

lighting the way

Starkweather Bondy Architecture helps an Oakland charter school realize its full potential

By Danine Alati

Photography by Cesar Rubio (interiors); Ken Gutmaker (exteriors)

Set as a beacon in an economically depressed neighborhood in Oakland, Calif., the aptly named Lighthouse Community Charter School, designed by Starkweather Bondy Architecture, offers its 650 K–12 students, their parents, and the community a new schoolhouse in which they can take pride. The public charter school, founded in 2002 by Jenna Stauffer along with her husband and a group of “like-minded people,” had outgrown its previous space and temporarily was located in a three-story office building with a dark, choppy layout. When a \$15-million gift from a private foundation made the new school possible, Stauffer, director of strategic development for Lighthouse Community Charter School, and Starkweather Bondy partner-in-charge Phred Starkweather chose an industrial, tilt-up, structure on a 3.5 acre site just off the freeway near the Oakland airport. At first sight, the practically windowless concrete building with a wood-truss roof might not have appeared as a viable option. But the design team had a vision for maximizing two fully glazed interior courtyards to make them central elements to the design and converting parking lot space into playgrounds.

“The attraction of the location was the large, open site, served by public transportation with outdoor space that you don’t usually find in an urban setting,” explains Starkweather. Here, the school is set as a haven in the midst of a rough neighborhood. With a diverse student population and a high number of educationally disadvantaged and ESL students, Lighthouse committed to its mission to prepare students for college or careers by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and principles to be self-motivated, lifelong learners. The school’s five tenets are: high expectations, a rigorous curriculum, serving the whole child, family involvement, and professional learning community. Family involvement is crucial to Lighthouse’s philosophy of learning, as is a connection to





The appeal of the location for the new Lighthouse Community Charter School was the expansive 3.5 acre site (opposite), which offers outdoor space. Starkweather Bondy designed the new schoolhouse to bring nature inside. A courtyard set at the core of the lower and middle school building is used as an outdoor classroom (this photo).

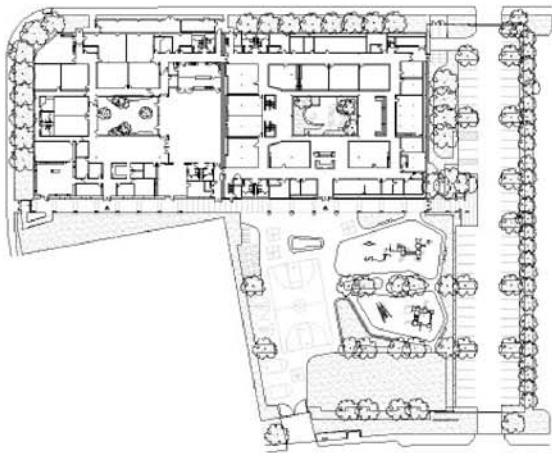




the total community, and Starkweather Bondy's design promotes this sense of transparency and community-based learning.

"The school serves the students well. All grades have their own space," Stauffer explains. "Also it was important for us to have a space that welcomes the whole community. And we wanted to create a safe place. So many of our students are struggling that we don't ever want them to worry about whether or not they are safe here." Stauffer says that when students are in a place where they are safe, they can concentrate on their studies. Likewise, when teachers are in a stable school and not uprooting their classrooms every summer, they can focus more on their instruction. "Providing a permanent home for the Lighthouse Community School frees us up to focus on what really matters," she adds.

Since the building required extensive structural repairs, mechanical system upgrades, seismic work, and life safety, security, and accessibility improvements, little budget was left for the interiors. Starkweather and his team therefore had to be crafty with how they allocated dollars. Designed as a series of glass boxes with integrated courtyards that bring the outdoors in, the new school is actually two buildings—the north for the upper school, and the south for the lower—that have shared functions to create one cohesive unit. By necessity the upper school has its own entry, but the programming promotes cross-pollination between the two. For example, the library for the high schoolers





The light, bright palette of the Lighthouse school is immediately apparent at the reception area, which features the school's emblematic yellow and green colors (opposite bottom). While designing for cross-pollination between the upper and lower schools, Starkweather Bondy also worked to create unique identities for each. The upper school has a student center, or "think tank," used for group or independent studies (below), connected to a courtyard for social activities (opposite top). The layering of spaces is evident in the lower school, where one can look from a kindergarten classroom out through the courtyard to a third grade classroom and the Family Resource Center (left).

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—Jenna Stauffer



design




Integral to the school's interior design scheme, the courtyards bring nature inside and afford students views outside from various indoor positions. The high school courtyard (left) is set adjacent to the multipurpose room, which serves the whole student population as both the cafeteria (left middle) and the gymnasium (bottom left).



is in the lower school, while the multipurpose room in the upper school serves as common ground. The high school side has a student space called a "Think Tank," and a corresponding courtyard for social activities, while the lower school's courtyard is positioned more as an outdoor classroom. "For these kids in East Oakland, this is more nature than some of them have ever seen," Stauffer notes. The Family Resource Center centrally located in the lower school adjacent to a courtyard offers a visual connection to most areas of the school and welcomes the community. There is a visible layering of spaces so that one can look out from a classroom through a courtyard and into another classroom.

Overall, the interiors palette is pretty basic, according to Starkweather, with simple materials and colors emblematic of the school. Green and yellow were established before the designers came on board, but they looked for a fresh approach to executing these colors. Carpet is used to facilitate wayfinding, hallways are wider for easier circulation, and copious glazing maximizes daylighting.

While the limited design budget and breakneck time line of 14 months proved challenging, the project was rewarding for all parties involved. Starkweather had been doing pro bono work for Lighthouse for years prior to this project simply because he believes in its mission. "Phred and his team took our little vision and magnified it. It's pretty amazing to be able to understand what a school community wants and make it better," says Stauffer of Starkweather's commitment.

And "better" also applies to academic results. Lighthouse Community Charter School's state assessment test results have steadily increased over the past five years, but the greatest testament to the school is in its students. A pioneer senior reflects on her journey at Lighthouse in the school newsletter: "I heard about Lighthouse. The name itself really caught my attention, and...I knew right away that it would be different...I immediately felt a sense of community...I felt very welcome and safe. Because of Lighthouse, I have found joy in learning again." 

For a project source list, see page 108 or visit www.contractdesign.com.

