



August 3, 2007

At Episcopal Academy, Even the Halls and the Walls Will Be a New Edition

A school's break with the past calls for a rare collaboration

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How do you . . . coordinate the efforts of four different architecture firms that are designing an entire K–12 school campus to maximize coherence and maintain each building's personality?

Summary: Pennsylvania's Episcopal Academy is moving to a new 123-acre site in Delaware County after outgrowing its current campus. The school hired four prominent architecture firms to design it. Though each set of buildings differs in form, they are coordinated through common elements in landscape, materials, and scale.

When the average public school runs out of space, it's time for mobile trailers, crowded classrooms, and contentious bond votes at school board meetings. When the well-heeled and historic Episcopal Academy on Philadelphia's Main Line needed room to grow, they drew on their considerable resources and put together a dream team of East Coast architecture firms to design a new campus.



Four firms (Venturi Scott Brown and Associates, Gund Partnership, Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, and RMJM Hillier) have come together to design the new 123-acre campus in Newtown Square, 13 miles west of Center City Philadelphia. Construction is under way, and the new \$212.5 million project is to be completed in time for the 2008 school year.

Suburb to exurb

Episcopal Academy was founded as an all-boys school in 1785 by the Rev. William White, the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania. In 1921, the campus came to its current location in Merion. The K–12 school began admitting girls in 1974 and has grown steadily along with the Main Line suburbs that supply its students. The current campus accommodates about



The Campus Center seen from the Campus Green.

1,000 students, but it's only built for 600. "We can't even get the whole upper school in the theater," says Ham Clark, Episcopal Academy's Head of School. "We're feeling really cramped."

The bucolic meadow that will be Episcopal Academy's new home was purchased by board of trustees members at an auction before they even had a chance to discuss it with the rest of the board. However, Clark

says that after the money was spent, little convincing was necessary. "Everyone was persuaded that the demographics of Philadelphia were such that our marketplace is moving west," he says. Design planning started six years ago, and the school is currently in the midst of a \$90 million fundraising campaign.

Coherence, not homogeny

This architectural collaboration was a product of both logistics and aesthetics. "For one architecture firm to handle this in the timeframe we have, it would have taken a lot of resources," says Chuck Boschen of the facility planning and program management firm Brailsford & Dunlavey. He's the primary liaison between the architecture firms and the school.



The Athletic Center from the Campus Green.

For Episcopal Academy's part, they didn't want the stamp of any particular firm's style emblazoned on their campus. "We don't want one architect," says Clark, who is a member of the master planning committee that oversees design and construction. "We want several architects. We want our buildings to look a little bit different from each other."

But not too different. "The old site is really a mishmash of different things," Clark admits. Some of these buildings were poorly received and haven't improved much with time. The squat, boxy, and nondescript upper and middle schools have never been popular. The chapel's severe shed roof that stops just short of the ground made onlookers scratch their heads. "For some people, it looked like a Howard Johnson," says Clark.

Architectural uniformity was not the goal of the project, but it was at least the direction. "What we told the architects was: 'We want the buildings to have similar themes. We want you to figure out what the connecting pieces are.'"

In response to this, they got a diverse, yet coherent sample of forms that are knitted together by detailing and the landscape. "Each [building] has its own character," says John Prokos, FAIA, of Gund Partnership.

At the heart of the campus

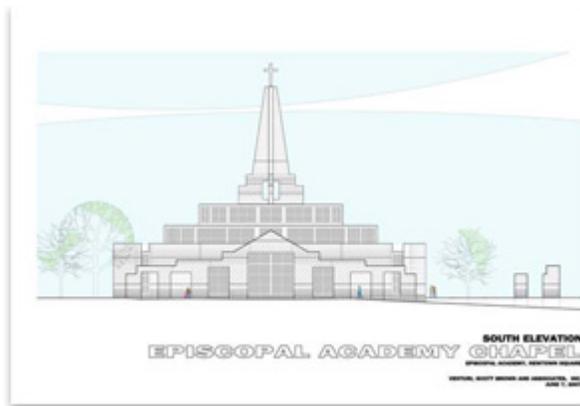
All four firms coordinated the materials used as well as the landscape layout of the campus, with its pastoral central



The Academic Center, The Middle School is shown on left, the Science Center in the middle, and the Upper School on right.

quadrangle and collegiate-village scale. Gund Partnership's design for the Campus Center features a U-shaped floor plan with a dining hall on one end and the library on the other. Ashlar stonework draws visitors into each of these entrances, and a courtyard lies between the two in the U-shape's center. Humble and inviting in form, the Campus Center building is reminiscent of the barns one might have seen while driving through the Delaware County countryside when Newtown Square was nothing *but* barns and pastures. The facility also features a theater, school store, faculty commons, and administrator offices. Prokos calls this extracurricular focal point the "functional and organizational heart of the new campus ... It's the one building on campus that everyone will come to, from the lowest grades up to the high school kids."

Clark was impressed with Gund Partnerships' work on the theater at the Westminster School in Connecticut and wanted to see what they could do with the Episcopal Academy's much larger performing arts space. Bohlin Cywinski Jackson were hired to build the school's Athletic Center, and RMJM Hillier came up with designs for the lower, middle, and upper schools. Venturi Scott Brown and Associates were selected for the new site's chapel, perhaps because they had had a bit of practice with the design. Robert Venturi, FAIA, is an Episcopal Academy alum (class of '44), and designed a chapel for the school's current site in 1950 for his master's thesis at Princeton.



Venturi's original design was much smaller than the iconic steepled chapel that is being built, says John Hunter, a senior associate at Venturi Scott Brown that worked on the project. The chapel stands in the center of the campus, with the campus center building off to one corner and classrooms off to the other. Its terraced form leads the eye up to the steeple, which looks out onto the main arterial entrance to the campus, Pennsylvania Route 252. To reinforce its role as the center of a religious and educational community, the chapel's pews are tilted towards the altar, wrapping around it in a semi-circle.

"It was a sentimental thing," Clark says, to give Venturi another chance to design a chapel for his alma mater, even though he had never had a freestanding religious structure built previously. This is the type of faith in Episcopal Academy graduates that the work of all the involved architects might hope to inspire.