



CARROLL ROBBINS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DESIGN COMPETITION

A MODEL PROCESS FOR PARTICIPATORY COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

CITY OF TRENTON
AND
ELLEN SHOSHKES PhD. COMPETITION DIRECTOR



Carroll Robbins Elementary School Design Competition

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Carroll Robbins Elementary School Design Competition

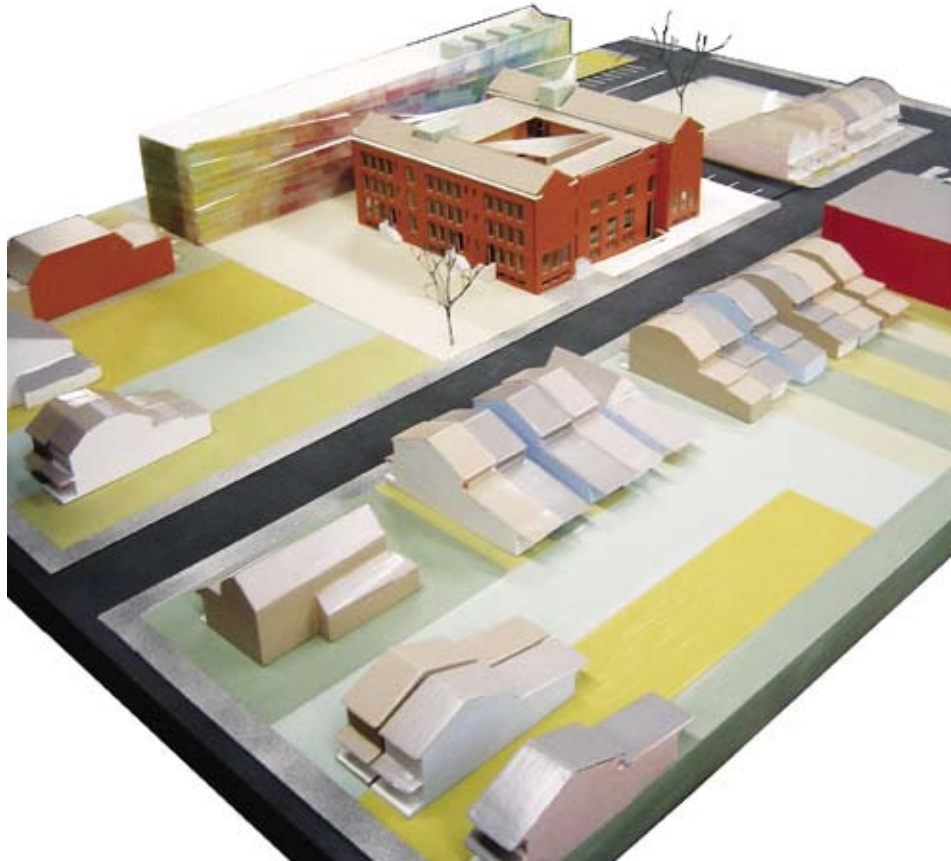
A Model Process for Participatory, Comprehensive Planning for School Reform

City of Trenton

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Ellen Shoshkes PhD. competition director

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The winning design, by Preston Scott Cohen Architect, is a sleek linear form that serves as a backdrop for the site.

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Introduction

As an historic city, a river city, a former manufacturing center, and the capitol of the State of New Jersey as well as Mercer County, Trenton has dozens of attributes driving its current renaissance, which follows several decades of decline. Mayor Douglas Palmer has led Trenton’s redevelopment efforts since 1990, implementing a comprehensive strategy focused on revitalizing the city’s numerous neighborhoods through historic preservation, new housing, economic development, youth enrichment, recreation, public safety, and health care programs, and upgraded infrastructure.

However, the rebirth of Trenton would not be assured without reinvestment in its public schools. Fortunately, the state’s capital investment of \$317 million to improve public school facilities in Trenton fueled an ambitious construction program tied both to school reform and the process of community renewal.

As part of this effort, the City and School District partnered to sponsor a national design competition for the renovation and expansion of the Carroll Robbins Elementary School, a one-hundred year old building in an historic neighborhood. The overarching goal of the competition was to demonstrate that it is possible to implement a participatory comprehensive planning process that would incorporate innovative design strategies to preserve historic neighborhood schools on constrained urban sites without adding unnecessary time or cost.

Another important goal was to create a model process that could be replicated both in New Jersey, where the Abbott school construction program is undergoing major reform, and in other states undertaking school construction. This publication describes that model process, the problems that arose during implementation, how those were addressed, and the lessons learned.

We hope that this story will inspire and guide others as they confront the challenges associated with a growing number of school age children and an aging inventory of school buildings.

Sponsors

City of Trenton, Department of Housing and Economic Development
 Trenton Public Schools
 New Jersey School Construction Corporation
 National Endowment for the Arts

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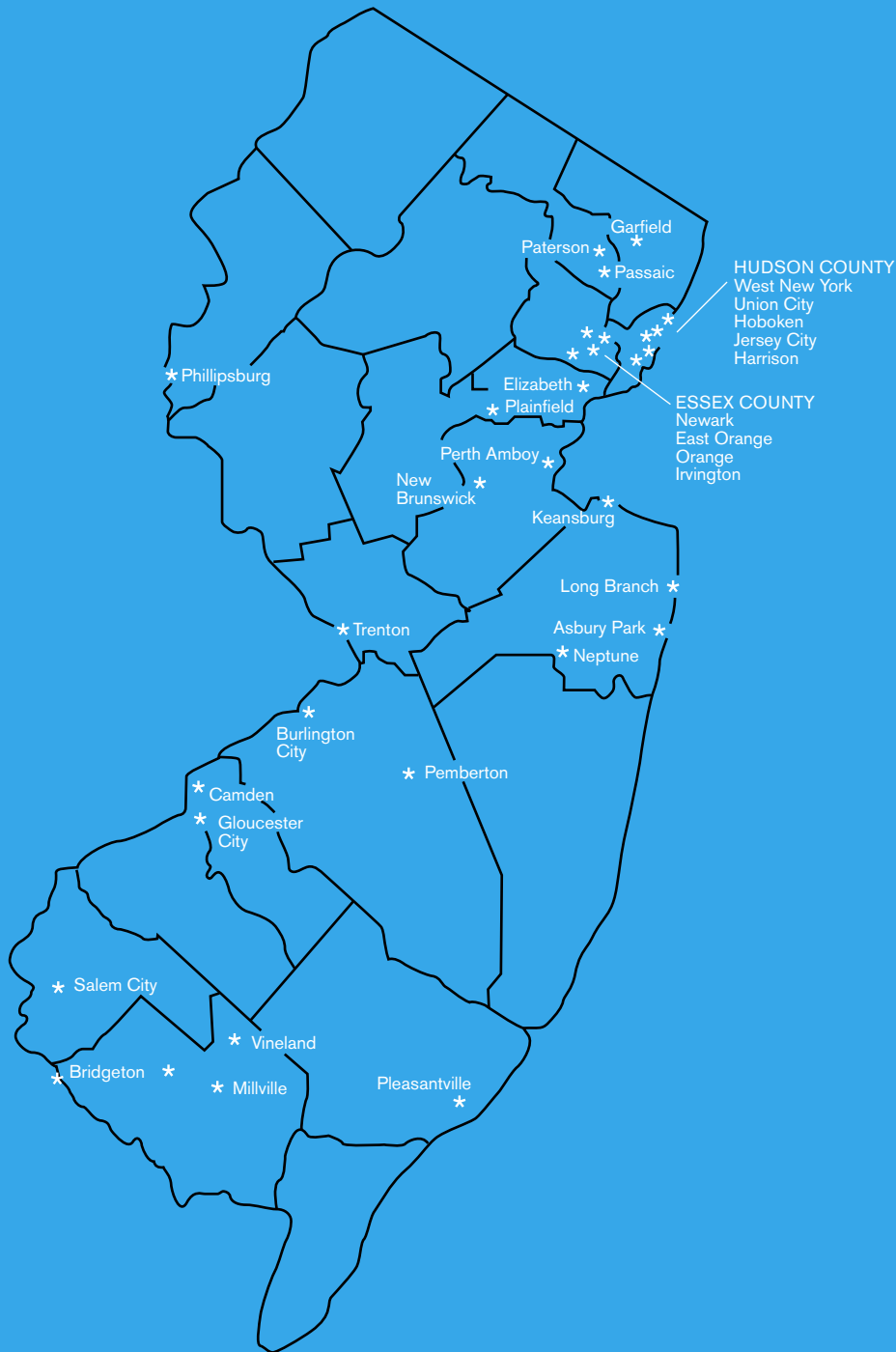


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Background: Planning For Schools and Communities in New Jersey

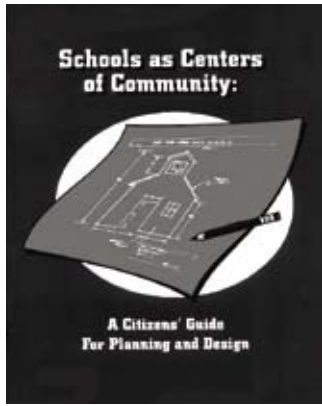


The state investment in Trenton’s school construction program has its origins in the New Jersey Supreme Court’s historic *Abbott v. Burke* set of decisions. In its original ruling in 1985, and subsequent rulings through the 1990s, the court cited the poor condition and overcrowding of school buildings in the state’s poorest communities, Trenton among them, as evidence of the pervasive inequities of the school finance system. The court directed the state to provide facilities for children in the 30 Abbott districts “that will be sufficient to enable these students to achieve the substantive standards that now define a thorough and efficient education and the quality of the facilities cannot depend on the district’s willingness or ability to raise taxes or to incur debt.”

In addition, the court ordered the state to implement whole school reform (WSR)—a comprehensive package of site-based reforms closely aligned with the concept of community schools. To remedy the court order, in July 2000, the state launched an \$8.6 billion school construction program—the largest public works program in the state’s history. This unprecedented capital investment gave Abbott districts a unique opportunity to integrate holistic neighborhood based school reform with facility design - building schools that serve as centers of community.

There are two ways a school can serve as a community center: (1) reach out and play a more integral role in the community; or (2) incorporate local resources into the school environment. The United States Department of Education predicts, “The most successful schools in the future will be integrated learning communities, which accommodate the needs of all of the community’s stakeholders.” Either way, the concept of community centered schools represents a key strategy to achieve the goals of New Jersey’s State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP), a blueprint for state investment based on the principles of Smart Growth. These principles include: supporting the revitalization of existing cities and towns; and encouraging new suburban growth, where necessary, to occur in compact patterns in order to curb sprawl and conserve scarce open space.

New Jersey’s Abbott school construction program offered an historic opportunity to leverage state capital investment to support the revitalization of high poverty cities. The City of Trenton was among the first to recognize the benefits of coordinating school construction with the city’s extensive redevelopment initiatives.



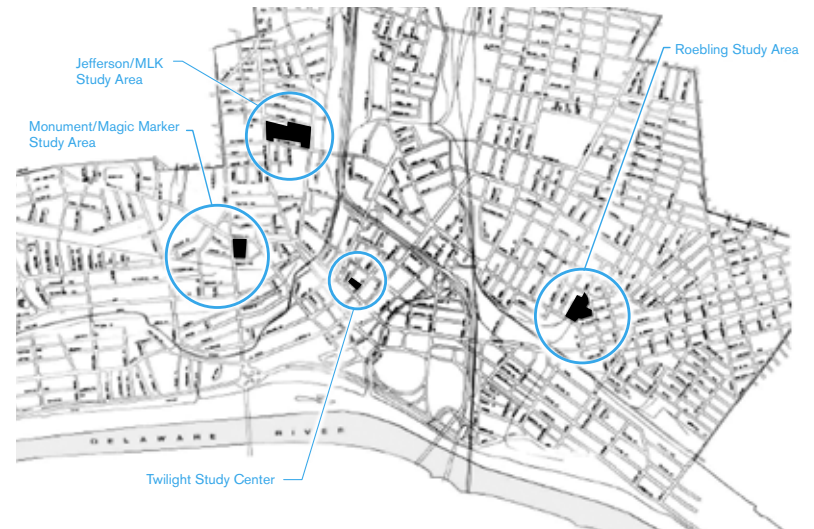
New Jersey's Department of Community Affairs launched the Communities of Learning Campaign with a white paper inspired by the US Department of Education publication: "Citizens' Guide for Planning and Designing Schools That Serve as Centers of Community."

Creating Communities Of Learning

To raise public awareness about this historic opportunity to leverage the state's massive investment in public school construction, the former Office of State Planning (OSP), in the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA), launched the Communities of Learning (COL) campaign --a multi-agency team effort including the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority (NJRA), Department of Education (NJDOE), and Economic Development Authority (NJEDA), the agency initially designated to build schools in Abbott districts.

The short lived COL campaign (2000 – 2002)—which sponsored conferences, symposia, outreach, technical assistance, and the Community School Smart Growth Grants program—made New Jersey a laboratory for creative community-based school planning and design strategies. The campaign offered the following six USDOE)—endorsed design principles to guide partnerships aiming to create twenty-first century learning environments. They must:

1. Enhance teaching and learning and accommodate the needs of all learners.
2. Serve as centers of community.
3. Result from a planning / design process involving all stakeholders.
4. Provide for health, safety and security.
5. Make effective use of all available resources.
6. Allow for flexibility and adapt to changing needs.



The Trenton Community Schools Master Plan focused on integrating four new and renovated school facilities and local resources to serve as centers for learning and catalysts for community revitalization.

Trenton Community Schools Master Plan

The Robbins School Design Competition evolved out of the COL campaign. Trenton was among the first Abbott districts to recognize the need to move quickly to both begin priority facilities projects as well as undertake comprehensive district wide planning. Both the School Superintendent and the Mayor recognized the benefits of coordinating school construction with the city's extensive redevelopment initiatives, but neither had the funding for collaborative planning. When approached by the COL campaign, they agreed to form a partnership and applied for a modest grant to create a Community Schools Master Plan.

Directed by a city planner, the partnership hired a team of national experts led by architect Roy Strickland, Professor of Urban Design at the University of Michigan, to orchestrate a participatory process to integrate four new and renovated school facilities and local resources to serve as centers for learning and catalysts for community revitalization.

This pioneering planning process sparked widespread public enthusiasm for new visions for schools and how they fit into Trenton neighborhoods. The timing of this successful effort dovetailed neatly with the developing USDOE priority to enhance design quality, which was supported by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding for school design competitions through its New Civics Works program. Learning that NEA had agreed to sponsor a design competition for a new high school in another Abbott district, Perth Amboy, Bill Valocchi, a Trenton city planner was inspired to submit a letter of interest to NEA. NEA, in turn, invited the planner to submit a full proposal; the agency was interested in elevating

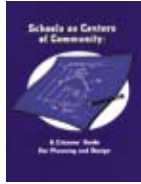
the importance of design, and hoped to influence New Jersey's massive school construction program. State matching funds would be necessary; it was assumed these would come from a Community Schools Smart Growth grant. As a result of state-level political choices at the time, that grant program was eliminated. However, the Trenton partners decided to develop a proposal to hold a school design competition without explicit state agency support.

Timeline

The Robbins School Design Competition offers a model process rather than a cookie cutter template. All projects are unique in that they are embedded in a particular set of local circumstances, depend on relationships among specific social actors, and are affected by the ever-changing dynamics of the macro social environment in which they are situated (which influence, among other things, the political agenda and priorities of funding agencies). The following timeline illustrates key benchmarks in the Robbins School Design Competition process as well as some of the events at the national and global scale which formed the backdrop against which this process played out.

Jan. 2000
President Clinton's last State of the Union Address proposes big spending increases for schools and health care.

Apr. 2000
US Department of Education publishes *Citizens Guide For Planning Schools as Centers of Community*.



Nov. 7, 2000
No clear winner is declared in the close presidential election contest between Vice President Al Gore and Texas governor George W. Bush. More than a month after the presidential election, the U.S. Supreme Court rules against a manual recount of disputed ballots in certain Florida counties (Dec. 12). Bush formally accepts the presidency, having won a slim majority in the electoral college but not a majority of the popular vote (Dec. 13)

Jan. 2001

Sept. 11, 2001
Two hijacked jetliners ram twin towers of World Trade Center in worst terrorist attack against U.S.; a third hijacked plane flies into the Pentagon, and a fourth crashes in rural Pennsylvania. U.S. and Britain launch air attacks against targets in Afghanistan after Taliban government fails to hand over Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind behind the terrorist attacks (Oct. 7). Following air campaign and ground assault by Afghani opposition troops, the Taliban regime topples (Dec. 9); however, the hunt for bin Laden and other members of al-Qaeda terrorist organization continues.

May 2000
New Jersey Department of Community Affairs Office of State Planning launches Community of Learners Campaign.

Aug. 2000
New Jersey legislature authorizes \$8.6 billion school construction program.

Sept. 2000
Trenton receives an early Smart Growth grant to conduct Community School Master Plan.



Jan. 2001
First round Community Schools Smart Growth Planning Grants announced.

May 2001
State Sponsored workshop on Community Schools and Smart Growth.



Oct. 2001
State sponsored School Design Symposium. National Endowment for the Arts announces grant for Perth Amboy High School Design Competition, and set aside of funding for school design competitions in the next round of New Civic Works program grants.



Nov. 2001
Jim McGreevy elected Governor of New Jersey. Closes Office of State Planning ending Smart Growth Community School Planning Grant program and Communities of Learners Campaign.



Jan. 2002

Jan. 2003

March 17, 2003

War waged by the U.S. and Britain against Iraq begins.

Feb. 1, 2003
Space shuttle Columbia explodes upon reentry into Earth's atmosphere, killing all seven astronauts on board.



April 2002
City of Trenton support from NJ Economic Development Corporation for proposal to adapt the Perth Amboy High School competition model for the renovation and expansion of the Robbins Elementary School.

July 2002
Gov. McGreevey establishes the NJ Schools Construction Corporation, replacing NJEDA as the agency in charge of the Abbott school construction program.

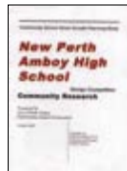


Oct. 2002
New Civic Works program grant awarded to City of Trenton for Robbins School Design Competition, based on adaptation of PAHS design competition model.



Conclusion of community based participatory planning for PAHS design competition.

Dec. 2002
SCC agrees to support the PAHS design competition.

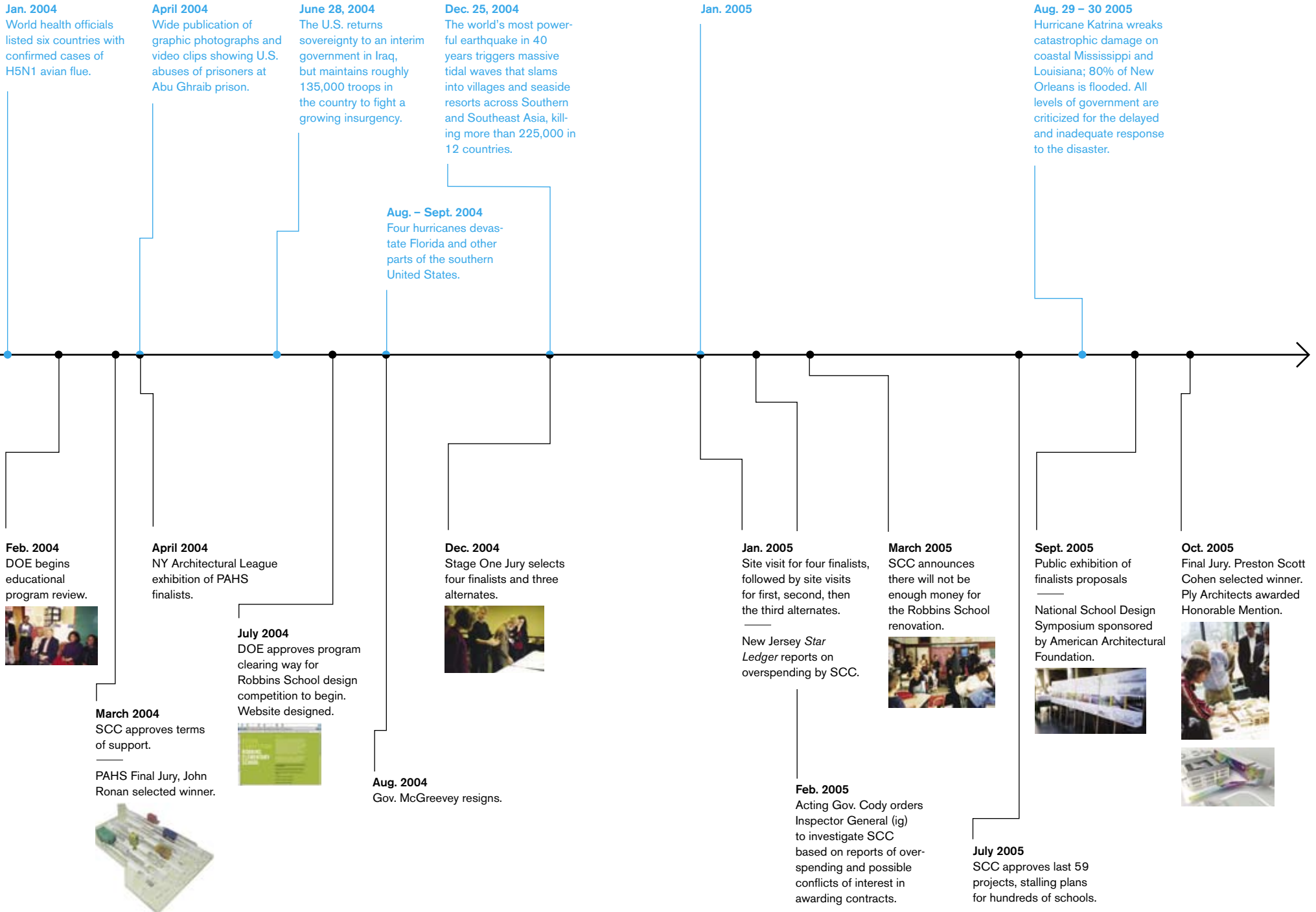


July 2003
PAHS Design Competition Stage I Jury.

Community based participatory planning workshops for Robbins School Design Competition.



Dec. 2003
Robbins faculty develops educational program.



Project Development: Rehab Rather Than New Construction

The School Superintendent chose the renovation and expansion of the one-hundred-year old Carroll Robbins Elementary School, a three-story brick structure in the historic Greenwood Hamilton neighborhood in Trenton's South Ward, as the subject of the design competition. Although the school is a city-designated historic landmark, the district had slated the building for demolition. A replacement school was to be located several blocks away, where the historic Roebling factory was being converted into an educational, office, commercial, and cultural complex. However, the student population in the predominantly Hispanic Greenwood Hamilton neighborhood—one of the fastest growing areas of the city—had been growing significantly, and there was a lack of other schools in the area. Instead of razing the Robbins School, the district decided to modernize and expand the building.

The Superintendent hoped the competition would provoke innovative solutions for the kind of urban school design issues typically faced in Abbott districts, which are mainly densely populated, formerly highly industrialized areas where it is difficult to find affordable and environmentally safe sites for new school construction. The challenges for architects included: designing a school that fits in a tight urban space; retaining the interesting character of the building and fitting into the historic context; and incorporating outdoor play space and parking as well.

Carroll Robbins School

The Carroll Robbins School opened on Tyler Street in 1908. The three story building is one of the oldest school buildings in the district—and one of the first to have a gymnasium. It has continually been adapted to support new users, becoming an elementary school in 1928. The building is structurally sound but functionally obsolete, with antiquated heating, ventilating, wiring, and plumbing systems. The only bathrooms are gang toilets in the basement. Thick masonry walls preclude the usual rearrangement of space for more current uses without

(top right) For nearly a century the Robbins School has served as a focal point for this working class neighborhood. (top left) Modest row houses facing the school on Tyler Street are typical of the Greenwood / Hamilton neighborhood, one of eight historic districts designated by the City Landmarks Commission. (middle right) Many students at Robbins Elementary walk to school. (middle left) The back of the Robbins School faces larger scale commercial and residential buildings along Hamilton Avenue. (bottom) An aerial view shows how the fragile neighborhood fabric has been frayed by surface parking.



major renovation. Some retrofit has been achieved, such as the installation of new windows, and an addition housing a cafeteria. On the other hand, the building boasts some fine architectural features, notably a central, two-story auditorium creates a dramatic volume that is ringed by ornate plaster pilasters that support a balcony and colonnaded galleries.

The school occupies about one third of a flat, rectangular, 1.14-acre site. The school grounds now primarily serve as a paved parking lot, and as a token play area.

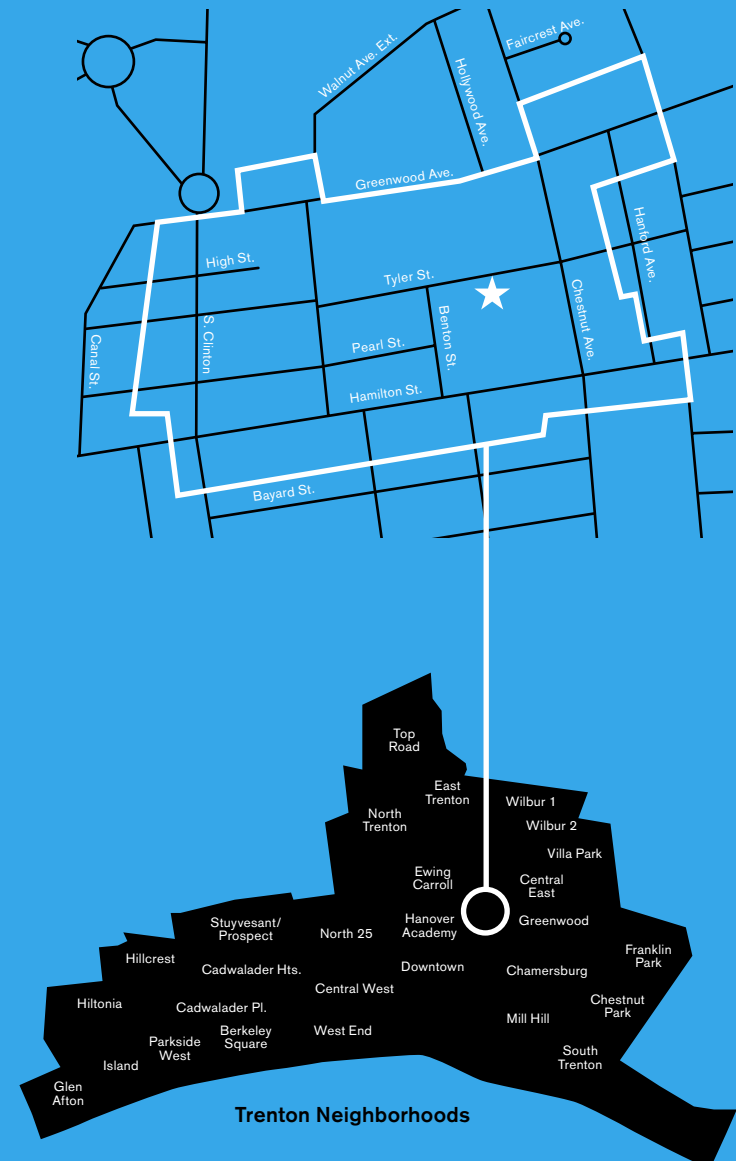
In September 2000 the Robbins School opened an “Annex” to accommodate a growing student population; enrollment had increased by 62% to 524 students between 1997 and 2002. (By 2004 enrollment increased by another 15% to 604). The Annex occupies the former rectory of the St. Joachim’s Roman Catholic Church, located several blocks away on Bayard Street. This leased building houses an additional eight classrooms. The renovation and expansion of the Robbins School would allow for consolidation of the campuses.

School Community Profile

The Robbins School and Annex instruct students from Kindergarten to fifth grade, and serve as one of four bilingual centers in the district. In 2003 one-third of the students at the Robbins School had limited English proficiency, and more than half received bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) instruction in grades K-3. Spanish was the first language at home for nearly half of the student body, and a growing number of older students with Limited English Proficiency who arrive at Robbins School are not literate in their native language.

Whereas the Trenton student population is predominantly Black (66%), and 30% Latino, Robbins School students are predominantly Latino (63%), with 29% Black. Statewide, Blacks represent only 16.9 % and Latinos 17.9% of the student population.

Many families and neighbors of Robbins School students are recent immigrants: 80% of the residents are foreign born, compared to only fourteen percent of the population citywide. Among the neighborhood’s foreign-born population, 67% are from Latin America, and nearly 60% arrived in this country since 1990. Largely because recent immigrants from Latin America retain ties to their homeland, and return for extended visits, the mobility rate at Robbins School is very high, averaging 40% between 1999 and 2002, compared to thirteen percent district-wide. High mobility rates also reflect the conditions of poverty in which



many students live. Yet high attendance rates, which averaged 94% between 1997 and 2001, show that this immigrant community strongly values education.

The median household income of residents in the Robbins School neighborhood in 2000 was 20% less than for households citywide. More than 36% of neighborhood families with young children were living in poverty in 2000, compared with 28% citywide. Nearly 63% of female-headed households with young children in the Robbins School neighborhood were living in poverty in 2000, compared to 41% citywide.

Thus the Robbins School serves students who require an education well beyond the norm for the district, let alone the state. In planning for the design competition, a major task will be to determine what supplemental programs are needed to address the student and school needs attributed to these conditions of high poverty and limited language proficiency—including intensive literacy, small class size, and social and health services—and the facilities to support them. This will require intensive consultation with district staff, the school faculty, parents, and community groups, as well as research best practices. And in order to engage community input, the team will have to be prepared to communicate in both English and Spanish.

Neighborhood Context

The Robbins School is located in the Greenwood/Hamilton neighborhood, one of eight historic districts designated by the City Landmarks Commission. Greenwood / Hamilton illustrates Trenton’s suburbanization between c.1850 and 1915. The Landmarks Commission reports: “The area comprises a mix of housing types closely associated with this development, many of the structures having considerable architectural merit.” The range of vernacular styles include Italianate, Greek Revival and Queen Ann. Along South Clinton Avenue, which parallels Tyler Street, some residences were built over ground floor commercial space, while other residential row houses were converted to commercial use. Thus, a commercial corridor developed along South Clinton and Hamilton Avenues.

In the early twentieth century the neighborhood was a thriving working class area. Its fortunes declined following World War II, as industry, jobs, population and other resources migrated to the new auto-oriented suburbs. The recent infusion of immigrants is helping spark a fragile wave of revitalization, which the City is seeking to bolster by extending a nearby redevelopment zone, centered on the for-

mer Roebling factory complex, to include the Robbins School site. The quality of the architecture in the neighborhood along with its proximity to a train station with frequent service to New York City and Philadelphia offer additional advantages.

The challenge for the Robbins School competition is to seek design solutions that blend the new structure with the old facility; and coordinate with the city’s redevelopment efforts, including historic preservation, carving out new open space and rehabilitation of neighborhood retail. Because of its status as a city landmark, competition contestants would have to consider the ten basic principles of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, which the City Landmarks Commission had adopted as design guidelines.

Adapting the PAHS Design Competition Model

An April 2002 deadline for submission of a proposal to the NEA quickened the project development process. The Trenton planner decided to follow the path taken by the Perth Amboy High School Design Competition, and hired architect Ralph Lerner, FAIA, (the professional advisor to the Perth Amboy Design Competition), to serve in that capacity for Trenton as well.

The proposal submitted by the Trenton team to the NEA was based on the proposal submitted by their Perth Amboy counterparts, and articulated the following goals:

To demonstrate that it is possible to do participatory comprehensive planning, and encourage creative thinking from designers nationwide about the renovation and expansion of historic neighborhood schools, without adding time or cost.

To complement the PAHS competition as a model that can be replicated both in New Jersey cities and towns and nationwide—where the vast majority of school construction funding is for improvements and additions to existing buildings.

To build a school that is an inspiring, challenging, and flexible learning environment; and to use the school planning and design process as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization.

A two-phased approach was outlined: a participatory planning study to assess the spaces needed to support improved educational programs as well as the supple-

mental services required to fulfill the particular needs of the Robbins School student body and to serve as a center for the community; and a two-stage national design competition.

The aim of the first stage would be to produce a vision statement and set of goals and objectives for the new school, and technical criteria, a facility program, and budget information for the design competition. The first stage of the national design competition would involve a selection process to determine four finalists who would compete at stage 2. All qualified architects and teams including qualified architects would be invited to submit a booklet illustrating their conceptual approach to the renovation and expansion of the Robbins school. The jury would review these submissions and select four to proceed to stage 2.

Stage 2 would be conducted following the award of \$100,000 matching funds from NJEDA. The four stage 2 finalists would each receive an honorarium of \$20,000 to develop their conceptual proposal into a schematic design that met NJEDA specifications. At the conclusion of stage 2, the jury would select the winner, who would have the opportunity to enter into an agreement with NJEDA for architectural services to carry out the renovation and expansion of the Robbins School.

With the deadline for the NEA grant proposal only weeks away, the challenge was to obtain NJEDA financial support for the Robbins School design competition. The CEO of NJEDA agreed to provide a letter of support for a competition that would adapt the PAHS approach. With this letter in hand, the Trenton team decided to proceed with the submission.

In September 2002 the Robbins School Design Competition team learned that it had been awarded a \$75,000 NEA grant. The proposed schedule envisioned beginning the participatory planning study right away, in order to stage the competition in June 2003, complete stage 1 by October, and complete stage 2 early in 2004. But neither the Mayor nor the Superintendent wanted to move forward before confirming support for stage 2 from the newly created School Construction Corporation (SCC), a unit of NJEDA. The Superintendent wrote the head of SCC, formally apprising him of the project, and requesting his “informed consent” before proceeding. SCC gave its support verbally; the Trenton team initiated the participatory planning process.

In April 2003 the Perth Amboy team was ready to announce the PAHS design competition by mailing a poster to architectural schools and listings in appro-



The graphic design firm 2x4 designed the poster and website for the two school design competitions, Perth Amboy and Trenton, as a paired image, to reinforce the programmatic linkage between them.

prate electronic and print media that would point to the competition website. The graphic design firm 2x4 designed the poster and website for the two school design competitions, Perth Amboy and Trenton, as a paired image, to reinforce the programmatic linkage between them. Anyone who visited the PAHS competition website learned that there would soon be a similar competition in Trenton.



Office of Mayor Douglas H. Palmer

City of Trenton, NJ 08608

MAYOR'S NEWS RELEASE

Monday, September 15, 2003

MAYOR PALMER, SUPERINTENDENT LYTLE CALL FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT TO REDESIGN ROBBINS SCHOOL

Mayor Douglas H. Palmer and Superintendent James Lytle of the Trenton Board of Education today welcomed students, parents, faculty and community residents to contribute their energy and ideas to a special redesign project for Carroll Robbins Elementary School.

For the planned renovation at Robbins, the National Endowment for the Arts has awarded \$75,000 to the City, which will coordinate an architectural competition. To inform the architects, City and school officials have scheduled community workshops about the project - and plan to explore the interests that parents, faculty, and community residents have for Robbins. The schedule for the project - including the community meetings - is attached.

"In 2009, Robbins School will be 100 years old," Mayor Palmer said. "The goal of this National Endowment for the Arts project is to make sure that the school's redesign takes into account the needs of the entire community and that we work on design features that will help our children perform better."

Contact: Kent Ashworth - 609-989-3828 - kashworth@trentonnj.org

Phase One: Participatory Planning

The Trenton city planner now formed a Steering Committee composed of representatives of city, district, county and state agency people, Robbins School faculty and staff, as well as local civic leaders. Ideally, each member would then partner to implement the project.

At its first meeting in June 2003, Lerner reiterated the charge given to a similar group in Perth Amboy: "What I need is for you to articulate the goals and objectives of the competition with clarity. Here is our educational philosophy. Here is our community. Here is our site. Here are our goals. Here is a building program sympathetic to our goals and objectives."

Visioning Process

Planning got underway on several levels to identify community needs and resources: surveys and site visits, review of extant reports and best practices, and focused interviews and visioning workshops conducted in Spanish and English. The goal was to develop a consensus on the education and supplemental programs participants wanted to see at Robbins School, as well as to generate ideas for community use of the facility. This "wish list" would then be translated into a space program that would reflect state standards for school buildings.

NJDOE had established Facility Efficiency Standards (FES)—"a square-footage building template developed by non-educators to promote cost efficiency, not educational adequacy"—in 1989 to comply with the school facilities aid requirements in a new State school funding law. Subsequent to the State Supreme Court's ruling in Abbott V (1998), which established "educational adequacy standards to ensure that every school has the instructional areas sufficient to enable children to meet the CCCS (Core Curriculum Content Standards)," the NJDOE used the FES for measuring educational adequacy as well as for containing costs. NJDOE issued guidelines to Abbott districts to complete Five-Year Facilities Plans using model elementary, middle and high schools based on the FES, and authorizing districts to request additional, specialized spaces based on particularized need.

Abbott districts often requested spaces in excess of the FES. Sometimes NJDOE staff would approve these requests if they felt the district had made an adequate case based on particular needs. But the process remained controversial, since the approved spaces in the "one-size fits all" model did not necessarily match the requirements for specific schools. Essentially, NJDOE transformed these criteria into "a set of rigid and conventional design standards" for the Abbott school construction program. This forced Abbott school districts to develop facilities projects

based on cookie cutter “models” that did not reflect the assessed needs of real students or schools in high poverty districts. An NJDOE official acknowledged that: “Too often, what has happened is there is a disconnect between facilities design and the educational program, whereas the program should drive facilities needs.”

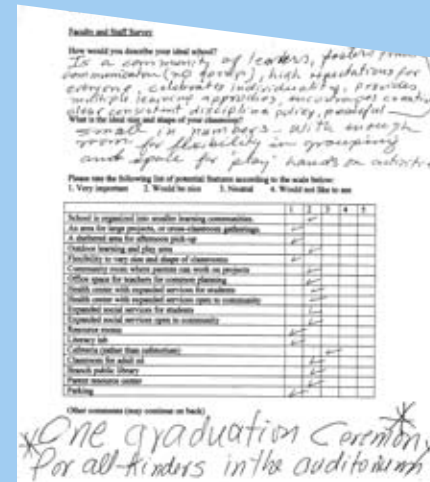
The Education Law Center concluded: “The FES have become an impediment to a thorough review, assessment and planning for school facilities projects by district officials and local community stakeholders, and make it difficult to plan for spaces, especially in renovation projects, to support instructional and program improvements. Further, the FES, as currently used, do not support planning for schools that could serve as centers of their communities.”

In Trenton, as in Perth Amboy, district officials hoped to use the school design competition to demonstrate the advantages of participatory planning for school facilities driven by the educational program, and the particular needs of actual students and schools, rather than the FES. Doing so would be a challenge in both cases.

Faculty Survey

One of the first steps, because the school year was nearly over, was to survey Robbins School faculty opinion. This survey would not only provide valuable feedback, it would also introduce the design competition project to the faculty, and, it was hoped, spark faculty interest in participating in the planning process when it was in full swing, after summer vacation. The survey asked faculty to rank a list of eighteen potential features to be included in the expanded school. Consensus emerged that a literacy lab and outdoor learning and play areas [see chart] were equally important top priorities, and that parking and expanded social services for students were next in importance. More than two thirds of those surveyed rated “resource rooms” as “very important.” Significantly, none of these features is included in NJDOE’s “model” school templates that are based on the FES.

When asked to describe the ideal school, the faculty mentioned both physical (“conditioned air, an elevator, outside playground. Grass!”) and psycho-social characteristics (“Happy Friendly People... Harmony among staff and students,” “Provides love of learning, compassion for all students”), as well as policies (“One which always puts the children first... the staff is family oriented,” “Teachers are not controlling to the extreme / class is not like a zoo, either.” These sentiments set the tone for the school visioning process as it evolved through a series



(top right) A preliminary faculty survey set the tone for the public visioning workshops. (top left) The public visioning workshops were conducted and advertised in both English and Spanish. (bottom) City planner and project manager Bill Valocchi points out expansion alternatives during one outreach meeting.

Robbins Elementary School Design Competition City of Trenton and Trenton Public Schools

RESULTS OF SURVEY FROM JUNE 19, 2003

Please rate the following list of potential features according to the scale below:

1. Very important 2. Would be nice 3. Neutral 4. Would not like to see

	1	2	3	4	1+2
School is organized into smaller learning communities. 2?*	13%	38%	25%	25%	51%
An area for large projects, or cross-classroom gatherings.	33%	50%	17%	---	83%
A sheltered area for afternoon pick-up	39%	44%	17%	---	83%
Outdoor learning and play area	78%	22%	---	---	100%
Flexibility to vary size and shape of classrooms 1 ?*	53%	24%	24%	---	77%
Community room where parents can work on projects	22%	44%	28%	---	66%
Office space for teachers for common planning	44%	44%	11%	---	88%
Health center with expanded services for students	28%	56%	17%	---	84%
Health center with expanded services open to community	17%	28%	44%	11%	45%
Expanded social services for students	39%	56%	6%	---	95%
Expanded social services open to community	22%	39%	39%	---	61%
Resource rooms	67%	22%	11%	---	89%
Literacy lab	89%	11%	---	---	100%
Cafeteria (rather than cafeterium) 1 ?*	47%	35%	18%	---	82%
Classroom for adult ed	28%	39%	33%	---	67%
Branch public library	28%	39%	33%	---	67%
Parent resource center	11%	61%	28%	---	72%
Parking	78%	17%	6%	---	95%

Notes:

N=18

Columns will not add up to 100% since fractions are rounded up to two decimal points.

*1? = one question mark instead of a score in that row. N = 17 in that case.

*2? = two question marks instead of a score in that row. N = 16 in that case.

If left blank, scored as if "3. Neutral."

Literacy Lab = Single Most Important (89%)

Outdoor Learning and Play Area and Parking, tied for next most important (78%)

Literacy Lab and Outdoor Learning and Play Areas tied for highest combined scores (100%)

Expanded social services for students and Parking tied for next highest combined scores (95%)

of community outreach meetings and visioning workshops that began in the summer and continued through fall.

Community Outreach

To advertise the first community meeting city planning staff produced a flyer in English and Spanish which was widely distributed—mailed to churches, service providers, civic leaders and the media; sent home to parents with children in the summer programs at the school; and posted throughout the neighborhood. Refreshments would be served to entice participation.

A parent liaison provided a simultaneous Spanish translation for the small crowd that assembled in the school cafeteria to hear the presentation about this opportunity not only to redesign the school, but also to revitalize this community. There were many questions: How long will the restructuring process take? How will it happen? Will the school build vertically or expand horizontally? Will there be community space for residents to use?

"We need to do more than just renovate the school," the Principal told the audience. "The school cannot be an isolated island. The resources of the school and community can be shared."

"We're not asking you to design the school, but to help come up with a broader vision," the Trenton city planner made clear. "We don't want to try and prepare students for the 21st century in a school designed one hundred years ago. And we don't want to just look at how old schools have been modernized. We want you to help us look at the big picture. Through the competition we will ask architects to respond to this vision, as well as present their own ideas."

The Mayor, the Superintendent, and the NJDOE Commissioner addressed a student assembly and press conference at Robbins School in mid-September to publicly kick-off the project. "This is one of the few places in the state where we are asking a lot of people to think about what a school should look like," the NJDOE Commissioner said. Student drawings of the "school of the future" decorated the stage for the Mayor's remarks. He urged the room full of third-, fourth- and fifth-graders to continue to come up with ideas for renovating their school. "Even if you don't want to be an architect, I encourage all of you in your mind to just picture what you would like a new school to look like." Then speaking to a larger audience through the press he proclaimed: "The goal of this project is to make sure that the school's redesign takes into account the needs of the entire community and that we work on design features that will help our children

perform better.” The Mayor urged people to get involved in the upcoming visioning workshops. The workshops were held at the school in the early evening, with a light snack provided.

Community Needs and Resources Workshop

This workshop discussed how to better connect the school and the neighborhood. What is the role of the school in the community? What is the role of the community in the school? The parent liaison again facilitated a simultaneous English-Spanish discussion as participants considered:

- What makes an ideal school and neighborhood?
- How can we create this ideal at the Robbins School
- What problems do we need to overcome?
- What opportunities can we take advantage of?

Community Needs Report

A couple of week later a synthesis of the results of the Community Needs and Resources Workshop was presented to the group, which developed a summary statement about:

- Assets:* Features that are working well now and should be retained
- Problems:* Features that are not working well and should be fixed
- Opportunities:* Resources or features that could/should be taken advantage of
- Aspirations:* A vision of the ideal school and neighborhood

Some of the top community priorities—all focused on the needs of students—included:

- A safe area where parents can pick up their children
- A large school yard
- Bigger classrooms with storage space for all supplies and childrens’ things
- More classrooms to accommodate a growing population



Mayor Douglas Palmer (top left) and Superintendent of Schools James Lytle (top right) addressed a student assembly at the Robbins School to publicly kick-off the project. Student drawings of the “school of the future” set the stage for their remarks. (bottom) Participants in the community needs workshop discussed how to better connect the school and the neighborhood. Parent liaison, Maria Santiago (standing), facilitated a simultaneous English-Spanish discussion.

Bathrooms in each classroom, or at least on every floor; and separate bathrooms for adults

A gym on the first floor (not in the basement) with windows and a large play area

A clinic for students and their families

More before and after school activities, sports, and enrichment assignments

Neighborhood safety: control traffic and criminal activity (drugs)

Faculty And Staff Brainstorm

Since the Robbins School faculty is much smaller than that at Perth Amboy High School, and due to restraints imposed by teacher employment contracts, the faculty visioning process used during the Perth Amboy planning process—which involved organizing subcommittees to focus on different areas of interest such as creative learning environments, healthy school, or “school as community center”—proved to be an unwieldy model. Instead, a group of volunteers formed a School Design Committee. The ten-member committee began its work—for which participants were paid when they met outside of contract work hours—by considering the following list of questions:

What does the concept of a Community School mean to you?

Based on research that indicates that school size affects student learning, how would you organize a larger school (as many as 600 students) to preserve small learning communities?

How do the classes / classrooms in a grade relate to each other?

How do the grades relate to each other?

What about organizing the Robbins School around a special theme?

Should the Robbins School include Pre-K?

What are the trends in technology that will affect the way you teach?

Would you like to integrate the environment (nature/neighborhood) with the curriculum?

What features of the existing building and grounds work well?

Which are problems?

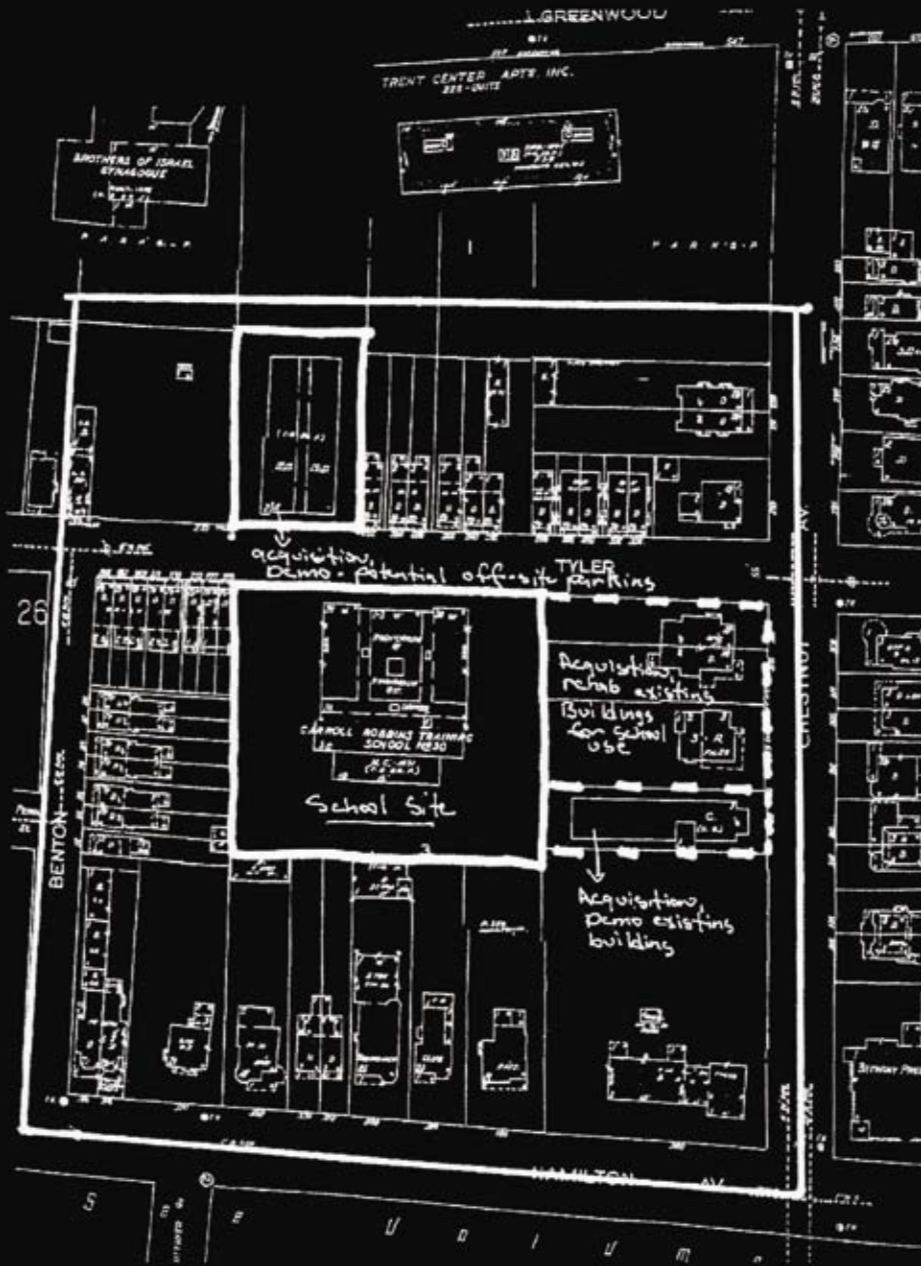
The teachers, with support from the planning team, researched trends in elementary education, and best practices employed elsewhere to improve teaching and learning. This material, collected in a binder, was made available in the teachers’ lunchroom so other faculty members could review it and comment. The committee met weekly, and by early December it had articulated a shared vision to become a full service Global Studies Community School—a logical extension of the Comer approach to whole school reform already being successfully implemented at the Robbins School. The Comer Model provides a structure and a process for mobilizing adults to support students’ learning and development. Parents, administrators, faculty and mental health professionals share responsibility for implementing the model using three teams: School Management Team, Student Staff Support Team, and the Parent Team. Parents work with staff to plan and support academic and social programs of interest to the school community.

Site Expansion Needs And Options

The Steering Committee began to discuss expansion options for the school, including the possible need to acquire additional land if the student population were going to increase significantly. The options for expansion were extremely limited. Alternatives included:

(1) Acquiring two large, dilapidated Victorian homes, now boarding houses, adjacent to the school site, and adaptively reusing the buildings and capturing the space between them. The Robbins School could possibly share space in the buildings with related educational or service programs, such as a health clinic. The SCC could acquire and renovate the two buildings, for use initially as a swing space for the Robbins School during the renovation, then lease the space not being used for the school to the nonprofit service providers;

(2) Acquiring the lots adjacent to the back of the school site, currently occupied by a funeral home, a multi-family building and parking lots, fronting on the main commercial strip in the area. This option offered the opportunity to incorporate a commercial storefront space that could be leased to a service provider or cultural group;



Options for expansion of the school site were extremely limited.

- (3) Acquiring and demolishing a multi-family building and / or adjacent vacant lot facing the school. This would provide the option to bridge over or even vacate the street to provide access between the existing school and the new site; and
- (4) Acquiring and demolishing a row of small, single family homes adjacent to the school. This option would involve relocating the occupants, mainly elderly, long-time homeowners.

Since all of these options would be controversial, before going any further the city planner advised both the Mayor and Superintendent about these discussions, explaining: “The general idea for the competition is that we will make the architects aware of the space around the school available for expansion, and let them come up with site planning strategies.” The Superintendent responded immediately by email: “We are very comfortable with the directions you’re headed.” This type of communication and partnership between city planners and the District was essential for moving the project forward, with many options for site expansion on the table.

The next step was for the city planner, assisted by Lerner, to make a preliminary presentation of these conceptual plans for the expansion of the Robbins School to the City Landmarks Commission, which is responsible for the review of all new construction proposed in locally designated historic districts. Luckily, the Commission recognized the critical need for the school to expand, and the positive impact this expansion could have on conserving and revitalizing the historic district as a whole. The Commission endorsed the competition and accepted the conceptual plans, including supporting the potential demolition of residential properties in order to accommodate the expansion program and the need for strategies to improve pedestrian and vehicular circulation, and to design and locate parking and playgrounds.

Educational Program Drives Facility Programming

By December, community stakeholders had reached a consensus on the programs and features they would like to see. And the faculty had developed a shared educational vision statement and goals. In January the district determined that the enlarged Robbins School would support a projected enrollment of 600 in grades pre-K–5 and would serve all students who needed bi-lingual instruction through the end of elementary school. The next step was to assist the faculty in defining the specific spaces needed to support all educational and supplemental

programs. The community and faculty wish list was then distilled into a facility space program that would fit within the constraints on the use of Abbott funds. This was a challenge, since the state's only guidelines—the FES—did not apply to the renovation of existing facilities, especially one hundred year old buildings. Furthermore, the NJDOE staff assigned to the Robbins School project saw their role more as regulator rather than as partner in the process, as had been the case in the Perth Amboy High School project. The only advice the NJDOE liaison provided was to calculate the size of the addition required based on the number of unhoused students—which presupposed that the renovation would not involve an overall restructuring of the school, and that the extension would simply house additional classrooms.

To achieve the educational vision and goals of the faculty, the Robbins School program called for organizing this large elementary school in three smaller learning communities: the Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten program; Grades 1 – 3; and Grades 4 – 5. Each smaller learning community would be centered on its own Instructional Commons, a flexible space that could support a range of learning group sizes, from individuals to assemblies of the entire learning community. This structure would support new instructional approaches such as team teaching and looping, as well as the project-based instruction called for in the Comer model.

The initial facility program submitted to NJDOE in March 2004 totaled 118,395 gross square feet, or nearly 184.4 gross square feet per student (assuming 642 enrolled students, a 90 percent utilization rate, and a 1.5 grossing factor), significantly more than allowed by the FES. All of the nonconforming spaces would need to be justified. It would take five months for NJDOE to approve a program which would indicate how large of an addition would be eligible for state funds—and whether or not land acquisition would be indicated.

In the meantime, to keep the project moving forward, the Trenton team estimated the size of the addition required. The existing building contained approximately 54,510 gross square feet (in three floors and a basement). Given the need for a gut renovation, and restrictions due to the historic designation, a conservative estimate was the existing building could house 200 students. That left 400 students un-housed. At 180 gross square feet per student, there would be a need for a 72,000 square foot addition. If two-stories, the addition would require a 36,000 square foot footprint—twice the size of the existing footprint (16,327 square feet).



The Steering Committee easily formed consensus around site option B (top) even though it required the difficult choice of acquiring and demolishing the occupied row-houses (bottom) adjacent to the school, as well as vacant properties across the street.

Site Expansion Resolved

With the expanded 600 student program and site options submitted for NJDOE review, the team now had to come to grips with the limitations of the site. The district had eliminated acquisition of the two large Victorian homes as an option. For a variety of reasons, there were essentially two alternatives for acquiring additional land surrounding the school:

- a) Renovate the existing Robbins Elementary School to serve 200 students, and find additional land elsewhere to build a new, 400-student school.
- b) Acquire sites around and adjacent to the existing school sufficient to house all 600 students. This would require the difficult choice of acquiring and demolishing the occupied row-houses on the block, as well as the properties across the street, which were suitable for faculty parking, but not for instructional spaces, due to programmatic, economic, and historic district constraints.

The choice was clear, largely because there was no land available nearby to build a new school. A consensus easily formed among members of the Steering Committee for option b, despite the need to relocate residents. The district quickly agreed, because it hoped to preserve Robbins as a robust neighborhood school and bilingual center for the growing immigrant population. Fortunately, the elderly residents welcomed the prospect of state assisted relocation.

Terms and Conditions of SCC Support Resolved

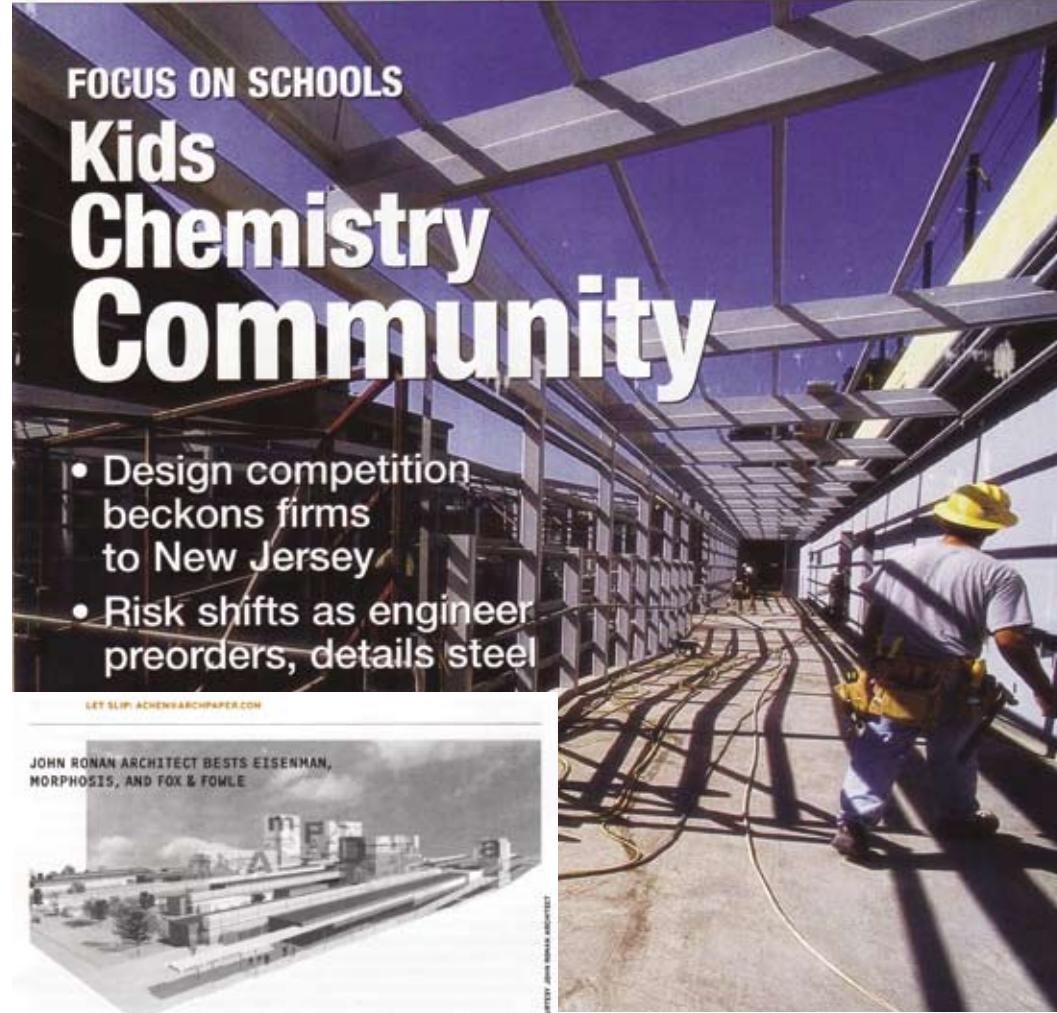
In March 2004, SCC agreed to support the Robbins School Design Competition with a somewhat smaller predevelopment grant of \$94,000, slightly less than the \$100,000 requested. The fact that the Perth Amboy design competition was concluding with great fanfare at this time probably helped pave the way to securing SCC support. The four finalist proposals had been on exhibit in PAHS throughout the month of February, and the final jury was held in early March. The story of the upset victory by John Ronan, the young up and coming architect, over his world-renowned competitors had been picked up by local, regional, national and international media. The Trenton team hoped that the Robbins competition would generate similar excitement, albeit geared to the smaller scale of the project and the lower profile of the elementary school in the community. The SCC decision about the Robbins project followed an earlier one that specified a cap on design

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Competing
Iraqis outbid
foreigners for
reconstruction
work

Corruption
KBR pulls the
plug on em-
ployees who
took bribes

Conclusion
Congress
passes long-
awaited
spending bill



FOCUS ON SCHOOLS
Kids
Chemistry
Community

- Design competition beckons firms to New Jersey
- Risk shifts as engineer preorders, details steel

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JOHN RONAN ARCHITECT BEATS EISENMAN, MORPHOSIS, AND FOX & FOWLE

UPSET VICTORY IN NJ

Chicago-based architect John Ronan beat Peter Eisenman, Morphosis, and Fox & Fowle Architects in the final round of the national competition to design a 677,000-square-foot high school on a 15.3-acre site in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Eisenman placed second. Placing a high value on visionary yet accessible architecture, the competition—advised by Ralph Lerner and juried by Henry Cobb, K. Michael Hays, Carlos Jimenez, Toshiko Mori, and three local officials—awarded the \$84 million job to Ronan on February 24. "I'm surprised and elated," said Ronan. "I knew we had a good solution but we also had tough competition." "I think Ronan won because of the clarity of his scheme," said Lerner. "He produced a fresh image that epitomized the optimism of the community." The winning design features glass towers that contain publicly accessible spaces (media center, gym, theater) and a horizontal "barscape" of classroom buildings that can easily accept additions and have interior constructions that will allow room sizes to be adjusted as necessary.

DEBORAH GROSSBERG

ronan raises the bar

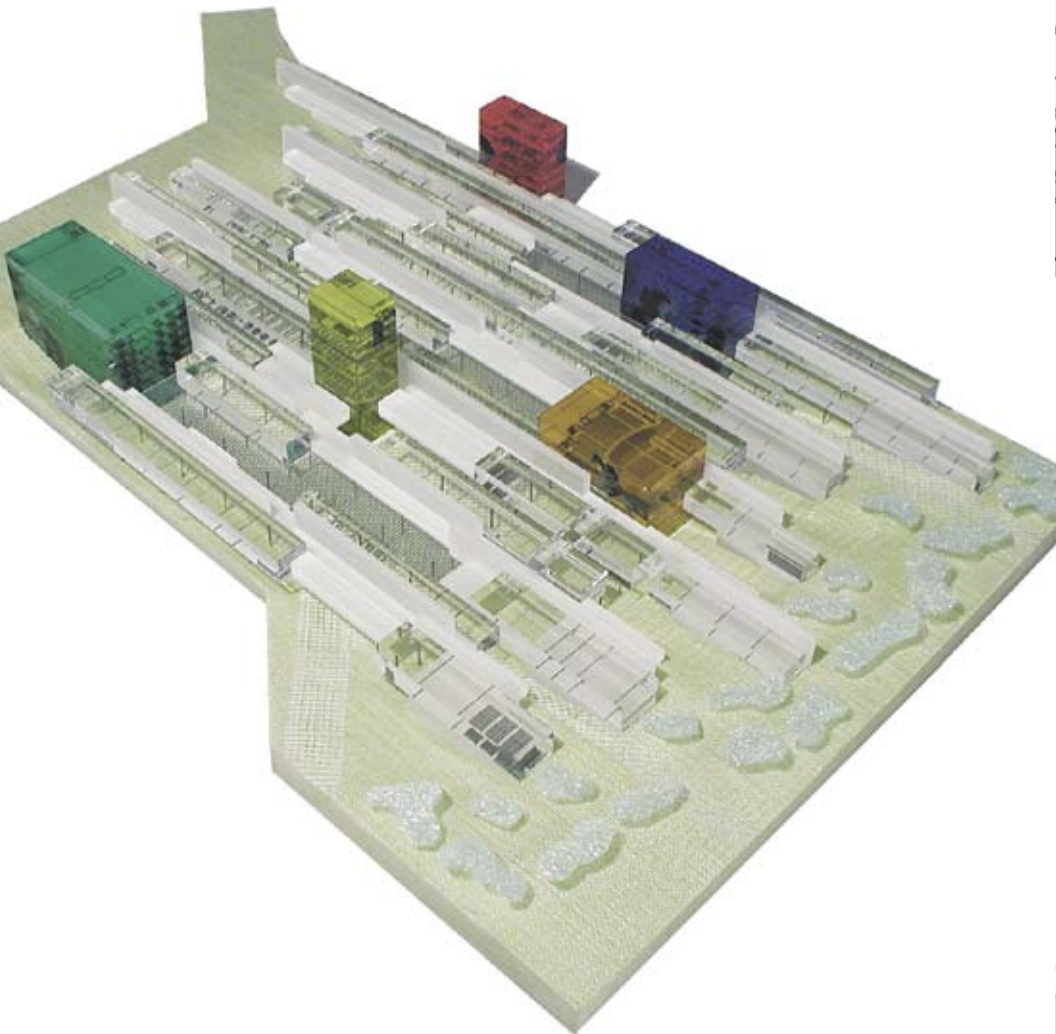
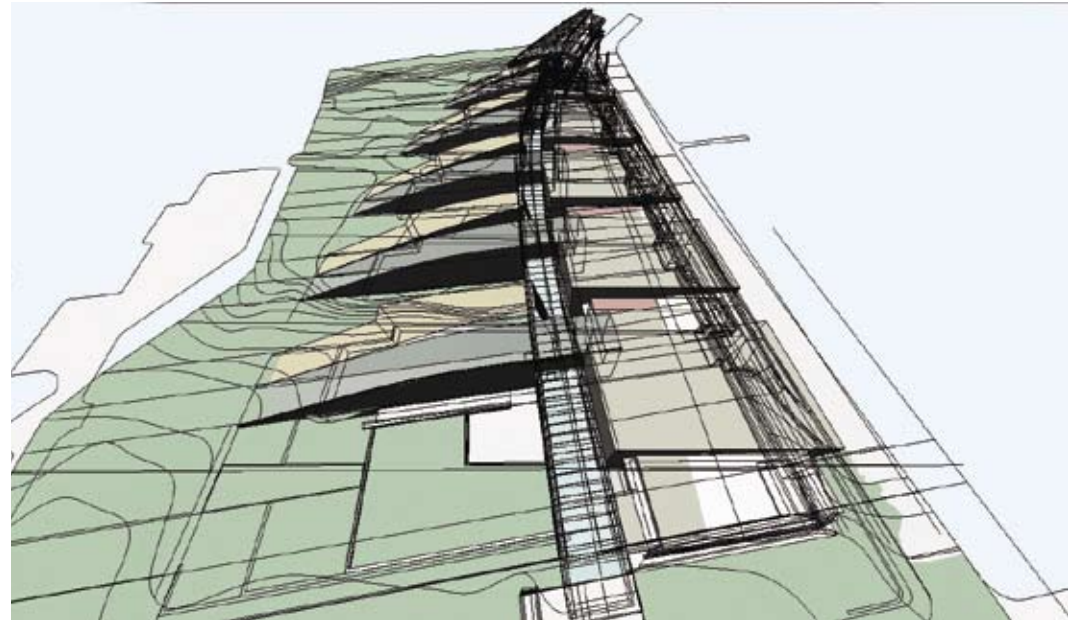
An ambitious competition for a new American high school attracted strong entries and produced a radical result. Presenting the four finalists in the Perth Amboy High School Design Competition ...

The story of the PAHS competition was covered by local, regional, national and international media.

John Ronan Architect, Perth Amboy winner



Eisenman Architects, Perth Amboy second place



Fox & Fowle Architects' submission



Morphosis' submission



fees, including reimbursable expenses, at 15% of construction cost, and setting a limit of \$200 per gross square foot of renovation and new construction costs.

Lessons Learned From Perth Amboy

The SCC liaison called a meeting of the Robbins School project team to discuss lessons learned from the successful Perth Amboy experience that could be incorporated into the Robbins competition. The liaison was particularly concerned about the context created by New Jersey's strict procurement rules. In Perth Amboy an effort was made to mimic them in order to make the design competition a replica of the architectural commission. The biggest problem is to make sure that architects who submit proposals in stage 1 are ready and able to become pre-qualified according to NJSCC procurement criteria. The liaison suggested revisiting the competition terms and conditions to take that into account. If selected, the finalists will need to get a license to practice architecture in New Jersey, and to have an architect on the team who meets the NJSCC pre-qualification requirement for a rating of \$20 million or greater, based on their past volume, type, scale and complexity of work experience. The liaison recommended including more information about the timeframe of the prequalification process so that applicants would know what to expect. His words proved to be prophetic.

The NJSCC liaison was also concerned about how to ensure that the finalists' proposals stayed within budget. He suggested making the Technical Review for stage 2 proposals more substantial. The Technical Review Committee is a panel of reviewers who are qualified to evaluate the construction costs involved in the project. To address this concern, along with legal issues raised by the state attorney general, the Trenton team agreed that the winner of the competition would not automatically be awarded the design contract, but would receive bonus points on the SCC selection team's evaluation of their response to the project RFP. The points would be based on their technical and fee proposal, and on the experience of key team members.

Professional advisor Ralph Lerner proposed another lesson from the Perth Amboy experience: don't solicit written public comments on the stage 2 proposals. In his opinion, this conveys the impression—inappropriately—that public opinion would have some influence on the outcome of the competition. He felt that the nearly two hundred comment forms received about the finalist proposals in Perth Amboy did, in fact, influence the opinion of the two elected officials who



Members of the faculty planning committee, here with Principal William Simpson (far left) and city planner Bill Valocchi (with clipboard), were pleased that the educational program, once approved by the state Department of Education, would now drive the design process.

served on that jury, the Mayor and President of the School Board. The Robbins team agreed to accept Lerner's advice.

Facility Program Approval

Throughout the spring the team sought NJDOE approval of the proposed program, which had now been pared down to 112,000 sf, including a 58,000 sf addition. As the NJDOE staff assigned to this project continued to insist, based on an inflexible application of the FES:

The projected enrollment is 600. The existing capacity is 244, which produces 356 un-housed students. The state funding formula establishes funding based on un-housed students at 125 sq ft per student. The district is requesting constructing 58,000, which is 13,500 sq ft determined to be ineligible.

The district submitted yet another justification for the additional space, reiterating in more detail the need for larger than average classrooms to accommodate, at various times, parent volunteers, ESL teachers, literacy coaches, and a 300 book in-class library (required by recent legislation), as well as project workspace, to implement the Comer model and serve the needs of the low income, bilingual student body.

Finally, in June, the Superintendent personally argued the district's case, persuading the agency to adjust the rigid guidelines and approve the program nearly in its entirety. In July NJDOE authorized SCC to procure the land and Professional Services for the Robbins School project. The state budgeted approximately \$20 million for the renovation and new construction, including nearly 100,000 square feet of classrooms, an instructional commons, auditorium, media center, arts and music workshops, computer lab, literacy center, administrative offices, health and social service provider offices, cafeteria, gymnasium, fitness and play areas. The competition could now proceed. The educational program would, indeed, drive the design process.

Phase Two: The Design Competition

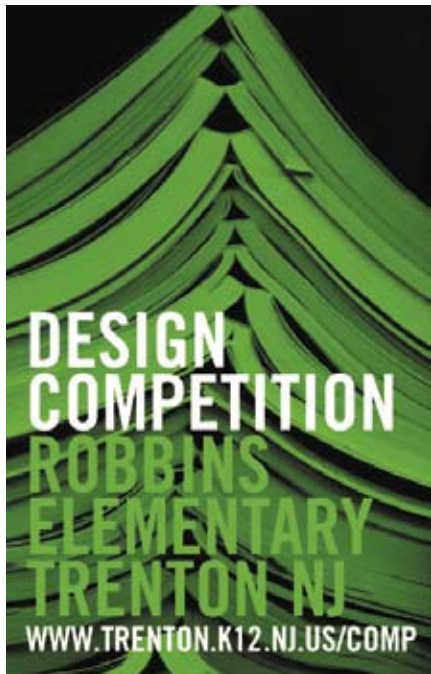
In preparation for launching the competition in mid September 2004, Lerner coordinated the preparation of the competition conditions document, compiling the statements of the programmatic requirements (“the brief”) developed in Phase One, along with a clear statement of the rules. He also assembled the site drawings, photographs, and forms necessary for contestants to register and enter submissions. Graphic design consultant, 2x4, produced the poster and completed the website—the primary vehicle for disseminating information about the competition. Lerner announced the competition on pertinent websites, in professional journals, and through a nationwide mailing of posters to various architectural organizations and schools. The submission deadline was set at 5 pm on December 10.

Stage I: Conceptual Approach

There are two basic types of architectural competitions: one is to find the right architect or design team for a project; and the other is to find the most appropriate design solution. The best method to find an architect is the Competitive Interview, according to The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), which has extensive experience running competitions. This method is similar to the SCC's selection process, where architects respond to a request for qualifications (RFQ), and a panel consisting of representatives of the SCC and the client school district interviews a short list. In this case the winning architect helps the client develop the program.

Design competitions may be either open to all registered architects, or limited to a group of invited architects. The Robbins School project involved an open competition, which offers the opportunity to choose from among a wide variety of design solutions; to perhaps “discover” a new talent; as well as to encourage submissions from established firms not known for designing public schools. For a \$100 entry fee, any qualified architect had the chance to submit an anonymous five-page booklet summarizing a design approach to the project. By involving a second stage, when a short list is invited to develop their proposals, with anonymity lifted, the client is able to establish a preliminary sense of the working relationship with the competing design teams, who in turn are able to gain client input before elaborating their designs. (The objective of a design competition may be to simply generate ideas, in which case a second stage is not necessary and the outcome of the process is an exhibit and publication).

The nature of the jury process is critical to the outcome of an architectural competition. The most critical factor is the composition of the jury. When a majority of the members are architects, it is a sign that the jury will privilege design



More than two years after the poster (above) was designed, it was finally time to print copies for a nation-wide mailing, and to launch the website (top right) that would be the vehicle for disseminating information about the competition, notably the Descriptions and Conditions (bottom right).



excellence as a criterion. The panel of jurors for the Robbins School competition consisted of four professional and three public members. The professional members, all architects, included:

Dana Cuff, Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, UCLA; Principal, Community Design Associates, Los Angeles, California;

Monica Ponce de Leon, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University; Principal, Office dA, Boston Massachusetts;

Brian Healy, Visiting Professor, Department of Architecture, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University; Principal, Brian Healy Architects, Boston, Massachusetts; and

Jessie Reiser, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, Princeton University; and Principal, Reiser + Umemoto, RUR Architecture, New York, New York. The public members of the jury included Mayor Palmer, Superintendent of Schools Lytle, and Bernie Piaia, NJDOE Director of Facilities. Ralph Lerner was instrumental in selecting the professional jurors, looking for prominent practitioners who would bring the appropriate perspectives to bear on the process, for example, expertise in school design, neighborhood revitalization, urban infrastructure, and investigations of new materials and construction techniques. It was also important to seek gender and ethnic diversity on the panel.

Stage 1 Jury

In mid-December the jury convened at the Trenton Marriott, which provided meeting rooms at a discounted rate. After a bus tour of the city and walk through of the school and its surroundings by the professional members of the jury, the group settled into a conference room at the hotel and took up the challenging task of selecting from nearly 140 eligible entries—from 22 states, Puerto Rico and Italy—a set of four finalists and several alternates to proceed to stage 2. To evaluate this many submissions would require a full day of focused effort, for which the professional members of the jury received a \$1,000 honorarium as well as travel expenses.

Under Lerner's direction, the jury evaluated the submissions in four rounds, which were carefully documented to ensure the crucial need for transparency and accountability in the process. In the first round, the jurors reviewed the entries individually and without discussion, giving each a score between one and ten. The ten submissions with the highest average scores were culled from the rest for con-



Jurors convene (clockwise from top left) Monica Ponce de Leon; Bernie Piaia, NJDOE and Dana Cuff; Brian Healy and Mayor Palmer; Ralph Lerner (far left), Pete McGlinchy, SCC liaison, join the discussion; Bill Valocchi, Trenton city planner and Pete McGlinchy observe

sideration in round two. Subsequently, if any juror felt that a particularly strong proposal was being overlooked, that juror could make a case for it. If the other jurors agreed, it was added to the pool of the top ten.

The round two discussion help the jurors construct a shared understanding of their aims. In an illustrative exchange, one juror re-introduced a scheme that she felt presented a particularly sensitive relation of the new addition to the existing building. Another noted it also had more space to hide, which could lead to more break-ins, and security concerns. The first juror explained that her purpose wasn't to select a particular building, but a general approach.

A third juror suggested that: "In stage 1 we are identifying architects. In stage 2, they visit the site, meet with the client, and can then refine their scheme. So we were looking at the quality of thoughtfulness and sensitivity in the schemes." A different juror countered: "But we are not looking at an architect. We are looking at their sensibility based on one sketch problem." "That's saying the same thing," was the response. "The general organization of their approach is the starting off point."

In round three Lerner spread out the expanded pool—the ten highest scoring submissions plus an additional seven chosen by the jurors—on a long table. The jurors then engaged in an animated discussion, which led them to sort the submissions into groups based on similar strategies for organizing the program on the site. Given the challenging site, it is not surprising that the proposals reflected only a few basic parts. "There is the courtyard building, the bar building, and one where 'fingers' extend alongside the old building," one juror noted.

A courtyard building creates internal outdoor spaces and organizes the elements of the project around those spaces. It can either be closed, surrounding an atrium, or open, forming a "U" shape. A bar building is a simple, compact structure that organizes the program in a linear form. By standing apart from the existing building the bar structure creates an external courtyard between them. The "finger" forms are parallel bar buildings accessed from a common core.

"Did any of them give the old building a distinct function?" one juror asked. "A lot did," answered another, adding: "But I think that will change once they see the real place." There was agreement on this point: "Once I got the walk through, I would change what I did just based on the website." In addition the jurors paid attention to adherence to the program. The jurors were wary of those who appeared to be adding things, since a qualified architect should know that this sort of building, in this sort of neighborhood, with this sort of budget constraint, could not sustain an enlarged program

Having settled on the groupings, the jury selected the strongest proposal in each. “We wanted to make sure that in the first round there would be broad representation across a typology of solutions to this problem, of how to expand the historic school building on a tight site, in a fragile neighborhood context,” one juror recalled. “If there had been three really good entries in one category we would have found a way to include them. But we wanted to insure that the City had a choice across the typologies.”

In the fourth and final round, the jury selected four finalists and several alternate competitors. The Mayor, clearly impressed by the architects on the jury, suggested: “Maybe your vote should be weighted more than mine. We do not look at these proposals in the same way.” But the architects noted that even they looked at the proposals differently, and not all were comfortable with the finalist choices. “Because of the aspirations of this project, we want to give you—the client—a challenge, one said.” “Two of the submissions we selected as finalists are less developed than the others, they took a more analytical approach,” said another. “One submission is especially abstract because that competitor clearly wanted to meet with the client before developing more detail. But the concept shows promise and is economical.” “Making a selection based on which scheme has the potential to develop into more is risky, but interesting to try,” said a third juror.

“You are looking for a germ of an idea,” Lerner stated, endorsing the jury’s risk taking selections. “Does this look like an intelligent person / team developed this idea? Is it worth putting some money into watching this idea develop further?” But the Superintendent cautioned: “You also have to think of stakeholder groups—the City, the DOE, the SCC— it has to meet their parameters. Looking at some of these schemes as a teacher, some would be very hard to imagine evolving into an environment for teaching. But that may be a function of this mode of representation.” He went on to say: “I’m comfortable with these four as presenting intriguing possibilities. In terms of discussion of site strategies, it has already been very instructive just to consider them all at the same time, as we have been doing today.” The jury then ranked the alternates by unanimous vote.

Now the identity of the competitors was revealed. The four finalists were (in alphabetical order): CR Studio Architects of New York; David Cumby Architect of San Francisco; Ply Architecture of Ann Arbor; and Preston Scott Cohen (PSC) Architect of Boston. The alternates in order of ranking were first, Peter Lee Architect of Los Angeles, second, Magnet Studios of Berkeley, and third, Urban Office Architecture of New York. Unlike Perth Amboy, where most of the finalists

were prominent architects, the Robbins School finalists were all relatively young and inexperienced. One benefit of this situation is that fresh talent would have a chance to make its mark, but this situation would present its own set of challenges, compounding the risks involved for the client in undertaking the competition process. Among these risks is the fact that the client would not benefit from the experience of many noted firms who had entered the competition and who had now been eliminated.

There were no prizes, or awards in stage 1 of the Competition. However, each of the selected four competitors participating in stage 2 would receive an honorarium of \$20,000 to prepare a design for the Robbins School, payable upon submission of the complete proposal.

Stage II: Detailed Design Proposal

In late January the four finalists came to Trenton for the mandatory site visit. After a guided tour of the city and neighborhood, they convened at the school to meet “the client.” SCC staff carefully described the pre-qualification process requisite to compete in stage 2, which was sure to be an obstacle for some of these young architects. The various state agencies involved had agreed to expedite their applications for the sake of the competition. SCC staff were prepared to assist them, but emphasized that each team had to make it a priority to complete the paperwork. If a finalist did not have the capacity to become pre-qualified on its own, it would have to form a joint-venture partnership with another firm that could, or else withdraw from the competition.

The teams now consulted with faculty, staff, students, and steering committee members. The Trenton city planner impressed on the finalists the importance of this project to the city. “What does a \$20 million investment in schools mean to a community such as Trenton? The renewed Robbins School will anchor this neighborhood, and hopefully attract more investment and new vitality, rather than merely prevent its further decline.” He urged the teams to develop their visions for the future of the school with the future of the neighborhood in mind.

The Robbins School principal cautioned the competitors about tailoring their designs too literally to statements made in the program about implementation of the Comer model. He said that the district and state were beginning to move away from WSR, in part due to the cost, but also because each school had adopted a different approach, which created its own set of problems since kids frequently move from school to school in the district.

The challenge to the architects was to provide a container that would support the current educational philosophy and reform model, but could easily be adapted to accommodate new ideas. That evening there was a community event where each team presented its general ideas (not the details of their submission) and answered questions from the public. The finalists now had until mid-April to prepare their drawings, a model, presentation panels, and the technical and fee proposal.

The Technical Review would be undertaken based upon submission of the stage 2 proposals. The comments of the Technical Review committee would be reported to the jury at the time of its deliberations. This Technical Review would be made available to each of the four finalists one week prior to the meeting of the jury, and each competitor would have the opportunity to respond in writing, providing clarifications for the jury to consider.

Delays and Uncertainties

Stage 2 got underway as SCC came under a cloud of criticism resulting from a January report published by *The Star Ledger* (Newark), New Jersey's leading newspaper, alleging mismanagement of the Abbott funds. The acting governor asked the State Inspector General (IG) to investigate. In March 2005, at the IG's request, the governor suspended awards of new school construction contracts pending the results of the investigation.

Meanwhile, David Cumby had to withdraw from the competition due to difficulties with prequalification. His replacement, first alternate Peter Lee, also found prequalification to be an insurmountable obstacle, as did the second alternate, Magnet Studios. It was nearly April by the time the third alternate, Urban Office Architecture (UOA), agreed to enter stage 2. The UOA team would visit the site in early April, and have until late June to complete its submission.

These delays proved to have a serious impact on the fate of the Robbins School project. In early April, SCC officials said Abbott funds would be depleted by January 2006, having paid for less than one third of the schools approved for construction. Trenton district officials immediately began to lobby for Robbins to be included on the list of projects earmarked to receive the remaining funds. But the IG's report proposed ten changes to be implemented before lifting the moratorium on school construction. The IG also recommended that SCC suspend land acquisition until it could establish appropriate guidelines for selection of suitable properties.



Finalists came to Trenton for a mandatory site visit, where following a tour of the city they convened at the school to meet "the client." (top) During a walk through the school, the group observes the second floor balcony overlooking the auditorium. (bottom) They visit a classroom.

Given the delays due to the withdrawal of three competitors, and the moratorium on school construction funding, the sponsors reluctantly postponed the final jury until early October. This would provide enough time for all of the finalists to complete the pre-qualification process, and permit the exhibition to take place in September, when school was back in session. In addition, the SCC suspended the Technical Review, because a cost estimate of the proposals at this point was moot.

The Finale

The focus now shifted to the details of the exhibition and the final jury, which would take place in the atrium entry to Trenton City Hall. City Hall was chosen for logistical reasons—there was no room at the school itself—but the venue signaled the City’s critical interest and key role in the project. In July, in the middle of planning the finale, SCC announced the list of the last projects for which there would be funding; Robbins School was not among them.

Happily, the opening of the exhibit in early September revived the enthusiasm of the teachers, students, and neighbors who had participated in the planning process over the previous 18 months, and sparked new interest in the possibilities suggested by the competition. The creative ideas on display raised hope for the future of New Jersey schools, even as the SCC—“reeling from charges it squandered much of the first \$6 billion entrusted to it”—was developing new, cost cutting design standards that angered school districts and education advocates.

Final Jury

A torrential downpour pounded on the skylights covering the atrium of Trenton City Hall throughout the daylong final jury, as hard to ignore as the storm surrounding SCC. Unfazed, Lerner advised the assembled jurors: “Remember, you are selecting an architect, not a design. You are not selecting the best scheme, but the best scheme as the basis for selecting an architect.”

The SCC liaison clarified the significance of their deliberations. “The intent of the SCC was to solicit nationally good ideas for this type of project, ideas that would be replicable throughout urban districts. These ideas might be incorporated in one of the agency’s new design manuals and as such perhaps even form part of a vehicle for architect procurement,” he explained.

This competition process itself could very well serve as a model for the



The finalists’ proposal were on exhibit in City Hall for a month.

state, the Superintendent added: “A loud argument is being made that excluding the district and the city from the procurement process has led to all kinds of problems that collaborative planning would have helped avoid. The SCC had been operating kind of unilaterally. If and when the legislature authorizes more funding for Abbott school construction there will be all kinds of arm wrestling about who will get the money, and within districts, people will have to prioritize projects, they will discuss, with the city, all kinds of issues. One of the intriguing things about this project is that it is much like the situation faced in many urban districts, where there is limited space for school expansion or replacement. As a result of the partnership between the city and the district, the neighbors accepted the need to acquire some of the adjacent homes. They took a mature look: we want a good school. But the confined site requires of necessity a certain footprint.”

The SCC’s liaison seconded the Superintendent’s comments: “This competition is not just about the education reform piece (the space program) but also about the urban context: circulation, access, open space. How do you fit the biggest educational bang on the smallest site? Your mission is to pick solutions that best provide opportunities to improve urban school construction. That will ultimately lead to architect selection. (The winner of the competition will likely be included on the short list of architects interviewed for the project once the legislature authorizes additional funding, but that is not likely in the foreseeable future.)”

Each finalist team then had 20 minutes to make a presentation, with 20 minutes for questions and answers. This provided an opportunity to discuss both their design approach, as well as how their team was organized, which is particularly important where the architect had teamed up with a consultant. Finally, the jury began its discussion of the projects.

The Superintendent began with an admission: “I was not a believer in this process early on, but I was really impressed with some of the imaginative ideas in these projects. Now I see that a competition like this has a lot to say for it.” However one juror confessed: “I feel guilty about saying it but I am disappointed with the level of consistency among these projects, since we selected concepts based on their promise for further development (the finger, the bar, the courtyard.)” The jury viewed PSC’s scheme as a bar building, the schemes of CR Studio and Ply as examples of courtyard buildings, and UAO’s scheme as a finger building.

A second juror agreed: “The basic ideas got undermined by their development. But maybe we saw the clarity of those basic ideas while the finalists themselves did not. These architects could all develop a scheme in response to a set of

critiques. Perhaps we should have shared our comments with the finalists after the stage 1 jury?”

The jury quickly agreed that two of the proposals showed the most promise: PSC and Ply. After further discussion critiquing these two schemes, the jurors settled on PSC’s submission as the favorite. A few representative comments explain why: “It is such a straight forward solution.” “Scott’s design shows a lot of restraint. I wanted to hear more about the classrooms on the upper level. But I was convinced by the way he handled the renovation of the existing building.” “He had a very beautiful way of separating the uses from the courtyard.” “And the play yard would be the least obtrusive on the classrooms. But Scott’s scheme has no larger group space; it’s missing that sub-level group identity. The serpentine corridor could become that, though.” “He managed to pull off the civic thing, the front door, which I didn’t think he could.” “Only, Scott’s scheme will not be media friendly. The bar building is a little intimidating at the outset. But it’s a strong architectural statement and that is what’s good about it.” “I agree with [that] concern. It seems stark. But if he had the opportunity to make a public presentation he could make it come more alive.”

With a consensus coalescing, the SCC liaison shared his view with the jury: “Only two teams addressed the issue of buses, Scott Cohen and Ply. In my opinion, Ply handles it better. ...running the buses around the building. Another big aspect aside from education is community use. Scott kept the gym, cafeteria and media center in the existing building and put the auditorium in the bar, which requires separate access and control. Ply has one entrance, which goes down to the public spaces, which were stacked. But in terms of cost, Scott’s probably is the most cost efficient of the buildings looked at today—the more condensed, the better net to gross. Ply’s features are good for a more expensive building but not for an elementary school. Essentially they are building two skins.” A juror added: “Regarding cost, in fairness to the process, Scott’s stage 1 submission was controversial since it was the least developed. But it made it to stage 2 because people realized it was economical.”

One juror summed up as follows: “We seem to agree that it seems justifiable to have a winner and an honorable mention. At this point the Mayor’s representative interjected: “One thing to consider is that the City has strongly advocated after hours use of school buildings. And we are recognizing Scott for not rebuilding the gym. But if the gym is not large enough for adults, then are we short-changing the community?” The NJDOE official responded: “Community use is not the



Jurors Jesse Reiser, Dana Cuff, Dr. Lytle and Monica Ponce de Leon, listen closely to Craig Borum and Karl Daubmann of Ply Architects.

driving force here. The state won't build a gym for the community, but will build a gym for the kids that can be used by the community after hours."

The juror who had earlier attempted to summarize now reminded the group: "The expectation was that we would select a scheme, and then the design process would begin."

The NJDOE official noted: "Scott's scheme is flexible enough. He can move things around to make it work. Some of the others are like a jig saw puzzle." He then moved to award Scott first place, and Ply Honorable Mention; the other jurors agreed unanimously.

At the awards ceremony that evening, the Mayor proudly announced the winner and Honorable Mention. The unrelenting downpour outside was not enough to dampen the joy of the winner, or relieve the disappointment of the other finalists. And despite the gloomy outlook for school construction in New Jersey on that rainy night, the designs produced by the Robbins School design competition have taken on a life of their own, as the focus of exhibits and articles, and recipients of prizes.

The hope is that the dissemination of these design ideas and the lessons learned in Trenton will find concrete form in urban school buildings in New Jersey and beyond.

It should be noted that PSC's proposal was not the popular favorite. A juror explanation: "You have a competition when you have a problem that is not easily solved by conventional approaches. So, it is not surprising if it doesn't appeal to the public, or the SCC." The juror elaborated: "The whole point of Scott's scheme is that it is a medium rise building. Could a medium rise building ever fit within the budget? Typically it is not done, so the first reaction would be 'no.' The client would need to talk to different kind of builders, think about different types of construction methods, and consult different structural engineers. That points to why a competition is useful. The competition produces a good solution, a part, but not a building. As a result of a competition you are hiring an architect who thinks along those lines—their creative problem solving bent—as much as the solution itself."

Preston Scott Cohen Architect, winner

Preston Scott Cohen's winning design is a sleek linear form that serves as a backdrop for the site. The colorful addition is programmatically connected to the original building by three bridges. The folds, patterns and colors of the new façade define serpentine corridors and will generate ever-changing visual effects.



Ply Architecture, honorable mention

“Assembly Required,” Ply’s honorable mentioned proposal, intertwines the public spaces and classrooms around a series of outdoor courtyards and playgrounds that can be securely accessed after school hours for community use. The entire roof of the addition is green, with an active playground.



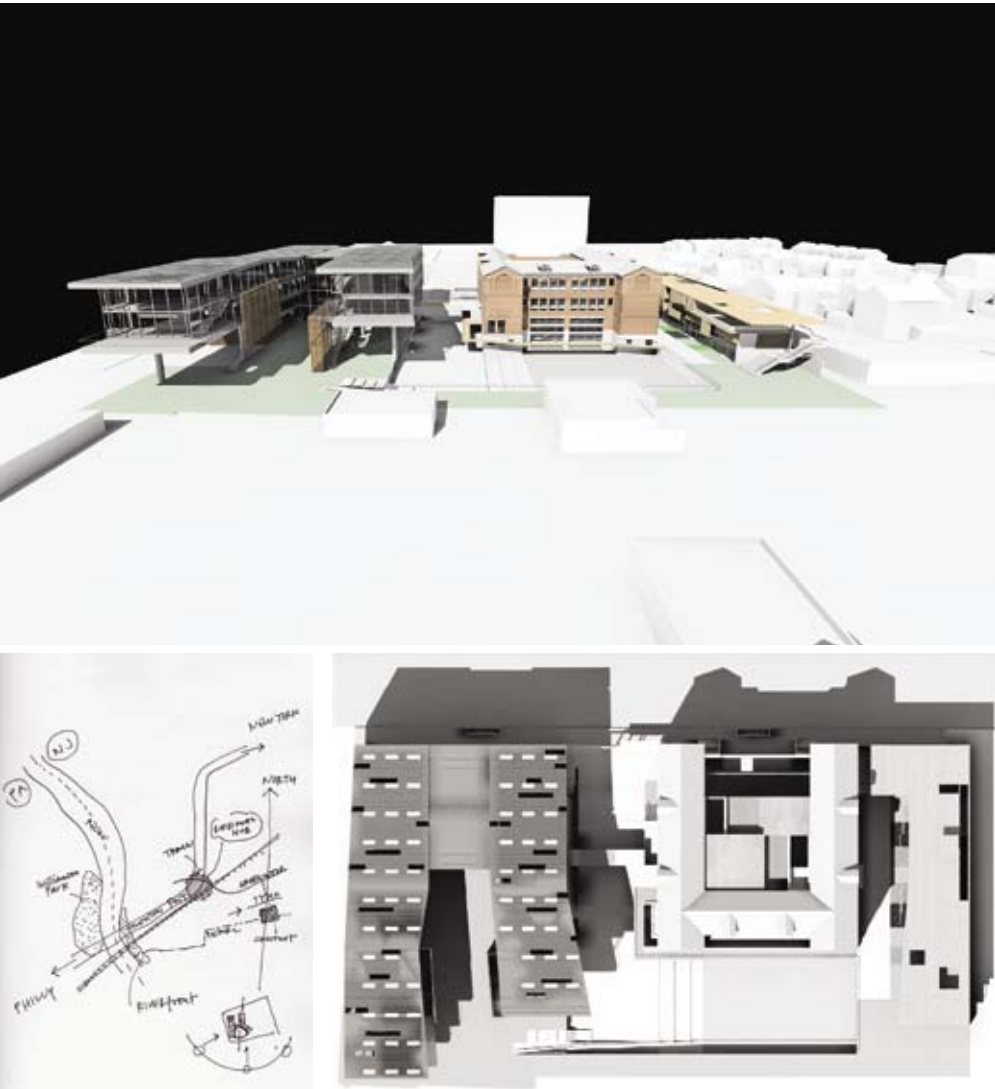
CR Studio, finalist

“Nexus,” proposed by CR Studio, reconfigures the U-typology of the existing school to form a U-shaped complex around a central courtyard. A multi-functional circulation path called “nexus loop” connects core programs which anchor each corner of the site, and winds up to a gymnasium and playground roof terrace.



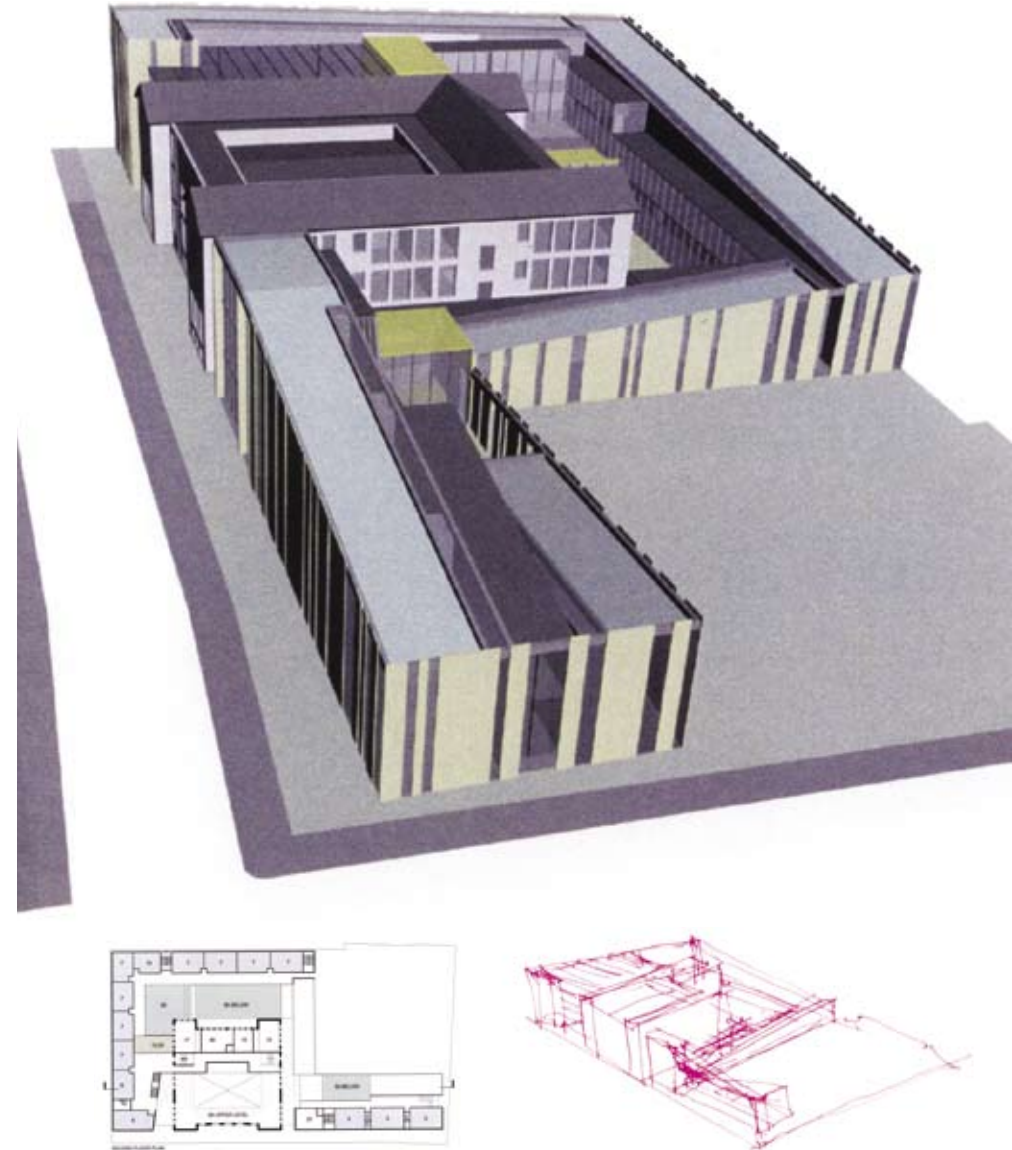
Urban Architecture Office, finalist

“Aristotle’s Fingers,” by Urban Architecture Office proposes an “open campus” including five new “finger” buildings and a new open green open space. This design—conceived as “volumes flying over the park”—refers way beyond the site, to neighborhood parks and circulation.



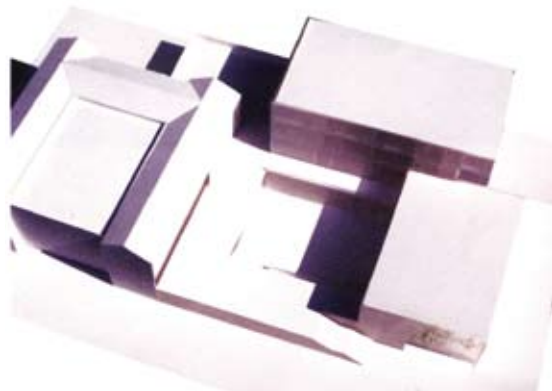
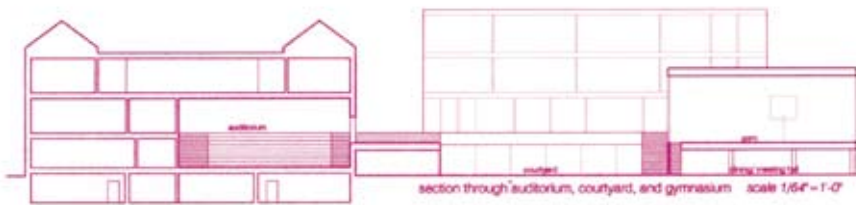
David Cumby Architect, finalist

David Cumby designed a ribbon-like form that partially envelops the existing building. The ribbon, composed of classrooms, takes the form of a series of tapered segments, which modulate the scale of the new school. A metal and glass façade provides a protective wrapper and unifies the units.



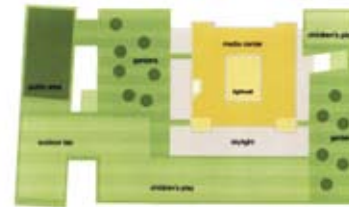
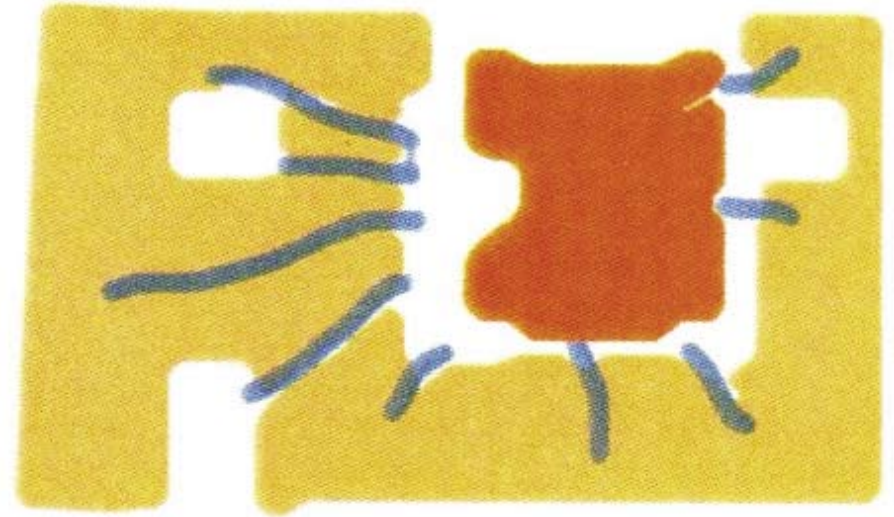
Peter Lee Architect, finalist

Peter Lee's proposal aims to intensify the school's potential accessibility, visibility and capacity for social exchange with the surrounding community. Three building blocks are plugged into a one-story plinth which houses almost all of the school's communal activities and playground courtyard.



Magnet Studios, finalist

Magnet Studio's strategy was to match the scale and density of the neighborhood by filling in the site around the existing school. This infill, effectively a plinth, contains a mix of academic and open spaces, to be designed with input from the users. The landscaped roof features public spaces and community gardens.



Lessons and Conclusions

The Winning Design

The intent of Preston Scott Cohen’s (PSC) winning design is to give primacy to the existing building while maximizing outdoor space. The result is a sleek linear form that serves as a backdrop for the site, stepped away from the historic school while respecting its volume and scale. The colorful addition is distinguished architecturally from the original building, yet is programmatically connected to it by three bridges. A series of ramps lead to a new main entrance to the kindergarten and grades 1–3, and an entrance to the gymnasium and computer laboratory programs to be shared with the community. Another ramp ascends to a foyer between the two buildings, where visitors pass under the bridges to arrive at an entrance leading to the auditorium and upper school programs. The sloped landscape contains rooms for the cafeteria and media lab.

The folds, patterns and colors of the new façade define serpentine corridors with niches associated with nearby classrooms, which have individual character. “Light shelves” reflect natural light deep into the plan. The new structure’s complex geometry and tinted glazing will generate ever-changing visual effects that will stimulate the imagination of students and teachers.

The compact design solution allowed PSC to preserve some of the houses scheduled for demolition, looping the bus access drive in back of them. The cafeteria below serves as a holding station for students waiting for buses or others to pick them up.

Honorable Mention

“Assembly Required,” Ply’s honorable mentioned proposal, intertwines the public spaces and classrooms around a series of outdoor courtyards and playgrounds that can be securely accessed after school hours for community use. The addition duplicates the volume of the existing school, forming a new complex organized as three concentric layers

Sleek linear backdrop for the site

Three concentric layers that can be securely accessed

wrapping an internal courtyard and plaza.

The outer layer—the building envelope—consists of structural, pre-cast concrete panels that rotate to respond to sun angles. The central layer contains classrooms and circulation separated by a colored storage wall, associated with the three grade-based learning communities. The inner layer consists of a yellow fiberglass grill that forms a transparent screen between the interior corridors and courtyard, which functions as an active recreation area.

A central portion of the roof of the existing building is converted to a planted courtyard and light well while the entire roof of the addition is planted, with a fenced off active playground. A vehicular drive loops around the southern edge of the site, where the pick up and drop off point leads to the entrance to the pre-K and kindergarten program and access to the rest of the school via the central courtyard. The courtyard steps down to the road forming a grand stairway to a “front door.”

Finalists

“Nexus,” proposed by finalist CR Studio, contains a wealth of creative concepts that upon elaboration in stage 2, however, were blurred by a lack of clarity. Their approach reconfigures the U-typology of the existing school to form a U-shaped complex around a central courtyard. They located core programs at each corner of the site, and connected these “anchors” with a multi-functional circulation path they call the “nexus loop.” The nexus space expands and contracts, overlapping with other programs to accommodate common areas, winding up from the ground plane to a gymnasium and playground roof terrace, and back down.

Each program area is organized in a U-shape around a medium-sized central area. Classrooms are conceived of as three prototypes: The “envelope” contains a room within a room to provide an intimate space; the “tray” is the platform of group instruction; and the “nexus interface” is “a flexible,

An u-shaped complex around a central courtyard.

occupiable threshold.”

To meet budget constraints CR Studio uses standard structural steel studs and columns with light-gauge infill. Terra cotta panels are used for the building’s skin.

“Aristotle’s Fingers,” by finalist Urban Architecture Office (UAO), proposes an “open-campus” of “peripatetic spaces,” composed of five “finger-like” and three discreet buildings that extend to a new green space at the south edge of the site. These fingers and the new green space refer way beyond the site, to neighborhood parks and circulation.

UAO transforms the existing building into a new hub where common uses are located in two bays centered on an atrium. To the west, classrooms for grades 1–5 are located in the new “finger” buildings, accessible through a central core that echoes the plan of the existing building. A smaller building housing the pre-K and Kindergarten anchors the eastern edge of the site.

UAO envisions their design—conceived as “volumes flying over the park”—as a means to encourage the pedestrian facet of the place both as a learning tool and as a community asset with gardening, recreation, performance and social gatherings as possible outdoor activities.

The Competition Model

The success of the Robbins School / PAHS model in achieving most of its objectives suggests that it offers a very useful tool to integrate school reform, facility design, and neighborhood planning, and generate creative design solutions for tight urban sites. New Jersey’s Abbott school construction program shaped the particular goals and structure for the Robbins School / PAHS design competition model, and different political and economic circumstances will influence public school design competitions elsewhere. But the Abbott package of school finance reforms heralds a greater state role in public school finance, involving standards-based, district-wide reform, along with increasing calls

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for site-based governance and community-school partnerships. Thus, lessons learned in the Robbins School project apply to the planning and implementation of school design competitions not only in New Jersey, but in other cities and states undertaking similar school reform and construction programs as well.

Political and Economic Considerations

The story of the Robbins School and PAHS design competitions confirms that it takes a lot of effort to cultivate a constituency and mobilize resources, both political and financial, for such projects. The statewide Community of Learners (COL) campaign created the framework for a serious discussion within a public forum about the problems and potentials for planning and designing schools that serve as centers of community. This conversation helped sway allies within state government and enabled the launch of the Community Schools Smart Growth grant program. Availability of state planning funds got the attention of School District Superintendents and Mayors and facilitated collaboration among public entities accustomed to a high degree of autonomy. Moreover, the planning money—which is generally hard to find and typically not part of a capital budget—allowed the partnership between the city and school district to look at the big picture and cultivate a planning framework within which an innovative project could emerge.

State planning funds and the partnership of state and local officials in Perth Amboy, along with the statewide COL campaign, earned the commitment of the NEA, which was convinced that the model for the PAHS design competition would succeed and could be replicated. The competition offered a cost effective, transparent method to ensure a level playing field among architects, and an incentive for innovative ideas that would raise the bar for design excellence in public schools. Thus, strategic investment by federal and state agencies brought design to the fore and instituted the

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use of design competitions as a public forum as well as a procurement method.

The competition, and community-based planning for it, situated school design in a broader social context that brought a civic perspective to bear on the questions raised, how they were framed and the input received. This underscores the importance of the partnership between the Mayor and the Superintendent of Schools as sponsors of the competition. Not only were the Mayor and Superintendent “on the same page,” but they also understood the need to communicate with a single voice. As the top elected official, the Mayor has to be the lead spokesperson for the school district as well as the community. Thus, prestige associated with the NEA grants gave the community a voice it otherwise would not have had in the Abbott school design process—and also helped give state agencies permission to fulfill their responsibilities in new, more flexible and collaborative ways. That permitted the architects to be more innovative.

The success of the PAHS design competition established an informal pattern of accomplishment and cooperation among a range of stakeholders that enabled the adaptation of the model in Trenton. Equally important, the PAHS precedent created a sense among the jurors and competitors that the Robbins School project would really happen. Was the Robbins School competition a success? “It was a particular goal to encourage imaginative designs around solving the problem, rather than go the standard SCC contract award route,” stated the Superintendent. “We definitely achieved that goal, compared to the other designs for schools in the district.”

A clear lesson from the New Jersey design competitions, though, is that there is no guarantee that the winning design will be built. There are many risks, and many factors are out of the sponsor’s control: unexpected turnover of elected and appointed officials, bureaucratic resistance to change, and loss of what appeared to be assured funding. Savvy leadership by the Mayor and Superintendent of Schools, and their

“We definitely achieved that goal, compared to the other designs for schools in the district.”

unwavering commitment to the design competition, was essential in keeping the project moving forward despite the uncertainties and pitfalls along the way.

But given the length of time it can take to bring such a project to fruition, it is equally important to have as advocates energetic and experienced mid-level bureaucrats, both in City Hall and the School District, who are likely to be around after the Mayor and Superintendent have left office. How can this be achieved?

It is necessary to institutionalize the partnership to keep alliances in place for a sustained effort. This is not easy to initiate or to maintain. At the local level one strategy might be to create an Office of Community School Partnerships that reports both to the Mayor and Superintendent. Ideally the community-school partnership will become embedded in a supportive network of relationships that link agencies at many levels of government and the community, and that share overlapping reform objectives related to school funding, governance, educational programs, and facilities. In this way, leadership can shift from the state to the local level, and back, as political circumstances change, as they did in New Jersey.

Likewise, the winning architect will “need to see themselves as actors in a political system, not floating above it as an artist or a neutral professional,” as advised by the political economist Lynn Sagalyn. “Without political skills, they will find their efforts outflanked by those accustomed to acting in the political arena.”

Planning

The competition clearly served as a catalyst for public participation in the school planning and design process, but the consultant who served as project director actually made it happen. “We couldn’t have done it without ... an external facilitator,” the Superintendent confirmed. “Districts don’t have that capacity.” A key role of the project director,

Ideally the community-school partnership will become embedded in a supportive network of relationships

The winning architect will need to see themselves as actors in a political system

who was trained as an architect and planner, was to open up the school planning and design process to include other important stakeholders in the community. As a result, the Superintendent observed: “We had a lot more community involvement in the Robbins school than in our others, and by community I also mean the city, getting the planning staff involved in the process, not just at a zoning hearing.”

This outreach effort was also successful from the community’s perspective, as the Robbins School parent liaison (who also served as the translator for the planning process) attested: “The competition was a good way to get the community and parents together to design what we think a school should be like. We learned that there are people from all over who wanted to build a school that could benefit the whole community. We learned the ins and outs of how these things are done, the process it takes to build the school. We also learned that a lot more people care about the city than we think.”

The community planning process and the design competition did not prolong the school procurement process. The significant amount of pre-design planning would not otherwise have occurred at this stage in the standard state procurement process, yet it added tremendous value to the final product, in addition to the innovative designs elicited by the competition. “Originally, I was concerned about what the competition would do to the timeline,” the NJDOE representative admitted. “In the end, the competition was better thought out than the non-competition process, and accomplished a lot of the things that should be part of the school construction program: engaging input from the school, the district, and the town from the beginning; and tying the education program to the facilities planning.”

Clearly, funding for such collaborative, community-based pre-design planning should be part of any schools construction program, no matter what method is used for architect selection. The client should hire an external consul-

“The competition was a good way to get the community and parents together

“A lot more people care about the city than we think”

The competition was better thought out than the non-competition process

tant to do this planning, as the planning process educates the client about what to look for in an architect.

Jury Process

A competition is only as good as its program and its jury. Together a well-written and carefully researched program and a notable jury enhance the credibility and professionalism of the competition, but do not guarantee a successful outcome. Inclusion of the second stage of the competition provided an opportunity for the finalists to meet the client—sponsors and various stakeholder groups—and get a better feel for the project. However, there was no mechanism for providing the finalists input from the jury or the public concerning their proposals. In retrospect, it would have been useful to provide the finalists with a report of the jury’s comments, including, perhaps, recommendations for how they might improve their scheme.

To provide the finalists with meaningful community input about their proposals would require first educating the public about the alternatives and the role of public opinion in the jury process. One juror suggested: “Allow the architects to present what they feel are fresh approaches to the problem, and have the community give the architects feedback on that approach—not on the design.” However, at such a public forum, the competitors would learn about each other’s approaches as well, which may or may not be desirable.

An alternative would be to have the project director serve as an intermediary, explaining the alternative approaches and conveying community feedback to the finalists. A follow up meeting would help members of the public evaluate how the stage 2 submissions responded to community input. In this way, the competition would serve as a tool for public education about the value of public design and the design process.

With careful attention to the program, structure of the

A well-written and carefully researched program and a notable jury enhance the credibility and professionalism of the competition

“Have the community give the architects feedback on the approach—not on the design”



Mayor Palmer and competition winner Preston Scott Cohen, with a model of his proposal. The fate of the project is uncertain, however.

jury, and the jury process, a design competition can ensure that the process is informative, transparent and fair. “Using the competition builds community support, and credibility,” the Superintendent states. “You can see the project as it takes shape, as decisions are made.” Given the long gestation period for these projects, and the uncertainties about whether or not they will be built, it is important that the process engenders such trust and pragmatic optimism.

Implementation

The Robbins School and PAHS design competitions were designed to mimic New Jersey’s strict procurement rules, replicating the architectural commission process. “Procedurally we did well,” the NJSCC liaison confirmed. The finalist and alternates who were unable to complete the pre-qualification process were evidently unable to assemble a qualified team. The stage one selection process needs to screen out such applicants, because the delays created compounded the risks, time and cost of the project. It remains to be seen whether or not the winning designs for the Robbins School and PAHS can be built within budget. But as one juror noted, “No interesting project starts within the budget. It’s always a matter of engineering it down, in terms of scope, size, materials etc. The jury selects not just a design concept, but also the framework for the conversation that begins following the competition, about how to solve the problem. As a result of a competition you are hiring an architect who thinks along those lines as much as the solution itself. Their scheme reflects their creative problem solving bent.”

The Trenton Superintendent is convinced of the benefits of the Robbins model, predicting: “If the SCC re-emerges, there will be more opportunity for districts to select architects, and manage projects. The Robbins Competition provides an example of how this might be done in the future (presuming that new funding materializes), in New Jersey and other states as well.” The NJDOE representative agrees

“Using the competition builds community support, and credibility,”

...“No interesting project starts within the budget”...

the design competition model has value, for special types of projects: “Why not have a competition for redeveloping part of a community that includes a school? The competition would produce the master plan, the school design and propose the development team.” This state education official’s creative proposal is tangible evidence of the fruits of the seeds sown during the fertile, albeit short-lived COL campaign.

The real obstacle to implementation of the Robbins School and PAHS design competition model is what planner Don Schon referred to as the “dynamic conservatism” of institutions: “a tendency to fight to remain the same.” The rules of the game—facilities standards, procurement guidelines, funding formulas, etc.— may present obstacles along the way, but they are also constantly evolving. Schon advises: “We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are ‘learning systems,’ that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation.”

The COL campaign and the Community School Smart Growth Planning grant program proved to be an effective way to encourage local experimentation with creative approaches—design competitions among them—to integrate school reform, facility design and neighborhood revitalization. It is only through such a systemic effort—operating at many levels of government, in the private sector, academia, and at the grassroots—that it is possible to create schools and communities capable of planning and designing their own continuous improvement. In addition there needs to be an incentive for innovation, so that local state agencies do not simply replicate what has been done in the past. NEA support for public design competitions provided such an incentive, and should be continued and expanded. Finally, for innovative projects such as the Robbins School design competition to benefit the functioning of the system as a whole, there is a

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need for continuing evaluation through case studies and the exchange of information. It is in the spirit of exchange that this report has been written.

Carroll Robbins Elementary School Design Competition

All photos are by Ellen Shoshkes except as noted below:

- p.6 top and bottom by Preston Scott Cohen Architect
- p.9 Top Row by City of Trenton (except William Valocchi, third from right); Bottom Row, far left (Ralph Lerner) by Princeton University
- p.10 Google Earth
- p.17 (Governor James McGreevy) by State of New Jersey
- p.20 Model by John Ronan Architect
- p.22 (NEEDS TO BE CHANGED TO P.23) model by Preston Scott Cohen
- p.26 Bottom by Google Earth
- p.39 Top left (Mayor Palmer) by City of Trenton
- p.49 (Page might change) John Ronan Architect
- p.50 Top: John Ronan Architect; Top Middle: Eisenman Architects; Bottom Middle: Fox & Fowle Architects; Bottom: Morphosis Architects
- p.69 Preston Scott Cohen Architect
- p.70 Ply Architecture
- p.71 CR Studio
- p.72 Urban Architecture Office
- p.73 David Cumby Architect
- p.74 Peter Lee Architect
- p.75 Magnet Studios



