

READING ROOM

THE ROBIN HOOD FOUNDATION AND ITS BAND OF MERRY ARCHITECTS ARE BUILDING LIBRARIES FOR NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS.
BY ERIC FREDERICKSEN

The day starts in Harlem, where a few of New York's best architects are gathered in the school library at P.S. 101. Tod Williams and Billie Tsien are presenting their first completed design since the rapturously received American Folk Art Museum, some 60 blocks to the south. This project, a 2,200-square-foot library within the old school building, will not appear in as many magazines, and will be seen by fewer people in a year than visit the museum in a weekend—just 800 elementary school students. But it's part of a much more ambitious undertaking, endearingly and immodestly cited by its commissioners, the Robin Hood Foundation: ending poverty in New York City.

Robin Hood, a foundation started by three Wall Street types in 1988, is known for both its ambition and its pragmatism. In this case, the problem is New York's schools, where annual tests of fourth graders show 60 percent reading below grade level. The foundation (led on this project by an energetic director named Lonni Tanner) came up with an apparently

simple way to address schools' problems: focus on their libraries.

The problem was glaring: Many of the schools simply didn't have one, and those that did had cramped spaces, untrained librarians, and paltry holdings (schools are allotted a mere six dollars per student per year to buy library books). Recent studies have found a strong correlation between library investment and student academic success. Robin Hood's goal is therefore to make sure that each of New York's 650-odd schools has a well-stocked, well-designed library. It's the most ambitious library-building effort since Andrew Carnegie decided to rid himself of his millions.

The library project is a private-public partnership in the best sense. Money from Credit Suisse and USA Networks, among other corporations, matches NYC Board of Education financing to fund the libraries. Children's book publishers Scholastic and HarperCollins offered a million books each. And Robin Hood's consulting architect Henry Myerberg

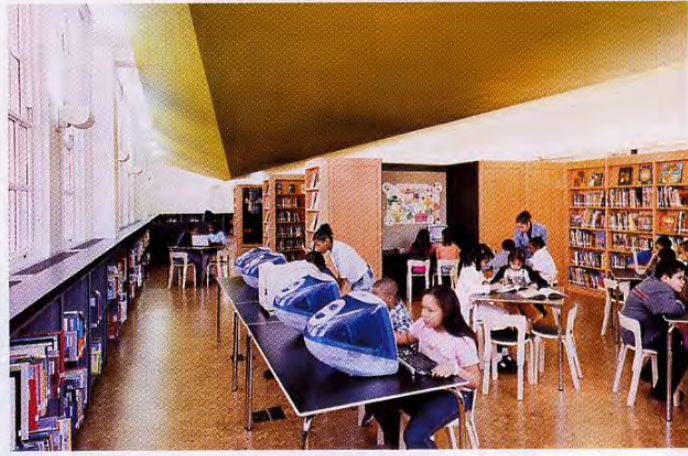
pulled together, in 10 calls, nine architects (as well as himself) to design the first 10 libraries, pro bono. Thus the high-quality architectural companions on a late-spring visit to the first six completed libraries: Andrew Bernheimer and Jared Della Valle, Marion Weiss and Michael Manfredi, Zach McKown, Richard Lewis, Paul Bennett, and Ronette Riley. Also along was industrial designer Tucker Viemeister, who served as design guru. (Alexander Gorlin and Deborah Berke participated as well.)

The schools range from '20s Collegiate Gothic (Elementary Gothic?) to '70s modern, but they have much in common: Over 75 percent of their students qualify for free lunch, and over 60 percent read below grade level. Robin Hood also looked for a strong commitment to improvement by the schools' district superintendent, principals, and staff.

While the architects were given a long set of guidelines, a budget of about \$500,000, and typically cramped spaces within which to work, their designs vary



P.S. 18 | Brighton, Staten Island | Della Valle + Bernheimer Design



P.S. 101 | East Harlem | Tod Williams Billie Tsien & Associates

as widely as the schools do. They share several elements: instruction space, built for collaborative learning; a performance area; four computer workstations; and space for 10,000 books. After these commonalities, it's a case of 10 very different flowers blooming. Richard Lewis alone turned in something consciously approaching a classic Carnegie library-style design, with stained wood shelving rising high up on all four walls. Weiss/Manfredi, who argued for and won a larger space than they'd originally been allotted, created the most overtly architectonic space, using a wormlike wall with shelving below and overlapping sheets of plywood above to separate the library from a first-floor corridor. Many of the designs used bright colors—a broad stand-in for the idea of making a space welcoming for children, though Della Valle + Bernheimer reserved their loud color (hot pink) for the floor, turning in an otherwise restrained palette of brushed steel and wood. Uncolored homosote covers the walls, so that children's

pinned-up work will provide most of the color and liveliness in the space.

They're ambitious designs as far as school libraries go, though a bit conservative given the architects' CVs. On the tour, Tod Williams said as much to Jared Della Valle: "I don't know how far we [collectively] pushed it."

"I don't know how far you could push it—it's two classrooms," answered Della Valle, "I mean, you have to have books."

That said, Williams and Tsien's design is certainly the most pushy entry, with a dropped ceiling like a massive faceted crystal, painted green to create a sort of inverted park above. Anyone who imagined themselves walking on a ceiling as a child will understand the imaginative possibilities for a creative kid.

The best designs have that link with actual childhood memories. Zach McKown of Tsao & McKown talked during the tour of happy moments spent hiding with a book in the corner of the library in Gafney, South Carolina. His firm's library, among the smallest in square footage

(and at the biggest elementary school in the city) is also among the coziest, with small round pillows on the floor and multiple crannies for the kind of student who doesn't necessarily learn best amidst the tumult of today's collaborative classroom.

Myerberg compares the results to a student studio in built form: 10 architects are given the same problem. The difference is these projects undergo a lot more scrutiny than a visiting critic typically gives in school. In the next round of 20, some of the original 20 firms will design multiple libraries, while some new "freshmen" (Myerberg's term) will bring new ideas. How will they get from 10 or 20 to 650? Myerberg compares the process to the Model T. "We'd like to come up with a vehicle that everyone can drive, and everyone can afford, but right now we're still trying to invent the car." ■

Eric Fredericksen is the managing editor of Art on Paper.

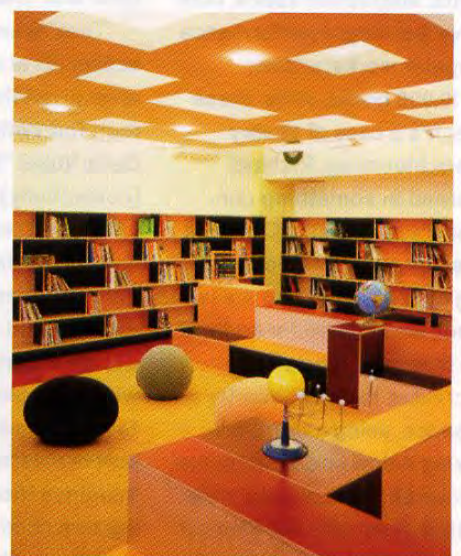
Photography by ESTO.



P.S. 42 | Far Rockaway, Queens | Weiss/Manfredi Architects



P.S. 184 | Brownsville, Brooklyn | Richard Lewis, Architect



P.S. 149/207 | Harlem | Ronette Riley Architect



P.S. 19 | Queens | Tsao & McKown Architects

Ag
Vinc
Buch
in a
boat
Prot