

LEARNING CURVE

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ARCHITECTS
Svigals + Partners
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PROGRAM
Kids Build

**New Haven,
Connecticut**

Stewardship 101

Thanks to a citywide building effort, New Haven students are getting an up-close education in architecture.

Despite the presence of Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, remains a largely poor and working-class city. This makes the recent (and ongoing) transformation of its public schools a minor miracle. Since 1995, the city has rebuilt or renovated more than 30 schools and expects to complete work on all 47 facilities in its system by 2014. The \$1.5 billion effort has not only remade the school system but also inspired a new educational program. Developed by Svigals + Partners, a local firm that has designed four New Haven schools, Kids Build teaches students about building design, construction, and maintenance. "It's an innovative way to introduce students to meaningful careers in architecture and construction, and also teach them to be proud of their schools," says Mayor John DeStefano Jr., the undisputed force behind the city's school-construction initiative.

During four two-hour workshops, 30 fifth and sixth graders visit the Svigals + Partners office, take hard-hat tours of their future schools, and meet in project trailers with construction managers, architects, and tradespeople. "When we started this, the existing stock of schools was outmoded and in extremely poor condition," says Jay M. Brotman, a Svigals



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partner. "As a result, the kids were not treating these schools with the proper respect. If the city was going to invest in new facilities, we felt that students needed some help in changing their actions."

Kids Build—which evolved out of Svigals + Partners' experience with Edgewood, the first school in the system to be rebuilt—is part of a much larger effort by New Haven to involve the community in the creation of its new schools. For each project, an advisory committee consisting of teachers, administrators, parents, and neighborhood residents is formed to solicit input on the design and monitor its progress. "The committee is the first point of engagement between the building effort and the community," DeStefano says. "A factor in the selection of architects in our program is their ability to engage neighborhoods successfully. I look for great designs. I look for the ability to produce drawings that don't require constant prodding from construction managers. But the ability to engage the neighborhood is particularly important in an urban area where we're not building in green fields, where we have to respect existing uses and buildings, and where we **continued on facing page**

Architects from Svigals + Partners conduct a site tour for students of the pre-K-8 Beecher School. Since taking office in 1994, Mayor John DeStefano Jr. has virtually rebuilt the school system. He initially funded the effort by placing a huge pool of previously uncollected taxes in a school-construction fund.

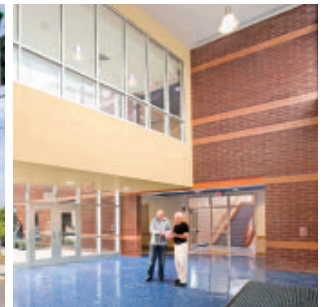
BEECHER SCHOOL, PRE-K-8: an addition to an early-20th-century building



COLUMBUS FAMILY ACADEMY, PRE-K-8: new construction



Columbus's entrance leads to a courtyard that is the heart of the school.



Bottom photos: Robert Benson; all photos courtesy Svigals + Partners

sometimes tear things down—all of which people have opinions about.”

The most significant community feedback came early in the rebuilding efforts, during advisory meetings for Edgewood, when parents expressed a strong preference for keeping middle school students close to home. “They felt it would be a better school environment if they stayed together in the neighborhood with their siblings,” Brotman says. This approach proved so successful that the city is now phasing out middle schools completely—there is just one left in the system—and returning to the traditional K-8 neighborhood model.

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It’s unclear whether Kids Build is turning out a new generation of construction geeks in New Haven, but judging from the relatively pristine condition of the four schools involved, it has certainly fostered a sense of pride in and stewardship for the built environment. “It’s a complement to the fundamental purpose of getting the school designed and built,” the mayor says. “For me it’s an opportunity to engage the community more coherently, more completely, and to create a sense of ownership by everybody around the project.” ◉

Barry Svigals conducts an interview with Channel 8 during the construction of the Beecher School.



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