



## Reusing Unusual Buildings

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For public charter schools, expanding their school facilities or constructing a new school building can be a challenging experience. More than half of all U.S. charter schools are situated in dense urban areas, where few buildable sites are available and those that are available can carry a hefty price tag.

Another viable option to consider is the revitalization and repurposing of older building stock. At first blush, planning a school in a building that was never meant for educational uses may seem counterintuitive. However, the benefits of bringing back older buildings in core urban areas can serve the community in many ways. Although their original purpose may be obsolete, their role in the urban fabric often is crucial.

In many urban neighborhoods, commercial and industrial buildings that once formed the backbone of the community have been left behind as new patterns of growth occurred. Manufacturing and warehouse buildings in particular often are not suited for new uses. In many neighborhoods, turning this building stock into school facilities, rather than building brand-new schools, is a practical solution that provides a variety of benefits.

Although the floor plate organization of commercial, manufacturing, industrial and warehouse buildings may be unusual, their large column-free spans actually can serve the highly personalized and community-based approach that many charter schools espouse. Additionally, these buildings can reinforce the school's role as an integral and strategic member of the community, save the school money on building costs, and help brand the school as a unique educational environment.

Three Boston area charter schools offer a window onto how special learning environments can be created from unusual buildings.

### **Cars, Parts and the Rise of Technology**

When driving down Boston's Commonwealth Avenue, the unique facade of the Media and Technology Charter School (MATCH) stands out within the sprawling campus of Boston University. The three-story, 21,000-square-foot building features large windows that recall the building's previous life as an auto showroom and dealership.

The iconic building, originally built in 1917, was a showroom for the Lincoln Motorcar Company. As downtown dealerships disappeared, becoming victims of their suburban counterpart's success, many of the buildings in the area found new uses. The once proud dealership, however, was downgraded to a used parts store. For many years, the building was an informal landmark in the area known as the "Ellis the Rim Man" building because of the store's huge rooftop billboard.

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When MATCH first began looking for buildings, "Ellis the Rim Man" did not seem a likely candidate. The building needed extensive reinforcing to meet earthquake codes, and MATCH's desired educational program was not a perfect fit for the building. However, if the school chose to tear down the building and replace it with a new one, it would lose out on favorable tax incentives. The school opted to renovate the building and use community-based resources for portions of their educational needs. Ultimately, the cost savings inherent in this approach covered the costs of the off-site programs.

As a result, high school students are immersed in the community along Commonwealth Avenue. Because the school partnered with Boston University, MATCH students take advantage of university facilities for specific activities. In turn, Boston University students are encouraged to participate in the MATCH school's tutoring and mentoring programs. The school's decision to save money by not building a kitchen or cafeteria also sends students out into the community. Students support local business because they eat at the establishments that have flourished along Commonwealth Avenue to serve the college-aged population.

The MATCH School retains the building's original details to create a unique learning space for its students. The building's marble staircase with iron grillwork is at the heart of the school assembly area. The school also features nine general classrooms, a computer lab, a media center and small breakout spaces to accommodate the school's morning advisory sessions.

The building has the benefit of being ideally situated along both a branch of Boston's Green Line light-rail service and the a major bus route, making it easy for students to get to school and connect to the rest of the Boston community.

## **A Renaissance of the Warehouse and the Mill**

Another school that has benefited from creating its new campus from an unusual building is the Boston Renaissance Charter Public School in Hyde Park, Mass., slated to open this fall. The new school campus is an amalgamation of two distinct non-educational facilities: a warehouse and an old mill building.

The charter school project, the largest of its kind in Massachusetts, provides students with more space than the original location in downtown Boston's Theatre District. Real estate can be prohibitively expensive in the downtown area, and space for outdoor play areas is limited. By relocating the school to Hyde Park, about 5 miles southwest of its former location, the school was able to trim costs both in site acquisition and construction as compared with a new school, while maximizing play space and classroom space for its 1,200 students.

The warehouse building, which has high ceilings and wide column spacing, contains large public and assembly spaces, including a gym, a cafetorium, a library, music classrooms, and dance studios. The new addition contains an administration suite, support facilities, and some of the kindergarten classrooms. Parts of the building, such as the mill's original beams, also have been left intact as a learning tool for students to discover the original origins of the building.

Most important, the new facility offers a way to showcase and brand the school. Boston Renaissance uses the Carnegie school-within-a-school model, featuring three distinct schools within their larger facility: a kindergarten, primary and elementary schools. Each of these smaller schools is housed on a separate floor of the mill building. The front of the new school features colorful silhouettes of houses, further reinforcing the school's learning program.

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The new school location is a key component of the revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood. A mix of storage facilities, warehouses and small clusters of homes has not provided a strong economic base to attract the support services that enable the community to thrive. The daily influx of teachers and parents into the neighborhood should have a positive impact on community development, and the school provides stability as well important athletic, social and cultural activities to invigorate the community.

The proximity of the bus and the commuter rail offers students an easy link to the world outside their school.

## **Nursing New Life into the Neighborhood**

Another compelling adaptive reuse of an unusual building is the Neighborhood House Charter School (NHCS) in Dorchester, Mass. The mission of this pre-K-8 school integrates "education with social services and health care programs for the benefit of students and their families that otherwise have limited public educational opportunities." The school building was intended to serve as a community center during non-school hours. It is therefore fitting that this school, which grew out of the Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, created its campus in a former nursing home.

The new school's inner lobby offers a permanent reminder of what preceded the school and its facilities speak to the school's mission. The new facility includes spaces for the delivery of programs such as family services, a parent center, community teaching and adult education, creating a vital link to its community.

## **Is Adaptive Reuse for Every Charter School?**

Although repurposing non-academic buildings has worked well for these three schools, it is not a viable solution for every charter school. Although the cost of renovating unusual buildings to current codes and standards is usually less expensive than new construction, on occasion the costs can be equal to or even greater than new construction. A careful analysis is required to understand the comprehensive costs of adaptation before the final site is selected.

Some spaces may just not be appropriate for education. For example, double-height rooms aren't ideal for classrooms because they provide inadequate acoustics. Mechanical systems sometimes can be difficult to install when floor-to-floor height varies as it did at Boston Renaissance. In addition, some potential school buildings may lack adequate space for play areas, which are critical for schools that serve elementary-age children.

However, with the number of charter schools growing exponentially (the number of schools has more than quadrupled in the last 10 years from 1,297 schools in 1999 to more than 5,043 schools in 2009), adaptive reuse is a solution that should be explored. Unusual buildings can be a wonderful container and counterpoint to the unique educational program needs, costs, and goals of charter schools.

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