

COMMENTARY

In country and town, 2 projects restore buildings with respect

By Blair Kamin
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The planned rebuilding of the World Trade Center and the Soldier Field controversy have so thoroughly dominated the news about architecture in recent months that they've shoved other worthy design stories off-stage. This column is about two of them and offers a reminder that modest-size projects matter every bit as much as the big ones that grab the headlines.

Both designs will be honored by the Chicago chapter of the American Institute of Architects when it presents its annual awards Oct. 11. Both create a new image for drab 1950s buildings and teach significant lessons about the creative rethinking of buildings that the shortsighted are ready to consign to the junk heap.

The award-winners are a boldly conceived but sensitive addition to a high school in McHenry County and a deftly handled renovation of a public housing project in Chicago's Chinatown. Pretty unsexy stuff, to be sure, but the new work has been carried out with such respect for the '50s buildings and with such care for the users of the structures that one realizes, upon visiting them, that they are as much about the substance of living as eye-catching style.

The high school addition can be found among the cornfields and the grain silos of McHenry County, about 40 miles northwest of downtown. It's in the fast-growing exurb of Cary, where elementary school teachers in Cary District 26 recently ended a five-day strike. Buildings like this used to be called libraries. Now they are known as

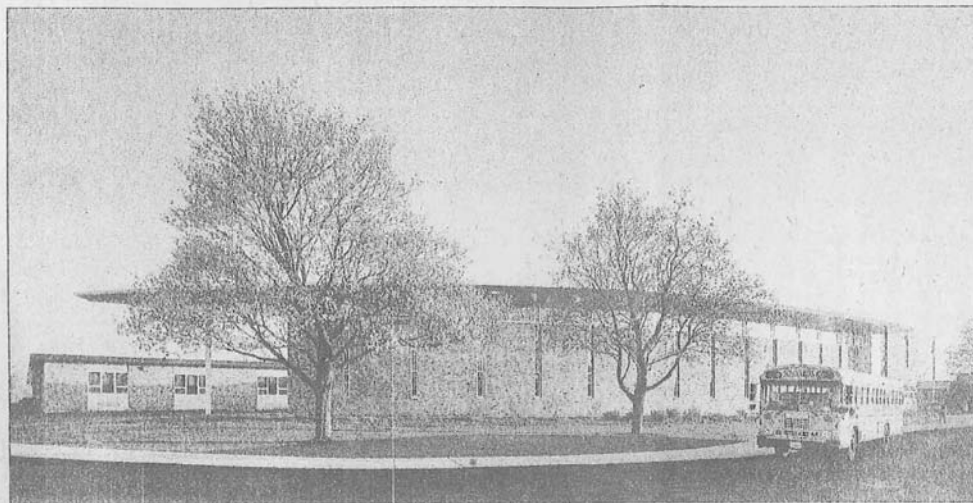


Photo by James Steinkamp, Steinkamp/Ballogg

A curved facade gives a bold look to the media center addition at Cary Grove High School.

"media centers" because they house computers as well as books. Whatever term you use, few show as well as this one does that an everyday building in the suburbs can be a proud presence, almost monumental.

\$6.5 million renovation

Designed by Ralph Johnson of school specialist Perkins & Will, with P&W's Mark Jolicœur, the year-old Cary Grove High School media center replaces the school's old library, now an office for teachers, and is the key element of a \$6.5 million renovation. It's a low-slung, one-story structure that addresses the visitor with a sweeping, curved facade and an overhanging metal roof whose apex thrusts into space like a ship's prow. The sculptural shape is designed to catch the eye of the passing driver and to elevate the image of the school, which risked appearing dowdy

compared with new ones.

But the media center, which is carefully connected to the rest of the school, is no showy clip-on piece. It matches the height of the existing school, a nondescript 1950s building with handsome internal courtyards. In the process, it makes the high school's entry area a pleasant, U-shaped courtyard. The addition even gracefully picks up on the old school's busy, multicolored brick, a welcome departure from the self-indulgent behavior of star architects who insist that buildings must incorporate their latest design fetish.

Equally praiseworthy is the way the addition resolves the demands of form and function. Narrow windows admit natural light to the airy, 30-foot-tall reading room of the media center, but not so much that it prevents students from using computer screens. Computer classrooms are tucked in the basement,

holding the media center to the height of the existing buildings. But the basement isn't cavelike because the architects designed sloped inner courtyards that let natural light seep into the lower floor.

Interestingly, Perkins & Will designed both the new and the old buildings at Cary Grove. Johnson thus had a chance to improve upon what his predecessors did half a century ago. Does that make the original 1950s building a case of planned obsolescence? Not really. It was a good building for its day, but it needed freshening. The media center perfectly fills that bill. It's a textbook study of how a new building can simultaneously acknowledge and uplift an old one.

A few steps from the pagodas of Chinatown, at 23rd Street and Archer Avenue, low-income housing expert Peter Landon and his colleagues at Landon



Photo by Mark Ballogg, Steinkamp/Ballogg

A new glass wall, visible at rear, has made the Archer Courts housing project in Chicago more attractive and more livable.

Bone Baker Architects have worked a similarly deft transformation at the Archer Courts public housing project, which was built in 1951 to house Chicagoans displaced by highway construction.

Archer Courts never sank to the depths of Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes. Its relatively stable condition was surely due to its relatively modest size — just two-seven story buildings, with a total of 147 units, as opposed to the massive concentration of poverty that burdened the vast projects. Nevertheless, Archer Courts had deteriorated enough by 1999, Landon says, that some Chinatown community leaders wanted to raze the buildings.

The architect argued otherwise, noting the still-solid construction of exposed concrete frames and Chicago common brick infill. He won his case and devised a \$6.5 million renovation plan that has altered both the image of Archer Courts and the living conditions of its mostly Chinese occupants.

A wall of glass

The key step was to place a curtainlike wall of glass across the fronts of the buildings where, before, in the manner of most public housing high-rises in Chicago, there was only a

chain-link fence lining outdoor corridors. Idealistic modern architects called these corridors "streets in the sky." But all too often, they became filthy, crime-ridden and brutally cold in winter.

Installed after the Chicago Community Development Corporation, a private affordable housing developer, purchased Archer Courts from the CHA, the year-old glass wall not only frees the corridors from searing summer heat and winter chill, but also gives the once-drab buildings a new look, a transparent layer that showcases the bright colors of residents' doors and, at night, endows the once-dark buildings with a subtle glow. To ensure that the glass wall didn't look like a commercial office building, all rigid and orderly, Landon arranged opaque window panels like confetti, giving the new façade a pleasing irregularity.

Add other positive features, from outdoor pavilions that subtly evoke traditional Chinese architecture to a slope-roofed medical center that also houses an attractive community room, and you have a model for recycling old public housing. It's another instance of how projects of a modest scope can make a major impact on the cityscape.