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Greening the Past: Inner City School Gets State-of-the-Art Retrofit

In gritty north Jersey, an old chocolate factory becomes a model of sustainability.

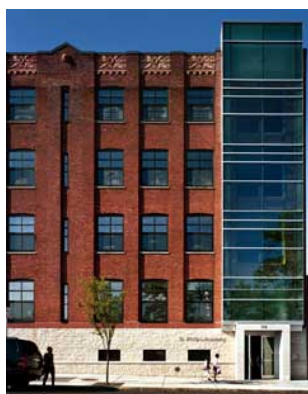
by Owen Edwards

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Field of Dreams: The one entirely new structure at St. Philip's Academy is the full-size gymnasium, separate in style and material. *Credit: Michael Moran*

St. Philip's Academy is a private K-8 school in Newark, New Jersey -- by definition, outside this magazine's usual public school territory. But certain facts make the school a success story worth studying: St. Philip's is dedicated to serving at-risk students in Newark's inner city, it is a meritocracy with no set financial requirement for admission, and it has just moved into an environmentally forward-looking renovation by the renowned architectural firm [Gensler](#).



Credit: Michael Moran

Now the new home to 330 inner city students, the school is located in a 1920 building that was once a chocolate factory (back when Newark, not Hershey, Pennsylvania, was the cocoa capital of the United States). The Gensler renovation -- a 55,000-square-foot facility and new 15,000-square-foot gymnasium -- is a near-seamless merging of the architectural substantiality of an earlier industrial age with the light-filled, spatially fluid design of our modern era, along with the increasingly sophisticated design approaches to sustainability and efficient energy use. (The old-to-new building was designed to meet [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design](#) criteria for sustainability.)

The academy, formerly housed in a much smaller building that had been a bank and an insurance company, is devoted to city students whose academic promise usually exceeds their family's financial situation. So, when a move to a larger facility was decided on, a downtown location was essential.

According to Miguel Brito, the school's principal since 2000 (St. Philip's was founded in 1988 by the dean of the Newark Episcopal Diocese's Trinity and St. Philip's Cathedral), "We looked at over twenty sites before locating the right building about a mile from our original school. The search was a real challenge for nonprofessionals, but luckily we had friends in Newark real estate."

Finding a site was just the first of the challenges. "The building had been through many incarnations since its original use as a chocolate factory, and after the 1967 Newark riots, it was abandoned," Brito says. "So it had to be gutted and completely redone."

But not torn down. Ralph Walker, lead Gensler architect on the four-year project and a specialist in designing educational facilities, emphasizes that the idea of demolishing an old building and starting over runs counter to the principle of sustainability and conservation. "To tear down a basically sound structure is a big waste of materials," he says. "Though renovating an old, existing building creates certain limitations, the size and location of the old factory were ideal." Also, Walker points out that the rigorous process of finding the right place gave everyone involved a chance to refine their goals. "At Gensler, we spend a lot of time with a client before we begin actual work on a project," Walker says, "and the process of eliminating buildings gave us a chance to dig in and understand what the expectations for the new school were."

Beyond the initial goal of providing students with more space for science classes and labs and an all-around larger environment (including a full-size gym, which the old school lacked), the driving expectation was to go green in both structure and spirit. The budget for the renovation was \$22 million, much of it raised through private individuals, members of the church's board of trustees, and friends and supporters of St. Philip's. "More than just making a sustainable building, we wanted to create an environment in which the students are an integral part of the process and can learn from it," Brito says. "For instance, on the roof of the gym, we are putting in a garden with 2 feet



Garden of Eating: Project-based learning in the gym roof garden will help supply organic

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of soil and some raised beds with 4 feet of soil. The kids will grow some of the food that will be used in the cafeteria, and they'll compost waste to return to the garden in a closed-loop food cycle. That project-based study will be part of our teaching about nutrition, wellness, and health." produce for school lunches. *Credit: Michael Moran*

Ralph Walker says the design brings together the old building with new elements but doesn't attempt to have the new overshadow the old. "We wanted to note the changes, not camouflage them," he says. "For instance, when we put in acoustical ceilings, we placed them between the original wooden beams, which we left unclad and rough. Similarly, the glass 'lantern' that brings natural light into the interior is pulled away from the brick face of the building so that it's clearly an add-on."

The school continues to be a work in progress. "After we moved in, some of the construction was still going on, so students could get a vivid idea of what the job of building entails," Brito says.

Taking a cue from living-history museums such as Colonial Williamsburg, Gensler designers are at work on a signage project that will turn the school into a kind of physical curriculum. "As an example, those wooden beams will have signs that will discuss forests, the timber industry, sustainable logging, even how wood has been used in construction through history," Walker says. "We are working with the science faculty on how various architectural elements could be used for life sciences."

This signage is designated as stage two in the renovation, which Walker hopes will be funded by a new series of grants. "We're planning for teachers and students to be able to use the signs in a kind of scavenger hunt, to encourage them to put together a complete narrative, piece by piece," he adds.

"It's been a long run, but there's a certain thrill to the whole process," says Brito. "For all of us, just being in the building is uplifting. If I could have written down the most hopeful scenario, it wouldn't compare to the reality."

This article was also published in [Edutopia Magazine, September 2007](#)



Best in Glass: Gensler maximized window area to offer the right setting for enlightenment. *Credit: Michael Moran*

Green Inner-City

Submitted by [Zaccai Free](#) (not verified) on October 18, 2007 - 16:33.

It's imperative that the inner cities and communities of color be included in the "Greening of America". Those who have traditionally been left out of the economic and social transformations, actually hold the key to innovative applications of developing ideas/projects.

By improving the environmental awareness of youth in the inner cities we seed a future of consciousness, clarity and creativity. The youth when properly equipped will inspire the rest of us and demand that we take more responsibility for the planet and move more swiftly to address the myriad problems we have created.

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