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Designing a City of Learning Paterson, New Jersey

Few aspects of American life bring people together in common purpose as clearly as their hopes for their children. Ask families why they live where they do, and many will answer, “because of the schools.” The City of Learning strategy for Paterson, New Jersey, attempts to harness this interest in education to the rebuilding of a bypassed rust-belt city.

Paterson, sixteen miles northwest of New York City, is home to some 170,000 residents. It was founded in 1791 near a seventy-foot waterfall on the Passaic River that could power textile mills. For more than a century the city typified the promise of the American experience, even lending its name to a celebrated collection of poems by William Carlos Williams.

After World War II, Paterson entered a long period of decline. The middle class departed for the suburbs, leaving behind an aging infrastructure, dilapidated housing and deteriorating public schools. Eventually, a mask of poverty descended over Paterson, shrouding its former heritage, its importance as a county seat and its significance to a new generation of immigrants.

In 1998, however, Paterson’s fortunes brightened when twenty-eight of the state’s urban school districts successfully argued that years of suburban school expansion had denied them a fair share of facilities-construction money. Largely as the result of that New Jersey Supreme Court ruling, Paterson expects to receive more than \$700 million in state school-construction funds over the next decade.

City of Learning/Paterson proposes that most of this money be used to weave new learning spaces for the district’s 26,000 students into the city’s fabric of historic buildings, industrial architecture and dense neighborhoods. Capital projects are to be balanced between building small new schools and recycling empty or underutilized structures, such as former industrial, commercial and institutional buildings. The eventual goal is to leverage the social and economic capital of students, teachers and parents towards the greater project of urban revitalization.

Jurors noted the project has wide-ranging implications: in the next decade, an estimated \$200 billion will be spent on school construction across the nation. Indeed, the City of Learning strategy has already become a model for New Jersey’s “Renaissance School Zone” program, and plans are being pursued to expand it to Union City and Trenton.

The Integrative Approach

City of Learning/Paterson emerges from more than twenty years of research, planning and design by Roy Strickland, currently Director of the urban design program at the University of Michigan.¹

As Strickland notes, for the last fifty years the prevalent model of a public school has involved either locking students onto urban campuses or isolating them in self-contained boxes at the edge of town. First at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and now at Michigan, his New American School Design Project has explored a variety of ways to break out of this mold.²

Strickland’s views have been deeply influenced by educational theorists such as John Dewey, James Comer and Theodore Sizer. He believes the activity of learning should be incorporated into the community—both physically and in terms of a “lesson plan” drawn from local resources.

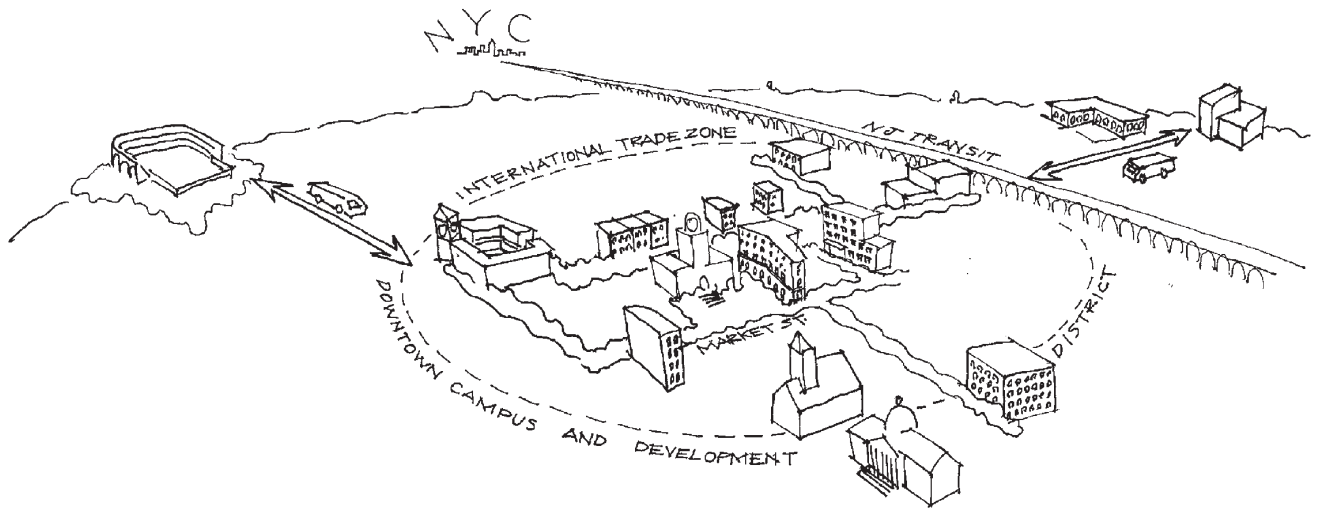
One of Paterson’s great resources in this regard is its architecture. When Strickland was first hired to advise the district in 1998, he says he found a city filled with “aspiring architecture from another time.” Much of this heritage consisted of handsome buildings built downtown as part of an earlier renewal effort, which followed a devastating turn-of-the-century fire.

Strickland pointed out that restoring such structures would be less disruptive and more valuable to the community in the long run than building new school facilities from the ground up. In the process, the district could foreground the history of place in the lives of a new generation of Americans.

Part of the success of this integrative philosophy in Paterson comes from its combination with a small-academy approach to raising achievement levels. That philosophy was brought to the district by Dr. Edwin Duroy, the state-appointed Superintendent (the state disbanded Paterson’s school board and took over its failing schools in 1991), who successfully initiated a similar program in Hoboken. Duroy believes the small-academy approach will never entirely replace existing programs and facilities, such as Paterson’s two traditional high schools, but that it offers an engaging alternative for motivated students who may benefit from concentrated programs in specific fields.

So far the partnership between Duroy and Strickland has resulted in the establishment of some ten small academies, many of which have involved architectural restorations aimed at raising the profile of learning in the community. The projects include a performing arts academy in a former Lutheran church; a health and related professions (HARP) academy in a nearly vacant three-story downtown mall; an international studies and languages academy in an old synagogue; and a transportation academy in an abandoned locomotive factory.

City of Learning/Paterson’s most ambitious proposal has been to envision the entire downtown as a campus serving some 1,500 to 2,000 high-school and middle-school



students. Although this will take many years to achieve, Strickland believes it represents the district's best chance to create new learning opportunities for students and facilitating links with other institutions. Eventually, a downtown campus might even lead to new and renovated mixed-use structures and improved transit connections within the city and between the city and the region.

Learning by Doing

One of the most successful new academies has been the Metro Paterson Academy for Communications and Technology (MPACT). Beginning in 1999 with twenty-five students in the same disused Main Street mall that housed the HARP program, its popularity has continued to grow and plans are now being drawn up to expand it into a rehabilitated building of its own.

MPACT was originally based on the belief of its director, Stephen Cohen, that immersion in technology and communications was the best way to prepare a new generation of city leaders. But when architecture and planning were added to its curriculum, it became the first test of City of Learning's philosophy that the city itself should be part of each student's lesson plan. MPACT students now split their day between a traditional curriculum and sessions more typical of a graduate architecture studio.

One of the first projects the students took on involved an elementary and a middle school across the Passaic River in the low-income Northside neighborhood. The two schools are located a block apart in the shadow of a row of high-rise public housing blocks. The challenge was to redesign the barren asphalt between them (much of which was being used for teacher parking) as an educational park.

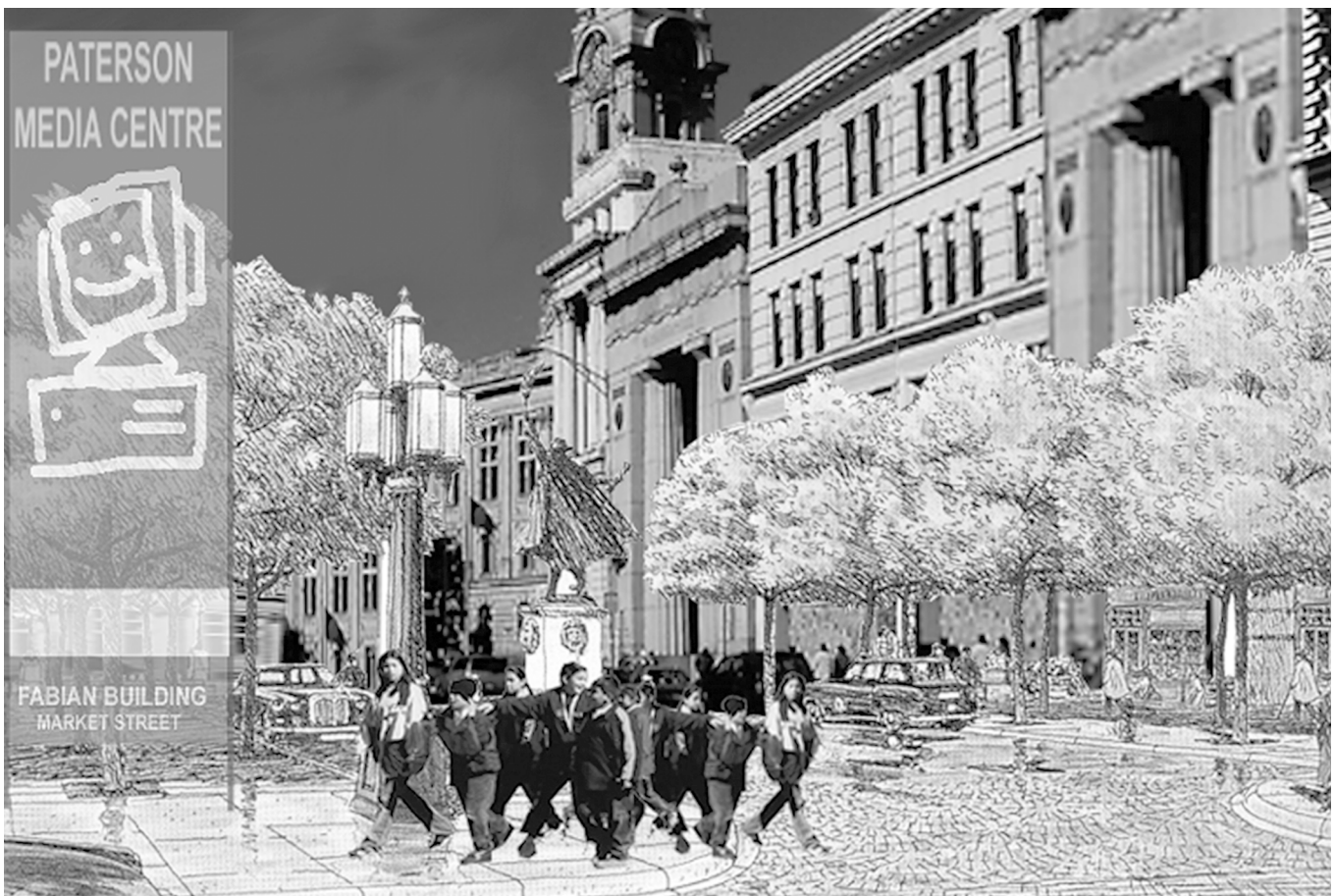
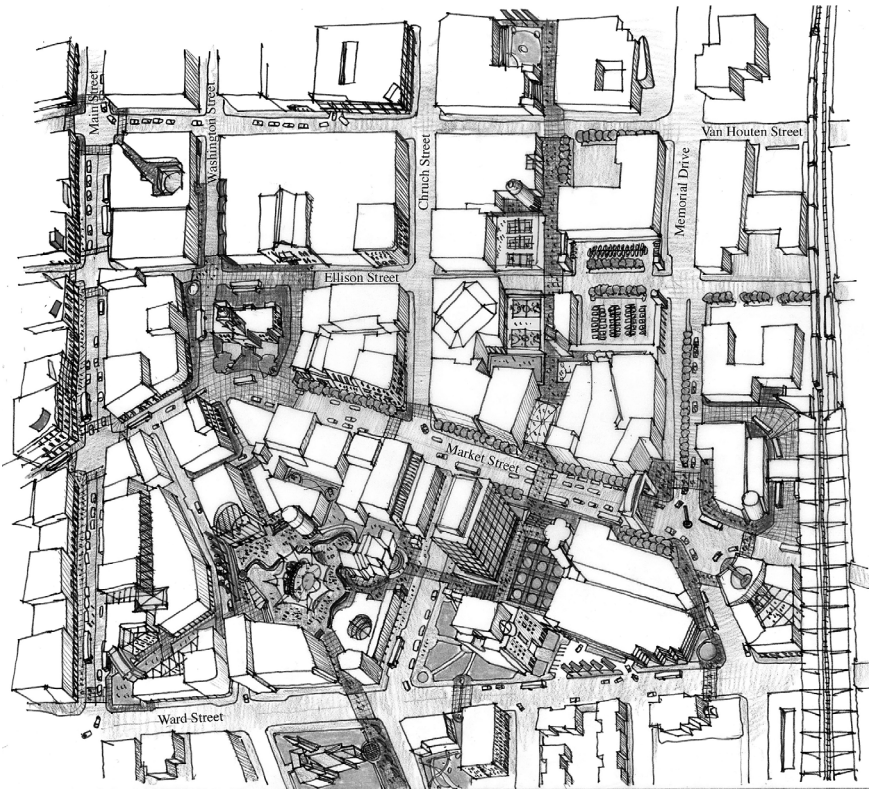
Working in cooperation with students, teachers and parents, City of Learning/Paterson envisions that the two schools might eventually anchor "a neighborhood for living and learning" that would combine streetscape improvements with a mix of community facilities for both children and adults.

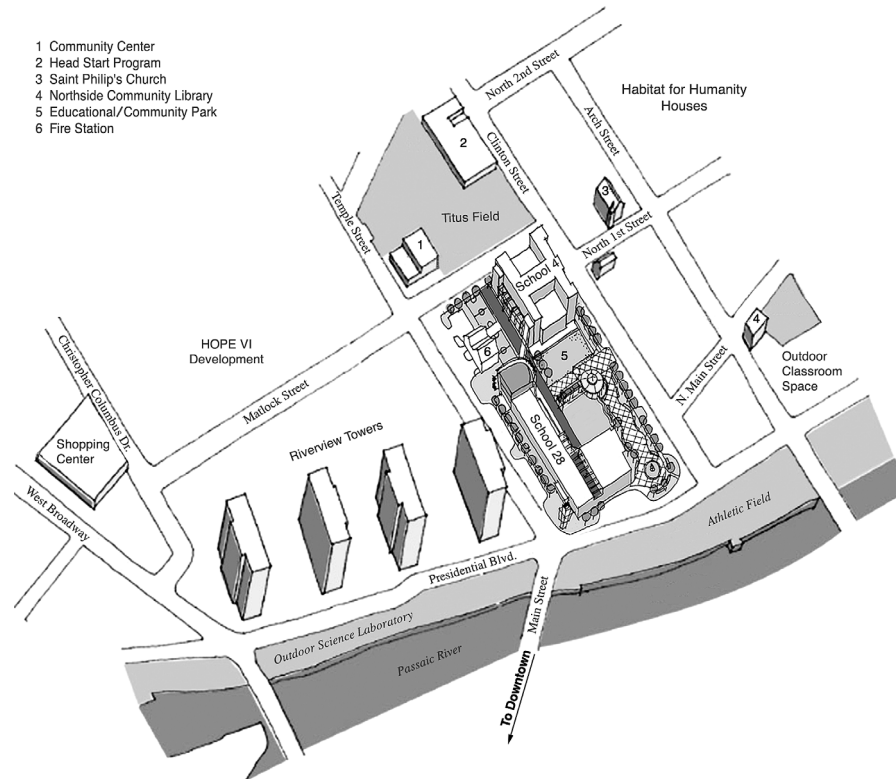
Critics of City of Learning question whether school-based redevelopment can have the same long-term impact as programs based on investment in businesses and housing. The ultimate success of the initiative will certainly depend on additional efforts, such as attracting a diverse set of employers, who could offer jobs commensurate with the skills of the city's new graduates. Until this happens, though, City of Learning offers a strategy for putting Paterson's best foot forward — both by highlighting the importance of education in the lives of its residents, and by revaluing and rediscovering its environmental heritage.

— David Moffat

Notes

1. See Roy Strickland, "Neighborhoods for Learning," *Places* 13.1 (Winter 2000). His research was cited by a previous EDRA/*Places* award winner, the Rosa Parks School in Berkeley, Calif.
2. The Paterson work began when Strickland was teaching at MIT. Many of its proposals were developed with help from students in the graduate architecture and planning program there.





Jury Comments

Brown: I know, based on research on human resistance to revitalization, that in cities crime and schools are the qualities that are the two biggest stumbling blocks. This project takes on the school issue. It's not just, "Let's put some money in and hope it works." They built an entire framework of curriculum, research and seeing schools as community centers. Cities have resources for students you can't find anywhere else. We can draw from this wealth to make city schools something suburban schools can't be.

Rabaim: This fits the awards program better than any other entry we've seen. What I think is very interesting is its applicability to a whole host of situations where one can conceive of using investment in civic uses in the way that this revitalization strategy suggests.

Fraker: And yet it's the schools that are seen as community builders, because every parent is emotionally, physically, daily tied to an institution they want desperately to succeed for their child. It has the emotional attention of the citizenry. To use that as leverage for fixing cities is the right way to go. If you could spend all your money fixing the school system in each city, I think practically all the

other things would take care of themselves, because people would make sure they did.

Mozingo: It's a very strategic way of thinking about capital planning in cities, where you accomplish a social goal and an urban-fabric goal at the same time. We don't usually think of schools as vehicles for knitting the urban fabric together. We tend to think of them as being added on, or that they should be in the suburbs. It is strategic and smart.

Quigley: Giving an award to this project would have special value in that it might encourage other school districts to put something like this in place. You can't say that about the architectural design projects. They are limited to the talent of one person at one point in time.

Fraker: I would rather put it in planning than design. If there were just one case study showing how these principles ended up producing a different kind of design than the ones you normally get, I'd be really excited.

Opposite: Proposal for a downtown campus of living and learning.

Above: Proposal for a "neighborhood for living and learning," turning a parking lot between two schools into an educational park.

City of Learning, Paterson, N.J.

Roy Strickland (University of Michigan)

Edwin Duroy (State District Superintendent, Paterson Public Schools)