

Session 5- School Buildings As Community Anchors - January 19, 2012

Our fifth session, the first of 2012, focused on schools serving as anchors within our communities. We explored different school models within our community, discuss the Kansas City Public School's initiative to repurpose/redevelop several of the closed school sites and learned the efforts to reopen a former elementary school in the Waldo community. Ultimately, we gained a greater understanding of the importance schools have within our communities.

Cristo Rey Kansas City

We started the day at Cristo Rey High School meeting with Andy Stith, Vice President for Institutional Advancement, to learn about their unique educational model. The high school is in a retrofitted former grade school that had been closed adjacent to Redemptorist Catholic Church on Linwood. The students that attend are pulled from the entire metro-area and represent ethnic and religious diversity but all of the families are low income. Cristo Rey provides a college prep education while also exposing students to the corporate world. Cristo Rey students spend one day of the school week at a professional job. The work week is shared between four students. The fifth day is covered on a rotating basis. The school day and school year are both extended to accommodate the students working. The adjacent businesses find it easy to recognize the Cristo Rey students because they are in professional attire whether going to work or spending the day at school. Cristo Rey has a drop-out rate around 1% and work to see that all the students are able to pursue education beyond high school, whether that is community college or traditional four year programs. Several of the students led us on a tour of the facility and shared their insights with us. The school has an ongoing need for mentors for students and volunteers to help with math tutoring. We concluded the session with how the design profession can help with those needs.

Repurposing Initiative For Kansas City Public Schools

For our next session, we jumped over to the office of MainCor to meet with Shannon Jaax, Director of the Repurposing Initiative for the Kansas City Public Schools. One of the largest contributing factors to the Right Sizing, in 2010, was the decline of school population in Kansas City by 52% from 1980. After the 2010 Right Sizing, the school district had an excess of properties within the district. Jaax leads the effort to return 30 of these closed properties to viable thriving community assets. The process has integrated public opinion through public tours and meetings, technical assessment of the facilities to determine condition, proposals for reuse and market analysis for project viability. While the most common answer from the community may be the need for community centers, this is not necessarily the correct solution for long term management of the properties. The most viable categories for reuse tend to be: senior/affordable housing; education/community services; market rate housing/mixed use; and in a few instances yet unknown uses. The size of the facility and grounds vary greatly between locations. This can make it difficult finding the right solution within a community. Jaax mentioned that documentation for historic purposes may be incorporated into some of the renovations. Partnerships with some community organizations, such as libraries may help the viability of these locations. One bright spot in this effort was the repurposing of one property for the second location of Academie Lafayette. Hopefully, these vacant buildings will be brought back to life in the near future.



Pillars would like to thank the following individuals. Please click on the links below to find out more information.

Andy Stith, Melanie Valenzuela, Sister Linda Roth- (Cristo Rey)
<http://www.cristoreykc.org/>

Shannon Jaax- (Kansas City Public Schools)
<http://www.kcpublicschools.org/>

Ashley Hand- (Friends of Hale Cook)
<http://halecook.org/>

Christine Kahm and Katie Roos- (Waldorf School)
<http://cityoffountainsschool.org/>

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Hale Cook Elementary School

Our third stop for the day was to go to the Hale Cook Elementary School. We met with Ashley Hand, the co-founder/ director of the nonprofit Friends of Hale Cook, for a tour of the building. Hale Cook, originally built in the 1920's, was recently closed in 2010 due to a loss of accreditation. Ashley led us on a tour throughout the school, where you could immediately see unique detailing and design quality within this forgotten place. Some of the special design features included fireplaces within the classrooms, wood benches with internal storage, rotating doors, a pottery kiln art room, an multi-use auditorium, a gymnasium, a full kitchen and lunchroom, access to a stair tower, floor to ceiling windows, and a courtyard that engulfs the surrounding classrooms. After the tour, Ashley informed us of her organizations desire to reopen the school. Currently, there are 6,000 children who live within this district, and are available to attend this school. Unfortunately, only 10% of those 6,000 students attend public schools. In order to open Hale Cook Elementary School again, they would need at least 350 children to enroll. One thing is for sure, with a little work and effort, Hale Cook could again be a positive community anchor of education for the children living in this district. It's a constant work in progress, but eventually after all these efforts, this school will thrive again.

Waldorf School

After our tour concluded at Hale Cook, we had the privilege of having Christine Kahm and Katie Roos ,two teachers from the City of Fountains School, present their school model to us. The school, which is a non-profit organization, is dedicated to providing Waldorf inspired educations to the Kansas City area. Developed by Rudolf Steiner in 1919, Waldorf Education is based on a profound understanding of human development that addresses the needs of the growing child. Waldorf teachers strive to transform education into an art that educates the whole child—the heart and the hands, as well as the head. Both Christine and Katie discussed their experiences of home-schooling, the initial meetings organizing the school in Kansas City area and their current struggles of locating a new home since the Westport Presbyterian Church fire earlier this year.

