



Abandoned Woolworth + Leap of Faith = School for City Kids

CICADA Architecture/Planning, inc.
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Making the Leap

This is an if-you-build-it, you-hope-they-will-come story. The administrators of Freire Charter School took a leap of faith in crafting a new Middle School from the abandoned bowels of a former Woolworth store in Center City Philadelphia. The vision to transform a worn-out “five & dime” into a vibrant learning environment was as bold as the school’s mission: to unlock the potential of underserved, urban young people in a nonviolent environment, and get them into college. Freire administrators are not afraid of a challenge. They succeeded in creating a new city high school a dozen years before, and now envisioned a vehicle for delivering their proven educational model to younger children who would then feed into the high school. The budget was lean: \$4 million to gut and redefine 40,000 square feet of space. They also needed it designed and built by the next school year ... in eight months. Led by Kurt Raymond and Monroe Buckner of CICADA Architecture/Planning, Inc., the design and construction team took the plunge, and stuck the landing.

School & Store Sandwich

Working around the Marshall’s and CVS that occupy the first floor, the architects were challenged to sculpt learning and administrative spaces on the second floor and basement level... two slices of school sandwiching a meaty retail middle, with a side order of ingenuity. A new stairway connects the two separated levels, bypassing Marshall’s. The new front entrance is branded with a logo and the drawing of the Freire Dragon mascot. A new back entrance leads to the alley where buses pick up and drop off.

Five & Dime Days

Relics from Woolworth’s glory days cropped up to challenge the architect’s creativity. The basement is next to the Market-Frankford subway stop where Woolworth’s had its own entrance. The architects created an acoustic buffer of necessary storage space between the noisy tracks and the new, high-use “cafetorium,” kitchen and administrative offices. The second floor was a ghost town of cubicles and cell blocks where shoplifters were briefly detained. This interesting, but depressing, scenario was regenerated into 18 classrooms and an art room.

Light & Sight

Classroom walls are angled inward along corridors to facilitate views from staff offices inserted here and there for a higher level of supervision... no hidden nooks and crannies. Open lounges at existing corner window walls welcome daylight into formerly bunker-like interiors. Mentoring and counseling rooms host one-on-one sessions with students who need advice or decompression time.

Fast & Affordable

Sticking to Woolworth’s brand of “affordable,” the architects adhered to the \$4 million budget by using the strengths and opportunities of the existing building, and creatively selecting paint and materials to add inexpensive color and accents that elevate the mood. The project was completed on a track as fast as the neighboring subway. A design-build method for engineered systems sped up the process. And CICADA’s experience with education and renovation projects eliminated any learning curve... so the Freire Dragons can breathe their fire!