

BEST OF
2007
AWARDS

John C. Daniels School

PROJECT OF THE YEAR: Schools - Pre-K-12

With its streetfront façade of masonry and punched windows, the John C. Daniels School blends right in with the low-rise residences and commercial buildings of its urban surroundings.

The interior projects a different image, one of an open, inviting, and secure environment where kids can learn and play.

Located on what had been a dilapidated 7-acre site in New Haven, Conn., the 100,000-sq-ft Daniels School consolidated grades pre-kindergarten through eight that were previously housed at two existing overcrowded buildings.

The new school opened in September.

Along with providing improved instructional facilities for approximately 650 pupils, the \$21 million project was also designed to “create a park-like, recreational setting in that part of town-one that was secure and durable, but also child-friendly,” says New Haven Public Schools project manager Claude Watt.

The centerpiece of this urban “safe haven” is a 15,670-sq-ft interior courtyard that features an amphitheater, play spaces with a multi-colored rubberized surface, shaded reading areas and landscaping contributed by teachers and staff. Bordered by two levels of glass-paneled circulation corridors, cantilevered classrooms and teacher work areas, the courtyard and its activities are always in full view.

“You don’t have the worries of kids running into traffic or other hazards often found at urban schools,” Watt says. “And with the special rubberized surface, there’s less danger of children hurting themselves. That helps reinforce the sense of safety for both students and staff.”

Along with being the school’s most im-



portant design feature, the courtyard was also its biggest construction hurdle, says Joe Luciano of Giordano Construction of Branford, Conn., which served as project manager on the school.

“With the composite system of fritted glass panels and cantilevered rooms, it’s almost like constructing separate buildings because you’re working from the outside in,” Luciano adds. “But when you see the end result, you understand that it was worth the struggle.”

The school’s interior layout also stresses openness, with a layout that ensures that corridors are visually connected with each other and provide light-filled views of the surrounding neighborhood. The school’s three-level, 2,500-sq-ft atrium bathes the main circulation routes in natural light, furthering the school’s transparent, open design.

“We didn’t want the students to feel like

Key Players

Owner: New Haven Public Schools

Architect: Davis Brody Bond Aedas, New York City

Construction Manager: Giordano Construction Co., Branford, Conn

they were in a rabbit warren of corridors,” says Christopher Grabé, project manager with architect Davis Brody Bond Aedas of New York. “Everything is clear and clean, allowing for easy visual orientation and fostering greater social interaction.”

Versatility defines the school’s instructional spaces as well. For example, a panelized wall system enables the cafeteria and adjacent choral room to be reconfigured into a 6,700-sq-ft multi-purpose space for school and community events. The teacher’s cafeteria opens to create a >>

stage area towards the courtyard with the capacity to accommodate the entire school population. Movable glass panels outside the second-floor music room create an additional, unique staging location.

Typical rectilinear classrooms on the upper floors are organized in a "bar/loft" zone with easily removable sound-insulated walls that allow spaces to be enlarged or reconfigured as needed to accommodate new needs and teaching methods. Specialized classrooms support instruction in the sciences, art, and music.

The Daniels School's exterior palette of materials makes it part of the neighborhood. The streetside elevation has a minimal setback to match adjacent buildings, creating room for a soccer field on the rear of the site for use by older pupils and the community. A portion of the site was excavated about 12 ft below grade to accom-

modate the 6,166-sq-ft gymnasium's 26-ft clear height and avoid a potentially obtrusive disruption to the building's profile.

"This is an urban school with an urban feel," Grabé says. "We used different-colored exterior brick to articulate the organization of mechanical core spaces and classroom areas. Inside, different-colored painted blocks communicate the different building-use groups and vertical circulation zones."

The school's lower levels are painted green and the upper levels are blue to mimic the grass and sky, reinforcing the school's relationship to the outdoors. Other interior finishes of maple, silver and stainless showcase displays of student artwork.

Despite the Daniel School's open design and extensive use of natural light, the design team minimized solar heat gains by taking advantage of the site's east-west

orientation and incorporating features such as low-E fritted glass overhangs, treated glass and strategically placed deciduous trees.

While New Haven Public Schools chose not to pursue LEED certification, the building's high-performance mechanical/electrical/plumbing systems have surpassed Connecticut energy guidelines for public buildings. Appropriately, exposed overhead ducts and other elements help pupils understand the importance of the built environment to their world.

Watt says that so far, the Daniels School has achieved the rare distinction of pleasing nearly every one.

"The teachers like it, the kids like it, and the maintenance people like it. The architect and construction manager worked together to create a remarkable building." <<