



Charter School Consulting Firm Takes Hold of a Gem in the South Bronx

CIVIC BUILDERS BUYS 24,000-SQUARE-FOOT BUILDING THAT WILL BE TAILORED FOR BRONX CHARTER SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

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The vacant warehouse at 950-960 Longfellow Ave. — with its graffiti-splattered walls and weathered façade — hardly enhances the South Bronx. To nearby residents, it's a dead-end block best avoided.

But to the Bronx Charter School of the Arts, it's a gem.

Like most charter schools, the founders faced start-up hurdles: no city or state funding for construction, no site for building, and no bank willing to lend them cash.

Enter Civic Builders, a not-for-profit group that helps charter schools cope with construction needs. It started two years ago to provide affordable consulting to charter schools, but seized an opportunity to go further with the Bronx Charter School of the Arts.

The organization bought the 24,000-square-foot building and will tailor it for the school.

It will expand the space to 30,000 square feet with a mezzanine for offices. Vibrant pink and green metal sheets will replace the dirt-stained bricks.

They'll install 12 state-of-the-art classrooms and art, dance, theater, and music studios with a wall of windows so the community can always eye the creative students. The roof will be lined with skylights.

"We didn't want to constrain our education programs because of physical space," said the school's executive director, Xanthe Jory.

Civic Builders expects to spend \$4.5 million to buy and rebuild the site. In exchange, Ms. Jory will lease the property for \$500,000 a year and have an option to buy the place after three years.

"This is a path to home ownership. The school has a lot on its plate right now," said the executive director of Civic Builders, David Umansky. "They have a few years to raise resources before buying the building."

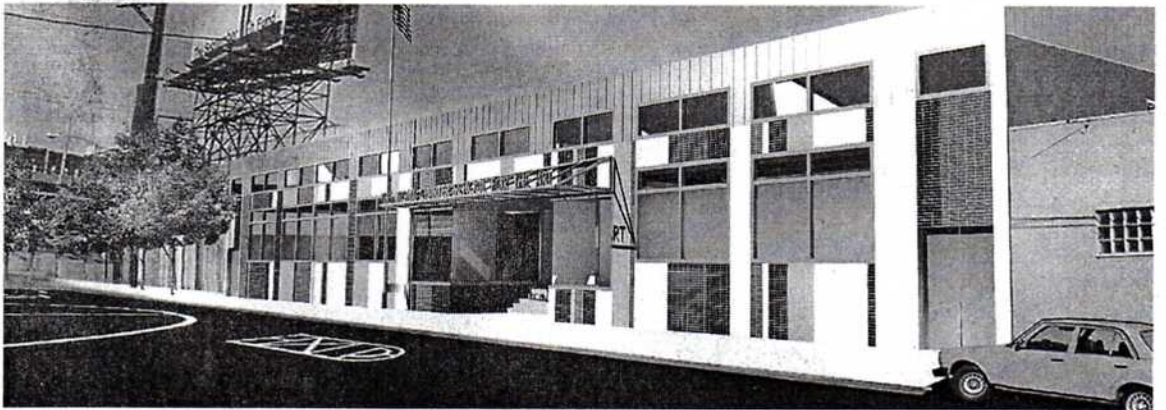
The school was approved to open this September with 160 youngsters, kindergarten to third grade. Eventually, it will grow to 280 students and include grades four to six.

Although the building won't be complete until next June, the school se-



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BEFORE AND AFTER Above, the site of the Bronx Charter School for the Arts. Below, plans for the finished product.



BRONX CHARTER SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS

cured room at I.S. 216/I.S. 217 on 163rd Street. The Education Department is lending them eight rooms at no charge for a year, but can't guarantee that space will be available in the future.

Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools don't get capital dollars — the principal barrier to starting a new school in New York.

The problem was compounded this year when the mayor and governor erased grants to charter schools for facilities.

Mayor Bloomberg eliminated the Charter School Improvement fund, created by Mayor Giuliani in 2000, from the budget. This provided the publicly financed, privately run schools with \$250,000 annually for their capital needs.

Charter schools received another blow when the state signed off on a budget minus the \$6 million Charter School Stimulus Fund. The fund was earmarked for construction and other start-up costs.

"Charter schools have a hard time getting credit from banks so Civic Builders plays the middle man. They have management and realty expertise and financial backing," said the vice president of the New York Charter School Resource Center, Peter Murphy. "Until city and state funds make a comeback, the role Civic Builders is playing is vital."

Still, the not-for-profit isn't merely a charter school advocate. They are aiming to revitalize blighted neighborhoods.

"It's not just about being a charter school, it's about being a center in the community," Mr. Umansky said.

Civic Builders is a spin-off of Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center, which renovated manufacturing space in New York to save blue-collar jobs. Similar to the charter school deal, the 10-year-old not-for-profit bought space and leased it to manufacturers at a low rate.

Civic Builders hopes to carry that tradition with other charter schools, using the Bronx Charter School of the Arts as a model.

"We can bring in school B if school A doesn't work," Mr. Umansky said. "It allows a distinction between an investment in education and an investment in real estate."