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Rosa Parks Elementary School



Location: Berkeley, California

Sponsor: Berkeley Unified School District
(Jack McLaughlin, Superintendent; Rebecca
Wheat, Rosa Parks Elementary School Principal;
Kristin Prentice, Building Committee Chair)

Design: The Ratcliff Architects (Christie Coffin,
Kava Massih, Don Kasamoto and Don Crosby)



The Rosa Parks Elementary School, opened in September, 1997, replacing a school that had been destroyed eight years earlier by the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

The school is remarkable for its design but also for the impact it has had on the community: It serves about 400 students in a diverse, mixed-income residential district along the light-industrial western edge of Berkeley, Calif., as well as providing space for a broad range of health, social and community education programs.

And it is remarkable for its long, inclusive planning process, which not only fostered the design of a complex, generous, human place, but

also helped see the project through funding cut-backs and pressures to change the design.

“For many of the families in this community who are traditionally suspicious of institutions, this site has become an extension of their daily lives. The activities that occur here are seen as helpful, not threatening,” commented Mary Friedman, Executive Director of the Berkeley Public Education Foundation.

Gathering Ideas and Resources

Before the earthquake, the school (then called the Columbus School) was the only public building in the area and the only green space and play

Rosa Parks Elementary School,
play yard and classroom clusters
Photo: Christie Johnson Coffin



Top: A small courtyard that serves a handful of classrooms and provides a connection to the neighborhood

Above: Classroom interior

Photos: Kirsten Walker

area that neighborhood residents could reach without crossing busy arterials. Its demolition created a dangerous gap in the neighborhood, and left the community without its most important institution.

The participatory process—involving not only parents, staff and children but also local police, librarians, social workers, parks staff and neighbors—began well before the school design started. After the earthquake, when Berkeley citizens initiated a bond measure to rebuild and retrofit earthquake-damaged schools, the neighborhood organized to deliver the highest “yes” vote in the city. It was also the first to organize a site committee.

The site committee then expanded the group that would have input into the school design, recruiting architects who were willing to work intensively with the community, then organizing five Saturday-morning workshops (all bilingual and all offering child care in order to encourage participation). One workshop divided participants into five groups and asked them to organize the elements of the school on the site. Among the

outcomes: each group suggested moving the school entrance, all to the same location, an idea the architects incorporated into the design.

This wide and deeply involved community network subsequently provided a foundation for raising \$1.3 million (with the help of the Berkeley Public Education Foundation) to incorporate elements such as community space, science facilities and computer resources, and to enlarge the multipurpose room for sports and other community activities.

Designing a School and Community Center

The design is civic at the entry and vernacular and houselike along two residential side streets. As the designers put it, the school is meant “to unfold to the community like a flower opening”—with different scales of space patio, courtyard, playground and park—providing different levels of privacy and openness to the city.

Classrooms are designed as houselike structures, each of which shares a patio and office-resource space with the next. The classrooms are grouped in four clusters around courtyards, which provide a child friendly scale and protected play areas for younger children, and which support the idea of “little schools” that tackle curricular initiatives.

At the main entrance, school and community offices; specialized spaces for science, music, computer and reading instruction; and the multipurpose room are clustered. The athletic field and public park are located at the corner of two important streets.

The school also includes a family resource center, a small, welcoming area of offices for family private meetings with families and an open space with a kitchen for informal gatherings.

The tall, barnlike classrooms have both north and south windows, providing ample natural lighting and ventilation; climate control systems are operated on a classroom-by-classroom basis,



which provides easier adjustment for comfort, is more reliable and is less expensive to build and operate.

Children and families can take advantage of various community services at the school, including health and counseling services, hot breakfasts and after-school activities. Parents can attend evening classes in various topics, soon to include computer skills, home repairs, early childhood education, literacy and English as a Second Language.

Community use of the facilities is increasing, as well. A multi-purpose room is used for public meetings, rehearsals of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, celebrations and performances. The design supports these activities by allowing portions of the complex to be used while others are not.

The school has been coupled with several social support systems. The Columbus Collaborative, a Head Start initiative, helps disadvantaged children. Parent Advocates, trained and paid low-income neighbors, assist families in taking advantage of available social, medical, food and educational services. The school also offers extended day care, with one-third to one-half of the student body participating.

After the earthquake, school district officials wanted to transfer the students to other facilities rather than building anew on the site. The community's determination won the school back, and its collaboration with the architects resulted in a place whose design fosters community connectedness and social goals. Now the Rosa Parks school has become one of the top choices in the district for a wide variety of families. It is helping to make learning visible in the community, and the community a viable part of the education.

—Todd W. Bressi



Jury Comments

FRANCK: This project demonstrates so clearly good participation, good design and good consequences—and the connections between all three.

HESTER: It shows an extraordinary sensitivity to the neighborhood and the residents of the surrounding community. Although a necessarily large institutional program, the school fits into the residential scale of nearby buildings.

KLEIN: I was taken with the open, inviting way the school relates to the wider context. The multipurpose room opens onto a public park at a street intersection.

FRANCK: It's a community school at several levels. Small groups of classrooms share bathrooms and courtyards, each becoming a small community in itself. The school as a whole is a rich community resource, housing an after school program, orchestra rehearsals, performances, athletic events and adult classes and meetings.

HESTER: It's clearly not a school that was plopped in the neighborhood and is locked up at night.

KLEIN: This is about place making, both in the way it was produced and in the way it is used. This project has provided real benefit to a racially and economically diverse community, yet one that is primarily composed of the disadvantaged.

FRANCK: Originally, the school district had not intended to rebuild the old school. Now children from all areas of Berkeley apply to get in.

KLEIN: It's significant that the process of planning the school came out of the empowering of the community. This was not token participation, it involved true user control. The building committee selected the architects, organized the participatory workshops and created the program for the design.

HESTER: There's proof of meaningful participation and specific examples of how citizens' ideas formed the design. We haven't seen many projects that do that.

KLEIN: And the community's sense of ownership and control of the project engendered the initiative to raise the extra \$1.2 million needed to complete the plans it had envisaged.

HESTER: There is attention to ecological and social detail throughout the plan, down to the detail of the natural ventilation and a teacher-controlled energy management system. The designers clearly used existing research in school design and supplemented it with participatory processes.

FRANCK: It's an incredibly encouraging story of how design contributes to what is possible in a facilitative way. That is, facilitating the ideas of others to emerge, translating those ideas into physical reality and facilitating the emergence of a special kind of place and the activities and relationships it can house.

Left: Community design workshop

Above: Model, Rosa Parks Elementary School

Photos: Ratcliff Architects