

The Metro Section

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 200

The New York Times

So Long, Mom, I'm Off To the Factory

New Public Schools In Unlikely Places

By SUSAN SAULNY

They are popping up all over, in the most unexpected places: an old salami factory in the Bronx, the boxy remains of a defunct department store in Harlem, a warehouse vacated by Sotheby's on the Upper East Side, the 13th floor of a downtown skyscraper.

These days in New York City, it is possible to find a public school almost anywhere that can hold a few hundred students and accommodate a redesign for classrooms and a cafeteria. These schools, with their loftlike spaces and sleek modern décor tucked inconspicuously into the cityscape, are a world away from the mammoth, often monumental but sometimes dreary-looking school buildings that had become the face of public education over the last century.

And the Department of Education plans to spend more than \$1 billion over the next five years creating more of them, turning on its head the traditional — some say outdated — notion of what a public school should be.

"We'll take any site we can get if it can fit a school," said William H. Goldstein, the president of the School Construction Authority, a part of the city's Department of Education. "We've spent a lot of time rethinking our standards."

This trend is being driven by need. The school system must create 66,000 new seats for students over the next five years to keep up with the population and ease the overcrowding that already exists among its 1.1 million students. It is also being helped along by changes in pedagogy. Small schools are at the heart of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's efforts to improve public education. And then there is the city's notorious real estate market and the increasing difficulty of finding open space and welcoming neighbors, especially for high schools.

But, equally important, there is the re-creation of the School Construction Authority, which only a few years ago was considered a bloated and scandal-plagued bureaucracy. The authority has thrown out its 2,500-page rulebook, a hodgepodge of guidelines that are decades old — calling for things like cinder block walls and basement boiler systems — that kept costs high and



Photographs by Richard Perry/The New York Times



The Bronx Charter School for the Arts, above and left, houses pupils in a redesigned sausage factory.



With its wraparound windows, Public School 69 in Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, left, hardly fits the city schools mold.



Millennium High School, on three floors in a 22-story office tower in Lower Manhattan, has an open floor plan.

Continued on Page 52

New Public Schools in Unlikely Places

Continued From Page 45

severely restricted what a New York City public school could look like.

Bruce Barrett, the vice president of architecture and engineering at the authority, said the agency was a lot less picky now. "There are sites that were probably turned down in the past that we would deal with now. If there's a tiny site, we make it a 300-seat," she said.

People who study school building and design nationally have been closely watching New York as it continues to build small schools in non-traditional places. While the city is not alone in converting old industrial or commercial spaces into schools (and private schools offer many examples), New York may now have the largest number of public school students in structures that were not built as schools. And the number is growing. Over the next five years, the authority will carve modern schools out of 30 spaces that once had other uses. The department already holds more than 100 leases of such spaces.

Not everyone warms easily to the idea of schools in old factories, though. Safety, cleanliness, air quality and lighting are typical concerns, even though standard school code requirements remain in effect in these spaces. And while many of the examples of reused structures are notable for their creative designs, many lack the space for gymnasiums and fields and auditoriums because of their tight urban locations.

Labor unions have also taken issue with the renovations, most of which are in spaces leased from private landlords. A coalition of labor unions has criticized Mayor Bloomberg's administration, saying that such arrangements allow officials to skirt wage laws that apply to public works projects. While administration officials have denied any wrongdoing, discussions between them and union leaders continue.

Some students have had concerns, too. "When they first told us the idea of reusing an old building, I didn't

think it would work," said Michael Oshinaya, a junior at Eleanor Roosevelt High School, located in a former Sotheby's warehouse. But Michael eventually came around. "The building was so nice," he said. "It's just a good school over all."

Jeffrey A. Lackney, the founder of the School Design Research Studio at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and an assistant professor of architecture and engineering, said, "What's happening in New York is happening out of necessity, and it's generating some very interesting and compelling ideas about what a school can be."

"There are delegations of Japanese architects that have visited us, and we point them to models in New York because we feel they are critical models to look at," he said.

Specifically, he points to Millennium High School, which scrapped the standard hallway-and-classrooms design in converting three floors of a 22-story office tower. It uses an open plan with comfortable lounge chairs that allow for informal learning in small groups. The cafeteria is more like a mall's food court, with cafe tables and a river view.

"What we were trying to do was have a space that would allow students and teachers the ability to do more than sit in a room and stare at each other," said Prakash Nair, one of the school's designers. "We have irregularly shaped classrooms so there can be many activity centers opening into multigroup areas and social space."

Just 30 years ago, the city was surrendering school buildings because it had an excess of space for a dwindling school-age population. And existing school buildings have been a problem. Crumbling brickwork, drafty windows and overall disrepair are facts of life in many school buildings. The construction authority will spend even more on repairing and renovating school buildings — more than \$7 billion — than it will on creating new spaces, according to its latest capital plan.

In Long Island City, Queens, three high schools have opened within the past three years in converted warehouses. (The School Construction Authority's headquarters is there, too, in a factory that used to produce Chiclets chewing gum.) Inside and outside Roosevelt High School, in the former Sotheby's warehouse on 78th Street near First Avenue, it is hard to tell the brick building was ever anything other than a high school, with its soundproof music bays, large auditorium and color-coded, student-friendly floors.

Examples like Roosevelt and Millennium aside, the majority of new schools in coming years will be built

from the ground up, and some are likely to be large enough to incorporate a number of schools. Many of the new schools recently completed or under construction are notable for architectural details like multilevel glass-enclosed atriums, skylights and museumlike display spaces.

While city schools used to be designed in-house, major architectural firms around the country now do the design work after going through a proposal and bidding process.

Arquitectonica, based in Miami and known for the colorful, off-beat style of the Westin Hotel on West 43rd Street, recently designed the exterior of the new High School for Architecture and Urban Planning, which is under construction in Gznee Park, Queens. It is safe to say that the school does not look even remotely like any other public school to come before it, with its glass-brick and metal-panel, red and canary yellow exterior. It is "Miami style," said Mr. Goldstein of the construction authority.

Richard Dattner, a longtime architect of schools and many other city structures (including the recent expansion of the 72nd Street subway station), said he believed the school system had begun "a new wave of imaginatively designed schools."

The entire High School for Architecture and Urban Planning was a lab, of sorts, for the School Construction Authority because the agency revamped itself midway through the school's design. Mr. Goldstein said cost efficiency and modernization



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Katie Wright, a teacher at the Bronx Charter School for the Arts in Hunts Point, preparing her second-grade class for a field trip.

had been a factor in selecting every system and material in the building. Instead of building a boiler in the basement, he said, officials went with a much less expensive rooftop heating and cooling system. They also rethought hardware, furniture and lighting.

The construction authority was criticized a few years ago for building schools that cost \$450 a square foot, more than many luxury apartments. The High School for Architecture and Urban Planning, in contrast, cost about \$300 a square foot; that has been close to the cost for the last several new schools. (The national average is closer to \$135 a square foot.)

The new Bronx Charter School for the Arts came to be on the edge of an industrial zone in Hunts Point after an exhaustive search turned up nothing better than a squat factory built in 1917 to make sausages.

The school's exterior, a rainbow of glazed bricks, stands out among its neighbors — auto repair shops and food distribution centers — like a piece of fine art. Bronx Arts' purpose is not to shrink from its neighborhood, but enhance it, said Xanthe Jory, the executive director.

"There were a number of parents who were like, 'You're moving where? Into what?'" Ms. Jory recalled. "I think all those people have been won over."