AMY At James Martin School

School District of Philadelphia
Philadelphia, PA

KSS

Project Team:

Client: School District of Philadelphia
Architect: KSS Architects
Master Plan Architect: Moody Nolan
Developer: Mosaic Development Partners JV
Contractor: Daniel J. Keating Company
Civil Engineering: David Mason + Associates
Landscape Design: Studio Sustena
Structural Engineering: O'Donnell & Naccarato
MEP Engineering: Aurora Engineers
Sustainability/LEED Consultant: Branch Pattern
Food Services Design: Corsi Associates



"The new AMY at James Martin school is more than just a building; it is a testament of our commitment to creating equitable, high-quality learning environments in Philadelphia for students. AMY at James Martin provides natural light through large windows, collaborative spaces, and classroom furniture to fit a range of student needs. I cannot wait to see the great things our students accomplish here."

- District Superintendent

Executive Summary

A Once-in-a-Generation Opportunity

The School District of Philadelphia has identified a new home for The Alternative Middle Years (AMY) at the James Martin School site, a once-in-a-generation opportunity made possible through funding from the federal American Rescue Plan Act. Replacing the former James Martin School, the new ground-up public middle school will deliver modern, equitable, and future-ready learning environments that support 21st century education and empower every student to reach their fullest potential.

SCOPE OF WORK

Location: Philadelphia, PA

Building Area: 88,000 sf

Design Enrollment: 6-8 grade

Capacity: 500 students

Completion Date: December 2025

Construction Cost: $43 Million

Construction Delivery Method: Developer Turn-key, Design-Build

Total Project Budget: $62 Million



A District's Vision

In 2020, the School District of Philadelphia introduced a new set of educational specifications and design guidelines, driven by the central question: "What will innovative learning environments in SDP look like in the future?" This forward-thinking effort established a shared vision for the future of education. Acknowledging the demands of an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the district aimed to ensure all students are prepared to thrive within it.

Vision

To prepare students to imagine and realize any future they desire.

Mission

All sectors of public education in Philadelphia will work with urgency to provide every student with the opportunity to achieve positive life outcomes in partnership with diverse families, educators, and community members who are valued and respected

Core Values

- Safety is imperative to our work
- Equity requires need based distribution of resources.
- Collaboration involves gathering and honoring community voices.
- Joy inspires active engagement and belonging.
- Trust is built through good communication, public transparency, and holding ourselves accountable
- Ambition requires use to work with urgency to accelerate student achievement



Profile of a Student

Adapt to unconventional work	• Show patience and adapt to new situations and opportunities • Demonstrates open-mindedness and is receptive to new ideas • Are self disciplined and motivated • Use brain breaks to increase attention and productivity
Lead as an entrepreneur or free agent	• Think critically and creatively • Show a strong will, persistence, and determination • Utilize code switching to interact within different cultures, assumptions, and expectations • Align knowledge, skills, and personal interests with career opportunities
Make a global impact	• Construct new ideas by being visionary and innovative • Show passion and ownership of learning • Engage in problem solving and design creative solution • Love to learn and exhibit curiosity
Perform in information age	• Utilize tech savy skills to investigate, create and produce • Use technology to increase communication and collaboration • Possess a healthy sense of self and is ready to learn • Learn from mistakes and develop grit and resiliency
Achieve in service economy	• Show humility, compassion, and tolerance of self and others • Demonstrate a sense of joy and well being • Develop organizational and interpersonal skills • Network with others and add value to the world through service

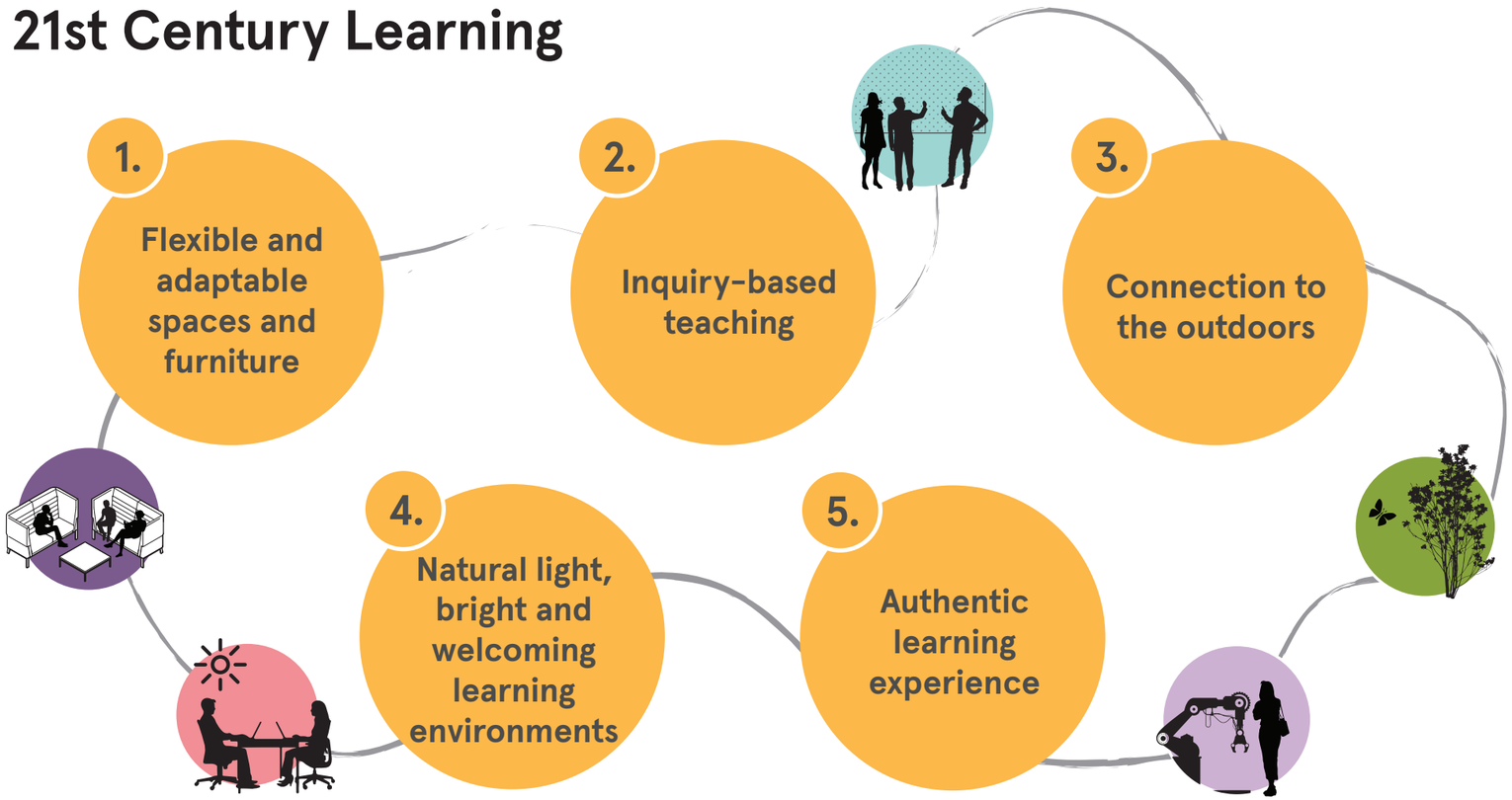
School & Community Research and Engagement

Community Context

Community engagement and stakeholder collaboration were foundational to the success of the AMY at James Martin project, shaping both the vision and final design. The project team worked closely with the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), school leadership, teachers, students, families, neighborhood residents, and local community organizations to align the project with district-wide educational goals while responding to the opportunities and constraints of the Port Richmond site.

The project faced a significant contextual challenge. Although a school had existed on the site since 1896, current zoning designated the property for single-family residential use, meaning a new school could not be rebuilt on the site by right. At the same time, district funding timelines created urgency around approvals and delivery. Through sustained collaboration between the School District, local leaders, elected officials, and community stakeholders, the property successfully advanced through the ordinance process and was remapped as a Special Purpose Civic District, allowing the new school to move forward.

Given the accelerated timeline and technical complexity of the project, close collaboration across the development, design, and construction teams was essential. District representatives, consultants, contractors, and stakeholders worked hand-in-hand throughout the process to test ideas, resolve challenges, and iterate on solutions that balanced educational goals, budget, schedule, and community priorities.







School & Community Research and Engagement

Stakeholder Engagement Process

Engagement efforts focused on transparency, trust, and ensuring stakeholder input meaningfully informed project decisions. The team used a range of engagement formats, including programming interviews, educational visioning sessions, interactive workshops, site planning studies, community meetings, and digital engagement tools.

The process emphasized “meeting people where they are.” In-person sessions were scheduled alongside existing school activities such as parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights, and teacher in-service days, while virtual surveys and digital updates expanded opportunities for involvement. This inclusive approach elevated perspectives from stakeholders, helping shape a flexible, student-centered learning environment responsive to diverse needs and learning styles.

To support the educational visioning process, the team also conducted benchmarking tours within and outside the district. These visits allowed educators, district leaders, and the design team to engage with peer schools and educational leaders to discuss successes, lessons learned, and emerging best practices in contemporary learning environments. The tours informed what 21st-century learning should mean for AMY at James Martin, reinforcing the importance of adaptability, collaboration, and long-term flexibility.

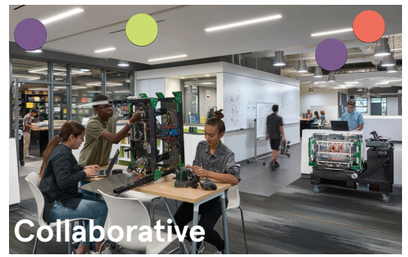
The engagement process was collaborative and iterative, involving:

- SDP executive leadership
- SDP facilities and planning teams
- SDP focus groups for building systems and operations
- School leadership, teachers, and support staff
- Students and families
- Neighborhood residents and community organizations













I learn best when _____?







What makes you feel safe?



Where do you like to play?







How do you collaborate at school?







Tell us your favorite thing to do outside







WE’D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU

- PLACE A STICKER ON AN IMAGE BELOW THAT YOU FEEL BEST ANSWERS THE QUESTION INCLUDED ON EACH BOARD.
- WHAT DO YOU THINK? WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR YOUR FEEDBACK. USE THE SHARPIE TO SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE IMAGES PROVIDED.



“The primary concern is the education and safety of the students. [The school should] be respectful of the neighborhood... and something that could push our neighborhood forward and something we could be proud of.”
- Neighbor

Daylighting

More technology

I would love if my school had: “a garden”
- Student

I would love if my school had: alternative learning environments
- Parent

Respect for the neighbors

Bright colors & open space

Safety/ Security

Green space/ outdoor program

School & Community Research and Engagement

Visioning and Design Outcomes

Engagement activities were intentionally interactive and exploratory, designed to generate meaningful dialogue rather than simply solicit approval. Students emphasized the importance of outdoor spaces that support not only recreation, but also flexible learning and social interaction. This feedback contributed to the incorporation of a green roof and a variety of outdoor environments integrated into the educational program.

Input related to emotional wellness and inclusivity informed the integration of sensory rooms, informal breakout spaces, and varied learning settings designed to support diverse learning styles and student needs. Teachers and staff helped shape classroom adjacencies, collaboration spaces, and operational considerations that support evolving instructional models and long-term adaptability.

Community engagement also informed how the school could serve as a broader civic resource. Discussions with residents and local stakeholders addressed concerns related to construction impacts, traffic, and neighborhood integration, while also identifying opportunities for shared community benefit, including public access to playgrounds, recreational areas, and the gymnasium outside school hours.





View at the intersection of Richmond Street



View at the intersection of East Ontario Street

Physical Environment

Neighborhood Context

Located at the intersection of an industrial corridor and a residential community in Philadelphia's Port Richmond neighborhood, the site serves as a gateway from Interstate 95 and the Delaware River waterfront to surrounding neighborhoods. The predominantly working-class area is defined by historic brick row-houses, a deep sense of community pride, and long-standing social continuity.

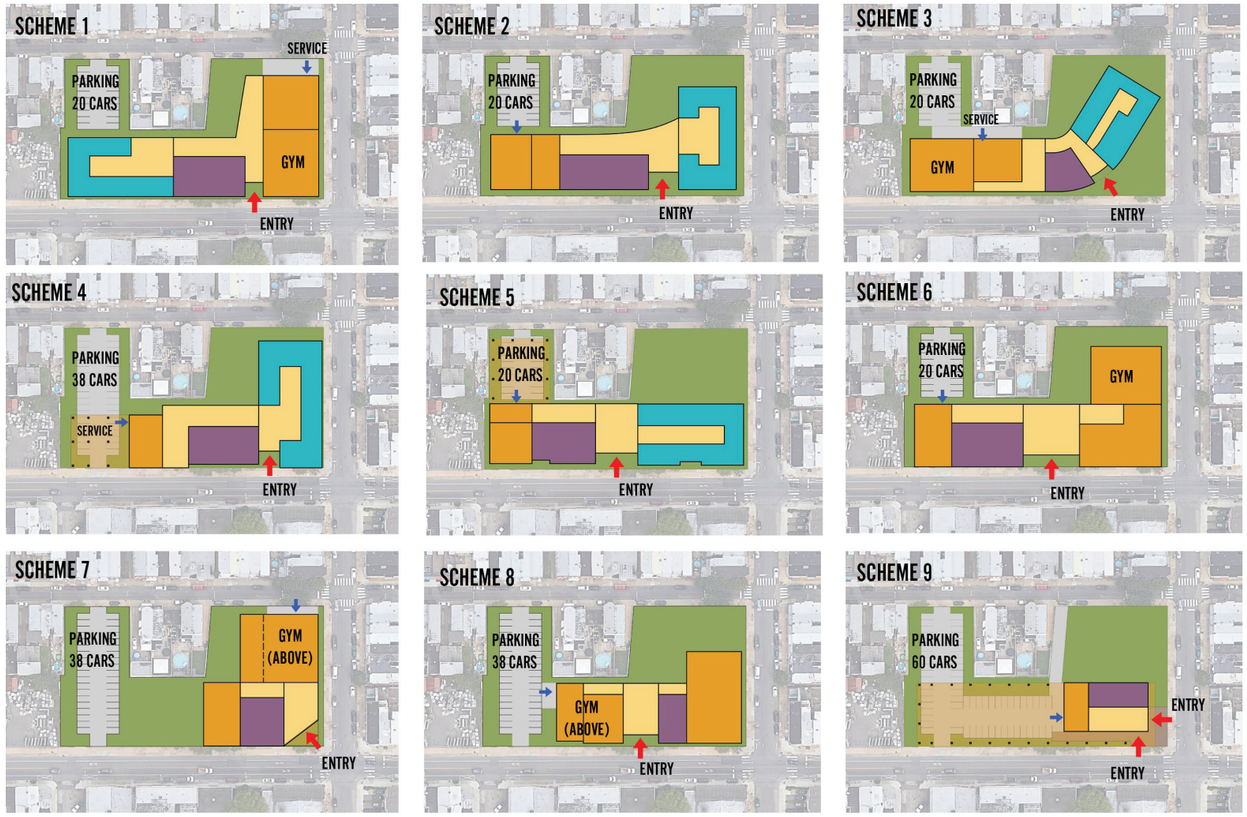
Context and Design Response

The site was home to the former James martin school constructed in 1896. The original building was past it's useful life with deferred maintenance challenges, inaccessibility, hazardous materials and poorly suited for expansion or 21st century learning environments. Originally composed of a series of properties the unique 'U-shape' of the site was a key driver to maximizing it's potential. A series of site planning and massing studies investigated the balance of building height and footprint, parking and site circulation, and access to the outdoors for play and programming. The result is a compact yet highly dynamic four-story "vertical learning neighborhood" that integrates seamlessly into the Port Richmond fabric.



INITIAL SCHEMES

ITERATIVE DESIGN PROCESS



Scheme 1
3-STORY
38,600 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
61% LOT
20 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 2
3-STORY
32,400 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
51% LOT
20 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 3
3-STORY
32,400 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
51% LOT
20 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 4
3-STORY
30,300 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
48% LOT
38 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 5
3-STORY
29,600 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
46% LOT
20 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 6
3-STORY
37,800 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR /
60% LOT
20 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 7
3-STORY
37,800 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
60% LOT
20 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 8
4-STORY
25,100 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
40% LOT
38 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Scheme 9
4-STORY
8,400 SQ. FT GROUND FLOOR
13% LOT
60 ON-SITE PARKING SPACES

Physical Environment

Context and Design Response

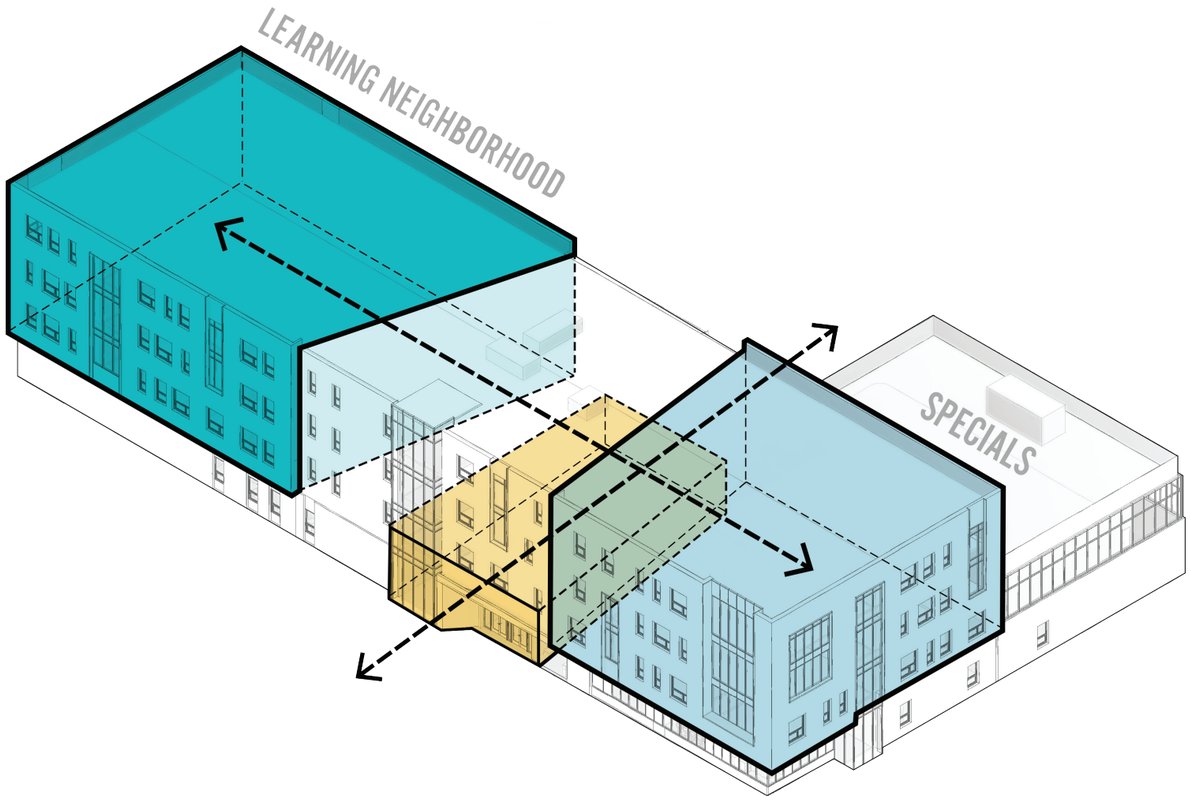
The building is organized as vertically stacked learning neighborhoods that maximize the limited site area, while maintaining strong relationships to the surrounding neighborhoods. Massing and site planning respond directly to adjacent conditions. The school steps down toward residential edges and orients larger volumes toward more industrial surroundings, allowing the school to feel both contextual and grounded within the neighborhood.

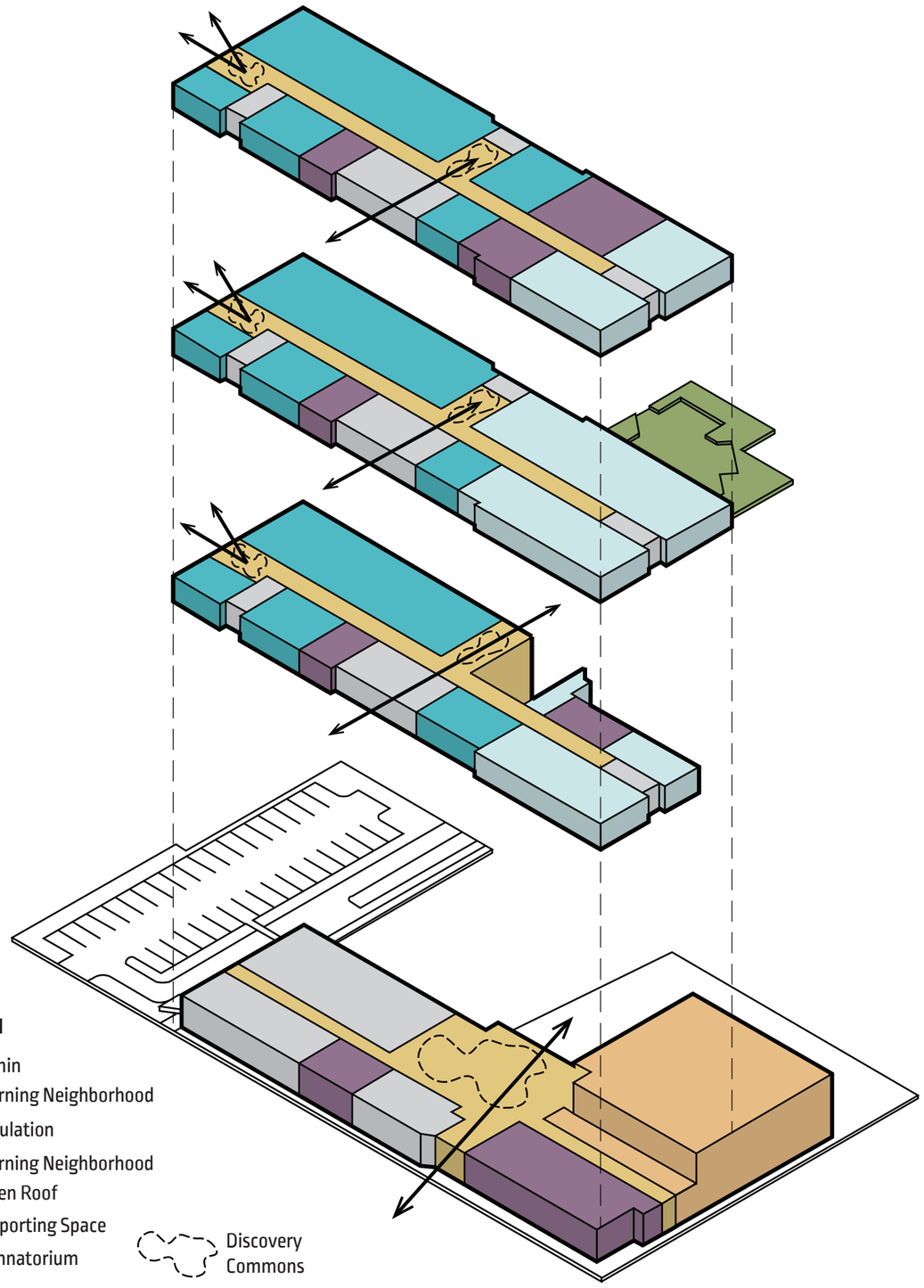
The exterior material palette reinforces the connection to the neighborhood context, with a modern brick façade that draws from local textures and patterns. Salvaged elements from the original school, such as stone and the historic plaque, embed a sense of continuity and community memory into the new structure.

Physical Environment

Vertical Learning Neighborhood

The building is organized around a series of stacked learning neighborhoods anchored on each end of the school. The neighborhoods create smaller, more intimate academic communities, each centered around shared commons, breakout spaces, and instructor hub that support a range of learning modalities. Efficiently planned and thoughtfully designed breaks in circulation space open to form student commons and space to gather or take a break with vast views to the neighborhood and city skyline.





Physical Environment

Mature for Middle School

Envisioned specifically for middle school students, the school is designed to balance independence, collaboration, and a sense of emerging identity. The jewel-toned color palette introduces vibrancy and maturity, reinforcing a level of sophistication. Each learning neighborhood is defined by a distinct color that extends vertically through stacked wings, using warm and cool tonal groupings to support intuitive way finding. These colors continue into stairways, creating dynamic visual connections between floors that are perceptible both within the building and from the exterior.

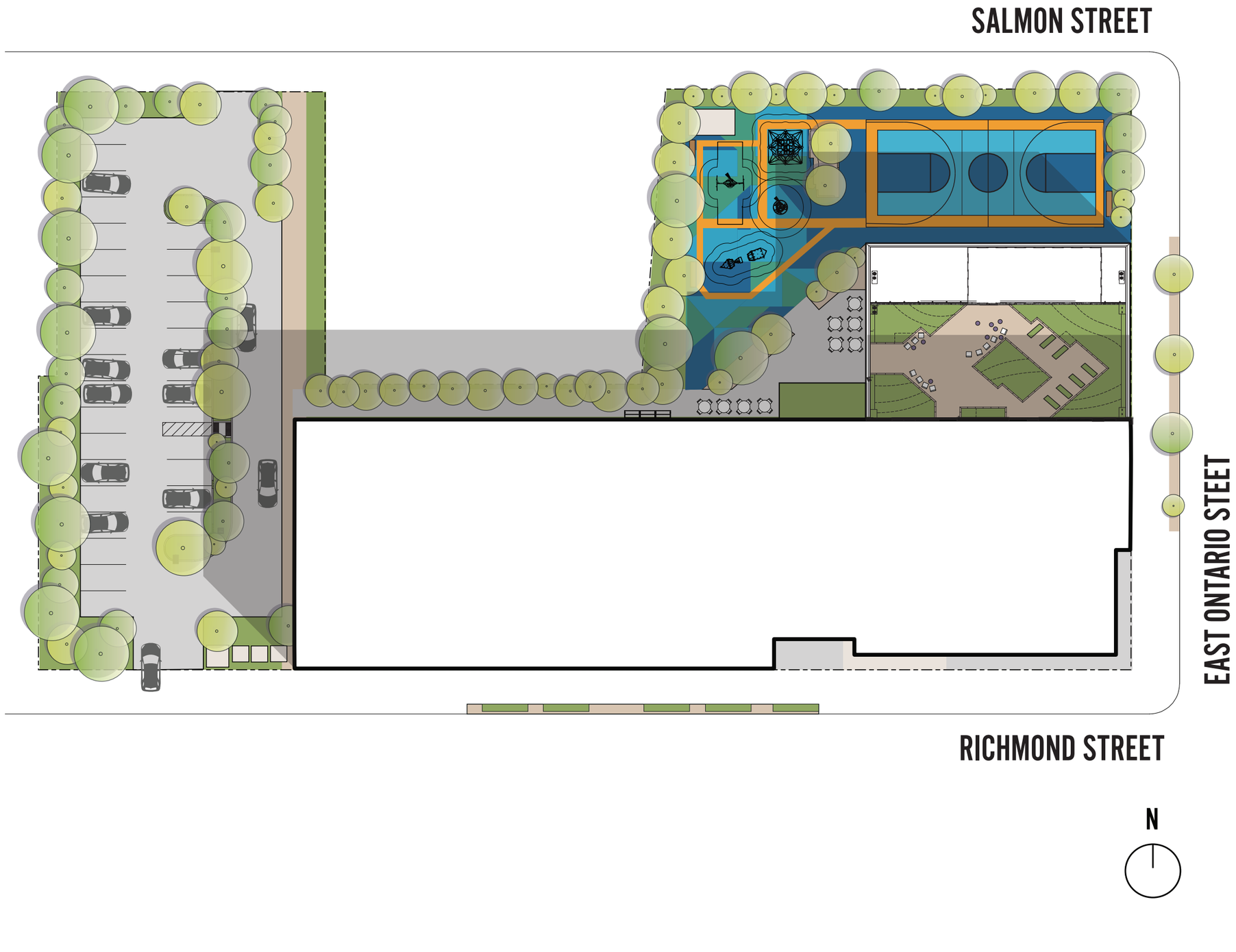
Inspired by the urban fabric and the school's forward-looking program, the design concept, "From Industry to Innovation", is reflected in materiality and graphics. Elements such as art-inspired wall coverings referencing Philadelphia's street art culture, durable tile patterns influenced by subway materials, and bold graphic way finding collectively create an environment that is engaging, resilient, and distinctly place-based.

Physical Environment

A Site Transformed

A once barren parking lot was transformed into a age appropriate outdoor learning landscape for middle school students with areas for active play with risk taking play equipment, basketball court, cycling and walking path, and a diversity of seating for outdoor dining, learning, and socializing. Functional parking and site circulation is balanced with ample greening with lots of trees and native plantings. The outdoor space is truly maximized for function and wellness.

The project extends this connection outdoors through a thoughtfully designed play yard and an accessible green roof, which serve as both recreational and instructional spaces. These outdoor environments are tailored specifically to middle school students, offering a range of activities, from athletics and social gathering to outdoor learning opportunities,while also incorporating sustainable features such as stormwater management and pollinator habitats. Views to the Philadelphia skyline from upper levels and outdoor areas reinforce a broader sense of place, helping students feel connected to the larger city and community.



Physical Environment

Community Commons

Community Commons and assembly spaces define the primary ground-floor entry sequence, creating a clear and welcoming arrival into the school. These spaces are organized to balance openness with secure access, supporting community use while maintaining safety. A generously scaled lobby flows directly into the dining commons, forming a continuous, flexible space that accommodates daily circulation as well as event use, including pre-function space for athletic events and school gatherings.

The ground floor brings together key shared spaces, including the lobby, dining commons, and gymnasium, within an open, interconnected layout. Boundaries between these areas remain intentionally flexible, allowing spaces to expand, overlap, and support different uses throughout the day. This multi-functional approach encourages interaction and supports both informal use and larger events, reinforcing the school's role as both a learning environment and a community resource.

Physical Environment

Dining Commons

Open dining supports both independence and choice, offering a diversity of settings that allow students to shape their own experience. The open layout, with clear sight lines, enables passive supervision that enhances safety without feeling restrictive. Within this environment, teachers are often seen engaging with students in casual conversation, helping to build relationships grounded in collaboration, mentorship, and trust. Large windows flood the space with natural light and provide views to outdoor play areas, reinforcing a connection to nature while also allowing students independence to dine outside.

Physical Environment

Daylight and Wellbeing

Transparency is a defining feature throughout. Glazing at classrooms, corridors, and stairs allows daylight to penetrate deep into the building while also fostering a sense of openness and accountability. A strong emphasis on daylight, views, and connection to nature creates a bright and welcoming environment.





Physical Environment

Safety and Anti-Bullying Design

Areas such as stairs and toilet rooms are traditionally more isolated within school buildings and can become locations where negative behaviors occur. This project addresses those challenges through a deliberate design strategy that prioritizes visibility, openness, and access to natural light.

By introducing clear sightlines and opportunities for passive supervision, these spaces are transformed into environments that feel safe, welcoming, and actively used. Increased transparency and daylight not only deter inappropriate behavior but also contribute to a positive school climate that supports student well-being. This approach reflects a broader commitment to designing for safety, inclusion, and mental health through the built environment.

Physical Environment

Commitment to Sustainability

U.S. GREEN BUILDING COUNCIL
LEED GOLD
USGBC

WATER

- Low-flow plumbing fixtures
- 128% of runoff volume managed on site through sustainable stormwater design, including porous pavers
- Submeter tracks water usage
- 5M gallons of annual water savings compared against LEED baseline standards

ENERGY

- Natural daylighting reduces artificial demand, improves occupant wellness
- Building systems are predicted to cost 18.3% less per year compared to similar schools based on ASHRAE 90.1-20210
- All LED Lighting

MATERIALITY

- Specify materials with no or low VOC's improving indoor air quality
- Acoustical elements promote concentration & learning
- High reflectance roof and paver materials reduce the heat island effect
- Installation of bird safe glazing reduces the risk of bird strike
- Exterior lighting minimized light trespass

WELLNESS

- Space types vary across range, from calming respites to socialization zones
- Accessible green roof allows outdoor learning centered around art, science, and nutrition
- School encourages bicycle commuting with 12 uncovered and 30 covered bike parking spots and two showers with changing facilities
- 58% daylight autonomy in regularly occupied spaces through thoughtful glazing and shading placement

LAND/HABITAT

- Site located on previously developed land
- Green roof with native plants to attract pollinators such as bees and butterflies
- Transformed 100% impervious site to have 42% of the site area is open space. 30% of open space is vegetated
- Rich diversity of native and adaptive plant species include 72 trees and 254 shrubs
- 60% parking reduction from LEED baseline

FOOD

- New full-service kitchen provides freshly-cooked, balanced, nutrient-rich food to improve health

BIOPHILIA

- Landscape design incorporates a range of outdoor activities
- Settings built in harmony with nature make people happier & healthier
- Occupied spaces have amply daylight and quality views contributing to occupant wellbeing

COMMUNITY

- Access to quality public transit through multiple bus and trolly lines
- Street trees, site furnishings activate street

EQUITY

- Family & Visitor center for student and school community support services
- Space such as Gymnatorium and Dining Commons available for community use

Educational Environment

STEAM Learning Environments

The Makerspace is conceived as a dynamic, flexible environment that supports hands-on, project-based learning aligned with real-world problem solving. The open, adaptable layout encourages collaboration, experimentation, and iterative thinking. An exposed ceiling reinforces an industrial workshop aesthetic that reflects the space's purpose as a hub for making and innovation.

Mobile furniture, durable work surfaces, and robust infrastructure support a wide range of activities from fabrication to robotics. This environment enables students to prototype ideas, explore early career and technical education (CTE) pathways, and develop essential skills in creativity, teamwork, and critical thinking.The direct connection to the green roof extends opportunities for project based learning to the outdoor environment

Educational Environment

Where Knowledge is Shared

The Instructional Media Commons reimagines the traditional library as a flexible, student-centered learning hub. Designed to support a range of learning styles, diverse settings accommodate quiet reading, collaboration, research, and multimedia engagement, empowering students with choice and agency.

Open sight lines and integrated technology foster inquiry, exploration, and independent learning. Large windows introduce abundant daylight and provide views to the green roof, reinforcing a connection to nature and enhancing the sense of openness within the space. Architectural elements, including an angled ceiling and coordinated floor patterns, intuitively guide movement from the main staircase to the green roof outdoor classroom, strengthening spatial flow and visual connectivity. As a modern library, the space serves as a dynamic hub for literacy, creativity, and critical thinking.



Educational Environment

Outdoor Learning

Outdoor learning takes place on an accessible green roof with direct connections from the Instructional Media Commons and makerspace, extending learning seamlessly beyond the classroom. This flexible environment supports small group work, independent study, and outdoor instruction. Open activity areas and amenities such as a ping pong table encourage recreation, team-building, and wellness activities including physical education and yoga.

A rain garden, pollinator garden, and native plantings provide hands-on opportunities for science and environmental exploration, fostering observation, curiosity, and experiential learning across disciplines such as biology and art. The space also supports school culture, serving as a setting for student reward activities such as hot chocolate gatherings or pizza parties celebrating achievements like perfect attendance. The rooftop setting offers expansive views of the Philadelphia skyline, reinforcing a connection to the broader urban environment while creating an inspiring setting for 21st-century learning that promotes creativity, collaboration, and wellness.

Educational Environment

Beyond Athletics

The gymnatorium is designed as a versatile, multi-use space that extends well beyond athletics. Sized to accomodate basketball games with home team spectators, it also incorporates a stage to support, performances, and school-wide events. Direct access to the play yard further enhances its functionality, enabling seamless transitions between indoor and outdoor activities.

Operational flexibility and community engagement are key considerations in the design. A dedicated entrance allows for after-hours community use while maintaining school security. Back-of-house spaces are efficiently planned to serve dual purposes, with locker rooms designed to function as dressing rooms during performances.

Educational Environment

Building Momentum

The cycling studio enhances the physical education curriculum while supporting a bicycle safety program that equips students with the skills needed to navigate their urban environment. By promoting safe, independent mobility, the program fosters confidence, health, and real-world readiness. Large northeast-facing windows introduce abundant natural light and offer views of the sunrise, enriching the experience within the space.

Educational Environment

Engaging Every Student

The Autistic and Life Skills classroom is designed as a calm, structured environment that prioritizes independence, choice, and accessibility. Individual workstations provide defined personal space, while generous circulation paths and intentional furniture placement reduce distractions and support ease of movement throughout the room.

A range of sensory-responsive furnishings, including rocking chairs, wobble stools, and a supervised therapy swing offer students the ability to engage, move, self-regulate, or take breaks as needed. Adjustable, soft lighting further accommodates diverse sensory preferences, creating a comfortable and adaptable setting. This flexible environment enables students to build independence while accessing learning in ways that align with their individual needs, reflecting a commitment to inclusive, student-centered design.

Educational Environment

Arts

The Art Room is a vibrant, flexible environment designed to foster creativity, exploration, and student agency. Adaptable furnishings allow students to experiment and express themselves across a range of mediums. Ample daylight provides ideal conditions for art-making, while a large, dual-function storage and display case facing the corridor showcases student work. A dedicated kiln room further supports ceramics and three-dimensional exploration.

The Result

Achieving Educational Goals and Objectives

The project advances contemporary educational goals by creating flexible, student-centered environments that support a range of learning modalities, including collaboration, independent study, and hands-on, project-based learning. Spaces such as the Instructional Media Commons, Makerspace, and outdoor learning areas foster inquiry, creativity, and critical thinking, aligning with 21st-century learning frameworks. Specialized environments, including the Autistic/Life Skills classroom, ensure equitable access to education by supporting diverse learning needs through choice, sensory-responsive design, and opportunities for independence.

Achieving School District Goals

The design aligns with district priorities by supporting inclusive education, student wellness, and academic achievement within a safe and adaptable environment. Clear sight lines, passive supervision strategies, and thoughtfully designed shared spaces contribute to a secure and supportive school climate. Flexible program areas accommodate evolving curricula, including STEAM, career and technical education (CTE), and physical education initiatives such as the cycling program, ensuring long-term value and adaptability for the district.

Achieving Community Goals

The school design facilitates both student use and broader neighborhood engagement. As part of the development process, the School District established a Community Benefits Agreement with the community to ensure the project reflected local priorities and created lasting neighborhood value. The gymnatorium includes dedicated access for after-hours events, allowing community use while maintaining school security. Design elements respond to the surrounding urban context through scale, materiality, and visual connections. Features such as the outdoor learning environment and visible student work displays foster a sense of pride, transparency, and connection between the school and its community.

Unintended Results and Achievements

Several design strategies have yielded additional benefits beyond their original intent. Increased visibility and daylight in transitional spaces such as stairs and corridors have contributed to improved student behavior and a stronger sense of safety and belonging. The reprogramming of spaces, such as the cycling studio, demonstrates the building's adaptability in supporting emerging programs. Informal interactions between students and staff in shared environments, including dining and commons areas, have further strengthened mentorship, collaboration, and school culture.

Value and Stewardship of Financial Resources

The project demonstrates responsible stewardship through efficient planning, multipurpose spaces, and durable material selections. Spaces such as the gymnatorium and back-of-house areas are designed for dual use, maximizing functionality without increasing footprint. The adaptive reprogramming of rooms and the integration of flexible furniture and infrastructure allow the building to evolve over time, reducing the need for future renovations. The project was delivered on schedule and on budget, successfully meeting an aggressive funding deadline.

Sustainability and Wellness Outcomes

Sustainability and wellness are embedded throughout the design, supporting both environmental responsibility and occupant well-being. The project achieved LEED Gold certification, reflecting a high level of performance in energy efficiency, resource management, and indoor environmental quality. Access to daylight, views, and outdoor learning spaces enhances mental and physical health while reinforcing connections to nature. Interior environments prioritize comfort, safety, and inclusivity through thoughtful lighting, acoustics, and spatial organization, creating a healthy, supportive setting for students and staff.

