



DOWNTOWN

SCHOOLS

Photos contributed by Peter Kerze and Bridget Blank of the Cuningham Group Architecture, P.A.; Michael Armado, Marketing Assistant for EHDD Architecture; Charles Todd of Little Architects; Ken Maness, City Planner for Raleigh, NC; and Ethan Kaplan and Peter Aaron of Esto Photographs.



In recent years, downtown districts have been experiencing a comeback hardly imagined a generation ago. Cities of various sizes are scrapping downtown agendas dating from the days when the only attainable goals were adding parking decks, resuscitating ailing department stores and constructing corporate office towers. A bevy of diverse functions are being implemented—specialty shops and galleries, farmers' markets, civic buildings, streetscape enhancements, even mass transit and housing, are coming to life again.

One such function is the downtown public school, once a casualty of the wrecking ball in the days of urban renewal. This new generation of public schools is dubbed by a host of enthusiastic observers as a "new-building type", characterized by an integrated, even global mix of students, creative and discerning architectural forms, updated curricula, and partnerships with community institutions and services. What follows are capsule descriptions of three successful ventures: San Francisco, Minneapolis and Raleigh, North Carolina. Each school project demonstrates how creativity, vision and long-term commitment can overcome the status quo.

**SAN FRANCISCO—TENDERLOIN COMMUNITY SCHOOL—
URBAN MELTING POT**

In the fall of 1990, a meeting was held between the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center (BAWCC) and Superintendent Cortines of the San Francisco Unified

THE NEW URBAN FRONTIER

by Martin Zimmerman

School district, to discuss the results of an exhaustive two-year resident survey of Tenderloin, the name given to a downtown district, long reputed to be one of the toughest sections of San Francisco. Tenderloin, so-named in the days when cops and graft coexisted and prime steak was a job benefit, encompasses 56 high-density blocks just north of San Francisco's City Hall and civic center. Their findings confirmed a radical shift in the demographic makeup of Tenderloin. Numerous rooming houses, formerly a safe haven for the disenfranchised, were now bursting at the seams with families from China, Laos, Cambodia and the South Pacific islands. As many as 200 children lived in tight quarters on some blocks, and the swelling population was inching upwards towards the 30,000 mark.



Armed to the teeth with data, and with the backing of businesses and nonprofits, BAWCC made its case, but failed to garner the school district's support. There was no choice except to embark on a citywide campaign to win favor from those who held the purse. It took another eight years before the goal of final build-out could be achieved. At last in the fall of 1998 the K-5 Tenderloin Community School officially opened its doors to serve a global student population mixing the newcomers with Latino/Hispanics, African-Americans and Caucasians.

The respected Bay Area architectural firm EHHD adapted the complex program requirements to a tight 1.3 acre site along Turk Street. These requirements placed high priority on incorporating badly needed community resources within the school. For parents and students, there is a library with books in many languages, a multipurpose room available for rental, ESL classes and even a rooftop community garden. There are three playgrounds, two at ground level for preschool and grades 1-2 and one rooftop for grades 3-6. Located below grade is the Esherick Center, named after deceased architect Joe Esherick of

EHHD, which includes the Computer Center, Health Center with dental and mental health service areas and the Adult Education Center. According to Midge Wilson, director of BAWCC and a key player from the outset, there is even a handbook available in three languages explaining the various services available at Tenderloin Community School for students and families.

The design, both inside and out, shines as a bright sunburst of reds and yellows, and signals the school's presence as a refuge amidst a hustle, bustle district thought to be second only to Chinatown in density. The front façade and interiors are adorned with murals composed of 5,000 glazed tiles, a collaborative effort between school children and artist Martha Heavenston. Now in its seventh year of operation, Tenderloin Community School (TCS) has also solidified a base of downtown affiliations to augment its curriculum. These range from the Philip Burton Federal building to the San Francisco Ballet. With characteristic modesty, Ms. Wilson can now say that, "TCS has achieved its mission of educating, supporting and celebrating the entire community in all of its diversity."

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MINNEAPOLIS—THE INTERDISTRICT DOWNTOWN SCHOOL—DESEGREGATION

Sometimes it takes a court order to build a school. The genesis of the Interdistrict Downtown School (IDDS) dates back to the 1970s, longer than Tenderloin, and at a time when few could imagine a school for downtown Minneapolis. But when the city of Minneapolis was placed under court order to desegregate its schools, something had to be done. Nevertheless, it took until 1989 to establish a working partnership between the city school system and its nine suburbs to resolve the desegregation issue. The outcome was an agreement to build three new magnet schools in order to comply with the courts. It was also agreed that the first of these schools was to be in downtown Minneapolis.

It took until 1993 to obtain an appropriation of \$10 million from the state of Minnesota to cover construction costs. With a decision-making structure established between all 10 school districts to guide the programming and design, the requisite committees were convened and architectural consultants were hired. All planning was to be held in check by a twin mantra: 1) devise an innovative 21st century curriculum capable of engaging the downtown community; and 2) assure that the facility is cost-effective.

The outcome proved to be a remarkable combination of variables involving many additional partners. Two with the most direct impact turned



out to be the University of St. Thomas, which was interested in moving its School of Education facility from St. Paul to its downtown Minneapolis campus, and the city's interest in providing additional parking to serve the entertainment/theatre district. Today both educational institutions share air rights on top of an underground parking deck financed and built by the Minneapolis Community Development Authority and just up Hennepin Avenue from several theatre marquees.

Thus the twin mantra was achieved. IDDS could link its curriculum to a host of arts and science institutions throughout downtown via Minneapolis simply by walking through an interconnected system of overhead, pedestrian walkways, and no land needed had to be taken off the tax rolls. Construction costs were minimized by omitting uses which already existed in the downtown. IDDS has no gymnasium or performing arts space, and relies on the YMCA, a nearby theater, the Minneapolis Public Library and even a private

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bookstore to serve these needs. In the end, IDDS would cost no more to build and operate than suburban schools. In 1998 the four story K–12 magnet school finally opened, the first in downtown Minneapolis in 70 years.

Cunningham Group architects have crafted an innovative design of bold and dynamic forms. Incorporating these with many sustainable design options, such as the downtown's first active solar wall installation, have further enhanced the school's reputation. It took years of work, unprecedented cooperation across district lines, inventive curriculum planning and innovative architectural design, to forge such a successful outcome.

RALEIGH—MOORE SQUARE MUSEUMS MAGNET SCHOOL—CULTURAL PARTNERSHIP

Raleigh, the capital city of North Carolina, may not be as big as Minneapolis or San Francisco, but it is a community with a mission. With the completion of Moore Square Museum Magnet School (M2M3) in 2002, the long-standing mission to strengthen the downtown core and make close-in neighborhoods attractive and affordable took a big step forward. Moore Square is just a few blocks from the state capitol building and a host of downtown museums and performance facilities such as the North Carolina State Museum of Natural History, the Exploris/IMAX facility, Raleigh City



Museum, the Contemporary Art Museum and Pope House Museum. This proximity is central to a prime educational objective of Moore Square Magnet School. Cathy Bradley, its first principal, has noted that "because our campus is located in the heart of downtown Raleigh, we are ideally situated to realize our goals—joining with museums and cultural organizations to enhance learning."

Moore school's prominent corner tower faces its namesake square, which is one of five urban squares dating back to Raleigh's founding in 1792. It serves as a beacon to welcome students and guests from throughout the Wake County system into its dynamic three-story ceremonial room



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and gallery space. As a magnet school its students are selected by lottery from throughout the system, with a twenty percent set-aside for students of color. Moore school also acts to anchor and blend with the scale of the adjoining neighborhood where downtown planners are encouraging affordable in-fill housing.

According to architect Charles Todd of Little Associates architects, a great deal of remedial work was required prior to actual construction once it was confirmed as a brownfield site. In the process, remains of a former prison, a gas station and auto repair shop and rubber factory had to be contended with, and contaminated soil removal to depths as great as 30 feet was required. And like its sister schools in Minneapolis and San Francisco, lawns and large playing fields that are taken for granted on twenty-acre suburban sites had to be reduced to

fit an urban city block of four-acres. As one of the curriculum planners points out wryly, "We weren't sure at the time if the primary recreation activity was to be running in place or tiddly-winks." Eventually, it was decided that a gym, the science labs and the cafeteria were essential, but extracurricular team sports could be sacrificed. The student body was also reduced from 1000 to 600 allowing two playing fields, surface parking and bus drop-off to be located inconspicuously behind the school. Last year, M2M3's success on all of these fronts brought national recognition in the form of an EPA Smart Growth Award.

WILL THIS TREND CONTINUE?

Only time can tell. But a new awareness seems to be emerging as greater downtown emphasis is placed on the cross-fertilization of racial and ethnic diversity, culture and education. Quality public schools are being recognized as important agents not only for downtowns to continue attracting residents and jobs, but equally important: the provision of as broad a range of urban choice and amenity as possible.

Martin Zimmerman is an urban affairs writer, architect and city planner currently based in Charlotte N.C.