

school news.

Honoring the Past, Designing for the Future

*Renewing historic schools
for healthier, more
sustainable learning*



Fall 2026

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PHOTO BY ALEX NYE

Each fall, as students and educators return to campus, schools across our communities begin another chapter. Some have served generations of families, carrying histories that extend far beyond their walls. The challenge is helping them evolve without losing the character, memories, and sense of belonging that make them meaningful.

This issue of *School News* explores how thoughtful design can honor that legacy while preparing schools for what comes next. We examine the social, environmental, and economic value of adapting historic buildings, including the embodied carbon already invested in their structures and the sustainable principles embedded in many older campuses.

The stories also look beyond preservation as an architectural exercise. From renewing a beloved school theater to protecting

unexpected layers of community history, each feature considers the civic responsibility involved in deciding what should remain, what can change, and how both can work together. Our conversation with Lorne McConachie reinforces that idea, drawing on decades of experience creating solutions that respect the past while supporting contemporary learning.

What connects these stories is a belief that progress does not require erasing what came before. With careful listening, creative problem-solving, and a clear understanding of what communities value, schools can become safer, healthier, more sustainable, and better suited to every learner.

As a new school year begins, we hope these perspectives inspire thoughtful conversations about the next chapter for the campuses you know and love. ●

Brian Nye

By Brian Meyers
LEED AP BD+C
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As PreK-12 practice leader, **Brian** is responsible for the strategic planning, direction, and management of the firm’s PreK-12 practice. He has over 30 years of experience spanning all aspects of educational planning and design.

Honoring the Past, Designing for the Future

How thoughtful design can carry a school's legacy forward while creating healthy, sustainable learning environments where students thrive

By Jordan Kiel

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Jordan is an educational design leader focused on creating adaptable learning environments that respond to the evolving needs of students and educators. A collaborative partner to school districts and project teams, he is passionate about strengthening communities through thoughtful public school design.

Jennifer leads HMC's sustainability initiatives with a focus on creating healthier, more resilient schools. She helps project teams pursue meaningful environmental goals while remaining attentive to each district's budget, schedule, and educational priorities.

To meet the pedagogical needs of the twenty-first century, comply with modern seismic codes, and improve resilience to extreme weather conditions, school districts often must bring historic buildings into the modern era. Their first decision is whether to demolish the existing building and build new or renovate the historic structure.

Creating modern educational environments that are also sustainable doesn't always mean building new "greener" buildings from the ground up. Often, the most sustainable building is the one you already have. Reusing historic buildings offers incredible opportunities for a more sustainable future, allowing districts to build for today and prepare their schools for tomorrow without sacrificing their history, the material resources and embodied carbon already invested in the facility, or taxpayers' pocketbooks.

THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

There are many misconceptions about renovating historic buildings, including the perception that retrofitting older buildings carries a premium. But when given a building with good bones, the right project team can navigate the delicate balance of celebrating a historic building while bringing it into modern times, often coming out ahead financially. When deciding whether to reuse a historic building or replace it adaptively, districts should weigh three categories of impact: social, environmental, and economic.

Social: Assess the cultural value of a space, its history, and the impact of preservation.

Environmental: Analyze the water, energy, and carbon costs and savings.

Economic: Calculate the cost of replacement versus the cost of renovation.

Not all buildings are created equal, and some lack the structural bones that make them worth saving. A single factor can sometimes outweigh the rest, but a fuller assessment more often uncovers nuanced opportunities worth considering. Applying this triple-bottom-line lens often reveals that older buildings are worth saving after all.

SOCIAL: BUILDINGS CONTRIBUTE TO THE FABRIC OF OUR COMMUNITY

Historic buildings shape the fabric of a community's life and history, and communities pay a real cultural cost when they are demolished. School campuses are landmarks that help establish a sense of place, represent an important part of our collective history, and consequently earn the community's affection. As buildings age, they adapt through minor renovations, additions, and simple wear and tear, each leaving behind a physical record of service to the community. Program needs evolve too, and ongoing relevance ultimately determines whether a building survives the test of time. After a hundred years of service, it is only fair that a building would need a major renovation to bring its program back into focus.

PHOTO BY JEFF AMRAM



"Clients don't have to choose between honoring a building's history and designing for current and future needs."

Clients don't have to choose between honoring a building's history and designing for current and future needs. Our own experience converting twentieth-century buildings into twenty-first-century learning environments bears that out. Because existing spaces are unique and cannot be replicated, we start by assessing a building's characteristics, ranking them as primary (a grand front entrance), secondary (a historic theater), or tertiary (the back of the school). That ranking serves as a guide for where to focus resources and preservation efforts, so the character that makes a school feel like home survives the transition to a modern learning environment.

Because a building touches so many people, it's vital to bring as many voices as possible into the renovation conversation. District and school officials, sustainability experts, engineers, community leaders, historic preservation and California's Division of the State Architect (DSA) officials, and current parents and students each bring a piece of the picture, and together they help paint a more complete view of what a building means to its community. Students and alumni have a strong connection to their school, and historic schools regularly see generations of a single family come through their classrooms. Renovations help continue that tradition and preserve memories, identity, and community pride. These benefits are hard to put a dollar amount on, but they have an incredible impact on the school and the surrounding neighborhood.

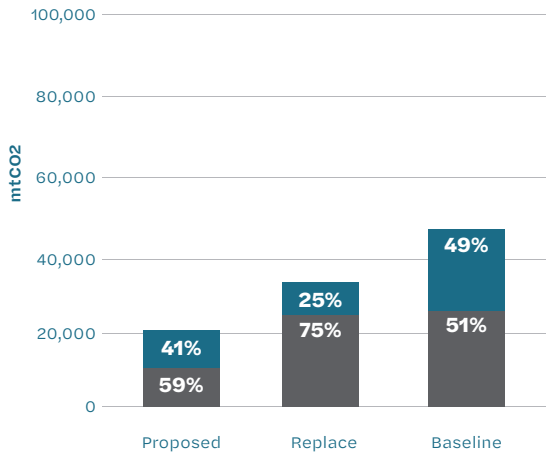
At Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon, we engaged students early in the process, and their pride in their historic building was immediately clear. However, additions from the 1960s and 1970s dramatically impinged on the grandeur of the original building. After many stakeholder engagements, we elected to demolish the additions to restore the front yard and the view of the historic façade, while stitching the remaining buildings together with a new addition at the back. This approach restored this beloved building to its former glory while creating a more functional, safe, and contiguous campus.

At Lincoln High School in Seattle, Washington, we uncovered surprises while converting the original 1914 auditorium into a more flexible library space. A previous renovation had incorporated drop ceilings, which cut two-story tripartite windows in half and covered up beautiful artwork donated by the class of 1966. When we removed the drop ceilings, natural light immediately poured in, and we were able to reveal and revitalize the original plaster ceiling details. These assets were already there; by uncovering them, we turned an already-loved community asset into something that brought some awe and pride back to the school.

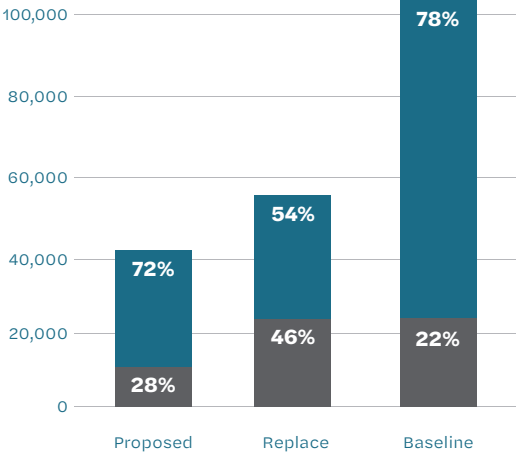
EMBODIED CARBON AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL CARBON FOOTPRINT

Seattle Utility Source

Total Carbon Over 20 Years



Total Carbon Over 75 Years



Embodied Carbon Operational Carbon

ENVIRONMENTAL: HISTORIC BUILDINGS BRING US BACK TO THE BASICS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Something that often gets overlooked is that the principles of sustainable design (daylighting, natural airflow, thermal mass) were simple necessities 100 years ago. Modern mechanical systems, curtain walls, and a growing willingness to rely on artificial light paved the way for the buildings of the mid-twentieth century to become the carbon-emitting energy hogs they are today.

Pre-war buildings lacked air conditioning and often had simple ventilation systems decoupled from the heating system. Designers created features that brought in abundant daylight and gave occupants agency over their spaces through operable windows that supported effective cross-ventilation. Designers also often arranged historic buildings in letter-shaped plans that mimicked E, H, and F patterns. These shapes kept the floor plate depth to a minimum to support airflow and allow light from tall windows to reach deep into every space. Learning spaces were usually designed with 11- to 12-foot ceilings to allow for tall windows. There’s a rule of thumb that daylight will penetrate a space 1.5 times the window head height, so many historic classrooms were kept rectangular, with a depth of approximately 24 to 26 feet from the exterior wall, to bring daylight farther into the classrooms.

Stewart Middle School, in Tacoma, Washington, was originally designed in 1928 with daylight in mind. Shaped like a figure eight, the building wrapped its classrooms around two light wells that flanked a central auditorium, a dark, underused space that left the school without a real heart. We flattened the auditorium floor and converted it into a multipurpose hub, then enclosed the light wells while ensuring they continued to bring daylight deep into the building. As enclosed atriums, they became flexible project labs that now serve the whole school. By leaning into what the building already did well (daylight), we were able to adapt the floor plan to meet contemporary educational needs while celebrating its history and architecture. The result breathed another 100 years of life into the building.

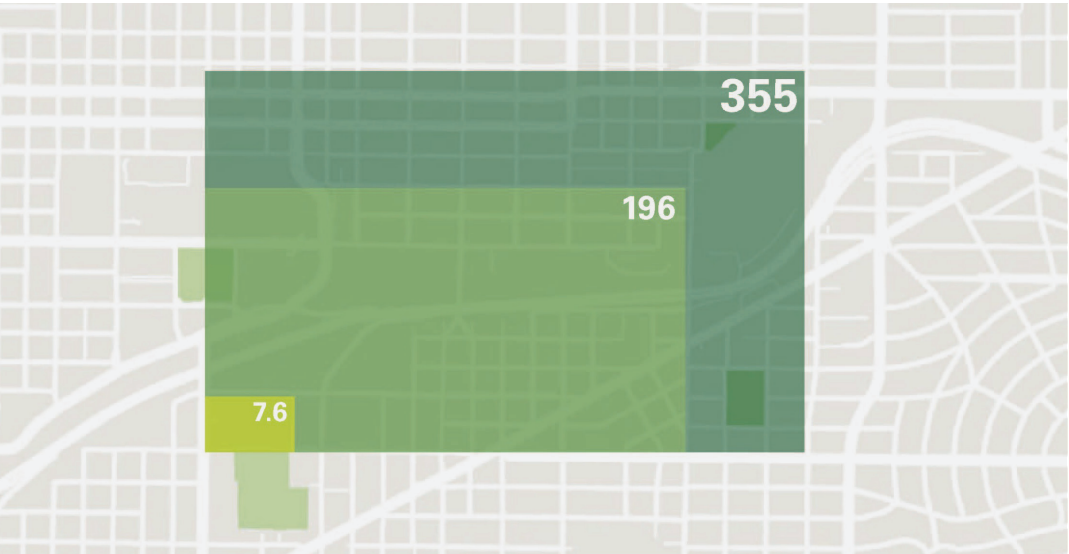
There is a richness in the craft of historic buildings that connects people to a space in a way that is hard to create in new construction. Saving this connection and craft is valuable and important. By working with a building’s unique attributes, updating it to meet current sustainability standards is often less intimidating than imagined.

“There is a richness in the craft of historic buildings that connects people to a space in a way that is hard to create in new construction. Saving this connection and craft is valuable and important.”



PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

INITIAL RESULTS: Proposed Design vs. Replacement



Acres of Forest Growth Over 75 Years

- Benson Polytechnic High School site:** 7.6 acres
- Proposed Design:** 11,980 mtCO2 / 196 acres
- Replacement Construction** 24,020 mtCO2 / 355 acres

EMBODIED CARBON: THE MOST SUSTAINABLE BUILDING IS THE ONE YOU ALREADY HAVE

It can take decades for the operational carbon of an existing, inefficient building to catch up to the embodied carbon spent constructing a new building. Reducing the operational carbon of existing buildings is a noble cause. It can produce significant savings for operating budgets, but if the goal is to reduce the overall impact on the planet, reuse is often the clear answer. Luckily, the concrete and masonry buildings of the early twentieth century, which typically carry the most embodied carbon, usually happen to have the best bones to work with.

For the modernization of Portland Public Schools’ Benson Polytechnic High School, we conducted a comprehensive sustainability study and found approximately 55 percent carbon savings compared with replacing the building, which is more than a century old. The project included a combination of renovated and new construction, and the entire facility meets current seismic and energy codes. By renovating significant portions rather than demolishing, we saved approximately 159 acres of forest while remaining cost-neutral compared to new construction.

A large portion of the carbon savings comes from the reused masonry and concrete structure, but we also paid special attention to the new materials we chose. For example, we incorporated a concrete mix with 40 percent less embodied carbon that performs the same as traditional concrete, and selected interior finishes that tend to have lower embodied carbon. Manufacturers are increasingly tracking the embodied carbon of their products, which makes this process easier, and these sometimes-unseen choices often have a big impact on a project’s overall footprint.

ECONOMIC: CLEVER SOLUTIONS TO SAVE REAL DOLLARS

Cost is often the deciding factor in whether a historic building gets a second life, and the good news is that thoughtful engineering can make renovation pencil out.

Bringing a historic building up to code while respecting its existing fabric takes an experienced team that can reconcile current life-safety requirements with the challenges of older construction.



When possible, we look for opportunities where needed interventions can do double duty. For example, a project team can locate a new ADA-compliant elevator shaft in a reentrant corner, where it also buttresses the old structure. At the John Marshall School in Seattle, Washington, the shotcrete walls that support the old gyms’ unreinforced masonry (URM) walls also serve as bearing walls for a new addition inserted between the gym and the historic classroom wing.

Historic classrooms often lack ceiling cavities for modern ductwork. A range of modern systems separates heating and cooling from ventilation, resulting in smaller overall duct sizes. Using more but smaller mechanical units located closer to the rooms they serve makes sense economically because the savings from reduced duct quantities and sizes offset the cost of the additional units. There is no one-size-fits-all answer, and discussions with maintenance and operations staff are vital to ensuring they can maintain the new systems.

BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY

It would be easy to treat a historic building as a blank canvas for today’s sustainability trends, bolting on solar panels and calling it done. But historic buildings already embody many fundamentals of sustainable design; designers laid the groundwork a century ago. Capturing that head start, rather than paving over it with easy upgrades, takes a team that knows how to read a building’s original intentions and build on them.

That know-how is what separates a renovation that merely meets code from one that truly performs. It takes a team fluent in both historic construction and modern building science: engineers who can see how a century-old ventilation strategy still has something to teach a modern mechanical system, architects who know how to protect a sash window’s craftsmanship while upgrading its performance, and a sustainability lead who can translate all of it into carbon and energy numbers a district can act on. ●

Adaptive Reuse vs. Historic Preservation

Our work walks a fine line between historic preservation and adaptive reuse. The two are closely related but differ in distinct ways.

Historic preservation = keeping the space as close as possible to its original appearance.

Adaptive reuse = modernizing a building to meet current standards while honoring the space’s spirit and history. It may not be a replica of the original space.

A building’s total carbon impact includes two interconnected, yet different sources: operational carbon and embodied carbon.

Operational carbon: the emissions associated with the energy used to operate a building.

Embodied carbon: the emissions associated with materials and construction processes throughout the whole life cycle of a building.

A Historic Theater’s Next Act

How school districts can preserve a treasured landmark while creating a safer, more inclusive, and more capable place for learning and performance

By Kristian Kicinski
AIA, LFA, LEED AP BD+C,
Principal Architect



Kristian helps shape the strategic direction of HMC’s sustainability efforts, bringing a deep commitment to innovation, pragmatic solutions, and progressive PreK–12 educational design. As principal architect, he works with clients and project teams to establish clear sustainability goals and performance targets from project inception through construction.

A historic school theater rarely belongs only to the school. It may be where generations of students performed, families watched graduations, and neighbors gathered for concerts and civic events. Its architecture can also preserve craftsmanship that would be difficult to reproduce today

At Natrona County High School in Casper, Wyoming, the theater has maintained a relationship with the Wyoming Symphony for 77 years. That continuity gives the space a cultural value that cannot be measured by square footage alone.

When the building no longer meets contemporary expectations, however, nostalgia cannot resolve poor sightlines, unsafe backstage conditions, limited access, or obsolete technical systems. A successful renovation begins by recognizing that the district is caring for two assets at once: a working educational facility and a shared community legacy.

PRESERVING WHAT GIVES THE THEATER MEANING

That dual responsibility makes the first phase of work less about selecting finishes and more about understanding what gives the theater its identity.

Archival drawings, historic photographs, physical investigation, and stakeholder conversations can reveal which elements carry the greatest weight. Those features may include a proscenium, ornamental plaster, murals, decorative ceilings, woodwork, or the relationship between the stage and the house.

This research establishes a hierarchy. Significant features can be restored, compatible elements adapted, and later alterations removed. A landmark designation may identify features that require particular care, but community participation remains essential because records do not capture every tradition or pattern of use.

INTEGRATING MODERN PERFORMANCE CAPABILITIES

Once that hierarchy is clear, modern systems can be introduced with greater confidence and precision.

Contemporary performance programs depend on acoustics, audiovisual systems, stage lighting, rigging, power, control booths, catwalks, dressing rooms, storage, and scene shops that many older theaters were never designed to support. The answer is not always to conceal every new component. Speaker arrays and lighting bars can read as contemporary insertions, allowing audiences to distinguish between original architecture and present-day technology. Other interventions can disappear almost entirely.



PHOTO BY FRED FUHRMEISTER

“Respect requires attention to how old and new meet and how the combined building serves its users.”



PHOTO BY KRISTIAN KICINSKI

At Natrona County High School, acoustical analysis showed that the audience chamber needed more volume. Sections of the flat plaster ceiling were replaced with acoustically transparent fabric that visually matches the surrounding surface. Sound can now reverberate within the structure above, improving performance without altering the room’s historic appearance.

Technology choices should reflect the people who will operate them. Teachers need intuitive lighting and reliable microphones, while productions may require more sophisticated equipment. Systems aligned with curriculum, staffing, maintenance, and budget are more useful than an elaborate package that the district cannot readily support.

IMPROVING SAFETY, ACCESS, AND COMFORT

The same practical understanding should guide improvements to accessibility, safety, and audience comfort.

Older theaters may have narrow aisles, inaccessible seating, inadequate restrooms, difficult stage access, outdated fire protection, and unsafe technical areas. Before the renovation, stage lighting at Natrona County was accessed via loose boards spanning steel trusses.

Proper catwalks created safer working conditions and made stage technology accessible to students who had previously been unable to participate. In other theaters, motorized hoists and remote-controlled lighting can reduce or eliminate the need for overhead access.

One of the project’s most consequential challenges was less visible but equally important. The auditorium floor lacked enough slope to provide clear views of the stage. Working with structural engineers and the construction team, the project carefully removed the slab and excavated within the ornate room without undermining the building. The new raked floor improved sightlines and created space for an orchestra pit, expanding the theater’s ability to host student musicals and traveling productions.

MAKING ROOM FOR GROWTH

When those improvements cannot fit within the existing envelope, a carefully considered addition can support the theater without competing with it.



PHOTO BY KRISTIAN KICINSKI

New lobby space, restrooms, elevators, dressing rooms, rehearsal areas, and storage may be necessary. An addition can respond through scale, proportion, material, and carefully designed transitions while remaining legible as architecture of its own time. Respect requires attention to how old and new meet and how the combined building serves its users.

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY IN THE NEXT CHAPTER

That relationship between continuity and change is also the foundation of productive community engagement.

Regular dialogue can uncover priorities that no condition assessment will reveal. It can also help districts explain why changes are needed and how the project will protect what people value. When stakeholders see their history reflected in the design, modernization can feel like stewardship.

Historic theater renovation is therefore a long-term investment in education, culture, and community life. In many cases, improving an existing venue can be more cost-effective than replacing it, while retaining qualities a new building could not recreate. The strongest projects go beyond new finishes and equipment. They improve acoustics, access, safety, sightlines, stage operations, and learning opportunities as part of one coherent effort.

A renewed theater should not reproduce the past as a museum piece. It can carry the best of that past forward, giving future students, performers, and audiences a place to write the next chapter together. ●

Q+A

Meet Principal Emeritus Lorne McConachie, FAIA

Since 1986, Lorne has designed educational spaces that support learners' academic, social, and physical development. His work—from new schools to the modernization of historic buildings—emphasizes personalized, collaborative environments, engaged communities, and sustainable connections to place. As Principal Emeritus of Bassetti Architects, a Design Studio of HMC Architects, he mentors the next generation and advances trauma-informed design practices.

Q How have the similarities and differences between California and the Pacific Northwest shaped your approach to designing educational facilities?

A I began exploring educational design in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-1980s, as educators questioned long-held assumptions about pedagogy. Working with committed educators and school districts, we developed learner-centered environments with adaptable, collaborative settings, evolving safety parameters, and deep community engagement. By the late 1990s, this work had gained national recognition. In the early 2000s, it drew the attention of the Gates Foundation, leading us to explore small-school designs in Los Angeles and Taiwan as a path to better student outcomes. Our work for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) included staff development presentations, workshops with local architects, implementation strategies for small learning environments within existing and new schools, and numerous site visits to assist schools in developing site-based designs.

There are many commonalities between school design in California and the Pacific Northwest. Basic brain science, learning styles, and students' needs are similar across regions and countries. However, the scale of facilities, cultural diversity, and, of course, climate are major differentiators.

Los Angeles has huge schools. Most high schools in the Pacific Northwest range between 1,000 and 2,000 students, while L.A. has dozens of high schools with 3,000 to 5,000 students. Implementing a more personalized approach to learning at that scale was challenging and demanded an intentional separation of learning communities—from administration to teaching methodologies to facility adjacencies. Of course, that meant the pull of 'nostalgic gravity' (doing things the way we always do them) was intense.

LAUSD is highly diverse, and it was a treat to work within such a broad range of cultures. Given a focus on learner-centered environments and community partnerships, understanding and reinforcing LAUSD's rich cultural diversity was a critical strategy for shaping powerful, responsive schools.

Finally, indoor/outdoor connection opportunities in the Southern California climate are compelling. Outdoor learning areas, exterior circulation, and climate-tolerant gathering areas become integral to school programming and planning.

“Working with committed educators and school districts, we developed learner-centered environments with adaptable, collaborative settings, evolving safety parameters, and deep community engagement. By the late 1990s, this work had gained national recognition.”



Q Historic school buildings hold deep meaning for their communities. How do you balance preserving a building's character with meeting today's standards?

A I believe there are three critical aspects to successfully renovating historic schools. The first is to carefully understand the school's importance within the community, from both cultural and architectural perspectives. Secondly, I think it is imperative to apply transformational educational goals to the reimagining of historic schools. Third, an earnest community dialogue and a flexible attitude are essential.

Culturally, our historic schools embody a rich history of place. Personal memories, generational continuity, neighborhood identity, ethnic heritage, historic events, and community pride are deeply layered into these spaces. Beyond social aspects, landmark schools also highlight the evolving geographical topology of place, from historic settlement patterns to growth and connectivity.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties stresses the importance of understanding a landmark structure's "defining characteristics." This is essential when revitalizing historic schools. Most old schools reveal a combination of primary, secondary, and tertiary characteristics. Primary characteristics may include a grand entry portico, main façade, elegant detailing, or an impressive auditorium.

Secondary characteristics may include lateral facades, a quirky old gym, or a new classroom wing that complements the original building. Tertiary characteristics include the back of the school, loading dock, or auxiliary shop spaces. How we choose to treat these various elements of an old school is foundational. Seldom have we had the budget or encountered the community's will to preserve every element of a structure. By focusing restoration efforts on primary and secondary aspects of historic schools, we have been able to selectively demolish tertiary portions of old buildings to accommodate new program requirements.

We pair a deep understanding of context with district-wide educational goals, so rehabilitations support twenty-first-century teaching and learning. Scenario planning helps us test adaptable, learner-centered configurations within existing structural systems, from departmental models to thematic learning communities and autonomous small schools. This work may combine additions with reconfigured legacy spaces—for example, transforming a double-loaded corridor lined with classrooms into a small learning community, an outdated auditorium into a grand library, or an old gym into a student commons.

PHOTO BY FRED HOUSEL



"In the realm of educational design, do your research. Know which progressive ideas are shaping great school design and apply them. Many teachers are busy managing the day-to-day classroom. Humbly bring knowledge and gently challenge assumptions."

"We pair a deep understanding of context with district-wide educational goals, so rehabilitations support twenty-first-century teaching and learning."

I'm a big believer in "both/and" solutions that support the future and honor the past. We often employ a "two-fer" approach, using a single design idea to solve multiple problems simultaneously. This might entail demolishing a tertiary wing of an historic school, adding an addition to meet program demands, complementing the historic character to address landmark issues, buttressing the unreinforced historic structure to address seismic challenges, and building vertically to address zoning requirements. This conceptual strategy has helped us meet budget and scheduling requirements across many projects.

Rehabilitating a community landmark involves many conversations. Students, parents, educators, and administrators bring site-based perspectives. School boards, activists, and alumni help shape a community-wide vision.

And, of course, politicians, code officials, and historic review boards offer regulatory direction. Careful listening coupled with the thoughtful balancing of competing interests is baked into the process of solving these complex puzzles.

Clearly identifying and restoring the "defining characteristics" of a historic school while incorporating twenty-first-century teaching and learning methodologies demands that we not compromise at "either/or" outcomes.

Q Throughout your career, you've mentored many architects and designers. What lessons have you tried to pass on to the next generation, and what qualities do you believe make a successful architect?

A I have had the good fortune to work with many talented architects and designers. Architecture is a team sport, and good ideas can come from many places: young designers, seasoned consultants, and enlightened owners. Listen, synthesize, and borrow every good idea that supports the overarching design concept.

Be prepared. Yes, the Boy Scout motto applies to professional practice. Know your project type and study precedents, and do your homework on context, community, and climate. Read books, blogs, and magazines. Know how the masters approached the problem.

In the realm of educational design, do your research. Know which progressive ideas are shaping great school design and apply them. Many teachers are busy managing the day-to-day classroom. Humbly bring knowledge and gently challenge assumptions.

Brainstorm: initially, there are no bad ideas. Develop an inspired “big idea,” or design concept. Work it until you’ve elegantly synthesized form, function, and place.

Q *What have you learned about building trust and navigating differing priorities during complex school projects?*

A Successful engagement is built around active listening, which involves focus, understanding, clarifying, and responding to input. Nonverbal cues such as eye contact, body language, and tone all play a role in building trust, improving collaboration, and ultimately reducing conflict.

We developed an engagement process that builds relationships, explores shared goals, and solves problems with students, staff, and the community. The process varies across communities and budgets, but essential aspects include regular meetings; shared learning activities, such as site visits to exemplar schools; the development of guiding design principles; and ongoing design reviews that use those principles as the lens through which we critique the evolving design.

Q *Looking back on your career, is there a project or moment that especially stands out to you? What made it memorable?*

A Edmonds-Woodway High School, in Edmonds, Washington, completed in 1999, was a breakthrough project. My exploration of medieval villages throughout Europe inspired the design. We worked with great educators and managers, the district focused on excellence, and a gifted team of designers and contractors worked well together. Our work transformed our practice and served as a springboard for many exciting future projects.



Q *How do you like to spend your time outside of work?*

A In retirement, I find myself pursuing a wide range of activities.

My love of history inspires me to read widely and travel often. Recent trips have included Turkey, Greece, and Italy. We just returned from a month in Tuscany, where we explored Etruscan tombs, medieval villages, and Renaissance villas, along with great art, food, wine, and, of course, gelato. Locally, I’m involved with Historic Seattle, an organization focused on preservation advocacy, education, and stewardship efforts.

We have a vacation house in the mountains of central Oregon that gives me great access to hiking. The nearby national forests and wilderness areas provide endless wonder.

On the home front, the garden and never-ending remodeling projects on an old Craftsman bungalow keep me busy. As my body ages and rigorous active sports decline, I’m grateful for a round of golf and a happy Labrador always willing to go for a walk. ●

Architecture as a Civic Responsibility

Preserving historic schools and the community memories they hold

Historic schools hold more than architectural history. Preserving them means protecting the layers of community memory that give a place meaning.

The most important historic features of a building are not always found on the original drawings.

Sometimes they are hidden above a ceiling, embedded in a wall, painted across an auditorium, or written by hand in a place never intended for public view. When those discoveries emerge during the renovation of a historic school, architects face a responsibility that extends beyond preserving architecture. They become temporary stewards of a community’s memory.

That responsibility recently took an unusual form at El Rodeo Elementary School in Beverly Hills, California. Originally constructed in 1927, the Spanish Renaissance Revival campus has been carefully strengthened and modernized while retaining character-defining features, including ornate detailing, an iconic dome, a historic auditorium, decorative moldings, cast stone, and ornamental tile.

Inside the school’s tower, however, another layer of history offered a reminder that cultural significance is not limited to what an architect originally intended. Graffiti accumulated within the tower became part of the building’s social record. Its recent installation as a preserved element recognizes something larger about historic architecture: Buildings acquire meaning through the people who occupy them.

For architects, recognizing those layers requires looking beyond conventional definitions of preservation.

Historic drawings remain essential because they document original design intent, craftsmanship, proportions, materials, and details that may otherwise disappear. At El Rodeo, archival understanding helped guide a seismic retrofit complicated by the need to remove and replicate character-defining elements so the finished building would appear virtually untouched. Intricate ceiling details and decorative moldings were preserved or recreated. At the same time, the historic auditorium was restored around its 1934 Hugo Ballin mural, a cultural artifact dating to the Works Progress Administration era.

Yet a historic school also contains another archive, one created over decades by students, teachers, families, performances, ceremonies, traditions, and everyday experiences. The tower graffiti belongs to that history just as surely as an original architectural detail does. Deciding that something deserves to remain can therefore require architects to consider social significance alongside architectural significance.

That same responsibility shaped the transformation of Natrona County High School in Casper, Wyoming. Constructed between 1924 and 1927 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Collegiate Gothic landmark was Wyoming’s first center of education and, for decades, a defining community institution.

By Israel Peña



As a senior project manager, Israel has over twenty years of experience delivering complex K-12 modernization and new construction projects. He enjoys the challenges of renovating existing buildings, often on occupied campuses, and bringing new life to aging and neglected campuses.

“Schools are living civic institutions. They need to become safer, more accessible, more sustainable, and better suited to contemporary education.”



PHOTO BY ALEX NYE

Its modernization preserved the historic building while creating contemporary learning environments around it.

Its historic theater illustrates how preservation can accommodate substantial change without erasing identity. The theater needed better acoustics, sightlines, accessibility, lighting, stage systems, and support spaces. Historic windows were rebuilt and plasterwork preserved, while new interventions were carefully incorporated within the existing shell. Ceiling bays were opened into the roof structure to improve acoustics, then covered with acoustically transparent fabric replicating the appearance of the original plaster ceiling. The result is a theater that appears remarkably unchanged even though its performance has been fundamentally improved.

The lesson from these campuses is not that every old feature should remain untouched. Preservation requires judgment.

Schools are living civic institutions. They need to become safer, more accessible, more sustainable, and better suited to contemporary education. El Rodeo required extensive seismic strengthening and modernization. Natrona County High School needed to support entirely new approaches to learning while continuing to function as a landmark deeply connected to Casper’s identity. In both cases, preservation became a process of determining what could change without losing what made the place recognizable and meaningful.

That distinction matters as communities across the country confront aging school facilities. Replacing an older campus may sometimes appear simpler than adapting it, but the calculation should include more than construction costs and square footage. A school that has stood for generations may carry memories of graduations, performances, friendships, civic gatherings, and family histories extending across decades. Its value cannot always be captured on a facilities assessment.

Architecture, therefore, has a civic responsibility to ask better questions before those layers disappear. What does this place mean to the people who know it? Which elements carry that meaning? What stories are recorded in the drawings, and which ones exist only in memories or unexpected traces left behind?

At El Rodeo, the answer might be an elaborate historic dome, a WPA-era mural, or graffiti inside a tower. At Natrona County High School, it might be the plasterwork and familiar proportions of a theater generations of residents remember.

Preserving those things does more than honor the past. It allows a community to recognize itself as its institutions evolve. The architect’s responsibility is not to freeze history in place, but to understand it well enough that progress does not inadvertently erase it. ●

PHOTOS BY MDC INTERIOR SOLUTIONS



Defining Moments



Lodi Unified School District Celebrates Groundbreaking of Samuel L. Gantner Elementary School
Lodi, California



Change to: Tracy Unified School District and Merrill F. West High School Celebrate New Agriculture CTE Building
Tracy, California



Roseville City School District Welcomed Students to the New Winding Creek Elementary School
Roseville, California



Los Angeles Unified School District and Thomas Jefferson Senior High School Celebrates New Gymnasium
Los Angeles, California



Twin Rivers Unified School District Unveils New Cafeteria and Administration Project at Garden Valley Elementary School
Sacramento, California



William S. Hart Union High School District and Sierra Vista Junior High School Celebrates New Multipurpose Modernization and Kitchen Addition
Canyon County, California

Design Honors



San Benito High School District New High School #2 — AIAIC 2026 AIAIC Design Award - Outstanding Award and Members' Choice (Unbuilt) Award



Irvine Unified School District, Greentree Elementary New Treehouse Multipurpose Building — AIAIC 2026 AIAIC Design Award - Members Choice (Architecture)



Benson Polytechnic High School Modernization — The Daily Journal of Commerce (DJC), Oregon's 2026 Top Projects award.



Mercer Middle School — 2026 WoodWorks Wood in Architecture Award



Los Angeles Unified School District John F. Kennedy High School — CMACN/AIACA Concrete Masonry Design Award - Grand Award for Education Design



Bridget Flecky was recognized as a Leader of Influence in Engineering & Architecture 2026 by the San Diego Business Journal.

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