EXTREME MAKEOVER

Sixty-one Beantown school playgrounds get new lives.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY HOWARD

> Schoolyard: "The natural and manmade environments that are part of our children's learning and play experiences; the space that connects a school to its community."
>
> —*The Elements of Schoolyard Design,* BOSTON SCHOOLYARD FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE

THE NATHAN HALE SCHOOL was built in 1907 atop a puddingstone knoll in the fashionable Fort Hill district of Roxbury, Massachusetts, between a handsome Victorian mansion and a grassy schoolyard. Nine decades later, the mansion had become a haunt for vagrants and the grass a barren expanse of crumbling asphalt furnished with a solitary basketball hoop. "The Hale" was now an outdated, undersized elementary school with 187 pupils on an abject half-acre that doubled as playground and staff parking lot, where children played kickball while dodging between cars. The barren lot also served as auditorium, theater, and gymnasium when the situation required.

2003 ASLA AWARD WINNER

On a recent Monday, the Hale's grounds are clean, and the city's only schoolyard arboretum of 13 trees is leafing vigorously into its fourth spring. Each class has adopted a tree, and the trees form a border around a new outdoor classroom, a stage, and play areas. Each tree's distinctive leaf shape appears as a metal cutout in an ornamental fence that also functions as a learning tool and a colorful entryway. Recently honored as one of Boston's most improved schools, the Hale has become an integral part of the booming Fort Hill neighborhood.

When the Hale's new sylvan courtyard was dedicated in November 2000, it became the 26th public school since 1995 to revitalize its outdoor space under the Boston Schoolyard Initiative. On its 10th anniversary next year, at a cost of $25 million, the initiative will have transformed 61 of the city's 130 schoolyards. Often cited as the flagship of a burgeoning outdoor-education movement in American cities, the initiative heralds an emerging field for landscape architects.

THE SORRY STATE of Boston's school grounds came to official consciousness in 1994, after a privately funded task force cited the land around public schools as a prime target for reclamation and renewal. While the city's renowned green spaces had sustained a robust revival after the first Earth Day in 1970, most of its schoolyards had fallen into disrepair. Many had become venues for gangs and drug dealers—and rats.

A cadre of advocates and funders approached the mayor, Tom Menino—a champion of Boston's neighborhoods—with a proposal in the fall of 1994. All told, they informed him, the schoolyards were underused assets—250 acres of prime real estate uniquely situated in the hearts of urban neighborhoods. Suppose they were transformed into appealing spaces to be shared by school and community for teaching, learning, recreation, and celebration? Places where families feel comfortable bringing children,

Landscape architects Tamar Zimmerman and Deneen Crosby, ASLA, of CSS Boston transformed the dreary slope behind the Mary Hale School in Brighton, *above,* into a multilevel space, *below,* that includes a circular outdoor classroom (foreground), shrub borders, hard courts, and (not visible) behind the play structures, a neighborhood sitting area with checker tables and student garden plots.

The Nathan Hale School's once-naked expanse of asphalt, *above,* now harbors outdoor stage and study areas, a play structure, *below,* and a border of shrubs and trees that make up the school's unique arboretum.

meeting neighbors, and socializing; where kids can safely play, explore, and discover; where teachers can expand their classrooms into the outdoors and give students a direct experience of the natural world; where children can learn the basic civic lesson of respecting and caring for a place and the living things in it; where school and community alike can come together for seasonal festivals, block parties, spring cleanups, and graduations?

Ad hoc school and community groups, the advocates noted, were already exploring this potential in a number of city schoolyards but were strapped by lack of capital and support. Suppose the city joined the private sector to fund a sustained effort to transform these islands of neglect into community assets?

Menino loved it. He promptly appointed a cabinet-level task force to create a public–private partnership to design, build, and maintain revitalized schoolyards. Members of the task force—bureaucrats, managers, and financiers as well as activists, educators, artists, and naturalists—brought diverse practical experience and expertise, recalls Kirk Meyer, who was one of the coordinators of the task force. The group's report to the mayor became the blueprint for the initiative, which melded two separate national trends: schools as round-the-clock community centers and school grounds as outdoor classrooms.

The task force outlined four components: a partnership approach, in which each schoolyard develops from a shared vision of school and community; an outdoor education model that aims to include neighborhood youth and residents as well as students; a shared maintenance strategy between community partners and the city, with the initiative training city custodians; and a shared public–private funding model that encourages participation and accountability by all participants.

Staffed by various Boston departments and a group of philanthropies organized as the Boston Schoolyard Funders' Collaborative, the fledgling initiative set out to transform Boston's schoolyards

While a Nathan Hale third-grade science class studies the oxydendrum (sourwood) tree it has adopted in the school's arboretum, a physical education class proceeds in the background.

into "dynamic centers of community life" and to create a model for schoolyard development that could be replicated across the country. Schoolyard construction and design would be managed by the city, supported by the collaborative, driven by schoolyard groups, and guided by landscape architects from a wish list through construction.

How these new public spaces would be designed and sustained was as important as their potential uses, observes Meyer, who is now executive director of the funders' collaborative. "We knew that if the initiative imposed a top-down, one-size-fits-all model, it wouldn't work," he says. "We'd all seen lovely places trashed because people had no sense of ownership, and we'd seen projects succeed when the {community} had a real investment in the place, especially if they'd helped create it."

For three decades, however, Boston's school choice program had bused many students to different neighborhoods to ensure that educational quality didn't fracture along racial lines. One consequence was that the traditionally close ties between school and surrounding neighborhood no longer existed in many areas, so groups that shared the same school didn't regard themselves as members of the same community. Because teachers, neighbors, merchants, and children would each bring different and sometimes conflicting agendas, the initiative sought to develop a process to resolve differences by focusing on shared interests.

As the task force refined its modus operandi, a project that would become a prototype for many schoolyards to follow was already under way in a densely settled immigrant neighborhood in East Boston. The makeover of the O'Donnell Elementary School began after teacher Mary Ellen Welch halted city workers about to cut down two basketball posts. An infuriated abutter had summoned them, hoping to put an end to the chronic ruckus older teenagers made outside his window. "The incessant pounding, drinking, drug dealing, and fighting finally got to him. He saw basketball as the cause of it all," recalls Welch. "The site reeked of urine and was so strewn with garbage and shattered bottles that students were constantly cutting themselves." And since this was the only open space for many blocks, the elderly used the yard as a shortcut to market, and mothers brought kids there to play.

As it happened, Welch was also president of Neighborhood of Affordable Housing (NOAH), one of several dynamic advocacy groups spawned after Logan Airport seized and destroyed Frederick Law Olmsted's Wood Island Park in East Boston in the late 1960s. Welch's group spearheaded the rejuvenation effort, which was keenly supported by neighbors, city officials, and police. NOAH hired landscape architects John Copley, ASLA, and Lynn Wolff, ASLA, (now Copley Wolff Design Group) to orchestrate the design. "This group already had a strong vision of the schoolyard as the heart of the community when we came aboard," recalls Copley.

He and Wolff held numerous workshops and field trips for students, teachers, parents, and neighbors to help them refine their ideas, envisage elements, and set priorities. "Meetings were spirited," he says. "Neighbors wanted more grass because it's quieter. Kids want more hard play surface. They were at each others' throats over basketball," says Copley, who viewed this passion as an asset. In the end, Copley and Wolff guided the factions to a compromise: a half-court with a lower basket to discourage use by older teens. "This worked because everyone got involved in the solution," Copley says.

For the rest of the schoolyard design, Copley and Wolff presented schematics with alternative layouts, from which they developed a master plan. The school cobbled together $100,000

A row of red and white crabapples, *above,* separates the outdoor learning and play areas at the Condon School from the athletic field, shared with the surrounding South Boston neighborhood. *Below,* Condon students frolic in their new play space.

for the first phase: transforming the front entry from a naked concrete slope into a brick-terraced teaching garden. With students' help, the designers selected almost 200 shrubs, perennials, and ornamental trees for their fragrance, texture, color, fruit, and seasonal blooms. Given the Massachusetts Horticultural Society's first School Garden Award in a century, the school's teaching garden now resembles a mature private garden in Boston's elegant Beacon Hill neighborhood. "In a neighborhood with no front yards, it functions like a magnet," says Welch.

Welch's second graders breed worms for the community vegetable plots in the back schoolyard, an area also designed by Copley and Wolff and built during the project's $250,000 second phase two years later. Copley and Wolff turned the sea of asphalt behind the school into a vibrant space with bright play structures, bold surface graphics, community garden plots, and a curvilinear seat wall bordered by a raised lawn and trees. Local artists worked with children to create elements connecting them to their natural and cultural histories. For example, a steel fence and a gate embellished with drawings of fierce marine creatures remind students that the ocean once covered the land their schoolyard occupies today. Small boulders marking the distance to immigrants' homes of origin—Sao Paulo, Lagos, Hong Kong—surround a circular world map etched in granite and shaded by crabapple trees, which are pruned high to prevent vandalism.

The first of eight schoolyards Copley and Wolff designed, this was the most memorable for both landscape architects, who saved the student drawings and writings from this experience. "Helping them build this was sheer joy," says Wolff.

Lessons learned at the O'Donnell Elementary School informed the subsequent design processes at other schoolyards, which have included 15 landscape architecture teams over nine years. The city official charged with overseeing design and construction, Janet Fishstein, explains that she looks for landscape architects "with similar experience in public projects, who have the technical ability with skills in design and community process," especially for teams that are "Boston-based, minorities, or women."

Fishstein says the initiative has begun an average of eight projects a year and usually has four qualified firms in a given year. Each school group gets to interview and choose from two that Fishstein feels are the best matches. "We tell them, 'Both are qualified; see who you connect with,' " she says.

Before bringing the landscape architecture team aboard, each school must demonstrate its commitment and viability by winning a competitive planning grant to support its fledgling group during a year-long predesign program. A part-time community organizer helps the team define its mission, form a leadership structure, and hone negotiating skills. "Some [school] principals have no sense of the complexity of this project and want to assign it to a teacher," says Meyer. "We encourage groups to hire professional organizers from

Colorful details like those pictured *above* give the yards the specific excitement that appeals to children. *Below,* kindergarten children graduate at the Warren Prescott School in Charlestown, the first Boston schoolyard to be completed (in 1997).

the local community development corporations," he says, adding that the organizers provide technical skills and long-term continuity.

The Hale developed partnership relationships with local health and senior centers, a community college, a convent, a merchants' group, a hospital, a supermarket, and City Year, a community-service program. "We sent our students door-to-door," says organizer Cherrita Hansel, a Hale teacher and neighbor who wrote five successful grants for the project. "People don't say no to children who ask for their school. The kids were crucial," she says.

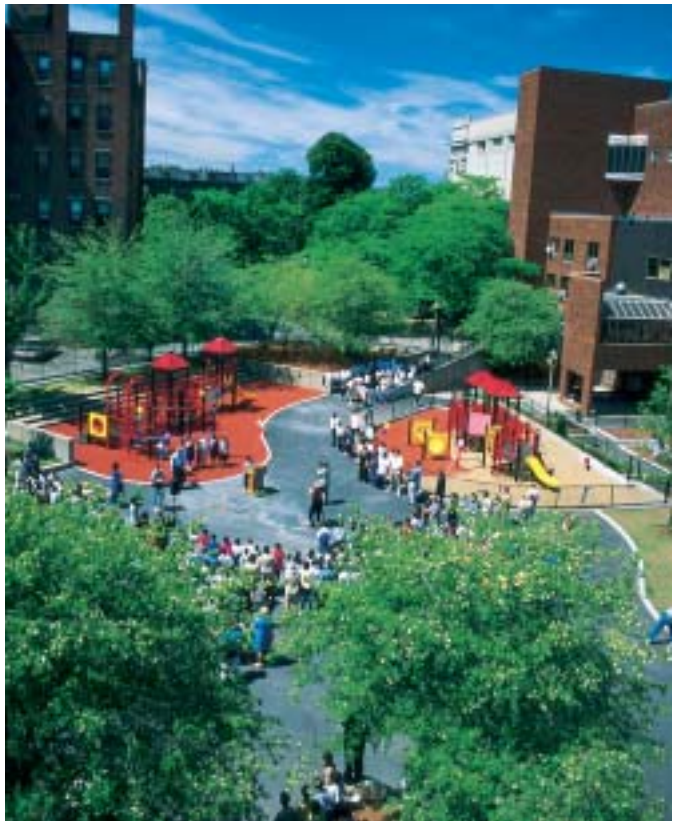
Most significant for the Hale, the education staff of Harvard University's neighboring Arnold Arboretum proposed to help create the city's first schoolyard arboretum. The staff led teachers and students through a yearlong training while the landscape architects, Wallace Floyd Design Group, completed the overall design. Kids then got to vote for their favorite trees—one for each of 13 classrooms—selected for their scientific and visual interest and including both exotics and native species.

During this predesign phase, Julie Stone, the funders' collaborative program director, leads schoolyard groups through a series of activities to build group identity and ownership and to raise awareness of design issues—site inventory, visioning, mapping, neighborhood analysis. The initiative's education specialist, Kristen Metz, leads a parallel process focused on outdoor curriculum, environmental stewardship, and art.

Outdoor education is a crucial component, says Stone, because it offers an informal alternative to textbook learning that appeals to students with different learning styles and needs, especially children who aren't native English speakers. "When kids get comfortable outdoors, they literally get grounded," says Stone. "If you *find* a bug under a rock instead of being told it lives there, it's exciting. You ask questions—What does it eat? How does it sleep?"

The ideas that come out of this phase are presented to the landscape architecture team, which spends the next year helping the group refine its vision, winnow its choices, and translate its needs into a viable design that can be built on a shoestring budget of $200,000—less than the cost of paving some high-end suburban driveways, Meyer observes (some budgets have gone as high as $350,000 with additional fund-raising and grants). The landscape architects must produce drawings, plant lists, detailed construction documents, and maintenance plans that are legible to contractor and layperson alike. The team also oversees construction during a tight, two-month summer schedule.

Deneen Crosby, ASLA, and Tamar Zimmerman are part of a pioneering landscape architecture team that has designed 14 schoolyards for the initiative—the most by any one firm to date. (Formerly with Wallace Floyd Design Group, they are currently with the firm of Crosby Schlessinger Smallridge in Boston.) Zimmerman, the project manager, says that because schoolyard design is so intimately linked with the school's mission, it



presents landscape architects with more complex challenges than parks and playgrounds. "The space is used differently when the same children are out there every day," she explains. "You need to understand exactly how kids use space and how they learn. They need open space to run and love graphic lines, steps, and curved walls. They learn by seeing small pieces that encourage curiosity and questions, so it's important to include lots of details so they don't get bored."

Crosby Schlessinger Smallridge's process begins with a site visit to decide what can be saved and what must be solved, followed by a meeting with the school group. "The gym teacher wants fitness gear, geography wants a compass rose, reading wants an isolated classroom, science wants a weather station," says Zimmerman. Neighbors ask about noise, security, traffic, dogs, and buses, and whether they'll have access to the yard. "We get their sense of the problems and opportunities—what's a must and what's negotiable," adds Crosby.

Parking is often a hot topic. Teachers depend on having parking and fight to save it, often vociferously, and abutters commonly use schoolyards for parking. But the city is adamant about ensuring that the initiative's goals take priority; where possible, final plans include a modest concession to parking.

The landscape architecture team's next step is to develop schematic drawings showing various combinations and options, and return to discuss the pros and cons. What happens if the amphitheater goes in the sunny corner? If a playground is next to the building, it's noisy; close to the street, it's dangerous.

Finally, the landscape architects present developed designs showing where elements go, and how functions can be combined or overlapped—basketball and gathering space, for example. What about circulation patterns? Is there something that makes the school or area special? Is there a cultural theme they want to work into the design? Ultimately, the budget sorts out what should be built now and what must be left open for future additions.

Sometimes serendipity prevails. The Hale's base budget, for instance, did not cover a crucial safety barrier between schoolyard and driveway, but the timely award of two separate grants for public art and signature elements funded the ornamental fence, which also functions as learning tool and colorful entryway.

More often, extras get postponed. The city's original capital funding of $200,000–$250,000 per school, supplemented with private funds for public art, outdoor classrooms, and signature elements, was later reduced to $150,000–$200,000 per school, increasing pressure on school groups to raise more private money.

The smaller budgets have made things more demanding for all involved. Sonja Johansson, ASLA, of the Johansson Design Collaborative, faced a massive site problem—and a classic catch-22—at the Everett School in Dorchester. The site had a hillside with trees, a rare city asset, wrapping around the side and back of the school, but the sloped grass play areas had eroded to rubble, and rains left the paved play court clogged with debris and standing water. "The city told us, 'You can't deal with the drainage because there will be no money left for the kids.' And the school said, 'We can't function unless the drainage issue is solved,'" Johansson recalls.

This conundrum forced a year's delay in the project, as the school began a heroic fund-raising effort. In the end, Johansson, who has specialized in playgrounds and parks for 30 years, devised an elegant solution: At the base of the

Dedication ceremonies for the Blackstone Schoolyard, *left,* included the release of butterflies into the vegetable garden, *below.*

hill, a dry streambed of cobbles and river stones diverts water from sewers into dry wells that recharge directly into the ground. The upper grass play surfaces were leveled and supported by a curvilinear retaining wall lined with garden borders. Upper and lower yards are connected by a ramp that meanders along the wall, allowing full access to planted areas, a play structure, and a shaded circle of rocks for classes.

A large paved compass rose at the center of an outdoor amphitheater, *above,* serves as a sundial for a fifth-grade class at the Mendell School in Roxbury. *Below,* celebrated Boston street artist Sidewalk Sam (in wheelchair) worked with children to create designs in clay tile for a large checkerboard at the Mary Lyon School's outdoor classroom.

IN SUPPORT of the 2003 BSLA award Johansson received, Principal Kathleen Flannery wrote: "Overworked and underpaid…in the face of an obstructive bureaucracy, [Johansson] solved our erosion problem, synthesized [our] visions and half-formed ideas into a coherent and inspired design, and created a finished product that surpassed all our dreams."

To prevail, Johansson had to put up with the law of inverse proportion: As the declining capital budget reduces the design fee, the challenges and the time needed to solve them increase.

Others have been less willing. "We stopped doing schoolyards because we had so little time for the community participation piece we loved, and there was less need for it because there was less to spend," says Copley. "It became more of 'How big a tot lot and where do you want it?' The city was driving [the project] to the point where the school wasn't the client any more."

Meyer accedes the point but stresses that the city's job is to get projects done on time and on budget, despite the community process. Says Crosby, "The city has to push hard to keep things on schedule. They've been demanding clients, and they have really appreciated our attention and efforts. Fee-wise, it's a real struggle, but it's worthwhile work and affordable if you have other jobs to support it."

For her part, Fishstein says she has become a big believer in community participation. "We're really proud of the numbers [61 schools since 1995], which speak to how the process does work without getting bogged down," she says. "We've had some real knock-down-drag-outs, but we've never had an impasse. People compromise

Students tend raised garden beds, *left,* and enjoy a story, *bottom,* in a shady grove on a knoll in the Blackstone Schoolyard. Once exclusively used for bus drop-off and pickup, the narrow schoolyard behind the Sumner School in Roslindale, *opposite top,* now accommodates an all-school outdoor celebration. A dragon detail captures children's imaginations, *opposite bottom.*

because they're all invested. The proof is that each yard has the mark of its own group. They do not all look alike."

A resident with children in the Boston schools, Fishstein often takes her kids to "test out" schoolyards on weekends and is rewarded to find the city's investments so crowded and popular. She gives landscape architects high marks for helping to make the process work so well.

Zimmerman has found designing schoolyards especially satisfying because they work so intimately with the people who use them. She says, "It's immediately gratifying to see kids using what we've designed, but I worry about maintenance—whether there will be resources and community follow-through."

Maintenance and educational programming, core tenets of the initiative's original design, continue to challenge all concerned. Both are key barometers of the success of the overall mission. Others include uniting schools and neighborhoods in an ongoing relationship; participation and investment by civic organizations, community groups, institutions, and businesses; and community empowerment to tackle other issues after the "victory" of developing a schoolyard.

"Measured against what the schoolyards were," Meyer says, "they're all better. What we might want them to be is something we continue to work on." After the yard is finally built, he says, "we tell the school groups that their real work is just beginning. They haven't achieved their goals unless they can use, share, and care for the space for its intended purpose."

A more specific indicator of success, says Meyer, "is parents choosing to send their child to a school, in part, because of the schoolyard environment, which is something we've heard from principals."

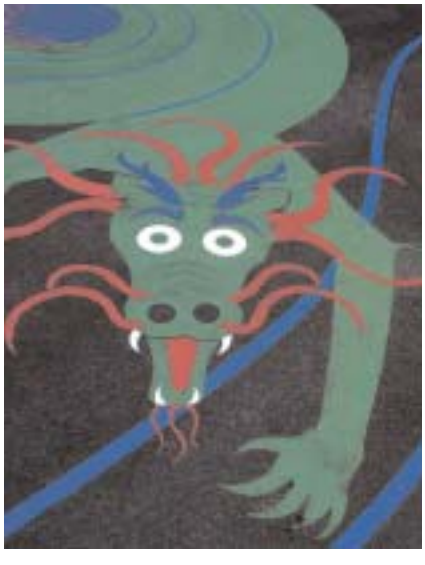
The Hale's principal, Sandy Mitchell-Woods, affirms that the schoolyard's effect on the community has been profound. As the schoolyard was under construction, the area grew more gentrified, ushering in ethnic diversity. "Whites, Hispanics, and Asians are moving in, and these families are giving us a good, hard look," Mitchell-Woods says. "Everyone comments on our courtyard. We have local angels who clean it and keep watch at night, including the police."

OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, Boston Schoolyard Initiative's projects have attracted interest from cities around the country and the world, and the initiative has offered guidance through conversations and written materials.

Originally a five-year program, the initiative has been extended by popular demand, says Meyer. "I think we've met or exceeded our initial expectations. On the other hand, we'd like to offer the opportunity to every Boston public school," he says.

Next winter, the original task force will reconvene to evaluate the initiative's first 10 years. "Who knows whether we'll decide to forge ahead," says Meyer, "or wrap it up and tie a bow on it?"

Fishstein thinks the projects will continue despite persistent budget issues. "This initiative has had huge support from the mayor. The capital budget has been the tightest ever, and we still built schoolyards. The upcoming evaluation is very important. After 10 years, with 61 schoolyards done, the wear is beginning to show. We have to start going back and see how we keep what we have before we know where we're going. With pent-up demand on the capital budget, I'm not ready to say we'll fund another round now. I suspect the city may decide to focus its resources on maintenance." LAM



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PROJECT CREDITS Following are the landscape architects involved in the Boston Schoolyard Initiative: Andy Rojas Associates, Boston. CBA Landscape Architects, Brookline, Massachusetts. Copley Wolff Design Group, Boston. Crosby Schlessinger Smallridge, Boston. Elena Saporta, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Francis Fox Spinks Associates, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Halvorson Company, Inc., Boston. Icon Architecture, Inc., Boston. Johansson Design Collaborative, Lincoln, Massachusetts. Paula Cortes Associates, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Planners' Collaborative, Boston. Weston & Sampson, Foxborough, Massachusetts. These landscape architects have been retained for current projects: Morice & Gary, L.A., Charlestown, Massachusetts. Vollmer Associates, LLP, Boston. William Caines/Hammer Design, Medford, Massachusetts.