the state. From rocky climbs to muddy adventures...

[LEARN MORE →](#)



HORSEBACK RIDING

Horseback riding on the Iron Range is arguably the best way to experience the natural scenic beauty that can be found along our many miles of horse trails. What could be better than breathing in the crisp fall air while riding a leafy path...

[LEARN MORE →](#)



SUPERIOR NATIONAL FOREST

Nearly half of the land that stretches across the Iron Range is designated Public Land. The arrowhead region of Northern Minnesota is home to the Superior National Forest's 3 million...

[LEARN MORE →](#)



UNIQUE HIKING TRAILS

There's a lot to see when you hike the Range. You don't have to look far to find unique hiking trails that include stunning natural and manmade landscapes. Don't forget...

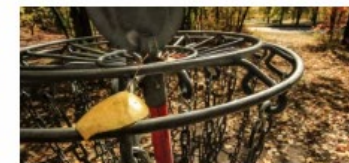
[LEARN MORE →](#)



AWARD-WINNING GOLF

The Midwest's best golf awaits. Here, great golf is combined with great value, making Minnesota's Iron Range one of the best places to hit the links, experience the rugged north...

[LEARN MORE →](#)



DISC GOLF

Where can you hit eight disc golf courses in a matter of days, all within 5-10 miles of each other? On the Range! Let's start our disc golf tour, and...

[LEARN MORE →](#)

Goals for North Star Elementary

1. Create flexible and adaptable student-centered learning environments
2. Restore green space and outdoor play opportunities
3. Reinforce the district's civic presence within the community on a historic downtown block





The Parking Paradigm

The Old Paradigm

Parking-First Planning

Sites optimized for vehicular flow, not people

Outdoor Learning Where it Fits

Green space and play fit into the extra spaces

Disconnection from Place

Schools as isolated campuses, not civic anchors

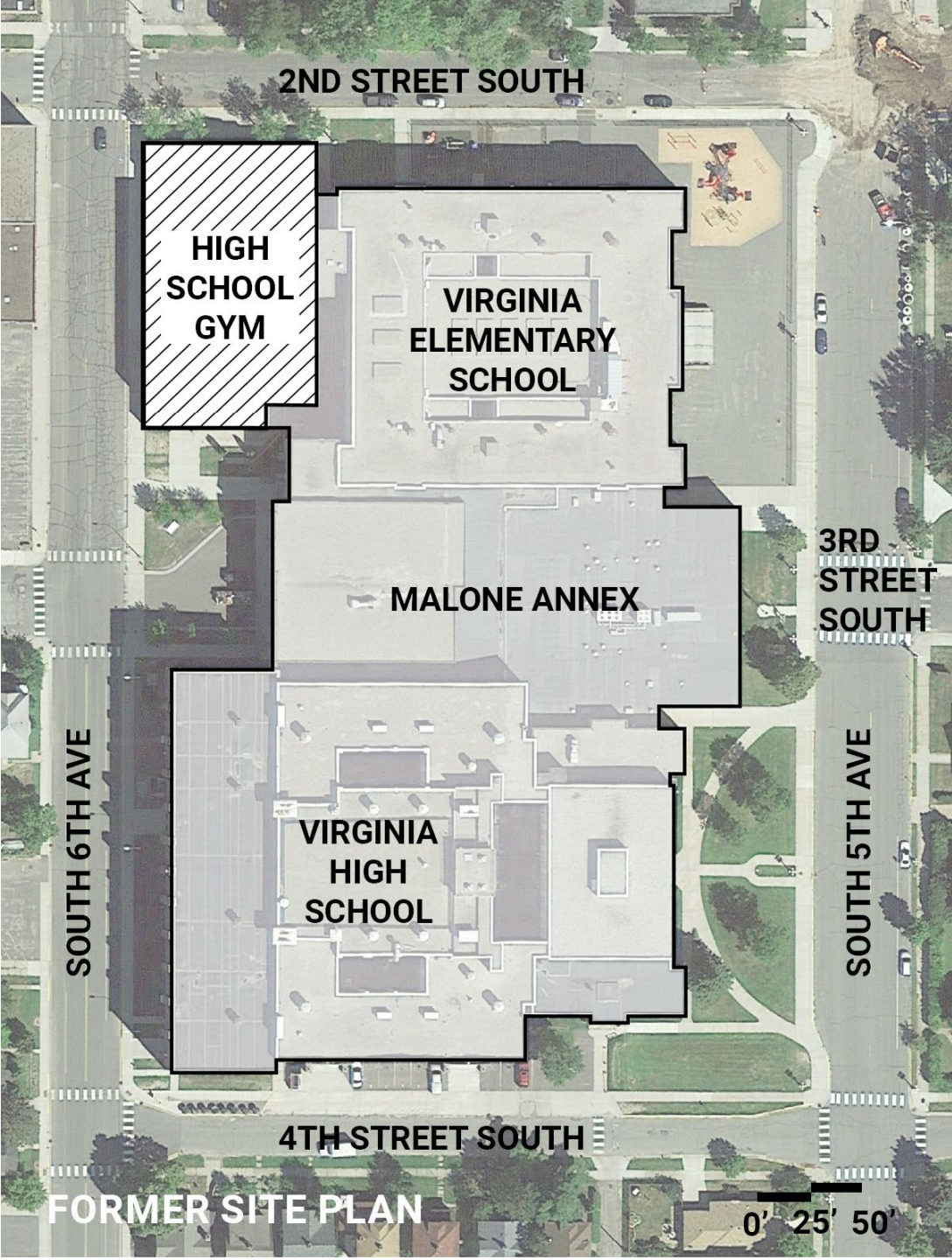




Infrastructure Challenges

- Failing building systems
- Not energy efficient
- Not accessible
- Floor levels didn't align with the gym or HS
- Unused space due to declining enrollment
- Lacking outdoor space





2ND STREET SOUTH

HIGH SCHOOL GYM

VIRGINIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

MALONE ANNEX

VIRGINIA HIGH SCHOOL

3RD STREET SOUTH

SOUTH 6TH AVE

SOUTH 5TH AVE

4TH STREET SOUTH

FORMER SITE PLAN

0' 25' 50'

% Impervious Area

% Tree Canopy

% Outdoor Play

SITE DIAGRAM

SILVER LAKE

ROUCHLEAU PIT

CITY LIBRARY

COUNTY OFFICES

SITE

COUNTY COURTHOUSE

BUSINESS DISTRICT

RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT

3RD STREET SOUTH AXIS



Why Think Differently

- Mental Health
- Student Engagement
- Climate Resilience
- Community Connection
- Urban Reinvestment





Reclaiming Green Space

**How might we create both
a school and a
community asset?**

Design Drivers

1. Compact Building Footprint

Vertical stacking freed up the site for outdoor use

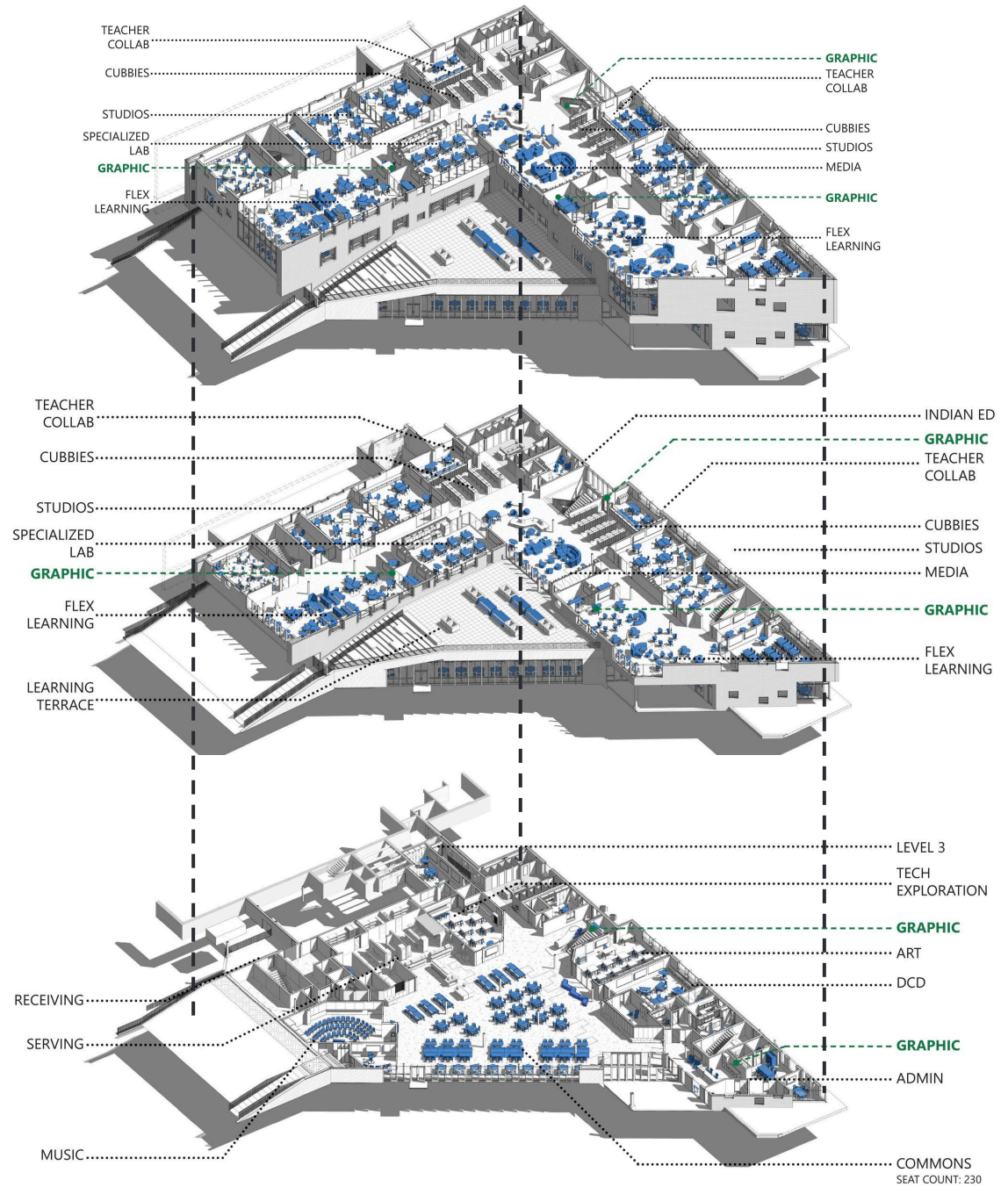
2. Reduced Surface Parking

Right-sized with shared use strategies

3. Network of Outdoor Environments

Purpose built environments for learning and community use

1. Compact Building Footprint



2. Reduced Surface Parking



Parking + Vehicular Footprint



Public Green Space

Existing Zoning Ordinance: Parking

“One parking space for each two employees including teachers and administrators, plus sufficient off-street space for the safe and convenient loading and unloading of students, plus such additional facilities for student parking as the Council shall deem necessary.”

Ownership
Use

Ownership
Use

Ownership
Use

Ownership
Use

Site Parking Locations



DISCOVERY/PLAY FOCUS



NATURE PLAY

- Slides and climbing elements
- Jumping, tunnels, and balancing elements
- Natural materials

HARDSCAPE PLAY



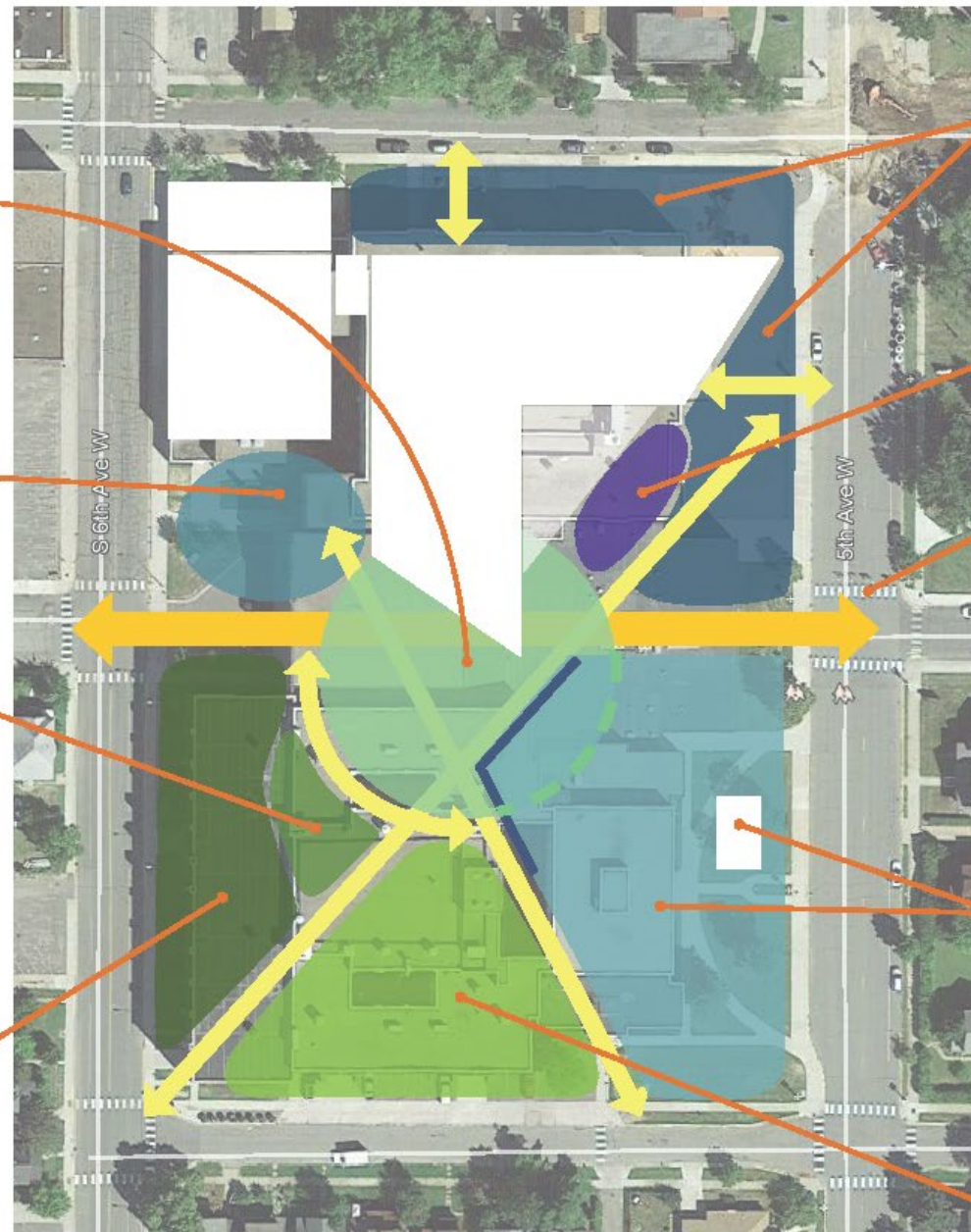
OUTDOOR LEARNING PAVILION

- Interpretive elements
- Integrated with play and discovery



COMMUNITY SPACE

- Community gardens
- Tree nursery program
- Public art



FRONT ENTRY PLAZA

- Pollinator gardens
- Water feature
- Outdoor learning spaces
- Interpretive elements

OUTDOOR CAFETERIA SEATING



CENTRAL CORRIDOR WALK

- Food trucks
- Seating



LAWN AND AMPHITHEATER

- Grassy hill and lawn for amphitheater seating and sledding
- Band shell for music/theater in the park and other community events
- Retaining wall on west side part of nature play

FIELD/FLEX LAWN

Site Plan Concepts: Discovery and Play Focus

NATURAL SYSTEMS FOCUS



STORMWATER SWALE OVERLOOK

- Overlook and outdoor learning space
- Water access for learning opportunities
- Interpretive elements

HARDSCAPE & NATURE PLAY



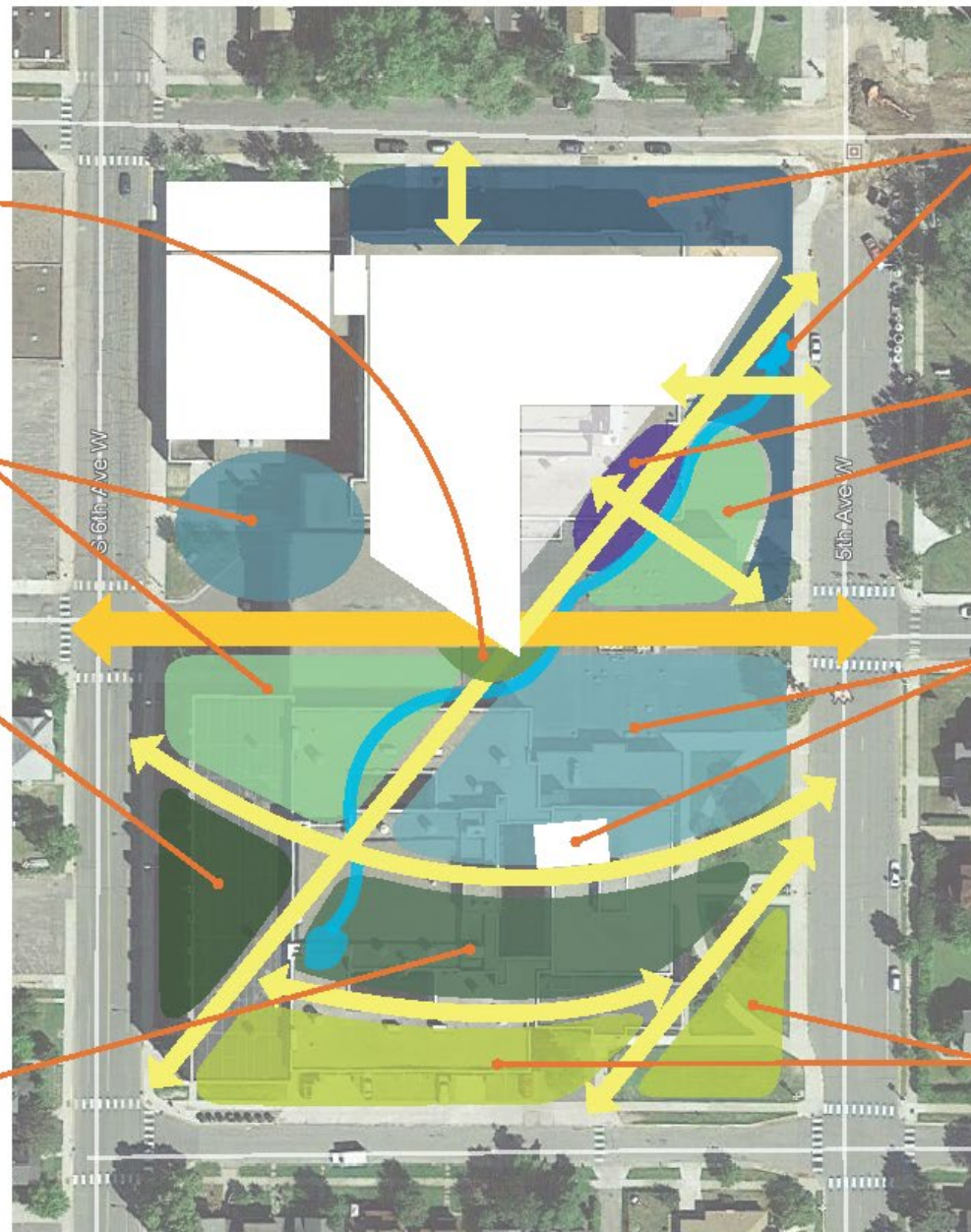
FOREST GROVE INTERPRETIVE LOOP

- Forested with mature trees
- Interpretive elements



NATIVE TREE NURSERY & GARDEN

- Native tree nursery program and community garden
- Community hub pavilion with tool shed
- Outdoor learning space with demonstration kitchen



FRONT ENTRY PLAZA

- Native and pollinator gardens
- Water feature
- Stormwater infiltration swale
- Interpretive elements

OUTDOOR CAFETERIA SEATING

NATURE PLAY



COMMUNITY MEADOW

- Amphitheater and flex lawn
- Pollinator gardens at perimeter



NATIVE PRAIRIE INTERPRETIVE LOOP

- Mounded earthwork for sledding and winter activities
- Interpretive elements

COMMUNITY ART FOCUS



HARDSCAPE & NATURE PLAY

- Court/hard-top play
- Nature play with natural materials



ART WALK

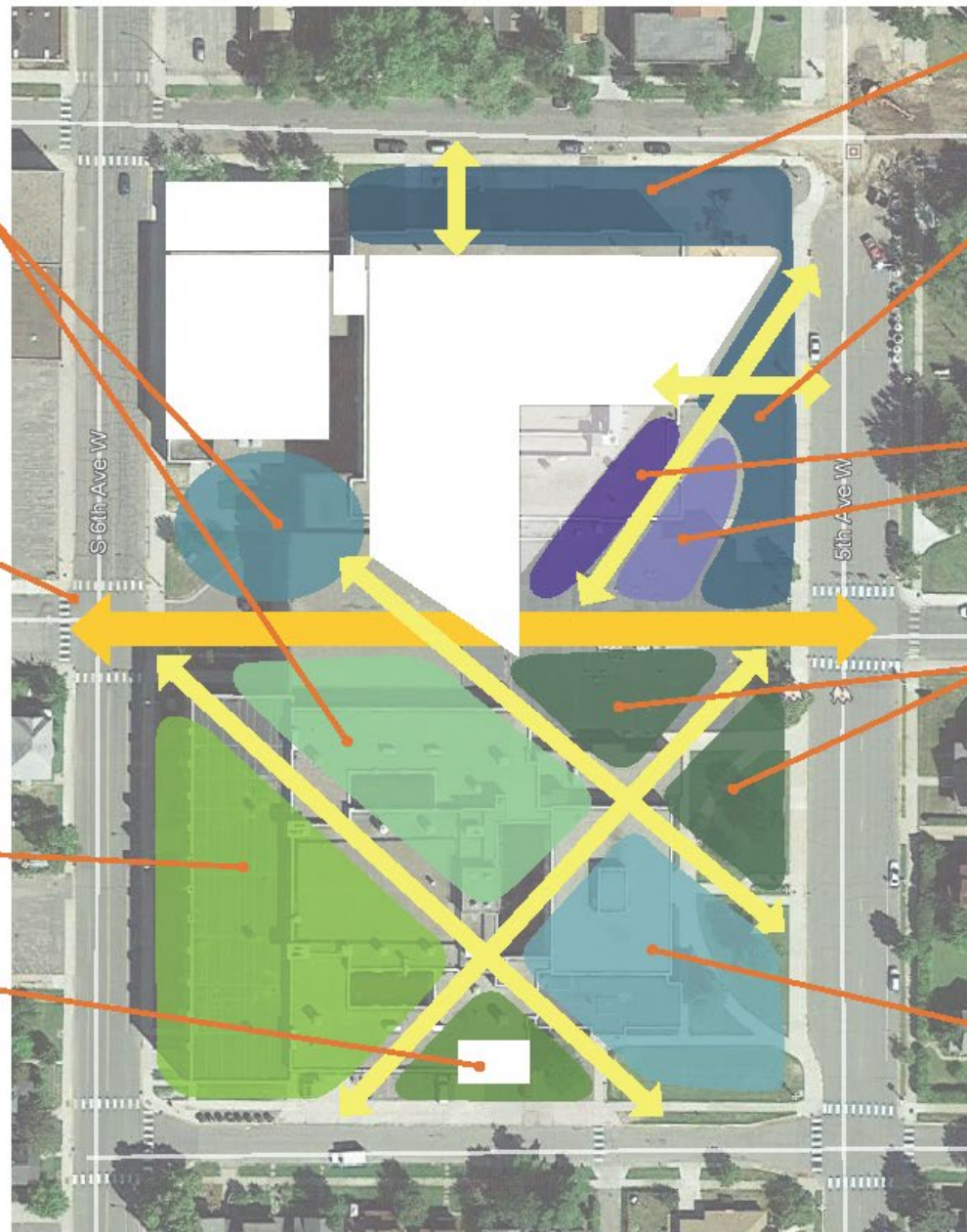
- Interactive art elements
- Makers/Farmers Market Stalls
- Outdoor learning spaces

FIELD/FLEX LAWN



MAKER SPACE PAVILION

- Community art space
- Outdoor learning space



DONOR/ALUMNI RECOGNITION



FRONT ENTRY PLAZA

- Rotating student gallery
- Gardens and stormwater feature

OUTDOOR CAFETERIA SEATING

OUTDOOR PERFORMANCE SPACE



TREE NURSERY & COMMUNITY GARDEN

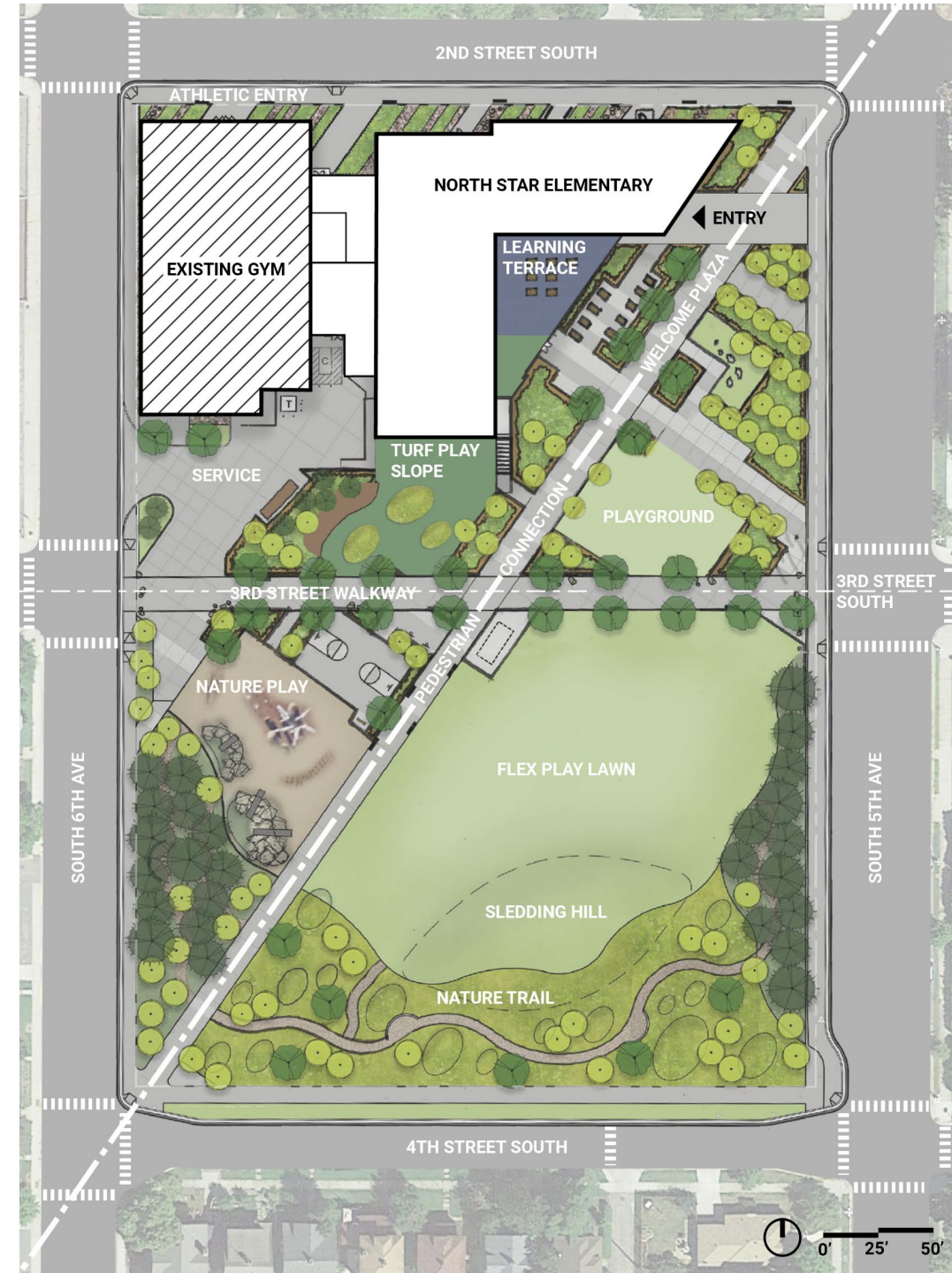
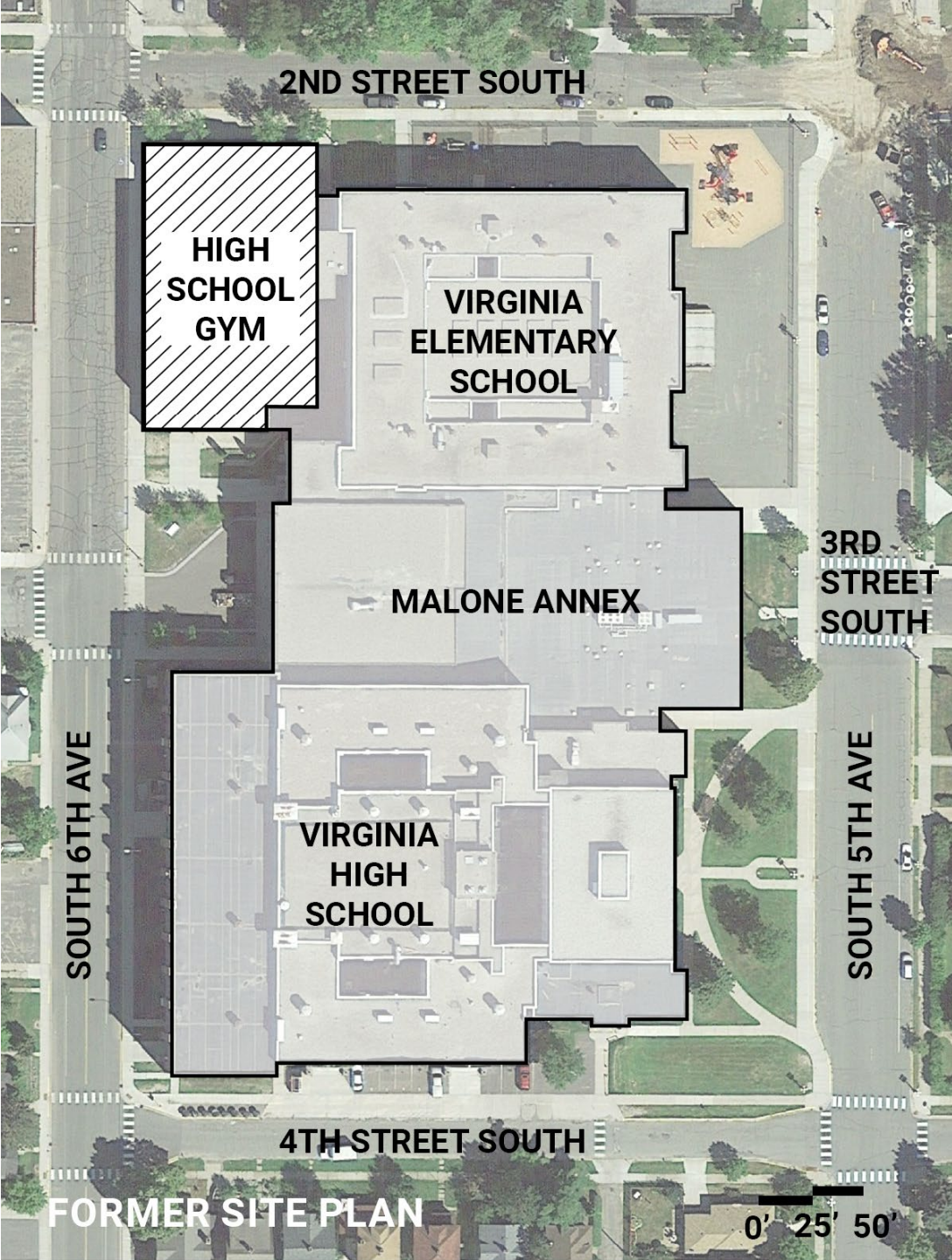
- Community gardens and tree nursery program
- Log sculpture with trees harvested from lake

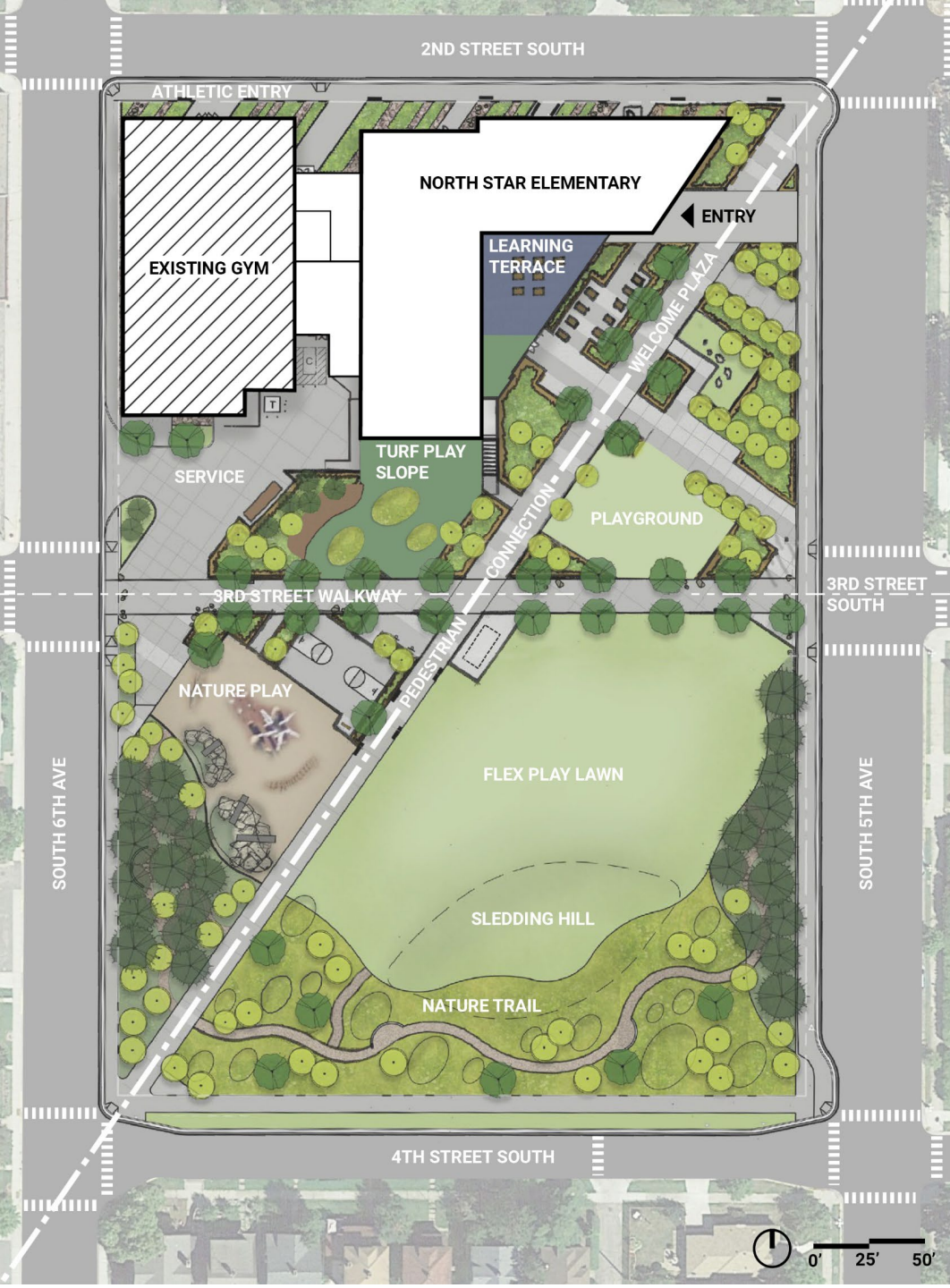


LAND ART & SCULPTURE GARDEN

- Earthwork for active play and sledding/winter activities
- Community and commissioned artwork
- Interpretive elements

Site Plan Concepts: Community Art Focus





% Impervious Area

% Tree Canopy

% Outdoor Play



Outcomes



Three-story Massing: Optimizing Green Space









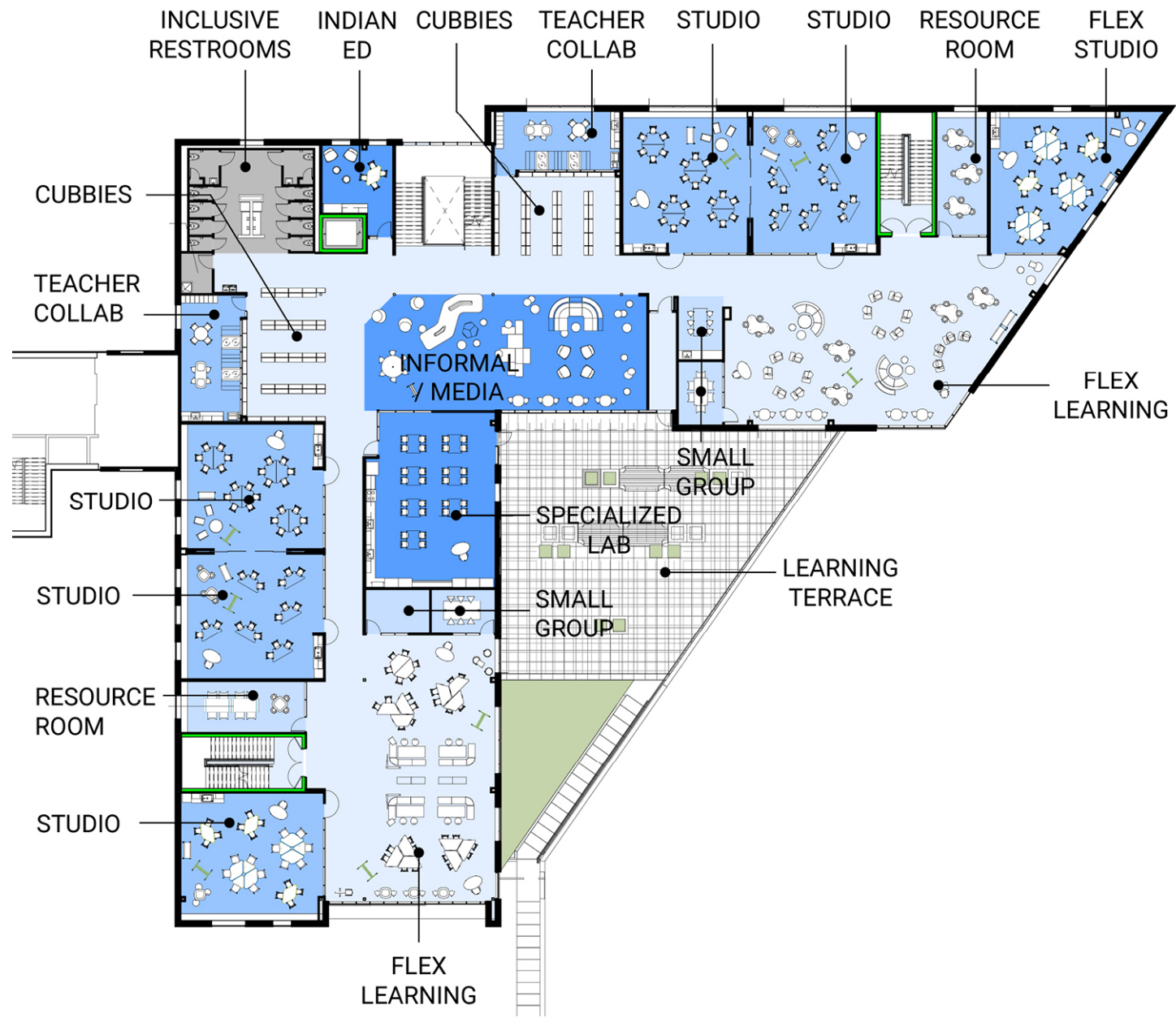


The main building features a dark brown vertical-slat facade. It has a large glass window on the right side and several smaller windows on the left. The number '224' is visible on one of the windows. The building is set on a grassy hillside.

A smaller building with a light-colored brick facade and a large glass window. It is connected to the main building by a set of stairs with a metal railing.

A grassy hillside with several children playing. A wide set of stairs with a metal railing leads up to the building. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds.

Other school buildings and an American flag are visible in the background. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds.



Second Story: Outdoor Learning



328

228

313

313

413

312

212

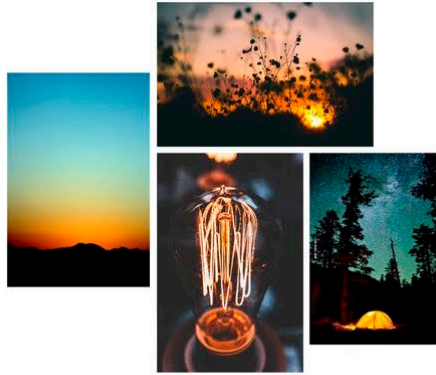




PRIDE



BRIGHT



WELCOMING



NATURAL



INSPIRING





The material palette for North Star Elementary is inspired by the natural character of its surroundings—reflecting the tones and textures of lakes, trees, and open skies to create a warm, grounded learning environment. **Interior and exterior materials are integrated into one cohesive palette**, blurring the boundary between inside and outside and fostering a seamless experience throughout the building and site. Wood tones, natural hues, and materials that tie to the surrounding context work together to reinforce a strong connection to place while creating spaces that feel calm, welcoming, and enduring.













North Star Elementary's Impact

- Reinforced civic presence as a dynamic centerpiece of downtown Virginia
- Created student-centered learning environments that further the community's vision for education

Strategies

1 Advocate for Site-First Thinking

- Lead with landscape
- Position outdoor space as learning infrastructure
- Challenge 'parking-first' mindset

2 Reframe Code Constraints

- Negotiate shared-use parking agreements
- Right-size to actual needs
- Use compact massing to free land for outdoor use

3 Translate Input into Design

- Map engagement themes to site program
- Prototype outdoor spaces with staff and student feedback
- Build long-term adaptability into site

4 Determine Measures of Success

- Frame outdoor learning in measurable outcomes
- Show ROI: civic value, wellness, community identity
- Connect sustainability and equity goals



**What are you
curious about?**

Thank You

