

SOUTH BRONX CLASSICAL IV

CLASSICAL CHARTER SCHOOLS



NEW K-8 SCHOOL WEAVES CLASSICAL ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS INTO MODERN SPACES TO SUPPORT MISSION AND CREATE A BEACON OF EXCELLENCE IN THE BRONX.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY + SCOPE OF WORK & BUDGET

One of the biggest challenges facing educators the world over has been fighting the impact poverty has on student behavior and educational outcomes. Education is one of the best ways to improve socioeconomic circumstances, yet students from low-income families face several significant barriers to success before they even walk into their schools, from decreased school readiness (measured in both academic and social skills) to lack of support in the underfunded schools typically found in these neighborhoods to lack of support at home, often due to parents working multiple jobs. This support is critical for students in order to complete homework and perform other essential tasks that will prepare them for life.

And as the income gap in the U.S. widens, so too do the outcome gaps among students. Which is where South Bronx Classical Charter Schools see an opportunity for improvement.

Built as an educational oasis in a dense, busy, and even at times chaotic urban setting, SBCCIV combines classical education, which asks its students first and foremost to focus on ethics, goodness, and virtue, and a uniquely designed setting with nods to the calming effects of the symmetry and proportions for which classical architecture from ancient Rome and Greece is best known. SBCC was built for K-8 students as a foundational experience: helping students build the social, emotional, and academic toolkit they'll need to succeed in life.

SBCC sought a modern take on a “classical school building” to support its highly structured setting and pedagogy, and the 22,000 square foot site features design touches such as columns, a portico in the entryway, and classical symmetry that is easy to navigate and beautiful. The floor plan centers the lobby (known as the Agora), the gym, and the cafeteria to mimic the central importance of social gathering at the heart of democracy and education, and employs materials such as stone and warm wood to create a calming space, while making historical nods. SBCC's philosophy is: goodness and humanity first, then academics. Students are called scholars, a small but powerful choice that underpins the culture SBCC is creating.

In the three years the school has been operating, SBCC's students have gone on to high schools with graduations rates of about 94 percent, a positive predictor of their long-term success.

OWNER: Classical Charter Schools

LOCATION: Bronx, NY

SIZE: 52,000 sf

CONSTRUCTION COST: \$22,000,000

SCOPE OF WORK:

New school programming, design, and construction administration

PROGRAM:

New school construction, which includes a gymnasium, classrooms, a medical suite, a cafeteria, common spaces, administrative spaces, and an outdoor plaza.





In New York City, only a few subway stops away from some of the most opulent residences and wealthiest people in the world sits what has historically been the U.S.'s poorest congressional district: South Bronx. Within South Bronx is the Concourse neighborhood, typically considered a gateway to America thanks to its high concentration of immigrants from around the world.

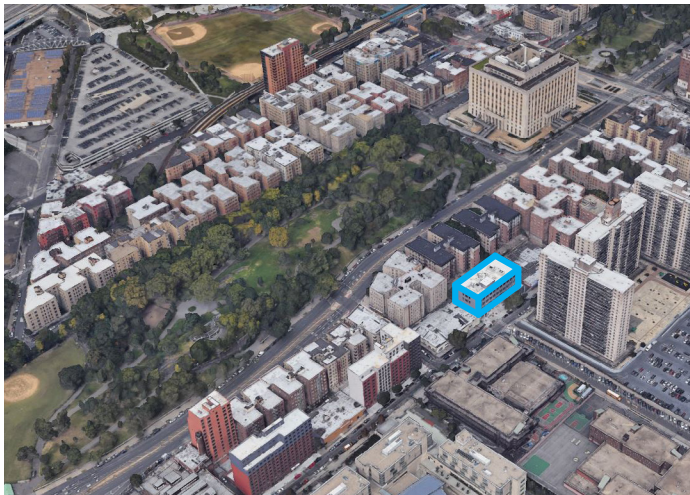
To develop the program at SBCC—and design an environment that would support this program—much of the work focused on how best to teach the social and emotional skills that form the foundation of academic ability and lifelong coping skills; academic success isn't created in a bubble, and in fact, social and emotional support from teachers, families, and the students themselves are more important than raw academic skill.

That meant developing a curriculum that focuses heavily on art, music, Latin, debate, fitness, and other disciplines proven to prepare students for lifelong success. It further meant designing a space that encourages positive social interactions, close relationships between students and teachers who then become trusted mentors, and integrating an administration that is closely involved in day-to-day operations.

WHO IS THE SOUTH BRONX CLASSICAL STUDENT?

90 percent of SBCC students are eligible for free lunch, a strong indicator of their socioeconomic status. A highly diverse student population walks the halls: approximately 45 percent of the students are African-American, and the other 55 percent are Hispanic. Many of the students come from immigrant families, which creates an additional challenge to academic success as these students and their families deal with the psychological challenges of living in a new country.

In many instances, the students attending this school are faced with every factor that could negatively impact their educational experience, and the data bears this out. The high school graduation rate for the South Bronx hovers around 55 percent, compared to the New York City average of 84 percent and the U.S. average of 84 percent.



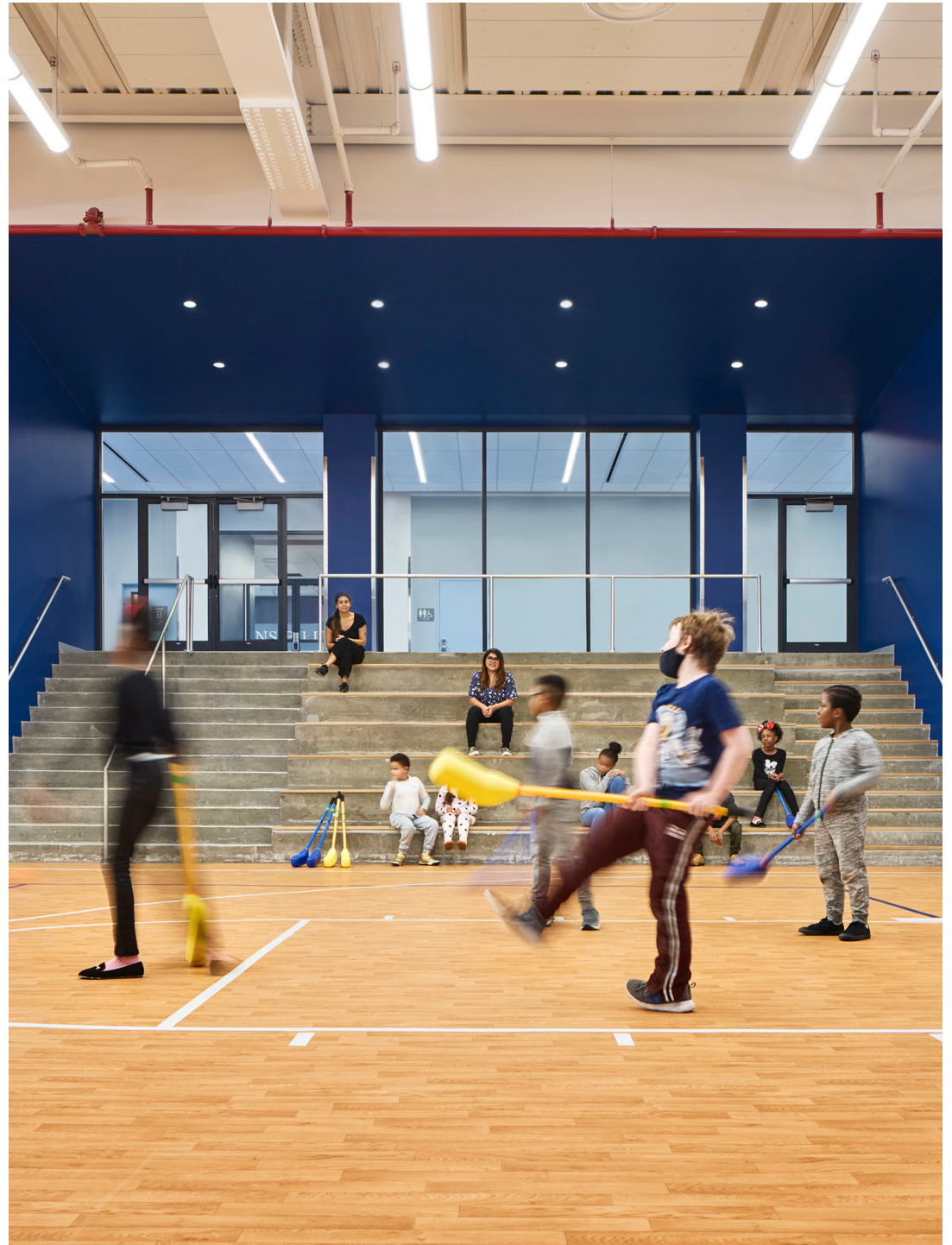
PARTICIPATING FROM THE SIDELINES

Many of the parents of SBCC students hold two or more jobs and/or work third shift, graveyard shift, or other schedules that make it difficult to participate in the ways that are often signifiers of a student's future success. Parental involvement is a key indicator of student success, so SBCC has developed alternative means of measuring and encouraging this involvement.

Engagement looks like clean uniforms, students arriving on time every day, and attending parent-teacher conferences; it also looks like the parents taking advantage of the exterior courtyard to spend time socializing with fellow parents, students, and teachers during morning drop-off. The school, in turn, has hosted food distribution drives, arising out of a pandemic-related increase in food insecurity, and serves not only students but community members who are also experiencing food insecurity. By hosting these events, SBCC has created opportunities for student and community engagement to continually hone the school's programming.

CLASSICAL EDUCATION: LOOKING TO THE PAST TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

Lester Long, who founded Classical Charter Schools, looked to virtue ethics philosophy and the pedagogy of classical education to shape the school's curriculum. Above and beyond, students in a neighborhood with higher-than-average crime rates, extensive noise pollution, and a lack of green spaces—all factors in well-being and, by extension, academic success—need the right combination of gently enforced boundaries, a calm learning environment, and the subject matter that will prepare them for the rigors of high school and beyond.





SBCC takes a distinctive approach to education, a direct response to decades-long trends that they believe have had a negative impact on students. “We sort of lost the plot,” Lester Long said. “We need to refocus on the essence of what a teacher is and what education is for.” So SBCC took their approach back to the basics: what makes someone a good person? And how can teachers facilitate this growth process?

REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Staffing shortages, budget cuts, lack of support from administration and parents alike, student behavior problems, protracted disagreements over curricula: teaching is experiencing a crisis, one that has led to record numbers leaving the profession. So SBCC has designed their educational environment to alleviate the pressures on teachers and give them the support they need to thrive and in turn help their students thrive. Research consistently shows that well-adjusted, satisfied teachers lead to well-adjusted, satisfied students.

Rather than managing oversized classrooms, which lead to students being lost in the shuffle and more administrative work than actual instruction and engagement, teachers at SBCC are facilitators, guides.

By keeping classes small, with a student-teacher ratio of 14:1, SBCC teachers can focus on students as individuals. While the coursework is regimented and rigorous, each student learns differently; small class sizes allow SBCC to balance the two seemingly opposing forces to create equilibrium and increase success. These small class sizes further allow the ethics-first modality that SBCC employs with great success.

Further, rather than housing administrative staff in one central location, removed from the day-to-day and operating as an island, administrators are distributed throughout the building to remain close to teachers, providing extra support as needed and remaining abreast of any goings-on among teachers and students and empowering administrator-teacher and administrator-student relationships that consistently lead to better learning outcomes.



DEFINING SUCCESS

“We’ve had students go on to great colleges, some join hedge funds,” Long said. “Really wonderful, traditional markers of success. But I care about the median scholar, the quiet one who might get lost in the shuffle, and the lowest-performing scholar. I want those scholars, who maybe have even higher barriers to success, to do well. And we measure that by determining if they’ve graduated from high school, if they’re in the workforce, if they’re able to function in society, something that this neighborhood can make difficult.”

Students start learning Latin in 3rd grade, which helps them with their language skills and critical thinking, and they start learning debate in 4th grade, which teaches them how to argue efficiently and effectively and reinforces the critical thinking skills they start building in Latin.

These are the skills, more than anything else, that Long and staff want students to leave with. There are lists of facts people have to know, he says, but more important than that is the ability to understand and manage not only their individual feelings but also the world around them, which can often be in conflict with one another.

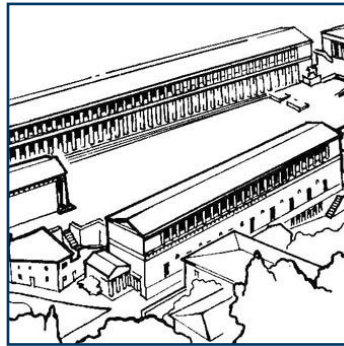


Just as the educational environment is a nod to antiquity while still being uniquely, effectively modern, so, too, is the building.

DESIGN ELEMENTS OF ANTIQUITY

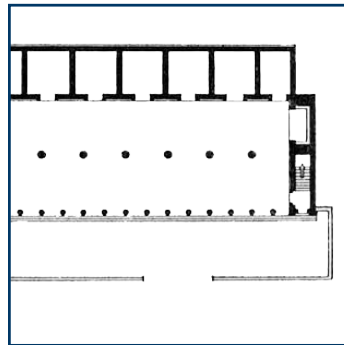
The design team analyzed six architectural prototypes: the Agora, the Temple, the Theater, the Stoa, the Monument, and the Ruin. Each element has been incorporated into the design of the building to organize the space, enhance wayfinding, and reinforce the personality and purpose of the building.

In ancient Greece and Rome, the Agora, the plaza, was the central organizing space of a town or city. It was where friends would meet and exchange ideas, political debates happened, and community events were held. It is important to the nature of SBCC's educational philosophy that the Agora is the first touchpoint in the interior. It sets the tone for the rest of the experience.



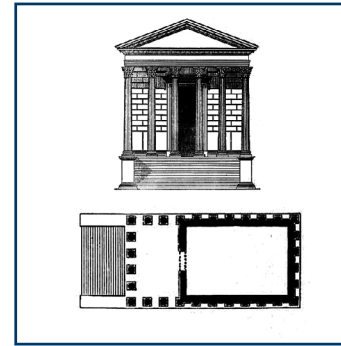
THE AGORA

The lobby takes on this form, a plaza surrounded by civic buildings that serves as a central gathering place, flanked by the gym and cafeteria.



THE STOA

A stone-wrapped colonnade frames the main entry and links interior and exterior spaces, evoking the Stoa, a portico which traditionally lines the perimeter of the Agora.



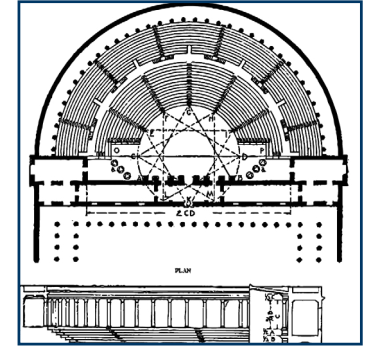
THE TEMPLE

The cafeteria, a sacred space where the community comes together to break bread and honor their bodily needs.



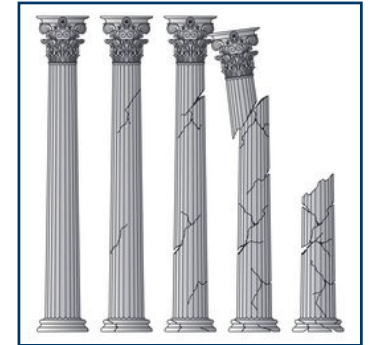
MONUMENT

Monument is achieved through scale and massing; this four-story building replaces an overgrown empty lot with a structure erected as a symbol of excellence in the South Bronx.



THE THEATRE

The gym takes on this form, acting as a civic space with tiered seating for watching an activity or presentation.

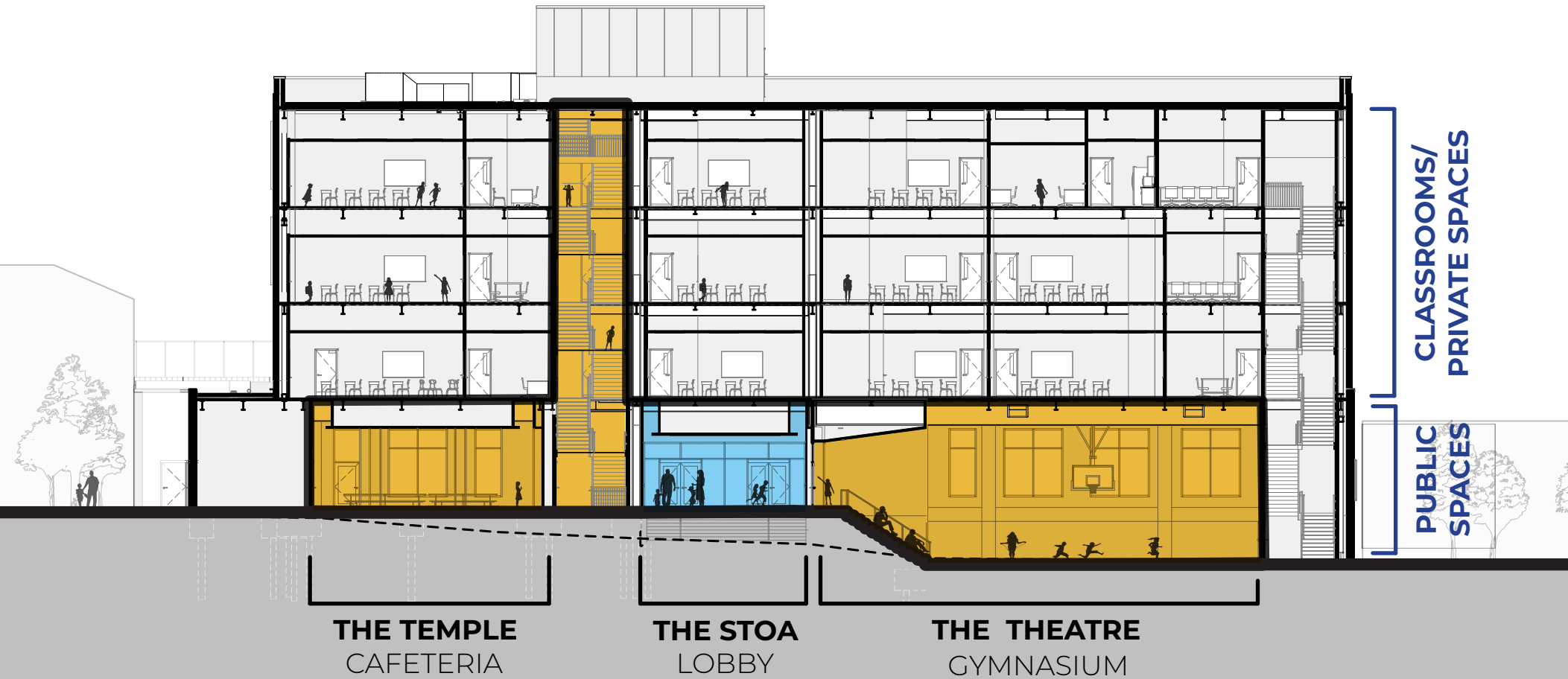


RUIN

Through texture and materiality expressed in stone and wood, the ground floor imparts the weight and importance of a Ruin.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT





SET BACK FROM THE STREET TO CREATE SPACE FOR COMMUNITY

In such a densely populated area, with nearly 80,000 people per square mile in the Concourse neighborhood of the South Bronx, it was important to set the building back from the street. Instead of going immediately from the busy street into the school, a gentle rise of stairs, a warm, stone-wrapped colonnade, and strategic landscaping provide a transitional moment for students and their families to shake off the hectic nature of the city before entering the inner sanctum.

The exterior design also mirrors the interior activity using the language of classic architecture: the main mass of the building engages the streetscape through an orderly, rhythmic façade. Its modern grid of fiber cement panels offers variety in scale yet pays meticulous attention to symmetry, highlighting the structure's precision and reflecting the rigorous academic community within.



USING COLOR AND SPACE FOR EASY WAYFINDING

The front entrance, flanked with cedar paneled walls, a nod towards ancient sacred spaces, leads to the lobby (Agora), which is in turn flanked by the gym (Theater) and cafeteria (Temple). The symmetry of the classroom layout, floor to floor, helps create an intuitive circulation that helps students get to where they need to go with ease. By additionally using color to signal purpose (such as the lines on the floors that help direct students), the space is easy to understand and navigate.

SMALL SPACES FOR BETTER SUPPORT

The design of the building includes smaller spaces, including support spaces peppered throughout the building. These support spaces allow students to take time to themselves to relax and compose themselves; it also provides space for students and teachers to meet one-on-one or small groups to spend time together, underpinning the importance of social relationships.



One cannot talk about sustainable buildings in New York City without talking about the stringent measures new buildings like SBCC must take in order to comply with city regulations.

DAYLIGHTING IN DENSITY

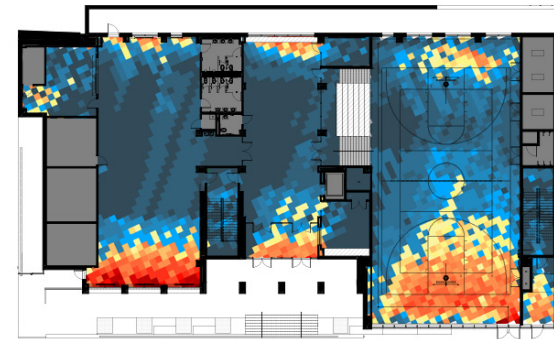
The importance of daylight cannot be overstated. Research shows that sufficient daylight does the following:

- Helps regulate circadian rhythm (sleep/wake time)
- Increases alertness
- Boosts focus
- Boosts serotonin production, which improves mood and increases focus
- Improves cognitive function

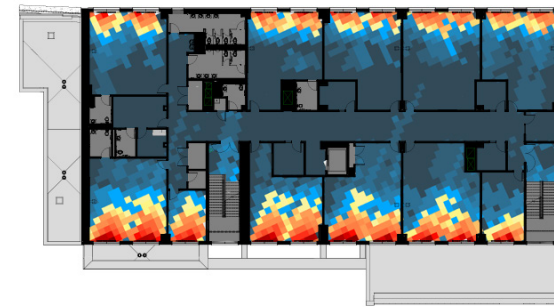
Designing for the students and staff to receive sufficient sunlight in such a densely populated neighborhood, however, was a significant hurdle. To determine window placement, glazing, and other measures that would help achieve this essential piece of the design puzzle, KSS employed Cove.tool's daylight modeling.

More specifically, Cove.tool's Spatial Daylight Autonomy modeling "describes the percentage of floor area that receives at least 300 lux for at least 50 percent of the annual occupied hours (8 a.m. to 6 p.m.)." 300 lux, importantly, is the minimum amount of light exposure needed for the benefits of daylighting to take effect. Thanks to technology-driven solutions, SBCC is a light-filled sanctum in a city where the built environment traditionally obstructs sufficient daylighting for the emotional, social, and psychological well-being of people.

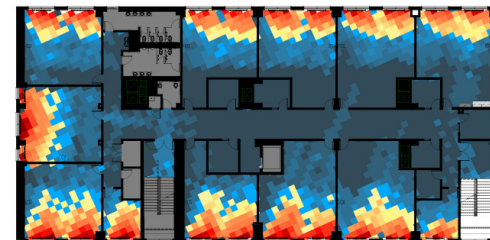
Daylighting also benefits the school's purse strings: the amount of natural light in this building reduces energy expenses while simultaneously reducing the building's impact on the environment by lessening SBCC's dependence on the energy grid.



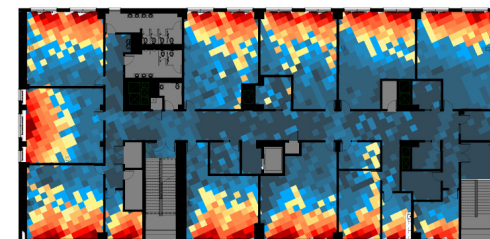
1ST FLOOR



2ND FLOOR



3RD FLOOR



4TH FLOOR

SOLAR READY ROOF

To prepare SBCC for the future, KSS also designed the roof to meet stringent specifications for solar and green roofs. Solar panels, particularly for commercial buildings, add significant weight (and stress) to roofs, and the installation process itself is so challenging as to require licensed experts. By meeting the standards set by the city during the design and build process, SBCC will be able to quickly and easily turn their roof into an energy-generating, sustainable space, instead of having to worry about the cost, time, and potentially negative environmental impact of retrofitting for this key design feature.

CONNECTION TO NATURE THROUGH BIOPHILIC DESIGN

A connection to nature is directly related to higher levels of satisfaction with life, better mental health, and better concentration. In an area like the Concourse neighborhood, that connection is hard to come by unless one spends a significant amount of time traveling to green space with sufficiently low street noise.

SBCC employs natural materials such as wood, which is not only visually pleasing but is also related to lower sympathetic nervous system reactions (also known as fight or flight). The landscaping not only creates an emotional barrier between street and school, but also promotes a sense of calm and well-being.





When SBCC opened the doors to IV, it was October 2020. The pandemic was worsening, and the state of education and well-being of America's youth were in crisis, feeding each other in a negative feedback loop. Long said there was concern about how scholars and parents alike would receive such a distinctive approach to education.

And yet, nearly three years later, SBCC is, by all measures, a success. Students regularly take advantage of the bleacher steps that overlook the gymnasium, both informally and for formal events. Community use of the building is starting to pick up, whether through basketball or soccer games or by events such as the food distribution drive. Students and parents regularly spend time on the front steps, and teachers and students use the small rear courtyard during free time to enjoy lunch and social time while surrounded by peaceful landscaping.

And of course, the overwhelming majority of students who graduate from SBCC go onto high schools with graduation rates at or above the city average. Compared to the community average of 55 percent, Long knows the students are succeeding and employing their social, emotional, and academic skills long after they leave the halls of this sanctuary.