

DESIGN

Yellowstone Schools honors the history of Third Ward

Design of new high school building draws from the architectural tradition of row houses found in the tight-knit community

By Diane Cowen STAFF WRITER



Photos by Yi-Chin Lee/Staff photographer

The exterior of the newly renovated Yellowstone Schools reflects the row houses in the neighborhood.

he old Frederick Douglass Elementary

School stands proudly on Trulley Street, a sturdy representation of decades of education in Houston's Third Ward. Just beyond it, though, with walls of tan brick and shimmery silver and orange metal plates, is



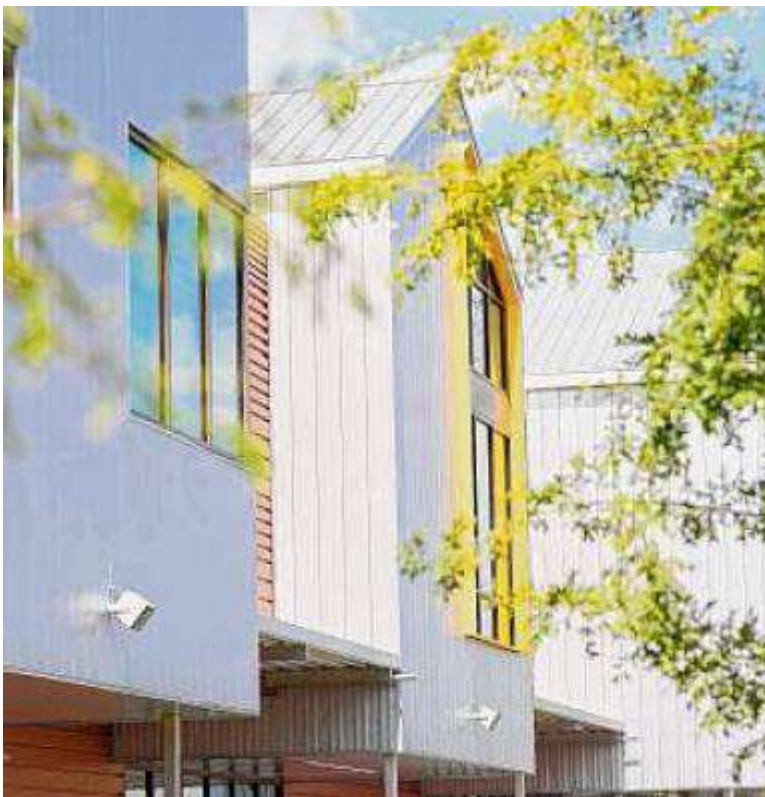
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its 21st-century companion: the new upper school at Yellowstone Schools.

As students report for a new school year Aug. 15, its first high school class of ninth graders will head to the new back building — dubbed Steadfast Hall — for their classes. Construction on the latest project began in 2020 during the pandemic from a \$30 million capital campaign.

Yellowstone Academy — a nonprofit, nondenominational Christian private school — began in 2001 with a year of planning, then launched its first school year in 2002-2003 with prekindergarteners. It added another grade level each year until 2012, finishing with eighth grade. Now, Yellowstone Schools, which also includes Yellowstone College Prep, has a new building to house high schoolers, as its first ninth-grade class arrives on campus.

The new high school building was designed to honor its predecessor and its neighborhood, but its differences also reflect how much teaching and learning have changed.



The exterior design reflects the iconic row houses in Third Ward.

“Yellowstone is engaging students of Third Ward. The architecture and art and people were our inspiration when we were designing this building,” said Nicola Springer, an architect and executive vice president at Kirksey Architecture. “You notice the three pop-ups that read all of the way to both sides of the building. They honor the history and tradition of the row house. As rapidly as everything is gentrifying, this might be the only memory of row houses in the next few years.”

A little history

What is now Yellowstone’s lower school began its life in 1926 as Frederick Douglass Elementary School, named in honor of one of America’s best-known freedmen. Douglass, born circa 1818 in Maryland, escaped slavery when he was around 20 and spent his life as an abolitionist, speaking and writing against slavery.



The first floor of the new building features an auditorium and a library, with classrooms located on the second floor.



Photos by Yi-Chin Lee/Staff photographer

The 100-year-old Frederick Douglass Elementary was renovated by Yellowstone Schools.

Houston's Douglass Elementary was one of many schools, streets, bridges and parks named after him.

Facing declining enrollment and a budget crunch, Houston Independent School District closed Douglass in May 2005, though it briefly reopened as a

school for Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

In 2006, it was bought by what was then Yellowstone Academy, which is financed by private donations along with state and federal funds. Though the school's website lists tuition at \$17,000 to \$18,000, Amy Tanner, chief of staff at Yellowstone, said tuition is fully covered for all students.

An adaptable design

Douglass Elementary was built of brick and wood, with thick plaster-coated walls, handcrafted millwork on wide staircase rails and huge windows to let in daylight. The windows opened to let in fresh air and the occasional breeze in the days before air conditioning. At some point, the school's

orange-red brick was painted white. It was more recently repainted red as a gesture to its original color.

A 1955 addition to the school brought more classes and what is now a multipurpose room with tables and chairs for the younger students to eat breakfast and lunch. A second cafeteria, with a warming kitchen, is

just beyond it, and obvious post-COVID effects are seen in hand-washing stations that might earlier have just been drinking fountains.

Drinking fountains are different, too. A student can still push a button, lean over and get a quick drink, but bottle fillers are a sign of health, hydration and just how ubiquitous the plastic water bottle has become.

The new two-story addition is forward-thinking, with an exterior “bridge” — a staircase and catwalk clad in metal grids.

It leads back to the new school, its unexpected shape and exterior could easily be mistaken for a mixed-use commercial space. Designed in sections, it looks a bit like homes in a neighborhood moved side by side, with narrow sections popping up like shotgun houses, the slim homes that once filled big sections of Third Ward but which are vanishing quickly.

The addition’s first floor has big shared spaces, such as a library and auditorium, with classrooms on the second floor. The library has a movable center partition, and many shelving units are on wheels so they can be moved around.

Down hallways, a graphic treatment in gray, white and yellow not only displays the school’s “Y” logo but plays off of the use of geometry in murals by the late artist John Biggers, who helped establish the art department at the historically Black Texas Southern University, also located in Third Ward about a mile away. Springer said that similar graphic treatments throughout the campus are meant to honor the legendary artist.

Everything was thought through with more than one purpose, from the science room with cabinets and sinks around the perimeter to movable desks and chairs so students can sit in the center of the room for classroom-style lectures, or shift toward the walls when it’s time for lab work or science experiments.

In the days before school reopened, open areas hadn’t yet been filled with furniture, but it’s easy to imagine students lounging with laptops, comparing notes or chilling with music piped through ear buds as they gaze at the downtown skyline visible from many of the school’s windows.

Those windows, triple-paned for energy efficiency, are in a variety of shapes and sizes, but they’re all larger rather than smaller, since education research shows that natural light and a view to the outdoors increases student reading scores.

“Daylight is huge for learning,” Springer said. “If you can see where you are, then you know what’s important as well. We love natural daylight, and teachers and students love it, too.”

“We love new buildings and treasure old buildings. We’re very excited to work on a campus like this and give back to the Third Ward community as well.”