

Larchmont Schools @ Lafayette Park



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Executive Summary

The site for the Larchmont Schools 8-12 grade campus provides a stable, permanent home where educators and leaders can plan for the future while supporting the school's goals of collaborative, project-based learning, diversity in its student body and outreach to the community.

The Larchmont Schools are served by four campuses, enrolling over 1500 children in grades TK-12. School leaders were committed to finding a permanent home for grades 8-12 that would both reflect and support the mission of the organization as a whole.

The site search was itself a time for introspection and reflection on the part of the school community. A central location, well-served by public transportation, remained important to allow the diverse school community convenient access to the new campus. With a limited budget available in an expensive real estate market, a strategy was devised to pursue a densely occupied site of flexible spaces able to leverage neighborhood amenities, including a newly renovated park, library and athletic facility, to complete the vision of a well-rounded educational environment.

The school is an adaptive reuse of a mid-century office building by noted architect Welton Becket & Associates, located in the corridor known as Los Angeles' 'linear downtown.' Once an elegant insurance company headquarters, the innovative shell of the building offered the opportunity for light-filled classrooms of operable windows with views both across the building interior and outward toward the city. The goal was to reinforce these exceptional opportunities while undertaking the complete modernization and reconfiguration of a repetitive office interior and dated, outmoded environmental systems.

This project is presented as a template for a vertical, urban high school able to enrich this interactive, collaborative learning model and advance the organization's goals of community involvement.



New York Life Insurance Headquarters, Julius Shulman photograph, 1957

presence reestablished, 2017



Scope of Work + Budget

Transforming a four-story commercial office building from the 1950s into a contemporary, healthy and energy-efficient school site presented fundamental challenges. To complicate things, decades of insensitive renovations and poor maintenance programs needed to be addressed and undone.

The project entailed a complete renovation of the building interior, including new systems, lighting and finishes, along with a completely reconfigured floor plan. The vintage custom aluminum curtain wall including its operable windows was repaired and reused.

- complete asbestos and other hazardous material abatement
- complete floor plan reconfiguration, including circulation systems, to provide daylight and passive ventilation throughout each classroom
- complete upgrade of lighting with energy efficient fixtures and dynamic daylight-responsive controls
- MEP modernization
- acoustics upgrades
- accessibility upgrades
- new finishes throughout, utilizing recycled and recyclable materials

site description:	existing four-story office building on dense urban corner
site square footage:	32,200 s.f
project square footage:	34,000 s.f. adaptive reuse
program:	23 classrooms for 600 students, grades 8-12
construction cost:	\$2,891,300
cost / s.f.:	\$85 / s.f.



building interiors as found



new multipurpose room

School + Community Engagement

“We believe our schools are not isolated entities in our neighborhoods, but instead are an integral part of the broader community. By bringing the community into our schools and engaging our students in the community around them, we help our students make deep connections between themselves, their families, the city at large and communities beyond their city borders.”

Diverse by Design

The school is unusual among local public schools in that its charter outlines a vision for a mixed socio-economic model, allowing it to draw enrollment from across the city. The result is an integrated student body comprising a mixture of Title 1 (45%) and middle-class students as well a broad range of ethnic and cultural identifications within the school community. Involvement, communication and collaboration are essential to allowing this diverse range of voices to feel seen and heard.



Stakeholder Involvement

A process of outreach with numerous community presentations engaged teachers' and families' concerns on a wide range of topics. Concurrent feasibility studies made clear the limitations imposed by the available budget and constraints inherent in the size of the project site.

Out of these conversations, along with an openness to creative problem-solving, a model emerged for a dense, four-story school that would allow for flexibility and overlap of program, and provide opportunities for collaboration to both students and educators. Additional feedback underscored the importance of providing spaces where parents and volunteers could contribute, participating in the curriculum and the life of the school.



pedagogical building section



parents' night

Beyond the School Site

“Constructivism is a theory of learning which holds that each of us has a unique schema of the world based on our lived experience. By interacting with our environment, we make connections to what we already know and construct new meaning.”

The school’s constructivist, project-based learning model supports a facility strategy that reaches beyond the classroom in support of real life, community-based examples and interactions. The site surrounding this building provides numerous public resources to be leveraged for the student community: a recently renovated park across the street with new athletic fields; a recreation center including a gymnasium; and a restored historic public library building with updated information systems and amenities.

The neighborhood is home to several other schools, allowing for extra-curricular collaborations and facility sharing, as well as other education-centered non-profit organizations. The central location is well-served by both rapid buses and a subway line, ensuring the campus is available to members of the community and its stakeholders, and supporting continuity of the student body all the way through high school graduation.

Availability of these local amenities enriches the life of the student body, while active engagement of the school community here has helped energize a reemerging neighborhood.



community institution connections

school athletics in Lafayette Park



Educational Environment

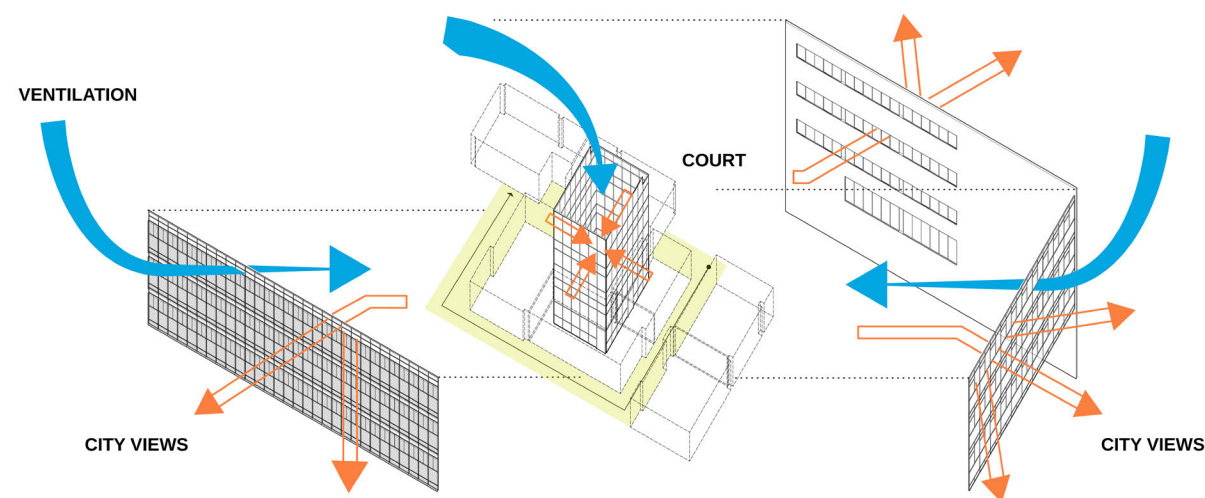
“We foster creativity and academic excellence; our students learn with and from each other in an experience-centered, inquiry-based learning environment.”

The Mid-Century Office Building

Innovative elements of this unusually forward-looking building allowed our reconfiguration and adaptive reuse to align with and support the school's progressive educational model.

The south and east facades are enclosed with a period, custom-designed aluminum curtain wall with operable windows. The south side is protected with a brise-soleil to mitigate the often-harsh Southern California sun. At the building's center an open-air courtyard offers daylighting and airflow but also an opportunity for cross-building visual communication.

Restoring these elements was at the center of creating a 21st Century educational facility. Circulation on classroom floors was reset to the south face, with generous daylight and views of the city. Extra width transforms the hallway into a social space – the ‘gallery’ – utilized by students for rehearsal space, art presentations, and importantly, chance encounters. East side classrooms have daylight, fresh air and views to the city skyline while a group of interior-focused classrooms, clustered around the court, foster a sense of community with shared access to light and air.



On a daily basis students engage urban issues around public space, architectural history and hands-on experience with innovative environmental controls as they make their way to class.

Resourcefulness is at work throughout the school site. While some spaces, such as science labs, were designed and constructed for a specific use, most classrooms are continually repurposed. Smaller classrooms might accommodate a specialized AP class for certain periods and then be available for group meetings or research work at other times.

The multipurpose room serves as the lunchroom, community meeting room and performance space; the music and theater classrooms sharing the ground floor become rehearsal spaces and dressing rooms when school productions occur.



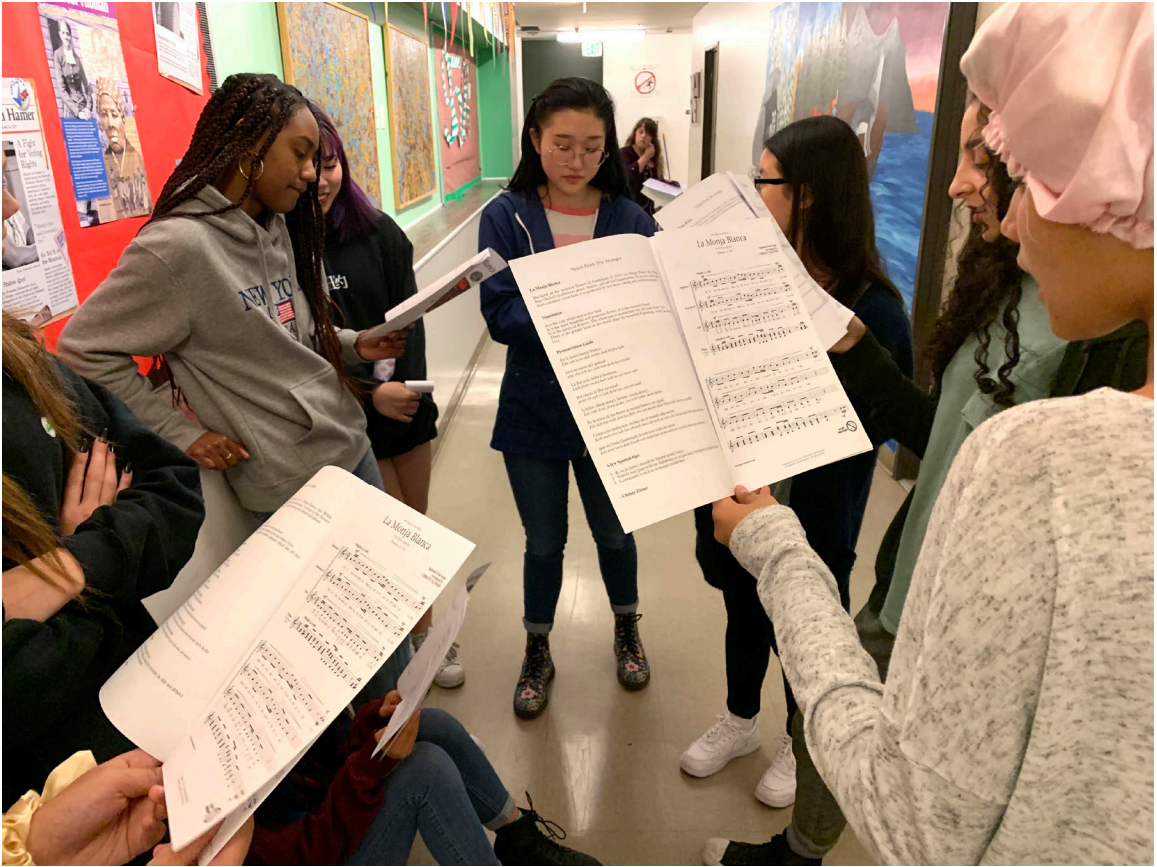
gallery activated

theater class in the age of Zoom



On site, outdoor areas are repurposed for athletics and additional assemblies, both planned and spontaneous. An Edible Schoolyard program, initiated under the direction of famed chef Alice Waters, continues to thrive with planting beds at the base of the central court. That harvest forms the basis for science-based cooking classes making use of the prep kitchen after breakfast and lunch have been served.

Similarly, the active theater arts and choir programs utilize flexible spaces on campus for practice and rehearsals of larger-scale performances that are staged at neighboring community venues. Students acquire skills demanded by full-scale production facilities and experience interaction with a larger and more diverse public audience. In these instances, the learning model comes full circle, with the school site serving as incubator for ongoing learning and engagement with a larger audience and the city as a whole.



spontaneous choir practice in the hallway

choir in the community



Physical Environment

Transforming a vintage commercial office building into a progressive urban high school required drastic intervention in its layout, circulation and systems to meet contemporary standards and pedagogical goals.

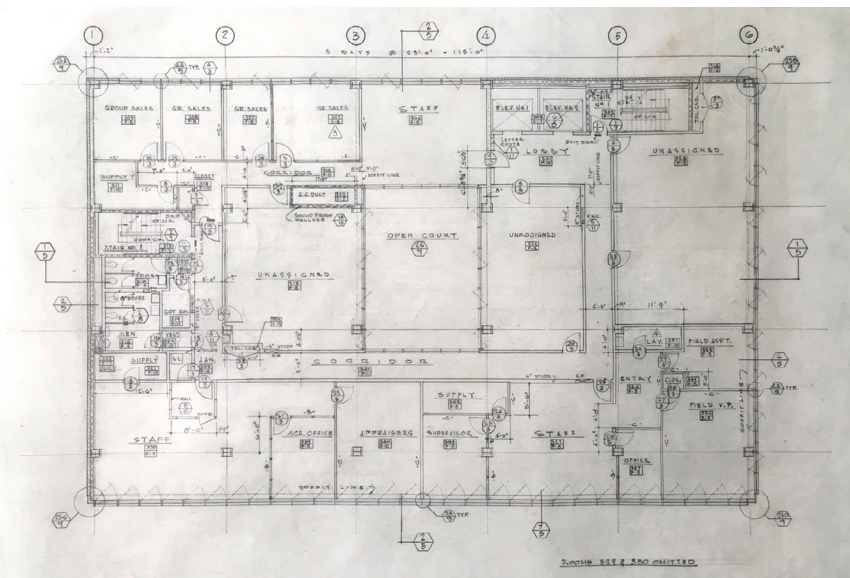
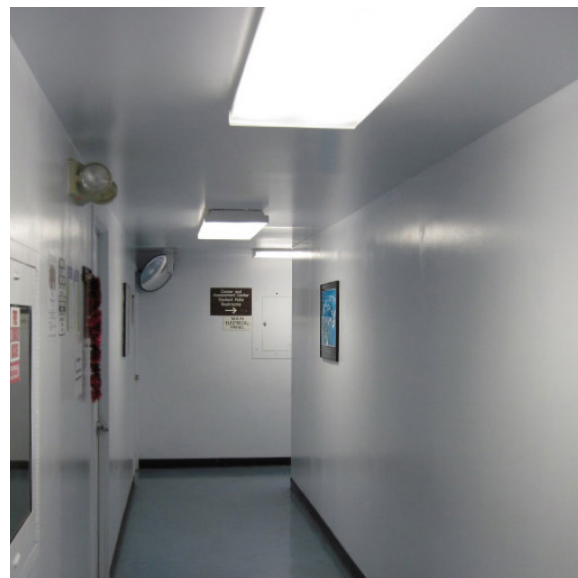
Each classroom was designed with significant daylight and natural ventilation, taking advantage of both the building's generous window walls and a small footprint that renders all spaces close to the exterior. Noise transmission and reverberation were addressed with new construction assemblies in both plan and section to provide focused teaching spaces. Understanding and leveraging the effects of these environmental factors on learning has improved student attention and performance and created classrooms students thrive in.

We shifted the central corridor to the south edge of the building to consolidate classrooms around the open-air court, buffer them from surrounding street noise, and bring character to a space in which students spend valuable time learning social skills – the hallway. This change, along with proposed one-way circulation in the stair towers (one up, one down) provides a continuous flow and mixing of students between classes.

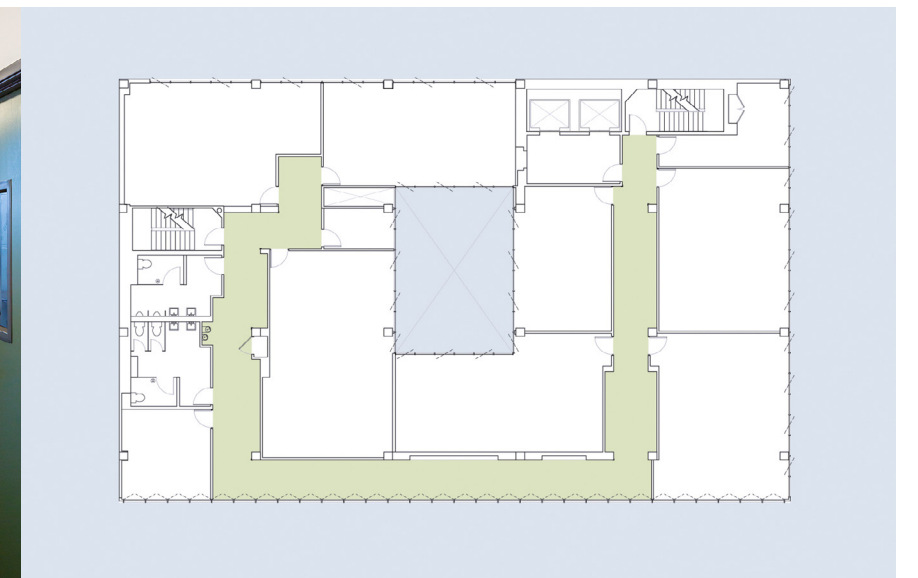


corner classroom

hallway before: original floor plan, New York Life Insurance



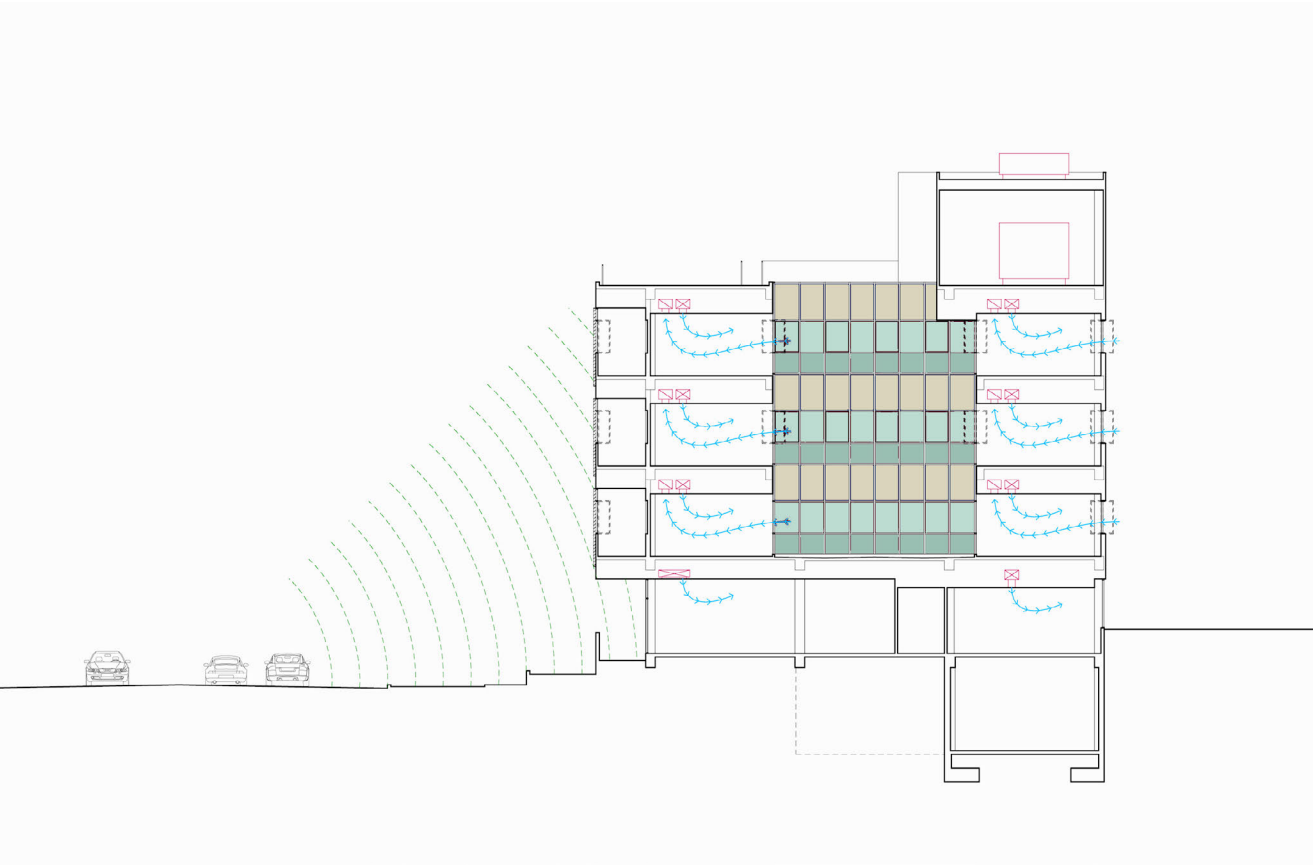
hallway after: Larchmont Charter School



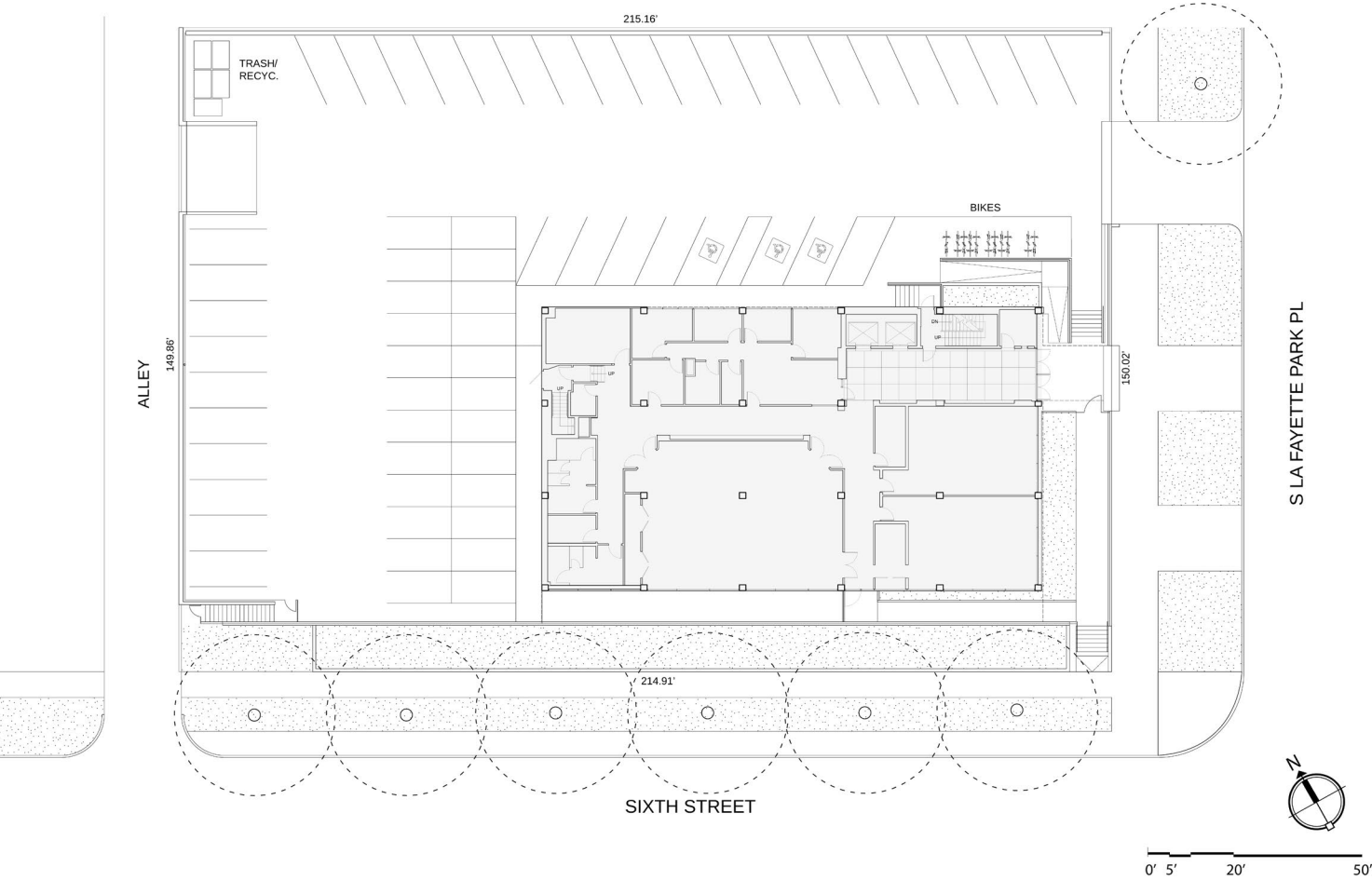
A large multipurpose room serving as cafeteria, assembly room, and performance space was inserted on the ground floor, with only a single load-bearing column interrupting the volume, cleverly accommodating the small structural grid. Simple Tectum acoustic panels provide sound control and light reflectivity in the open-ceiling space, and up-down luminaires allow for lighting configurations that support the different uses of the space.

Given the school's limited budget for rehabilitating this structure, sustainability upgrades were focused on the efficiency of lighting and mechanical systems. Collaborative for High Performance Schools (CHPS) standards were used as guidelines for the work, focusing on benchmarks for energy efficiency and Indoor Environmental Quality. The simple, effective and low-cost solutions utilized in these spaces demonstrate creative problem-solving and provide a valuable pedagogical opportunity to the students learning in them.

sustainability section



Taking advantage of the usually mild Los Angeles climate, outdoor space is treated as an integral part of the campus, even with a substantial portion dedicated to pavement for mandated parking. The significance of the initial site selection is demonstrated in the extensive utilization of the adjacent park and neighborhood for physical education, along with the other opportunities for linking to and engaging the surrounding area, as the students regularly travel off-campus and are visible fixtures in the community.



activating the pavement



asphalt field hockey

Results of the Process + Outcomes

The adaptive reuse of this building to a grade 8-12 school site is the realization of a 21st century campus in the heart of the city: modern, sustainable, flexible, open to its environment and supportive of a diverse, involved community of stakeholders.

The opening of this site has provided stability and continuity to its community. The socio-economically, culturally and racially diverse school draws its student body from across a wide geographic boundary. The completion of this centrally located, permanent campus has allowed the school to grow, to fully develop its pedagogical model and the students benefiting from this progressive public education to flourish.



midcentury + contemporary eras interlace

success stories



The physical school site plays an important role in the success of this educational experiment. Vertical organization of subjects supports a grade-clustering approach that reinforces the constructivist philosophy of education. Flexible utilization of spaces reinforces resourcefulness, hands-on learning and interdisciplinarity. The leveraging of publicly available amenities introduces students at an important age to means for engaging the world at large.

Statistics also tell the story:

- the campus is a 2021 California Distinguished School
- ranked in the top 6% of high schools nationally by U.S. News and World Report
- 97% graduation rate
- 90% college acceptance rate; 40% of those are first-generation college students
- class of 2017 was 47 students; class of 2021 grew to 105 due to increased reputation, stability and retention
- projected class growth to 150 by 2024

The success of this project is most importantly measured in the satisfaction felt among educators, administrators and families, and in the achievements of the students on a daily basis.

