



Space to Learn

HICKOK COLE ARCHITECTS HELPS TURN A FORMER SHOE WAREHOUSE INTO A NEW HOME FOR A WASHINGTON, D.C., NONPROFIT.

Source: *ARCHITECT Magazine*
 Publication date: 2009-04-01

By Mimi Zeiger

THE SPANISH EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT (SED) CENTER is a hub of Washington, D.C.'s Hispanic community. For 37 years, the nonprofit in the Adams Morgan neighborhood was the place where low-income residents turned for bilingual preschool and adult education programs. While the center has always been big on outreach, it was short on room for classes and day care. Cramped quarters limited the number of programs it could offer. "In the beginning, my wish list was mostly for space," recalls SED program director Martha Egas. "Space to accommodate our 88 children, and then some space for dreaming."

Designed by local firm Hickok Cole Architects, the new, 22,500-square-foot SED Center not only provides dedicated facilities for the preschool and adult education program, but expands the nonprofit's scope, adding space for infant care and community events. Located in a renovated 1940s shoe warehouse in D.C.'s up-and-coming Petworth neighborhood, the new center, which opened its doors on Feb. 2, is the result of a close collaboration among the city's design, development, and construction leadership. Spearheaded by Boston Properties, Clark Construction, and Hickok Cole, the project team also included the law firms Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, DLA Piper, Arnold & Porter, and Goulston & Storrs; real estate companies CB Richard Ellis and Jones Lang LaSalle; and contract furnishings dealer Washington Group Sales.

According to Hickok Cole principal Michael Hickok, his firm gave "three times the effort" in pro bono services in exchange for the small fee received. "Our firm has a give-back culture," he explains. "We find ourselves working on a lot of nonprofits, charter schools, and low-income housing—not necessarily because we seek it out, but because people on staff are emotionally invested in those projects." Project manager Gavin Daniels and interior designer Dana Mathews juggled billable-hour projects and their own personal time in order to give their best attention to the SED Center design.

The pair's scheme transformed the gritty warehouse into a warm, colorful education space, even as it retains utilitarian details like existing brick walls and industrial windows. The ground floor houses a street-level community gathering area, fronted by large storefront windows, with offices and infant care spaces toward the rear of the floor plate. A first for SED, the adult education classrooms, in the basement, are equipped with computers and full-sized furniture. (Previously, adult students in evening or weekend classes had to meet in preschool rooms, sometimes using children's chairs.)

Up a flight of stairs, with each tread numbered to catch the eyes of kids learning to count, are the five preschool classrooms. These, along with the rest of the building, are decorated in bright paint and colorful finishes. SED clients come from many countries—Brazil, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Mexico—and the center's palette evokes the tropicalia of Central and South America without falling into kitsch. Daniels and Mathews looked to the artwork of D.C. painter Pepa Leon to get an authentic sense of color and light. In keeping with the structure's original, industrial aesthetic, rolling garage doors separate the classrooms from the central play area. It's an inspired move. When the doors are all open, the whole floor becomes an event space, perfect for holidays and performances.

Although the SED Center, like other nonprofits, is facing a grim economic climate, its services are more in need than ever before. Egas is philosophical, and hopeful. "It is very fearful what is happening right now, but when the whole community—real estate, construction, local neighborhood—comes together, we can overcome obstacles. It says a lot about America: If you want to make a difference, you can."