Branded Environments:
Defining the Restructured High School Campus
by Adam Rubin
Education reform in the past decade has focused on the value of smaller learning communities as an effective way to educate students, particularly students within high-need urban communities. In New York City, Chicago, and cities across the country, educators and civic leaders are creating small high schools and locating them in large comprehensive high schools, forming campuses of autonomous small schools. These facilities, however, were built for another era of teaching and learning, when high schools were constructed for an average range of 2000-3000 students attending one school. If this nationwide effort to transform secondary education is to be successful, the existing building stock must be reconciled with a new educational agenda focused on small learning communities.

This reform raises urgent questions relating to the physical space. How do we utilize the existing building stock as the home for many small schools? How do we make these new campuses responsive to the needs of multiple learning communities, with different space needs tied to their unique missions and curricula?

Visual branding offers one solution. Visual branding uses an aesthetic treatment to establish identity. Within the realm of advertising, products are "branded" in order to improve their marketability. It is necessary to appeal to consumers’ sense of taste when differentiating a product from a spectrum of similar products.

In the context of buildings, visual branding can be a powerful tool not only to establish identity, but also to delineate and unify disparate spaces. Thus, a branding system becomes a marriage of image with functionality; advertising meeting architecture.

In New York City, New Visions for Public Schools is currently engaged in a large-scale process of creating new small schools, the New Century High School Initiative. This initiative has focused on developing schools that are small (between 400-500 students), academically rigorous, and linked to a community-based organization. These schools focus their curriculum around a particular theme, and work intensely on building student achievement through project-based and inquiry-based learning strategies, often done in concert with the community-based partner organization. By September 2004, there will be 75 New Century High Schools across the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. Over 85% of these small schools will be located within campus buildings.

New Visions has begun to explore visual branding as an important element of campus conversion — a way to make substantive change quickly and cost effectively to both a campus and individual schools housed on the campus. Visual branding can bring about substantive architectural and structural changes, reinvigorating spaces in fresh, exciting ways.

Why Visual Branding?
As New Century High Schools take up residence in buildings that formerly housed large high schools or currently house restructuring large schools, an identity for both the large campus and each individual school within the campus needs to be established. Small schools strive to create a sense of intimacy and identity for their staff and students. A distinct branded identity, creatively applied throughout the physical space of the school, aids that process by demarcating each respective school’s space, while also defining facilities and common spaces shared by the campus community.

Within the school building, a unified color scheme and uniform signage convey the sense of familiarity and belonging that is at the heart of the small school philosophy. A strong sense of place and permanence is grounded in ways congruent with the school’s mission and personality. Visual branding provides tangible and visible evidence of each individual school’s identity.

For the campus as a whole, a color and design scheme conveys a sense of cooperation for shared spaces and an overall building identity. In cases where the large school will be phased out, the campus identity is a way for the name of the large school to live on within the community. This newly redefined campus identity also respects community and political sensitivities. The old school name and colors become the campus name and colors, remaining as a public face externally on athletic teams and performance groups, and internally in shared extramural programming and educational linkages across the schools.

Visual branding plays an essential functional role of providing for clear wayfinding within large school buildings. A uniform signage system throughout the campus reflects the individual school colors, while tying together space with a recognizable system. Different colors and symbols throughout the building provide clear direction as to each school’s individual location within the larger building.

For administrators grappling with the challenges of sharing space, the process of developing a visual branding system can become a vehicle for a shared experience with a positive outcome and benefits for each individual school within the campus community.
New Visions selected South Bronx Campus as its prototype campus because it is the first campus housing New Century High Schools where the large school has been phased out or restructured completely.

In the case of South Bronx Campus, the large school — South Bronx High School — had begun its phase-out in September 2002 by taking no new ninth graders. South Bronx High School closed its doors in June 2004 to allow for the growth of the small schools in the building — Academy for Careers in Sports, Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School, and New Explorers High School. The final twelfth-grade class from South Bronx High School has stayed in the building and will graduate with a South Bronx High School diploma.

The branding work benefited from the positive relationships that had already formed among the schools’ leaders as they worked through operational issues and collaborated on programmatic linkages. The visual branding work built on their development as a cohesive group of leaders sharing the building and solving problems, becoming a very tangible and highly visible outgrowth of their collaboration.

Effective visual branding of a campus building requires a defined process and a 6-9 month time frame. Beginning with participatory design with members of the campus community, this process soon enters into a design phase, followed by feedback from the community, before moving on to fabrication and installation of system elements. The concluding phase is a celebration for the campus community, with invitations to parents and civic leaders to introduce them to the new campus.

The players who engage in this process can implement an intermediary organization to play the role of project manager, representatives from the Department of Education responsible for construction management (in a New York context, this body is the School Construction Authority), the campus principals, the campus custodian, and a design team to be selected prior to the beginning of this process at the campus level.

Visual branding can only be implemented to its full effect after a successful master planning process has been charted for the four-year growth of the small schools on the campus, and the phasing down or phasing out of the large school on the campus.

Community Engagement
Community engagement with any design work is essential. With visual branding, it is absolutely necessary. Only the individual school communities can inform a design team about the “essence” of their school. This essence can include theme, culture, demographic makeup of students, traditions, and the like. What gives the school its meaning and feel will define the color and symbols created to represent the schools and the campus.

Community Engagement
Design
Fabrication
Installation
Celebration

This stage occurs over 2-3 months and involves in-depth consultations with school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and community partners. A first meeting with the entire campus community introduces the concept of a campus-wide system. This meeting is quickly followed by individual school meetings of approximately 90 minutes, to better understand each school’s identity and how the schools relate to the campus. These meetings provide information that inform the design process. Some sample questions for the individual school meetings are included.
Sample Questions
for Individual School Meetings

Your School’s Vision and Mission
How did you decide what your school would specialize in?
Who was on your school creation team and how long did the process of creation take?
Why did you think your team would be successful?
What were the most difficult barriers to overcome?
How did teachers react to the mission and vision?
How has the reality of implementation compared with your vision?
What are the main changes you see in your students’ attitudes, motivation, commitment, and results?

The Campus
How does your school relate to the other schools on the campus – cooperative, competitive, etc.?
Should there be more or less interaction between schools and students?
How are common facilities shared?
How do the students from the different schools interrelate, if at all?
Are there areas where the students tend to gather more than others? Does that change during the different seasons of the year?
How/where are sports for all students shared, and are there intramural sports?
Are extra-curricular activities available for your students and/or for the campus as a whole?
Is there an overall campus brand/spirit and what activities, communications, dress codes, mascots, or symbols help to create and strengthen that?

The Community
How do parents relate to the new schools?
How does the neighborhood community get involved, if at all?
What is the role of gangs, and has that changed?
Is there a student government, and what do they do?
Are there plans to provide activities for the students after school hours? If so, what are those activities?

Branding
Are there existing graphic elements, mascots, and/or colors that you think are important for your school or the campus building?
Can you share ideas with us about how colors and/or icons should be determined?
Should there be a discernable difference between the schools and the larger campus?
How would you build overall campus spirit?
What role should uniforms play and what are their components (i.e., shirts only)?
The branding work piloted at the South Bronx Campus is a building-wide system, most effective when all parts of the system are implemented. However, due to budget constraints or the need to phase-in work as space becomes defined over a longer time horizon with the growth of some schools and the decreasing size of other schools, this system should be seen as a “kit of parts.”

This “kit” allows for an implementation menu. Certain pieces are more essential, while others can be added as the campus transformation process allows. The components of the system include colors, typeface, symbols, signage, border tapes, and paint.

■ Colors
Each campus will have its own two-color combination, and each school within the campus will have its own two-color combination, one of which will be a campus color. This protocol creates a visual coherence to the spectrum of colors represented across the entire campus community. Where possible, colors by which the schools already identify themselves will be preserved.

■ Fabrication & Installation
While design is in its final stages, implementing any final recommendations from the campus leaders, it is necessary for the project manager to begin identifying vendors to fabricate and install all pieces of the system. The contract mechanism should have been determined by this time, as well.

At South Bronx Campus, three bids were received for each element of the system. In the end, two vendors were given the contract to produce and install all of the fabricated elements of the branding system (signage, banners, lettering, canopy, adhesive border tape), while a paint vendor was contracted to do all of the painting in the building.

■ Design
The design process begins with community consultation. Based on the needs expressed and the cultures articulated in the consultations, a design team will create color, symbols, and typefaces to suit each respective campus. After these creations have taken place, the design team returns to the campus schools for a feedback session.

After making any changes based on feedback, the design team must then conceptualize an implementation strategy. How will the colors, symbols, and typefaces be deployed throughout the campus building? This implementation activates the designs. Another session with the campus community provides final feedback on the plans for installation. The design team will make recommendations to the campus school leaders, who then must work through the recommendations and reach consensus. Can all agree on the treatments for the common areas and the exterior of the building, as well as the applications for each individual school’s corridors or floors? Whatever is done on one space will be done throughout the building to create a building uniformity.

■ Celebration
A culminating event should be planned collaboratively by all campus principals, in conjunction with the end of the branding process, to show off the “new” building and reintroduce it to students, civic leaders, parents, and community partners. Campus celebrations can happen as part of larger campus events (sporting events or arts events) or can be stand-alone ribbon cuttings to invite the community inside.

South Bronx High School historically was represented by the colors purple and gold. These colors were therefore passed to the campus, in order to maintain a sense of history and continuity. Purple and gold served as the base of the campus-wide system. Mott Haven had already developed a strong attachment to teal and gold, having used them in some of their promotional literature. Mott Haven colors became teal and gold. The Academy for Careers in Sports and New Explorers, while not previously invested in any colors, were led through a collaborative brainstorm to identify the right colors for their school. After some deliberation, with attention paid to how the selected colors would interact with the colors of the other schools and matched with either purple or gold, Academy for Careers in Sports opted for beige/purple and New Explorers chose green/gold.
Symbols

Typeface

Typeface and font are powerful tools to reinforce concepts and convey character. The design team, based on the individual meetings with the school teams, will develop options for typeface and font for each school and for the campus building.

The South Bronx Campus chose the typeface, Rotis Semi Serif, as part of the overall identity system. A cross between a traditional serif and non-serif font, this font was chosen because it best conveyed the character of the school — somewhere between a traditional and nontraditional school.

Symbols

Each campus and each school on the campus will have its own set of symbols, consisting of its colors, a distinctive typeface, and a graphic representation of school mission. These school symbols will be used throughout the campus as the distinctive marker of the individual schools’ presence within their home floor or corridor on the campus.

At South Bronx Campus, a “proprietary” containing shape — the conceptual package for the school symbols — was conceived as a modernized version of a shield to conjure a sense of heredity and tradition. This stylized shield solidifies the feelings of family and supports the culture that each small school seeks to create. A graphic variation on the traditional shield, with the addition of a bar, coupled with bright colors and symbols, makes a statement which seeks to build traditions of academic excellence.

These shields and color combinations will appear throughout the building in two versions — with a monogram of school initials and a full school name. The symbols created will be more of a stylistic device than a mascot for the schools, providing a subtle representation of school culture and vision.

Appearing on all signage throughout the campus, these symbols reinforce the identity of each school throughout its own space, and provide powerful imagery throughout the building, defining for the campus community the meaning of each school.

The symbols of the South Bronx Campus schools are shown below. Each symbol represents something intrinsic within school mission and culture, and was discovered through an in-depth participatory design process. Themes from the discussions with the schools included: a focus on individual and group achievement, a strong foundation for future successes, and expanding the mind. These themes provided a backdrop to individual school themes. The combination of the two eventually emerged in the school symbols created.

Academy for Careers in Sports seeks to integrate sports and sports-related fields, such as marketing, management, law, medicine, journalism and broadcasting, into an enhanced and challenging high school core curriculum. Discussions for an appropriate symbol ranged from a TV camera with headset to a series of different sporting goods. In the process, a decision emerged to illustrate something representing both parts of the school’s mission, not just the more easily illustrated sports connection. A torch seemed to be a strong fit because of the connotation of both academic and athletic excellence.

Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School integrates humanities and natural science with community service and environmental awareness. The value of community and academic achievement is captured with the visual device of a sunburst. The sunburst is as much stylistic as it is symbolic, capturing the brilliance and power of a high level education.

New Explorers High School prepares students for college, professional opportunities, and lives of productive citizenship through a student-centered, project-based experiential learning environment derived from the inquiry model of learning. This school seeks to instill in learners the desire to use education as a metaphor for adventure, and to take opportunities to explore further afield, broadening horizons. This theme of exploration is captured in a joining of the compass rose with the school initials.
Exterior Signage

■ Banners
Large, double-sided banners bearing the school names on one side and the campus name on the other side will be hung directly from the building facade. These banners provide a prominent representation to the community of the shift that has occurred within the high school building, while also beginning to raise awareness within the community about the concept of campus.

At South Bronx Campus, 6 double-sided banners (3’ wide by 15’ high) were installed on the building’s front façade. In either of the two directions from which one approaches the building, the visual effect is to see the names of the three campus schools on the first three banners (hung in alphabetical order), followed by the words “South Bronx Campus” on the subsequent three banners.

■ Building Lettering
The building’s main entrance sends the first and most powerful messages to all who enter the school. Therefore, numerous treatments are important in this area.

On the exterior of the building, the names of the campus and each individual school should be prominently featured using metal or brass-plate lettering. Often, this will involve removing existing large-scale lettering and replacing it with the name of the campus. The campus name should remain the most prominent name represented on the building. Below the campus name, if space allows, the names of all of the schools within the building should be represented. Each building entrance may include metal lettering, shields representing all of the schools, or some prominent signage proximate to the main entrance with the names of each school located in the building.

This work at South Bronx Campus reactivated the center doorway as the building’s main entrance. On a pediment, approximately 15’ off the ground, the old South Bronx High School letters were removed. The original carved letters of the school building — originally built for PS 38, circa 1921 — were re-plastered, and the entire surface was painted. Atop that surface, new 12” metal letters, painted brass color, were pin-mounted into the stone, spelling “South Bronx Campus.” Onto a sizable brickface a few feet below, the names of the small schools were pinmounted in 8” metal letters, in alphabetical order.

■ Additional Exterior Signage
Additional signage, where space and budget allow, will include some representation of the campus name on different facades of the building, above secondary entrances that have high visibility to proximate public thoroughfares. Signage may include smaller banners, shields, lettering, or some combination. The idea behind the additional signage is to reinforce the campus image, and if separate entrances exist for the small schools, it is necessary to signal those entrances.

Due to the small size of the South Bronx Campus building, the size and scale of the front facade banners, and limited visibility for the west and the north faces of the building, the decision to install additional signage proved an easy one. Only one additional shield — a 3’ by 3’ South Bronx Campus shield — was selected to hang above a secondary entrance on the only other side of the building providing access and visibility from the street.
Among the many unique things about a campus are the numerous shared spaces scattered throughout the building. These spaces include the cafeteria, auditorium, gymnasium, library, health clinic, and science labs. Shared spaces can prove to be challenging to program for the multiple schools within a campus, but can come to represent an opportunity for collaboration and programmatic linkage.

Some treatments within these areas should signify that they are common campus spaces, carrying the colors and signage that are distinctly campus. Elements within these shared areas may also reflect all of the campus schools.

The work at South Bronx Campus chose to focus efforts on the interior and exterior of the cafeteria. Additional signage was also hung outside of the auditorium, library, and the health clinic. Above the entrance to the cafeteria, a large awning with purple and gold stripes and the name “Campus Cafe,” has been hung. Upon entering the cafeteria, a 4’ stripe, in one of two campus colors, has been painted around the room’s perimeter. Atop this stripe, at intervals throughout the room are small “South Bronx Campus” signs. Additionally, four columns located in the center of the room have large signs with each of the small school shields arrayed vertically. The entire treatment transforms the formerly drab space into one with vibrant color and imagery reflecting both the campus and the individual schools.

### Interior Signage

#### Shields on Entrance Foyer Walls
The entrance foyer allows for an additional opportunity to introduce all visitors and school community members to the learning communities within the building. Large-scale symbols such as the school shields for each campus school will be hung inside the ceremonial entrance of the campus and inside any other significant entrances. If a campus has dedicated entrances for each individual school, then the main entrance will represent all of the schools and dedicated entrances will represent the signage of each respective school.

Directly across from the building’s main entrance, the visitor’s attention is immediately drawn to the three 27” x 27” shields of the South Bronx Campus schools, hung in alphabetical order.

#### Interior Banners
Nylon banners with the full names and symbols for each school will be hung above the reach of students in prominent places, such as the ceremonial entrance, the cafeteria, above staircases, or in the auditorium. This signage is a continual reminder of the multiple occupants of the campus. Additionally, it reinforces the concept of shared space belonging to all of the schools, and not only the largest school within the campus.

In the South Bronx Campus building, a double stairwell ascends both sides of the central foyer from the ground floor to the second floor. This two-story space, while not entirely open, provides an excellent vantage point from the stairwells and the second floor central corridor. A double-sided banner for each school was hung in this central foyer space, with three banners above each stairwell.
■ Campus Directory and Uniform Signage System

A campus directory and uniform signage system has been designed to promote easy way-finding within the building for visitors, staff, and students alike. As the campus buildings get split into multiple learning communities, this system provides the visitor with a color code and floor-by-floor listing of schools. It has been designed so that the simplicity of color guides the newcomer through the building. If the directory colors for School A are teal and gold, one is guided to certain floor numbers.

Directories are located in all major entrances to the building and adjacent to the entrance floor elevator. Three directories were fabricated for the South Bronx Campus. The directories were placed in the two building lobbies and in the entrance floor elevator alcove.

■ Large School Signs

Each respective school will have one or two large school signs (4' x 6') in the school colors, depicting the school symbol and name. These should be located in close proximity to an entrance threshold, elevator, or stairwell where the heaviest visitor traffic can be anticipated. Such large signage within each school’s corridor establishes the space as belonging to a particular school. This signage, in tandem with the border tape and painted moldings, helps demarcate an individual school’s “autonomous” space within the campus building. These images and colors help establish an image that conveys the school mission and each community’s distinctive sense of self.

■ Border Tape

Border tape will run the expanse of the individual schools, demarcating an entire school’s space as unique. A narrow heavy-duty adhesive tape (4”-6” wide), using the school’s two colors in a repeating pattern of the school’s name and symbol (one color as the primary field, the second color for the lettering) will run along hallway borders. This treatment should be placed 2” below the ceiling or directly above a molding, if one exists, a minimum of 6 1/2” above the floor. The borders will run the full length of each respective school’s corridor. The tape allows for an obvious break in color and symbol on shared floors or corridors.

Directly below the border tape, on picture rails, moldings, or directly on the wall, a 3”-4” strip should be painted in the color of the lettering on the border tape. The combination of the border tape and the painted strip creates a highly visible 7”-10” band.

■ Doorway Treatments

In addition to the aforementioned treatments of individual and shared space, there are opportunities to create powerful statements with doorway treatments such as awnings or archways at the gateway to shared spaces or threshold entrances to individual schools.

At South Bronx Campus, a striped nylon awning using the campus colors of purple and gold will be hung above the entrance to the cafeteria.
Paint

One of the opportunities that visual branding creates for a campus building is the ability to address disparate colors throughout the building. Uniform painting in campus colors of stairwell railings, school doorways, corridor doors, and other common spaces gives the campus building a much more uniform feel. Dedicated and common areas will be painted to conform to school and campus colors.

Paint was an important element of the visual branding work at South Bronx Campus. In addition to painting the moldings throughout the building, every railing (both double and single railings) in the building’s five stairwells were painted purple and gold if double, purple if single. All railings in common areas were painted a uniform black, instead of the black, red, or natural wood railings that had created a lack of cohesion. All doorways and doors facing corridors were painted a uniform color. Ceilings throughout the building in corridors were scraped and given a double coat of white, sprucing up dark corridors.

Branded Environments Contributors

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New Visions for Public Schools

New Visions for Public Schools, founded in 1989, is the largest education reform organization dedicated to improving the quality of education children receive in New York City's public schools.

We believe that school facilities that support instruction are an essential element of school creation. New Visions has funded this work to spur innovation, with a specific focus on the intersection of school facilities and pedagogy.