

A New Approach for Chicago Public Schools

by Stanley Collyer



An Elementary School Paradigm?

In an era of mergers and consolidation, the small neighborhood school would seem to be a relic from the past. But recent studies indicate that children perform better in more intimate settings. So how does one avoid the "bigness" with all its problems, an all too common characteristic of our present schools? Judging from the entries which were submitted to the "Big Shoulders, Small Schools" competition held recently in Chicago, it is all about clustering. A medium-sized elementary school organized physically into smaller entities—each almost a school within a school—can aspire to recreating a feeling of "smallness." Add to this the fact that at least 20% of the students are in some manner handicapped and a budget limit of \$200 SF (the average cost in Chicago is \$150 SF), you have all the ingredients for a formidable design challenge.

In an effort to relieve overcrowding and improve learning conditions, many school systems have recently embarked on large capital improvement programs. Whereas Chicago may have been dragging its feet on this issue, various organizations within the city have been focussing attention on it for some time. One of the highest profile non-profits leading this charge has been the Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI). Together with Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) and the Small Schools Coalition (SSC) in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, a national design competition was launched in January 2000 for the design and eventual construction of two prototype schools based on universal principles at

two sites in the city—one in the south side Roseland community, and one in the north side Irving Park community.

The competition, which was hybrid in nature, was supported in part through a new program initiated by the National Endowment for the Arts under its Director of Design, Mark Robbins. The hybrid feature of the competition resulted from the NEA's insistence that at least four firms of national stature be invited to participate in a second stage with two winners from the first, open stage for each site. The inclusion of invited firms was stipulated to ensure high design quality. When the entries in the open competition section were unveiled—just under sixty entries each for each site—it was clear that the fears of the NEA were hardly justified. From the theoretical to

the architecturally exuberant, the entries exhibited a high degree of creativity and professionalism. Arriving at a decision on a winner in the open section was not going to be an easy matter.

A strong theoretical entry with with colored squares under a large roof, indicating the desired program and ultimate flexibility, more master plan than complete idea, lacked the design substance to be advanced to the final round. A futuristic scheme by Chicago architect, Joe Valerio, elicited serious consideration by the jury in the final round, just barely failing to make the final cut for the second stage. In one of the great human interest stories from the competition, simple, black ink drawings conceived by former SOM partner, Walter Netsch, while convalescing in a hospital bed after



