

# Renovating the Gales School: Reviving History, Rebuilding Lives, Restoring Hope

By Whitney Duffey

As Washington, D.C.'s oldest social service agency, the non-profit Central Union Mission has seen many changes since its 1884 founding. It has survived the Great Depression, two world wars, 24 presidential administrations and D.C.'s ever-changing landscape of neighborhood development. Now another significant change is underway: the challenge of relocating the Mission's services from its current facility to a new building known as the Gales School.

Just steps away from Union Station and the U.S. Capitol Building, the Gales School and the Mission are equally steeped in D.C.'s history. When the Gales School was constructed in 1881, the area around Union Station was a neighborhood known as Swampoodle, that was home to working-class immigrants. Measuring three stories and totaling approximately 33,000 square feet, the Gales School was designed by then-Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark. First serving D.C. as a school building, it then experienced multiple iterations as temporary housing and government administrative offices. However, until the Mission's involvement, the recent era had seen no long-term plan for the building.

After many vacant years, the Gales School fell into a state of extreme disrepair. The original roof, windows and floor framing were removed, leaving only a masonry shell supported by temporary retention bracing. Bringing the building up to code, addressing the numerous structural concerns and repositioning it to reengage the streetscape would be no easy feat. It seemed a fitting challenge for the Mission, a group usually tasked with transforming the area's homeless into productive members of society through education, prayer, nutritious meals and safe shelter. In this case, their latest rehabilitation would require tools of a different kind — program managers familiar with the unique needs of non-profits, architects with recognized design and engineering expertise and a skilled construction team able to meet the challenges of executing the Mission's vision.

The story of the Mission's relocation to the Gales School began in 2010, when it won an RFP issued by D.C. to renovate the Gales School and outfit it as a homeless shelter. The school was named for D.C.'s eighth mayor and social services advocate, Joseph Gales, Jr., and it seemed only fitting that the D.C. government again return the Gales School to a community-serving use. With the aid of its program manager, locally based Brailsford & Dunlavey, the Mission had been reviewing many potential sites across the city for a new facility. After years in their 14th Street

D.C. location, the need for their services had outgrown their physical capacity. Furthermore, the 14 Street neighborhood was rapidly developing and no longer served as a hub for the needy D.C. residents that the Mission served. The Gales School seemed like an ideal opportunity, with its proximity to multiple forms of public transit and its location in an area underserved by social services. The D.C. government had the foresight to recognize the city's ongoing need for social services and as part of the agreement offered a long-term lease to the Mission in return for the non-profit's funding the substantial upfront renovation costs. Importantly, the Mission's financing — which includes New Markets Tax Credits, Historic Tax Credits and the generous donations of its supporters — meant that the Mission could supplement the city's social services without any additional costs to D.C. taxpayers. Estimates show that the Mission's operation of the Gales School will result in a savings of more than \$60 million to D.C. in facility maintenance and service delivery to the city's homeless community.

After political delays, the Mission was able to break ground on the project in spring 2012, in what the Mission described as "the culmination of years of planning and negotiation." In addition to re-engaging program management firm Brailsford & Dunlavey, the Mission enlisted the services of D.C.-based architecture firm Cox Graae + Spack and Rockville, Md.-based construction management firm Forrester Construction to help realize its vision.

The Mission recognized that an expert interior redesign would be vital to the success of the Gales School's adaptive reuse. Furthermore, D.C. public space and historic preservation standards would require a nuanced design approach. As Cox Graae + Spack explained, "Our firm has specialized in complex adaptive re-use projects over our 32 years in practice and Central Union Mission has been one of the more challenging. Matching the unique Mission program and its non-profit budget, while respecting and restoring the Landmark 1880's building back into service to the community has required very close and successful collaboration between the owner, project manager, A/E team, builder, city politics and its many-layered review agencies."

Cox Graae + Spack's experienced team drew up plans for the existing structure, which includes transitional and residential suites, administrative offices, and day room and exercise space to provide D.C.'s homeless population with sorely-needed daytime programming. In addition to restoring the main structure of the Gales School, the design

The Mission moved into the Gales School in fall 2013.



Photo Credit: Forrester Construction

also includes a small addition for the Mission's full-service teaching kitchen, job training and educational facilities, dental and doctor's offices, and legal services. The new facility's distinct daytime and nighttime spaces for visitors, as well as defined administrative support areas, all designed specifically for those functions, will greatly improve the Mission's range of services and ability to serve D.C.'s homeless.

Green design features also play an important role in the Gales School renovation. The Mission is pursuing an Enterprise Green Communities certification, the only national platform for building and preserving green affordable housing. This certification leveraged the Mission's community-serving focus and set a design standard that met the requirements of D.C.'s Green Building Act of 2006. Features such as energy-efficient mechanical and electrical systems, water-efficient landscaping featuring native and adaptive plant species, a solar-reflectant roof to reduce heat island effect and many others contribute to the environmentally responsible renovation. Not only do these green features create a healthy living and working environment, but they will also reduce the Mission's anticipated operating costs.

The building's interior isn't the only part of the Gales School being upgraded. In 2002, D.C.'s Office of Planning added the Gales School to the Inventory of Historical Sites as an architecturally and historically significant property. Accordingly, the building's exterior also requires painstaking restoration to recreate its former appearance. In its role as construction manager, Forrester Construction identified a plan to com-

plete significant masonry and structural repairs.

Forrester's team explained, "The adaptive reuse of the historic Gales School has presented numerous challenges. Prolonged, unprotected exposure to the elements created structural issues requiring extensive repair. In addition, matching modern construction techniques with historic construction conditions creates a need for collaboration and creative thinking between all parties involved in the construction and design of the project. Early identification of problems as well as timely, collaborative, resolution-oriented working sessions allow the team to create the most cost-effective solutions and to rectify the unexpected issues that inevitably occur on reuse projects."

The Mission moved into the Gales School in fall 2013. To learn more about Central Union Mission, including donation and volunteer opportunities, please visit [www.missiondc.org/](http://www.missiondc.org/) or call 202-745-7118.

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