

SCHOOL LIBRARIES PROJECT TAKES OFF



BY TODD CYMROT

The Argentine author, Jorge Luis Borges once wrote, "I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library." Paradise, it seems, is coming to eight schools on Capitol Hill.

The School Libraries Project is a grassroots effort to revitalize eight Capitol Hill public elementary and middle school libraries. The project organizers have corralled community support to help redesign and rebuild the school libraries, transforming them from out-of-date, understocked libraries into model library media centers. Eight architectural firms have produced stunning new designs for these libraries, bringing a little slice of paradise to each of the schools.

Complete renovations of the Brent, Ludlow-Taylor, and Stuart Hobson libraries will begin this summer. Five more schools, Tyler, Maury, Watkins, Payne, and Peabody are scheduled for renovation the summer of 2007.

"The designs for the new libraries" says project co-chair, Todd Cymrot "go beyond merely upgrading antiquated libraries. They are models of what a modern school library should be." Wireless laptop labs, amphitheater seating, reading nooks, and lots and lots of brand new books are all in these libraries' future.

Building a Coalition of Schools

The genesis of the School Libraries Project started during monthly meetings organized by Suzanne Wells, co-chair of the Project and a former PTA President of the Capitol Hill Cluster School. Ms. Wells invited the PTA presidents of all of the other Hill public schools to look at how they could collaborate to improve Capitol Hill's neighborhood schools.

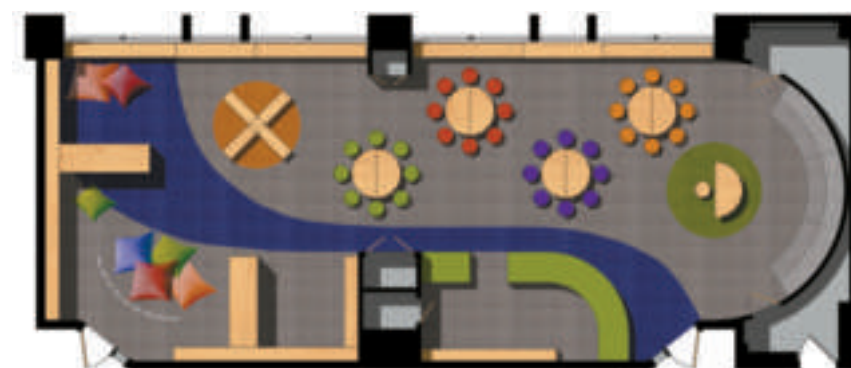
"We started with the libraries," remembers Suzanne Wells, "because they are such obvious centers of the school community, and in their current states, they send a clear message of neglect." Two of the libraries are closed because they don't have a librarian, and four of the eight libraries have book collections that were last updated in the 1970s. All of the libraries lack modern technology, well-stocked core book collections, and a physical environment conducive to learning.

Citywide Partnerships

The School Libraries Project grew from an idea into a reality at a surprisingly rapid pace. Last spring the group began investigating other models of library renewal, from an effort in Manhattan called the Library Initiative to the local effort to rebuild JO Wilson's library. They also submitted a proposal to the Washington Ar-

chitectural Foundation (WAF). By fall, the WAF found eight architectural teams that would redesign the libraries, free of charge.

Other support came with the same enthusiasm and generosity. The Capitol Hill Community Foundation adopted the fledgling project, offering financial and organizational support. With 16 years of ex-



Ludlow-Taylor

perience in fundraising and organizing community resources, the Community Foundation saw in the Libraries Project a chance to further its goal of expanding educational opportunities on the Hill.

Tom Regan of Regan Associates, a real estate development and project management group, offered his services free of

charge to oversee the construction phase of the project.

Dozens of other neighbors have offered their support, from graphic designers to retired librarians. The community, it seems, has embraced the School Libraries Project as its own cause. To date, the Project has raised over \$500,000 from neighborhood sources. This money, combined with funding from DCPS and federal appropriations brings the grand total raised to over one million dollars, nearly half of the total needed to renovate all eight libraries.

District 3 School Board Representative, Tommy Wells, has participated in the Project from the very start. "In the face of cynicism about the public school system, it is heartening to see a community rise to a challenge like this," comments Wells. "I cannot recall ever seeing a cause gain so much momentum in such a short time."

The DC Public Schools (DCPS) has also embraced the School Libraries Project. "We are extremely pleased with the willingness of Superintendent Janey and his staff to work with us on making this project happen," commented Suzanne Wells. She explains Dr. Janey has expressed in writing his commitment to ensuring these new libraries are staffed by certified library media specialists and has charged his staff with expediting the design permits.

The school system is also a financial partner in the project. Approximately \$50,000 worth of books and technology is designated for each school from a federal appropriation to DCPS, and DCPS is matching these funds with additional money for construction materials. "These same funds are being applied to school libraries citywide," explains Suzanne Wells, "but we are working with the school system to leverage the money into something

far more ambitious than what DCPS could do on its own."

Re-imagining the Modern Library

The School Libraries Project is building more than just new libraries. The vision is to create library media centers where

the librarian works with the classroom teacher to enhance the teaching of the curriculum. "One driving principle of the designs," comments Todd Cymrot, "is that the modern school library should be an extension of the classroom."

These libraries look more like performance spaces than places to read in silence. Several of the designs have actual stages built into them, and others have amphitheater-style seating. "We expect to see these libraries used as a teaching space by the classroom teachers," said Cymrot. Nonetheless, the designs do offer quiet spaces for students to curl up with a good book. Todd Ray, of Studio 27 Architects, designed what he refers to as "the nest", a curled wooden reading nook for the Payne Elementary students.

The architects were challenged to come up with creative designs while staying within budget, and designing spaces that can be easily maintained over the

While they share some common elements, all of the designs take into account the unique aspects of each school. Steve Lawlor's design for Brent Elementary incorporates large exhibit windows in recognition of Brent's long-standing partnership with the Smithsonian Institute. Jennifer Cahn's design for Peabody elementary has an "art area", a nod to the school's emphasis on learning through the arts. The Catholic University design collaborative incorporated a "café" space (serving hot chocolate rather than lattes) in the Stuart Hobson library, an element designed to attract the older middle school students of this school.

Overall, the architectural designs reflect an impressive response to the challenge set forth by the School Libraries Project. The architects were faced with an unusually broad clientele including librarians, teachers, community members and students sitting with them at the design



Brent

long run. One common solution was the use of stock lighting (with bulbs that can easily be replaced by the school), but then enhancing them with architectural features. Medtich Murphey's design for Ludlow Taylor, for example, suspends multicolored translucent forms under the fluorescent lights like a Calder mobile. Bonstra Architects capitalized on the available space many schools have. Instead of knocking down walls, they link two separate rooms across a hallway, incorporating the hallway itself as part of the Watkins library.

Each library has a \$100,000 budget for books, media and technology. LCD projectors and computer stations are incorporated in all of the designs, providing access to an online catalogue of books as well as access to the Internet for research. In the case of Ludlow Taylor, an elementary school with a sizeable learning disabled and autistic population, a wireless laptop lab will be equipped with software crucial to supporting these students.

table. For many architects, the time spent with six year olds forced them to look closely at issues of scale and accessibility.

Yan Huo, of Hartman Cox Architects, came to Tyler after working on the redesign of a Duke University library. While the scale of her new task may pale in comparison to that of her previous work, the resulting library is no less important to the lives of those who will learn within its walls.

"We hope this project is doing more than just building new libraries," explained Cymrot. "We hope that these libraries will express the values of a community, a community that values learning and creativity, and one that values its children and their futures." Paradise, indeed. ■

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