SCHOOL REUSE

Reactivating vacant schools in Philadelphia and beyond

A Grid report commissioned by the

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AIA Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Center for Architecture are proud to support the Community Design Collaborative and their volunteers. Their Design Grant program demonstrates the power design has to solve problems, create innovation, and improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods and city.

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When budget cuts and population shifts forced the School District of Philadelphia to close down 30 schools in 2013 and 2014, it was a citywide crisis.

For the people who lost a school, feelings run deep. For countless children, it was the place where the world opened up as they learned to read, explored what laid beyond the bounds of their block or felt the joy of making a friend for life. Parents did not lose an auditorium or gym, but the feeling of watching a child sing their first solo or make the winning shot at the buzzer.

In documentary photos of the last days of these schools, you can see and feel the emotion of the children, teachers, parents, administrators, security guards and others as they say goodbye; you can feel the loss in the empty hallways. Feelings of pride and possibility were replaced by sadness and anxiety.

Would this community anchor become an unsafe eyesore?

Andy Rachlin of the Reinvestment Fund, a national leader in financing community revitalization, explains what school closings meant for the City.

“Our communities are literally tight-knit,” he says. “When you have this big empty building in a rowhouse community or a community with twins that are all packed together, it’s a very visible presence in the neighborhood that is stacked with the potential for blight and vacancy. It’s a real risk to the community … even graver, of course, is the psychological impact of having [closed] schools, which are, in ways real and emotional, centers of community. To remove the identity of the neighborhood school, I think, was something that people were very concerned about.”

For some of these properties, developers saw immediate potential and began making plans, taking into consideration community input about what might work for them financially and also serve the neighborhood. This first scenario is an ideal situation where both developers and neighbors win.

But at one site in West Philadelphia, the speed of sale and development moved at a pace that left some community members feeling left behind.

Due to market or property conditions, other former schools were sure to languish, vacant, for an indefinite period of time.

Looking at this sensitive and complicated problem, the experienced advocates at the Community Design Collaborative resolved to give communities a voice in what came next for these closed schools and their neighbors, and to give people a tool that can change the world: thoughtful design.
“Our communities are tight-knit. When you have this big empty building in a rowhouse community or a community with twins that are all packed together, it’s a very visible presence in the neighborhood that is stacked with potential for blight and vacancy. It’s a real risk to the community.”

- Andy Rachlin
  Managing Director, Lending Investments
  the Reinvestment Fund

The Community Design Collaborative provides pro bono design services to nonprofit organizations in greater Philadelphia, and raises awareness about the importance of design in community revitalization. Since 1991, volunteer design professionals have invested 100,000 hours of their time and expertise in over 600 projects.

33% of Philadelphians are now living within a half-mile of a closed school

7 Number of schools for which the Collaborative coordinated pro bono design services

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The Facts

257 Number of active schools in Philadelphia in 2011

30 public schools were closed in Philadelphia between 2012 and 2014, due to financial distress and shifts in population and enrollment patterns.

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DATA: PEW CHARITABLE TRUST & UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
The future of the neighborhood, but where are the neighbors?

In the West Philadelphia enclaves of Mantua and Powelton Village, neighbors were worried.

The former sites of Drew Elementary School and University City High School, connected to another parcel of land, had been sold. Plans were already underway for development. It was a crucial 14-acre site, a super-parcel of land that could make or break the connectivity and livability of the neighborhood for generations. As Mike Jones of the Powelton Village Civic Association identified, "Such development can help to stitch back the fabric of this section of West Philadelphia torn apart by Urban Renewal in the 1950s or, alternatively, further isolate the communities along the Lower Lancaster Avenue Business Corridor."

After the trauma of losing two schools, the neighborhood was keen to increase the level of communication about plans for the site. Frustrated by their lack of involvement, several groups organized together. The Mantua Civic Association, Mantua Community Improvement Committee, Powelton Village Civic Association, Saunders Park Neighbors, West Powelton Concerned Community Council and the People's Emergency Center organized a community meeting attended by over 100 neighbors who voiced concerns and offered solutions.

Kira Strong, Vice President of Community and Economic Development at the People’s Emergency Center (PEC), says the group came to together to explore “what kind of redevelopment could happen on the site, within the realm of reason, recognizing that it would be dense, that it would be mixed-use and that there would be some economic drivers in terms of the site acquisition.” They knew that Wexford Science and Technology would be the main owner, and that Drexel University would be another partial owner; the neighborhood was wary of more student housing, as well as how high buildings would be built, but excited about the opportunity.

With ideas in hand, leaders reached out to the Collaborative to partner on generating designs. A week after the initial meeting, the Collaborative formed a rapid response team. In collaboration with the PEC and Interface Studio, a local planning firm that was already working with the neighborhood, the Collaborative facilitated a half-day “Design Workshop.” They worked to bring together the right mix of volunteer design professionals and representatives from the community groups.

“It’s a work in progress. But the community members have a seat at the table, and that’s an important thing.”

- Kira Strong
People’s Emergency Center / Collaborative board member
COMMUNITY DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

Visit the Sites, and Talk to the Community

The Collaborative recruited a team of volunteer design professionals who visited four school sites to examine the condition of the schools. The sites were narrowed down to two, which were then the focus of a charrette, or design day, as a way to start the conversation about how to reuse the more challenging school sites. A second volunteer team then spoke with residents and stakeholders from the surrounding communities and documented their findings to include in the discussion at the charrette.

Collaborate and Innovate on New Plans for the Sites

At the charrette, participants were presented with all the information the volunteer teams had found out about the schools and neighborhoods, and were provided with virtual tours of the sites. Charrette teams were made up of designers, neighborhood partners (nonprofit developers within the communities) and community members. They generated design proposals for both temporary and permanent reuse of the two sites.

Present the Plans to the City, Community and Developers

The information from the workshop and the designs that were generated helped prepare the community to testify at a School Reform Commission meeting and to work with Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell, who represents the area, to create a “Community Benefits Agreement.” Among other components, the agreement limited how high buildings could be built and how parking would be treated, and ensured a community review component to the design process. Development has begun, and neighborhood representatives have been meeting regularly for the past year with the developers. “They’ve been keeping community members apprised of their progress,” says Strong, “and have also been publicizing opportunities for local and minority job opportunities for construction, demolition and design.”
What happens at a charrette?

A design charrette gathers representatives from people who may be affected by a design project, design professionals and other stakeholders for an intense period of time in order to innovate, compromise and prioritize outcomes. The Community Design Collaborative uses the charrette process in some of its work as a way to mobilize citizen participation and ensure that community needs are met. Convening the right mix of people in the room and making sure the community is at the table is a core function of the Collaborative’s work.

Every site has its own realities, and the Collaborative aims to create cost-effective designs that are also innovative and sustainable. For the school reuse initiative, that meant assessing the conditions of the sites and then exploring the possibilities and realities of reusing these public school buildings that had been anchors in the community. This particular initiative focused on stabilizing the sites with a temporary use plan that would lead into a permanent plan, and trying to find solutions that could serve as models for other school sites in Philadelphia—or even in other cities affected by school closures.

**Charrette Goals**

1. Highlight the potential for redevelopment of those sites that had not yet received interest from developers.
2. Engage the experience and expertise of design professionals, private and nonprofit developers, city agencies and community members to explore redevelopment strategies for vacant schools.
3. Emphasize the importance of including the community in planning for redevelopment to ensure that community needs are met.
4. Create innovative design solutions which would activate vacant sites in the short term and accelerate the process in the long term development.
5. Create designs that can act as prototypes for other vacant school sites throughout Philadelphia and other cities.
6. Assist in the effort to return these long-standing neighborhood icons to their original roles as anchors within the community.

**Reactivating vacant schools**

While some buildings sold quickly, in other neighborhoods a handful of former school properties were languishing. The Collaborative stepped in to bring its resources to bear in ways that would assist the School District marketing overlooked sites to developers.

Its multidisciplinary teams of design professional volunteers toured four properties, assessed their conditions, and identified opportunities and limitations. In addition to the assessments, they also determined which would be the best candidates to address through an intense design day, called a charrette. The ideal sites were those that could serve as prototypes for other buildings, and where a potential community development partner—already embedded in the neighborhood and well-versed in its needs—could continue to offer support.

Two schools emerged: Old Frances Willard, in the Kensington neighborhood, and M. Hall Stanton, near Temple University. In November of 2014, the Collaborative brought together a mix of community members, design professionals, and public and private partners to re-envision temporary ways to activate the sites that would lead into more permanent uses, keeping in mind that innovative plans should also be realistic, cost-effective and sustainable. Neighborhood partner David La Fontaine of Community Ventures, a nonprofit developer, cites the Collaborative’s realism during the school reuse project as a critical component to how useful its work is to developers. “They are a really key part of the community development infrastructure in the City,” he says.

The two former schools represented different eras in school construction and had different neighborhood characteristics. Despite their differences, collective themes and needs emerged as the day went on: taking down physical barriers, creating chances for connection, building intergenerational affordable housing, accessing green space and replacing the educational programming that was lost. Public art would also help to liven up the spaces.

Lea Oxenhandler, of design firm KieranTimberlake, was one of the volunteers from her company, which led the design work for the charrette. She had also examined the issue of the school closings as a graduate architecture student at the University of Pennsylvania. “The continuity of this through the Community Design Collaborative was really exciting for me to be able to participate in,” says Oxenhandler. “[The Collaborative] has
Where are the schools?

M. Hall Stanton and Frances Willard are located in different neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Prior to the charrette, both schools were still vacant, and no interest had been expressed from developers who might buy and renovate the buildings into new uses. During the charrette, design teams created temporary uses and permanent uses for the sites in order to attract attention from developers and suggest realistic and financially viable uses that the community felt fit their goals. On the following pages, you can see how the community has re-envisioned these shuttered schools.

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Who Participated?

“By the time the day is over, there is just this absolutely massive amount of ideas and drawings and thinking about the projects. It’s really just spectacular.”

- Paul Vernon
KSK Architects Planners Historians, Inc. / Collaborative board member

been crucial in allowing a firm like mine to get involved in addressing the issue of vacant schools in our city. We were able to get about 25 volunteers together to work on the project ... it would have been impossible without [the Collaborative] as an intermediary.” Ox-enhandler also loved hearing directly from the community. “It was fascinating to see the level of interest and excitement about what these buildings could become ... it speaks to the necessity and value of community involvement in this kind of issue.”

New partnerships, and good will, are some of the other outcomes of the process that helped Philadelphians affected by school closings take ownership over their neighborhoods and use design as a tool for transformation and revitalization. Philadelphia Deputy Mayor Alan Greenberger supported and underwrote the Collaborative’s charrette, and he distilled the collective experience this way as he addressed the group: “School closures were painful for the [School District of Philadelphia]. But they were also painful for neighborhoods. Schools are part of the roots for many residents who went to these schools and saw their families go there, too. We accomplished three things today: a chance to accept, heal, get on and move past... a chance to network with others with a stake in school reuse... and a chance to create and see ideas and develop aspiration. Every one of us heard something today that was a good idea.”

Collaborative Executive Director Beth Miller was equally pleased. “The charrette brought communities and nonprofit developers together for the first time,” she says. “They came up with great ideas that respond to community needs, like intergenerational housing. And our designers were on hand to immediately sketch and test them out.”

While the day represented the end of an already intense process, the work wasn’t over: the Collaborative’s volunteer team from KieranTimberlake took the ideas and documented them with more refined design schematics and added cost estimates for the projects. The City, the School District of Philadelphia and community organizations now have site assessments and reuse plans they can use to help entice developers, a goal that Miller says is in sight. “There have been further discussions about applying these reuse concepts to these schools or similar sites,” she adds. “The charrette also demonstrated the huge value of temporary uses. Temporary uses aren’t merely placeholders. They bring energy and activity to school sites and keep them central to the life of the community. They are a real first step towards a long-term reuse.”
As this is an urgent issue for communities across the city, we were thrilled that a large number of our staff chose to participate.”

- Richard Maimon

KieranTimberlake / Collaborative volunteer
“School closures were painful for the [School District of Philadelphia]. But they were also painful for neighborhoods. Schools are part of the roots for many residents who went to these schools.”

- Deputy Mayor Alan Greenberger
City of Philadelphia

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COMMUNITY GOALS

Through a community task force meeting led by the Collaborative volunteer design team prior to the charrette, the community expressed the following goals for the site:

1. **Urban Agriculture**
   Opportunity to engage community, teach skills and generate revenue

2. **Porch**
   Open space to welcome community into the site, for meeting neighbors, and to connect the neighborhood through the site

3. **Recreation**
   Spaces for both passive and active recreation

4. **Intergenerational Housing**
   For grandparents raising grandchildren with spaces for supportive programming and services

5. **Community Programs**
   Dedicated space for existing programs, including youth and cultural programming, health clinics and daycare

6. **Neighborhood Hub**
   To replicate the school’s role as community gathering space for events, movies, performances, festivals and markets

“It was extremely rewarding to be able to collaborate so closely with neighborhood stakeholders … the feedback they provided was invaluable.”

- Fátima Olivieri
  KieranTimberlake / Collaborative volunteer
“[The school reuse project] made it more likely that the school will be reused. Just to have the work done, the design options explored, and the [estimated] costs are really, really useful.”

- David La Fontaine
Impact Services Corporation
Reclaiming Kensington’s Industrial Buildings Since 1979

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26 Units Slated to Open December 2015
www.impactservices.org
School Reuse Initiative
The Collaborative thanks the firms, individuals, organizations, and agencies who shared their ideas and expertise

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