A Positive Learning Environment for Children in the City

Providence St. Mel Elementary School
East Garfield Park, Illinois
May 1997

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Bachelor of Architecture Degree Program
Thesis Design

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Abstract


A child’s environment and his or her role models have a strong impact on their potential for learning and socialization skills. The three most influential settings in a child’s physical world of socialization include the home, school and neighborhood (Proshansky and Fabian 21). Where are places in the city that are positive influences for children and the surrounding neighborhood?

Providence St. Mel high school/elementary school, located in East Garfield Park on Chicago’s West Side, has a vision for a better community. East Garfield Park, located on Chicago’s West Side is one neighborhood making a difference for its children.

Architecture in itself can not solve social problems, but it can be used as a catalyst for change. The following thesis explores the idea of creating an elementary school in which the architecture becomes the home and neighborhood to its community of children. The program is driven by the needs of Providence St. Mel for a new elementary school. The design also enhances the relationship with nature in an urban environment, where children can have better contact with it rather than confined from it.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis book to my sister Stephanie. Her love of learning has been an inspiration for me in designing from a child's point of view. I wish that all children could receive the same opportunity to learn with positive role models and nurturing environments.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank many people whose time, effort and support is greatly appreciated (more than you know). Without everyone, this project would not be complete.

First I would like to thank my loving parents for giving me the opportunity to follow my dreams. I couldn't do it without your blessings.

Thank you to all my friends and family that supported me. To my best girlfriends Riitta Salonen, Michelle Mathia and Carolyn Ylagon, thanks for your ideas, input and moral support. To my studio classmates, thanks for your crits and late night conversations.

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Introduction

Personal Experience

Looking back at my childhood, going to grade school in the city had been a mixed experience. I attended a public school from preschool until 2nd grade and then a private Catholic school from 3rd grade until 6th grade. I remember getting lost in the corridors, playing jump-ropes and tag on asphalt pavement outside. I did not have a strong memory of a memorable space in school, nothing that lured me into wanting to stay there.

Children’s Village

Children have always been an interest of mine along with helping those in need. Originally, I wanted to design a Children’s Village where children could go to after school, a place that had a positive impact on their mind, their social life, their family. I wanted to address the gang issue, by providing a place where children could go to instead of the streets. I also wanted to include a community and resource center where adults of the community could also benefit by having place to gather and a place to take continuing education classes.
Introduction

Youth Centers
Sometimes children just need to feel accepted as part of a family. They need positive role models and peers. Currently there are a number of places that support after school programs that give children a chance to alleviate boredom and interact with positive role models. Including, for example, the Henry Horner, and James Jordan Boy's and Girl's club, the YMCA West Side Futures and the Chicago Park District.

How do you begin to design for a community's needs? How do you become sensitive in designing for children's needs? How do you make a stronger connection between children and the environment in an urban setting?
Introduction

Connections

My classmate Michelle Mathio and I were both looking in Chicago for an Urban site for our thesis. Since she was researching transient housing and I a children's center, we thought it would be a good idea to find sites adjacent to each other, potentially working together for one community. How did we find East Garfield Park as a potential site? First we talked to Urban Planning Professor Scott Truex, and he suggested contacting Jeff Kingsbury, a former Ball State University Urban Planning student. We visited him at the Shaw Company in Chicago. The project they were working on was the Homan Square development in Lawndale. He shared their project and then suggested to look into East Garfield Park where Principal Paul Adams had been instrumental and keeping together an inner city private school.

We were very interested in Principal Adam's story and the goals of the school and thought it would be a good opportunity to combine visions. Researching through the Internet, I found Providence St. Mel's home page. I tried to contact the school in this way and found myself in contact with Patrick Ford. He was our link to the neighborhood and school. That began a consistent correspondence in which I based much of the organizational criteria for the design of a new elementary school.
Site

Historic Background of Garfield Park
Garfield Park was formerly a semi-rural area that was incorporated in 1837. The community was annexed to the City of Chicago in 1889. Garfield Park was originally named Central Park and renamed Garfield Park in 1885, after the assassination of President Garfield. The area urbanized into a mixed residential and light-industrial neighborhood. Garfield Park had charm with its historic boulevards and was known for its conservatory. The park itself was designed by landscape architect Jens Jensen. The West Side was once known to have a thriving Irish-Catholic community with a parish on every corner. St. Mel’s church was the parish of East Garfield Park.

Cultural Background
Garfield Park in the mid 1800’s was originally populated by Irish immigrants and then later by some Jewish Europeans. By the end of the 1960’s industry declined and Chicago factories closed. Working class families moved out of the neighborhoods. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, racial tension increased and the population changed from European-American to mainly African-American. Commercial strips lost their strength and the community’s lack of education and jobs transformed the neighborhood into a ghetto.
Site

Change
According to the 1990 census, there were only 24,000 residents who lived in 8,500 units in the East Garfield Park area. In comparison to the 66,000 residents who occupied 20,350 housing units in 1960. The pleasant Garfield Park became a danger zone for drug dealing and crime. Today residents from the Garfield Park area are trying to take back the streets and regain a peaceful neighborhood where families can have the freedom to walk the streets without fear. Church members and residents are continually working as a team to build a better community by forming neighborhood watches, building affordable housing, filling the streets with positive activity instead of leaving it vacant for crime.
A positive learning environment for children in the city

November 21, 1996

SITE VISIT

Site

For a community I had I knew little about.

Site. Mel. I felt a little frustrated designing
between Road and home and Providence
hood. We noticed the similarity in design
we had a better feeling of the neighborhood
reading some articles about Paul Adams,
more pictures. We were slightly ner-
we took a second trip to Cathedral Park to

January 5, 1997

Site Visit

graphs and soon left.

little out of place. We took several photos.
McDonald’s inside of the school and let a
outside of the school and left a
park and a buffer of protection
time. We observed how there was an entire
the beauty and charm of residence of one
strong, triangular school. I could imagine
was a very beautiful park across from a
Cathedral Park by the bay, and noticed it
surrounding park. We walked around
and enjoyed a closer look at the school and the
and passed by streets of us we encountered
Cathedral Park was very intriguing. Curs
and walked to the school. The first thing I saw
and walked to the school. I noticed the
Great Cathedral Building
didn’t notice much of the school. I went to take a
looking down on the Chowon
After speaking with Jeff Kingsbury of the Show

November 21, 1996
Site Visit
March 10, 1997
After consistent correspondence with Patrick Ford, Michelle and I had an opportunity to visit the school. It was one thing to read and speculate about it, but it was another to observe from the inside and truly experience what goes on inside. Providence St. Mel is a castle in the city. It was like a fortress of protection from the evils of the city. They ran a tight ship. Halls were monitored by security cameras, no one loitered the halls.

Patrick gave us a grand tour of the school. It was a delightful old building with an interesting history and a collection of hidden rooms and spaces. Children appeared well behaved and dressed in their required uniform.

I was able to speak to several teachers about their wishes for an idea classroom and school. There are plenty of spaces in the school for classes, but not adequate to the size and proportions to the children. The rest can be found in a separate computer lab. Storage also seemed to be one of concern. One walk-in for art supplies and reachable shelving for the children. A bathroom and sinks were also a need. Natural lighting is also a wish perhaps an idea of a solarium where children can read and feel like home. The idea of a natural habitat for pets was another idea.
Site Analysis:
The site of the new Providence St. Mel School is located on the northeast corner of Monroe and St. Louis, one block from the current Providence St. Mel School. It is located within the residential neighborhood and has close proximity to Garfield Park. This location is second in choice. The first is right beside the current school on Central Park. Although the first is logical and more economical, the second site is chosen for this study.
Providence St. Mel

Mission Statement
"We believe in the creation of inspired lives produced by the miracle of hard work. We are not frightened by the challenges of reality, but believe that we can change our conception of this world and our place within it. So we work, plan, build, and dream—in that order. We believe that one must earn the right to dream. Our talent, discipline, and integrity will be our contribution to a new world. Because we believe that we can take this place, this time, and this people, and make a better place, a better time, a better people. With God’s help, we will either find a way or make one.”
-Providence St. Mel Mission Statement

Current School
Providence St. Mel is a private, 1-12 school, formerly Catholic. Now it is largely Protestant and 99% African-American. It is interesting to note that most of the children who attend are not from the East Garfield Park area, but from the surrounding communities which include West Garfield Park, Humbolt Park, and Lawndale. They call themselves “The school that works” They want to reach children at a young age so they already have special weekend programs. Many of the spaces already serve community center functions.
Providence St. Mel

Providence St. Mel Development Plan

Providence St. Mel has taken an integral role in the development of the East Garfield Park neighborhood. They have an established development corporation. Their vision includes an economically diverse neighborhood with the integration of rehabbed housing, new homes and townhomes, improved retail establishment along Madison. Flowershops, restaurants, grocery stores. The elementary school would also be a vehicle for a multiuse building with incorporated retail. Their main goal is to take hold of the empty lots and fill them with housing or commercial buildings. I agree that this would increase the value to the community and the liveliness of the neighborhood.

The following map explains the vicinity improvements. Area in yellow is to be rehabbed or infilled. Areas in orange are buildings and land owned by Providence St. Mel or Associated corporations and Areas in red are Buildings and land to be acquired by Providence St. Mel.
Teacher’s Wish List

Throughout my day at Providence St. Mel I was able to chat with a few teachers about what they would like to see in a future elementary school. Here are some of their responses.

Gwen Blossom: First Grade: She liked the idea of having extra space, perhaps a room of 20x40 or 24x40. The room could be then divided into several different activity areas where there could be places to work and places to play. She also thought it would be nice to have cozy nooks and a solarium that could have couches for reading and garden space. She emphasized that for young children, the room should feel like home.

I asked her about the opportunity to have flexible space where there would be movable partitions to combine classrooms. She gave me the impression that she did not like the movable walls. “Who wants to move them?” Unless there was a button to push to make it automatic. She liked the separateness of each classroom, yet the flexibility for the room to have multiple functions. She liked lots of natural lighting from windows, but thought it important to also have wall space for hanging up student’s work. Future placement of computers and an increase in outlets would be good idea.
Providence St. Mel

Mary Ann Welsh: Third Grade. She, like the other teachers agreed that it would definitely be nice to have a bathroom in the classroom, a carpeted area with a library (cozy), a non-carpeted area which includes an art center, sinks, shelves and a math and science center. She suggested an animal section which houses habitats for pets surrounded by their natural environment. There should be private areas divided by partitions, like curtains, screens, or a wall, sound proof if possible. The room should have ample storage space with shelves and cubby spaces. Like Gwen, she seems to like the extended classroom. She also wanted an observing area into the room enclosed in glass. The room need not be rectangular according to her.
The Programme

Classrooms: 9,000 sf
There are twelve classrooms, two for each grade (k-12). Each classroom is 25 x 30.
Each room should have an area to have desks and a carpeted area. There should be
wall space to pin up children's work. There should be a mudroom/cloakroom to
store children’s belongings. Each room should is required to have 1 toilet and a
sink area. There should be at least one wall of windows to allow for natural light.
The room should be flexible enough to suit each individual teacher’s and classes needs.

Art Studio: 720 sf
The Art studio has tall windows allowing plenty of natural lighting, sinks, and areas
to pin up space. There is allowable space for cutting, painting, and storage.

Music Studio: 720 sf
This room has space for singing and playing instruments. It will allow for natural sun-
light.

Computer Lab: 2100sf
This room will house 24 computers and the mainframe. Space is flexible enough to
conduct class instruction and can be divided into two separate teaching stations.
The Programme

Resource Center: 2100 sf
This area is located in the center of the building as the nucleus or information hub. It should include space for books, magazines, and audio-visual equipment.

Gymnasium: 5600 sf
Serves the dual purpose of a gymnasium/auditorium. There is space to store sports equipment.

Multiuse space: 720 sf
Used for holding adult continuing education classes, flexible to turn into permanent classrooms, if population of children increases. Could also be used for community meetings.

Child Care Center: 6400 sf
Child care used for the children of faculty and of the community. Art area, Music area, storytelling area.

Greenhouse: 1444 sf
Located on the roof top. Houses various plants for growing and studying.

Roof Garden: 22,500 sf
Roof top space is allocated for growing vegetables, having outdoor classes and functions, playing. Good environment.
Thesis Premise

Precedent Ideas
Here are a few examples of architecture that convey the type of spaces I wanted to create in the elementary school. The top photograph is The Vredenburg Music Center a space designed by Herman Hertzberger. It is essentially an interior street which is one idea that I wanted to create for an interior neighborhood. The bottom picture is a community center designed by Rob Wellington Quigley. It gives a good human scale feeling. Both break up vertical space by jutting out balconies and railing details.
Thesis Premise

The following series of photographs are designs once again by Herman Hertzberger. His simplicity of design makes a space come alive, not to mention making the most out of a tight budget. All photographs are part of the Montessori School in Delft (Lessons for Students in Architecture 154-155). You can see here how Hertzberger manipulates the floor plane by transforming it to extra seating and how he pushes the limit of concrete blocks to create places to plant on a roof top.
Thesis Premise

Here are some examples of children engaging with the environment. A hands on experience is always better than just reading it in a book. Photographs are taken from Project Wey (Alternative Learning Environments 229).
Design Methodologies

Village
What is a village? In a larger sense, a village a place that made up of smaller places. It is large enough to be comprised of a collection of buildings, small enough that those who inhabit it know each other. It is pedestrian friendly and humanly scaled. It is anti-institutional and fits into the fabric of the neighborhood. The proposed design for Providence St. Mel Elementary School follows the model of a village where each classroom is a home to its students and pairs of classrooms become streets. The combination of streets then become the neighborhood. The neighborhood has shared group spaces like greenspaces and outdoors spaces and a shared resource center. In this village, children can make a mental map in their mind of how their school is laid out.

Front Porches
We feel like we have entered our home territory when reach our front porch. Each grade is paired together and share a front porch which defines their home. In this case we define placemaking. Children will be able to easily identify where their classroom is because they can identify the entrance. They can say “This is my classroom, this is my home.”
Design Methodologies

Group Spaces
Like outdoor greenspaces and plaza spaces, the interior group spaces were designed to be used for students to gather to engage in storytelling, to meet for special events and to display student work. Here hall space is not always vacant, but full if activity. Since the children's projects occupy these spaces, they are more likely to take care of their space.

Roof Gardens
How do you give the opportunity to engage children with the environment in an urban setting? If you look at the current school, there is a lack of opportunity to learn about nature on hand. Even the current playground is really a poor attempt to something that could be enriched and exciting. It is located in the back, next to the parking to. It is blacktop paved, with a patch of grass. The idea solution would be a roof top garden. It would be paved and decked, including vegetable gardens, greenspaces and a greenhouse. This area would be more secure and something not typical for them.
Design Methodologies

Mural Wall
The mural wall was intended for children to use their creative energy for painting things of importance to them instead of defacing property. This could be a thing of such beauty, a place perhaps for each changing year of students to leave their mark.
Design Studies

The studies here represent schematic designs that lead up to the final design. On the left is a quick sketch showing some planning in the layout of spaces. The sketch on the right describes an idea of what happens if the street St. Louis were to be closed off to traffic in order to be pedestrian friendly, similar to a campus quadrangle.
Design Studies

The series of drawings here are explorations of existing shapes from architecture taken from the existing Providence St. Mel and the neighborhood residences.
Design Studies

Here are some sketches of ideas of what could be integrated into an outdoor playground.
Design Studies

These are examples of earlier design schemes for the elementary school.
Final Design

The exterior design for Providence St. Mel Elementary kept the same architectural integrity of the existing High School. On the northeast corner of Monroe and St. Louis is stair tower which not only identifies the main entrance of the school, but also is a defining landmark in the community. Although its appearance may seem massive, architectural elements such as the bay windows, break it down into smaller parts. In a sense, it is a scaled down version of the current school.
Design Solution

As before, the interior of the school is designed to be like a neighborhood where each grade has a street and each pair of classrooms share a roof to identify their home. Group spaces are shared by all the classrooms and are located adjacent to either the resource center or the computer lab, the nucleus or hub of the school.
Reflections

What did I learn from all of this?

What better solution to patch up the city than to find a school that has a goal to achieve and work with them. Providence St. Mel is a stronghold in the West Side Community with visions of a determined principal, supporting faculty and community. You can't erase or destroy everything existing that is bad. There is a history to every neighborhood and community. You watch it change and grow. You patch up the weak spots and get rid of the bad spots to strengthen the stitches.

Where there is empty space, there is trouble so you fill it up so people watch it. You take care of the space and most of the time people respect it. It's something to teach your children. Learning goes beyond what's in your school. It continues into your neighborhood and into your home. You feel safe in your school, home and neighborhood. These three have the greatest impact on your child. The architecture is one aspect of making things work. It take the effort a team. Students, Faculty, Family, Community, working together for the common good.

How do you design for children?

Keep in mind their size, proportions, eyesight, need for variety of spaces. Children want to be like adults, but act like children. They want to take pride of their pos
Reflections

sessions, their space and they have to be able to do those things and lessen frustration that hinders learning. If you make a beautiful thing, and have them take care of it, they will respect it and hold it precious. If they constantly break things, deface them, etc. They will continue to do it and the place or thing will have no value. Work with the school, see what their needs are and it will be clear to what the design will be.
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