

Merging Eras

A South Carolina school district draws from the past for its future and emerges with an elementary school for the ages.

The quaint South Carolina town of Newberry presents an admirable streetscape of antebellum homes, a Gothic opera house, an Art Deco theater, and various business and government buildings eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The School District of Newberry County recently added to this mix by renovating a stately, three-story structure that originated as the local high school. Following a meticulous restoration and modernization, the building now serves as a 500-student neighborhood elementary school.

In an era of closures and consolidations, the district's commitment to preserving this splendid structure demonstrates the merits of preserving older school buildings whose potential capacity and upgrade costs are often competitive alternatives to new construction. Many districts may find restoration projects such as this one viable alternatives to new construction, especially in situations involving an architecturally and historically significant facility.

A future role emerges

Designed by A. Ten Eyck Brown, a prominent Atlanta-based architect, the three-story brick and stone school opened in 1927. Generations of residents attended classes and events there and developed lasting social, per-

sonal, and business relationships as a result of their ties to the school.

The building remained largely unaltered until the 1950s, when a two-story addition was built on the north side. A freestanding addition for athletic programs was placed on the south side in the 1960s. When the district built a new high school in the 1970s, the building served as Newberry Middle School until 1999.

The building stayed closed for two years, just enough time for the district's lack of space to reach a critical level. The district's three grade schools were built to accommodate 980 pre-K through fifth grade students, yet combined enrollment topped 1,300 kids by 2001.

It didn't take administrators long to look to the abandoned high school as the possible solution to their dilemma. While the building had been too small to continue as a junior high, an initial architectural survey showed there were ample square footage and structural integrity to justify spending the \$8.5 million to convert it into a neighborhood elementary school. The board, which already had approved a plan to build and renovate much-needed schools in the district, selected McMillan Smith & Partners Architects, PLLC, to lead the restoration.

Following a comprehensive study of the building, the project began with an abatement of mold, asbestos, and lead

paint before selective demolition got under way. The work spared most of the original 85,000-square-foot core structure, including the 7,000-square-foot auditorium and 6,300-square-foot gymnasium.

The initial focus was on the academic portion of the building, which underwent a complete upgrade to comply with current handicap accessibility and building code requirements. In some areas, the floor plan and space were reconfigured to create, for example, two exit stairways and a light-duty passenger elevator. The end result is a building that has 26 classrooms, two restrooms on each level, a 130-seat cafeteria, and more than 1,300 square feet of office space.

Broad scope of improvements

The renovation suggests the scope of improvements that can be associated with these modernization projects. Restoration addressed the corridor ceilings, and the original terrazzo and wood floors, along with the original white marble base.

Severely damaged or missing segments were replicated with modern materials only when restoration was too costly. The original wood trim was restrained and fresh paint applied throughout to create a reinvigorated environment for the building. Light fixtures appropriate for a 1920s-vintage school complemented the cosmetic work.

New mechanical, electrical, plumbing, life/safety systems, and Internet access ensure a safer environment with technologies to access virtually limitless learning resources. The building's new closed-loop, water-source heat pump system delivers reliable heating, cooling, and dehumidification. All of the new life-safety and mechanical systems are con-

cealed behind the walls and ceilings to maintain the building's historic character.

A separate phase restored the vintage 450-seat auditorium. The lights and seating in the main and balcony levels were preserved in the auditorium and the arched windows removed, restored, and reset. The project was popular from the outset, as evidenced by the community raising \$12,000 in supplemental funds to replace curtains in the auditorium.

A color scheme common to the building's original period was adopted and is accentuated by the original stained oak trim. The gym's two-story windows received comparable treatment. Original bleachers, flooring, and exposed structure also appear in their original state.

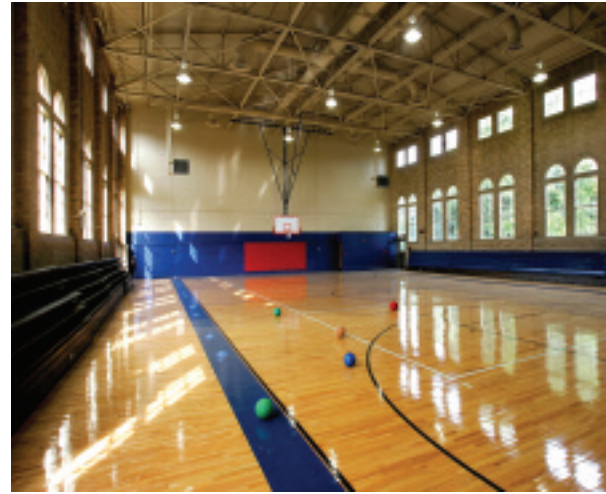
The building's exterior received a similar comprehensive restoration. Concrete balusters and top rails were cast to match the existing features. The small amount of wood rot discovered on the windows



The auditorium and gymnasium were refurbished during the renovations.

received meticulous repair. French doors—removed during a less sensitive renovation in the 1980s—were replaced with replicated units.

At the grand reopening of the school, many community members were clearly interested in the transformation of the once-vacant landmark into a vibrant elementary facility that can serve many more generations. The restoration project has since earned a South Carolina Historic Preservation Honor Award and a



state award for school renovation from the Council for Educational Facilities Planners International. ■

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