

News

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Spaces

Sunny addition nicely blends Yeshiva school with neighborhood

By WHITNEY GOULD

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This sounds like a recipe for disaster: Take two adjoining buildings, neither of them distinguished, build a new one next door and tie the three together.

Amazingly, architects for Yeshiva Elementary School brought it off. And the unlikely merger, while not perfect, shows how institutional development can be sensitively fitted into a residential neighborhood.

The school, at 5115 W. Keefe Ave. in Sherman Park, serves 181 Orthodox Jewish youngsters from kindergarten through eighth grade. Begun in 1989 in a former synagogue on N. 51st St., the school expanded in 1994 into an old grocery store around the corner. But by the late 1990s, even the enlarged quarters were so cramped, so poorly lighted and ventilated, that parents and staff knew they had to come up with a new building if they were to keep their community together.

The challenges were daunting. One was a very tight site. The school solved that by buying up a neighboring house and knocking it down, by acquiring a portion of the rear alley from the city and by allowing an alley neighbor who needed to back his boat out of his garage to turn around on school property.

Another problem: Remodeling would have to begin when school was in session and the new construction would have to be squeezed into the summer months, when school was out. Begun in September 2000, the \$2.7 million project opened a year later, in time for fall classes, and on budget. (Credit Todd Miller, the building committee co-chairman and fund-raiser; Stu Rothman, the construction manager and owner's rep; and John Kutil, of Beeler Construction.)

There were more basic dilemmas for design architect **Randall Fielding** of Minneapolis and his local partners, Haag Muller of Grafton: How to make a new building big enough to serve the school's needs without overwhelming the modest homes along the block? "You had to find a way to keep it from looking like a sore thumb," said Fielding.

The architect, a national innovator in school design, softened the mass by breaking up the new addition into zig-zag bays, their three-story facades alternating in red and blond brick, to match the neighboring buildings; he stepped down the section closest to the homes to two stories. With its generous windows and rhythmic angularity, the addition is jazzy in a gentle, street-friendly way. And, in contrast to all those retro buildings with faux-historical references, this one reflects its own time and place.

Another quandary: How to link the addition with the still-needed spaces in the synagogue building, a faceless, suburban-looking artifact of the '50s, and the former grocery, a dumpy little red-brick and Lannon stone box from the same era?

The results here were mixed. Although the old grocery lost its ugly, shingled canopy, it and the synagogue section (which houses an enlarged gym) remain as bland as ever. Would that budget constraints had not prevented an overhaul of their woefully dated facades. The best that can be said of the old grocery -- "the albatross of the project," as Haag Muller's Steve Jeske put it -- is that its stubborn presence is a reminder of the school's humble origins.

Step inside the addition, however, and you can see how far Yeshiva has come. A sun-drenched, skylighted corridor, its wall punctuated above and below by bands of windows, bridges the old and new sections and sends light into basement classrooms and other connecting rooms.

There's also a three-story, skylighted atrium overlooking a balconied, indoor playground. With sun pouring in from the atrium, from sidelight panels next to the doors and from windows in the angled bays, the classrooms welcome in the outdoors like an old friend -- a far cry from the cave-like claustrophobia of the old school. Also in the works is a roof garden.

Besides light, the interior owes much of its appeal to an explosion of color -- 22 separate colors, to be exact, ranging from warm terra cotta (in the skylighted corridor) to pale lavender, vivid orchid and grass green in the halls and classrooms. Interior designer Cynthia Musickant of Mequon knows how an artful palette can lift the spirit, tease the eye and animate space.

Now, let the users weigh in. "It's a child's dream," says Perel Wachsmann, a teacher. "A teacher's, too," says one of her colleagues, Gila Saltzman. "The kids like the playground so much we can't get rid of them at the end of the day!" Rabbi Naftali Kalter, Yeshiva's principal, says the sunny setting "puts everyone in a good mood. They're more happy, yet more serious about learning."

In the play area below, little boys in yarmulkes tumble down a curvy, bright blue slide, shrieking with delight.

A lot of architects would kill for raves like that.

Fill 'er up: A stone's throw from Yeshiva Elementary is another sign of Sherman Park's vitality: Sherman Perk. The recently opened coffee house, at 4924 W. Roosevelt Drive, was carved out of the old Copeland Service Station (1938), a decaying but still solid example of Streamlined Moderne architecture, which celebrated the curved contours of the Machine Age.

Rescued by neighborhood resident Bob Olin, with the help of state and local cleanup grants, the reborn building is no chi-chi fern bar. But its bare-bones honesty, right down to the concrete floors, is part of its charm. When I was there the other morning, the place was packed. It was a reminder of how much life there is left in overlooked, vernacular buildings, if resourceful people light some sparks.

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