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Forget facelifts. Architects are giving D.C. public schools luxurious settings worthy of trophy office buildings.

By Deborah K. Dietech

Battle lines are being drawn over D.C.'s public school boundaries, but we've already seen victories in improving the physical environments for learning. Only a decade ago, most of the city's schools were in deplorable condition, marred by broken windows, leaking roofs and overall disrepair.

Now almost two-thirds of D.C.'s 109 public schools have been partially or fully modernized. In his proposed budget for fiscal year 2015, Mayor Vincent Gray has set aside \$409 million for more school upgrades, primarily for high schools and elementary schools.

As this ambitious campaign proceeds, some noteworthy architecture is emerging to accommodate the newest approaches to K-12 education. These new schools reflect a more fluid, dynamic and campus-style approach to learning than the rigid "cells and bells" approach of the past.

Overseeing the building improvements is architect Brian Hanlon, who was appointed director of the District Department of General Services in 2011. He is trying to raise the level of public school design and construction in much the same way that the D.C. public libraries have recast their buildings.

But Hanlon is more interested in certified business enterprises than architects. He is relying on design-build partnerships to speed construction and guarantee costs and has awarded multiple school projects to the same firms, throwing into question his pursuit of innovation.

Nevertheless, Hanlon insists, "We are pushing the envelope of design to change the culture." That effort is clearly being made at some of the newer D.C. school projects, as evident from my recent tours of Ballou High School, now being constructed in Southeast's Congress Heights neighborhood, and Dunbar High School, opened last year in the Truxton Circle section of Northwest.

The gutsy design for Ballou, created by D.C.-based Bowie-Gridley Architects and Perkins and Will, is rising on a hillside next to the dilapidated 1950s school where classes are now held. Once the complex opens in 2015, the old school will be torn down to make way for new athletic fields and a stadium.

At Ballou, students will experience “an explosion of space,” predicts Hanlon, as they enter the building under a huge archway filled with curving glass. Large windows and expanses of glass will brighten learning spaces with daylight and visually connect them to the outdoors.

Nearing completion is the brick-clad academic wing where collaborative learning spaces are interspersed among classrooms with computer stations. Students will be able to share ideas with classmates and learn at their own pace in comfortable surroundings open to hallways.

Now framed in steel is the theater-style auditorium, destined to become one of the largest assembly spaces in Southeast D.C. The next-door practice room is being tailored to Ballou’s renowned marching band, which has played in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. A wing for athletics, eventually overlooking the new athletic field, will offer a competition-sized swimming pool, a fitness center and gymnasiums. The school will also house labs for auto repair classes and a teaching kitchen for the culinary arts.

Similarly impressive is the array of learning spaces already in place at Dunbar High School. This majestic building replaced a dreary, 1970s school, described by some as a prison.

Perkins Eastman with Moody Nolan Inc. designed the new school to reinvigorate pride in Dunbar’s legacy of academic excellence. “We wanted to build on the past but do it in a modern way,” said architect Sean O’Donnell of Perkins Eastman.

As the nation’s first public high school for African-Americans, Dunbar has many notable alumni, including Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., and jazz pianist Billy Taylor. Many graduates are now pictured on metal plaques set within a skylit atrium at the center of the new building to provide daily reminders of leadership. On my tour, students, teachers and principal crowded the light-filled space, underscoring its role as the school’s crossroads.

O’Donnell also showed me his firm’s plans to renovate Roosevelt High School, a 1932 Colonial Revival building on 13th Street NW, suffering from neglect. The school and its 1970s addition will be remodeled and enlarged with arts and athletics wings. The front colonnade and cupola will be restored and a courtyard, enclosed in glass to offer the same type of central gathering space as in Ballou and Dunbar.

Build a new school and the children will come. The new high schools are designed for larger student populations than they currently serve, but some modernized elementary schools like Stoddert Elementary in Glover Park, another Perkins Eastman design, are already feeling the squeeze of soaring enrollments. The community will come, too, for adult education classes, recreation, performances and public meetings in spaces designed into the new and remodeled schools.

Through such resources, the modernized D.C. schools fulfill a broader civic purpose in serving neighborhoods. They are contemporary in design, but built on an old-fashioned idea — the transformative power of architecture to improve lives.