

Rebuilding some old city libraries

New spaces are eclassrooms with technological features

By Ann Geracimos, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

It wasn't only serendipity that made Capitol Hill's School Libraries Project a reality, but it helped. Just as important were parental drive and a determination to succeed.

The grass-roots, volunteer-led project, results of which were dedicated in late October, has brought about a complete renovation and upgrade of the libraries in three of the community's public schools, with five more to come.

And it was done under budget in only 20 months, including early organizing efforts. The schools affected to date are Stuart-Hobson Middle School, Brent Elementary and Ludlow-Taylor Elementary, part of an eightmember consortium.

The accomplishment, which involved the cooperation of two area foundations as well as the federal and District governments, isn't entirely unprecedented locally, says Suzanne Wells, an employee of the Environmental Protection Agency who is project co-chairwoman along with professional property manager Todd Cymrot, both Hill residents who are parents of young children.

But the scope of the project may have set a record for public-private partnerships of this kind, involving as it did so many volunteers and pro bono professionals. (According to Ms. Wells, a similar feat took place four years ago to reclaim the library in the J.O. Wilson Elementary School in the District's Northeast.)

Still, with so many District schools in need of physical rehabilitation, why would the group tackle only libraries?

"This isn't just about our kids, but about all kids. Our goal is to get kids excited about being in a library and, from that, get excited about wanting to read, and from there the test scores will go up," says Ms. Wells, who helped foment the process by bringing together presidents of Capitol Hill PTAs for discussion about what could be done to improve what they saw as major weaknesses in local schools.

"We were just little PTA presidents, trying to be sure

kids who go to school here get great facilities and a great education," she says.

At their first meeting in January 2005 they talked about the weakness of the libraries.

"Another month someone mentioned the Wilson project and then the next, a similar initiative in New York City. We were fortunate because the Capitol Hill Community Foundation heard about what we wanted to do and said they would help," she says. "We just felt that new books, new carpeting and bookcases weren't enough, that we had to start from scratch."

By focusing on the foundation and its philanthropic arm, the project helped inspire what Mr. Cymrot calls "a major shift in money coming from neighbors."

The budget for each school is \$300,000. CHCF made a \$200,000 donation right away and raised another \$300,000, although it normally only endorses four-figure grants. The District's public schools and Congress, plus a number of law firms and other local foundations upped the ante considerably. Another \$1.5 million is needed to finish the job, which will cost a total \$2.4 million when completed next year. Project officials hope to have the remaining five libraries ready by fall, with construction taking place after schools close for the summer.

Someone in the PTA presidents' group knew about the Washington Architectural Foundation (WAF), the nonprofit arm of the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, whose Community Design Services program enlists architectural firms willing to offer free advice; the project's application was filed with the WAF in July 2005.

"With 50 percent of the District's school children reading below grade level, this is an opportunity for architects to give back to the community they help build" is the rationale expressed in a recent WAF press release.

Another hallmark was the cooperation and support of the DCPS facilities department and principals at each of the schools.

The libraries were not only to be stocked with new books - 4,000 in each school - to replace and improve on ragged, outdated collections, but they were to be considered a “central classroom “ of sorts, explains Mr. Cymrot. Designs were meant to incorporate new technology that would, in turn, promote a flexible learning environment to suit the needs of different age groups. The new library at Ludlow-Taylor Elementary, 659 G St. NE, has a built-in amphitheater at one end and a “meeting corner” in another. Shelving is mobile, so space can be rearranged for different purposes. A central closet contains a cabinet where dozens of laptops are stored and recharged.

Architect Marcie Meditch, of Chevy Chase, an education major while in college, got something of an education herself experimenting with new materials such as the colorful resin sky panels she conceived to enliven the 1,500-square-foot Ludlow-Taylor library space that previously functioned more as a storage room.

“We were given tremendous freedom to come up with the most imaginative thing we could think of,” she says. “It’s important to understand how kids utilize space differently from adults, the way they orient themselves in space. To make it easy for them to access materials so they have a sense of independence, which is ultimately what you want them to strive for.”

Libraries, of course, are better known today as library media centers and librarians are library media specialists. One of the stipulations made by the School Libraries Project’s leaders was a guarantee by principals that they would hire a full-time specialist, a difficult goal given the competition for their services in the Washington area. No librarian had been at Stuart-Hobson Middle School for two years, says

Jan MacKinnon, who moved there from Peabody Elementary, whose library is due for reform in the new phase.

“Kids recognize the value of books when they see they are clean, colorful and useful,” she says. “The most encouraging thing is to see how excited the kids are.”

“They say ‘I can’t wait to come back.’ ‘This is way better than my living room. Can I move here?’ “ adds architect David Shove-Brown, a Hill resident who is an assistant professor of architecture at Catholic University. He supervised the designs his architecture students produced for the 100-foot-long Stuart-Hobson ground-floor library room at 410 E St. NE.

They also fabricated much of the furniture themselves, inspired by the organic nature of rock formations and relying on birch plywood that is light and relatively inexpensive. A key feature are three sculptural clouds containing vocabulary words, a graceful ceiling element that helps break up the vastness of the room. The school’s students were consulted as well. “They would say ‘I don’t like being told to be quiet,’ but what they really meant was they wanted to be interactive, to have a place for discussions,” Mr. Shove-Brown says.

It’s gratifying, he says, “seeing the affect it [the project] could have on children and schools. We provide this room and all of a sudden people see things moving forward. You see you can make a difference. The best part of this is now I can’t go anywhere without running into people I met in this process. I get thank-you’s and hugs.”

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