Claiming Space for Small Schools

Laura Kurgan
Claiming Space for Small Schools


Project Director
Laura Kurgan
Assistant Professor
School of Architecture
Princeton University

Project Team
Jennifer Leung
Chloë Town

Graphic Design
ORG inc.

August 2003
Special thanks to:

• the people of the Office of the Superintendent of Bronx High Schools, especially: Rosemarie Rizzo-Tolk, Director of Facilities; Peter Steinberg, Professional Developer; and Eric Nadelstern, Deputy Superintendent for New and Small Schools. Their guidance was invaluable, as was their participation in this research and the access they offered to these schools and their colleagues.

• Beverly Donohue and Lili Brown of New Visions for Public Schools, for their help with the larger context of this research.

• the many students, teachers, principals and other staff currently engaged in the New Century Schools Project. They were our inspiration.

• the faculty, students, and support staff in the School of Architecture at Princeton University, especially the students of ARC 505b, “ReProgram: Public High Schools in the Bronx”: John Cantù, Laura Foxman, Jean Jaminet, Texer Nam, Susan Nelson, Michael M. Mueller, Sergio Lopez-Pineiro Perez, and Jonathan Solomon.

• the Van Alen Institute for their support of this project.

All of the photographs reproduced here were taken — in the schools studied — by Laura Kurgan, Jonathan Solomon, and Chloe Town.

Portions of this research were generously supported by a grant from the Architecture Planning and Design Program of the New York State Council on the Arts.

This report reflects research done by a team from the School of Architecture at Princeton University and is authored by Laura Kurgan. The document has not been authorized or directed by any representatives of the schools discussed, the Board of Education, or the office of the Superintendent of Bronx High Schools. The views, opinions, and findings presented here are solely those of the author.

© 2003 Laura Kurgan
CLAIMING SPACE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

Marble Hill High School for International Studies
Introduction

MUCH OF THE DISCUSSION about secondary school reform today takes for granted that the new educational architecture is about creating physically smaller schools. But while small schools make sense for new facilities, their allure can allow us to forget one big question: that of the existing infrastructure, those very large school buildings which house an enormous number of our public high school students.

These schools have their origins in the 1950s, when large schools seemed to offer an efficient and standardized model of – and even a utopian model for – public education. Today they are synonyms for overcrowding, inefficiency, and violence.

However evident their flaws, though, large schools are here to stay, since fiscal realities make it unlikely that any public school system can rebuild itself from the ground up. This situation creates interesting new challenges for architects, accustomed as they are to creating anew.

Since the summer of 2002, a team from Princeton University’s School of Architecture has been following a group of innovative educators in the Bronx High Schools as they rethink the architecture of small schools. The group, under Deputy Superintendent Eric Nadelstern, has pioneered a number of unusual small school projects in which they have re-organized large and troubled school buildings into small school “campuses.”

Rather than building new schools, the New Century Schools, as they are known, use a “school-within-a-school” strategy and transform parts of big existing buildings into new small schools.

The project leapfrogs the standard approach – one school at a time – for the more politically-challenging goal of reorganizing a large number of schools across an entire district simultaneously. Thirty small high schools have opened in the Bronx in just over one year and have been assigned space within nine existing high school buildings.
CLAIMING SPACE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

BASING ON OUR RESEARCH in five large high schools in the Bronx, each of which hosts one or more new small schools, we have elaborated specific proposals for this kind of radical reorganization of a building. Although the educational goals of these projects cannot be contested, the appropriate strategies for their architectural implementation remain unclear and often difficult.

Architectural work, therefore, is critical to the success of the New Century Schools project. If the ad hoc insertion of small schools into big buildings is done too casually, the results can be disturbing, and not simply in aesthetic terms. When the lines between big and small are not drawn with care, the differences between the few and the many in the student body can turn into conflicts, and the results are not good for learning, safety, or the school community.

How to be “small,” it turns out, is not always obvious. We aim to make the insertion of these new small schools as smooth as possible, with a series of new approaches to the practice of “smallness.”

A strategy for the successful incubation and growth of these schools in their host buildings might begin with architecture, but it does not end there. We propose an approach to the master-planning of these projects which incorporates specific models that take non-architectural interventions just as seriously, in design terms, as those which rebuild walls, doors, and hallways.

Inexpensive media – usually thought of as secondary to architecture – like graphic design, scheduling, information technologies, and furniture organization have become for us essential tools in the design and planning process. Beyond the imposition of walls and barriers, these soft interventions quietly establish the individual identity and territory of each school within its host building.

The goals are twofold. First, we have sought to imagine the creation of actual spaces in which students and teachers can truly learn, by talking and working and reading together, and do so attractively and affordably. Second, we have tried to use the urgency and immediacy of the New Century Schools project to force some conceptual leaps, to challenge traditional ways of thinking about size and scale, and to inspire new ideas about architecture itself.

THIS PROJECT BEGAN with a design studio at Princeton University’s School of Architecture, directed by Laura Kurgan, in the Fall of 2002. The eight students in the studio, called “ReProgram: Public High Schools in the Bronx,” were asked to study the New Century Schools project and its urban context, and to propose design approaches for the aspects which they found challenging. The research in the studio involved investigations of school architecture, site visits to the Bronx, and an extensive investigation of the political, spatial, urban, and pedagogical dimensions of the small schools movement.

At the end of the semester, they presented their work to a jury of architectural critics at Princeton, as is customary. What was not entirely customary, though, was that on the following day they also exposed their work to a ‘jury’ of school administrators, teachers, and staff, at Evander Childs High School, and received a dramatically different set of comments and critiques.

Our research and conversations have continued – even intensified – since then, and this preliminary report marks our first attempt to document what we have seen and learned, to propose some directions for the future, and to take responsibility for our part in this ongoing dialogue.
Questions for This Term
1. Who am I?
2. How did the past affect me?
3. How can I affect the future?
‘Small’ today is not what it used to be.
We will not return to small towns, homogeneous neighborhoods, and one-room schoolhouses, and certainly not in the Bronx.

This is our current urban condition: globalization has created a new experience of Bigness (in size, reach, and scale) which can only be addressed by a new practice of Smallness.

If the large schools gained momentum based on a powerful idea of standardization – derived from a “Fordist” model of mass production – we can now ask how small schools might learn from new practices of space – in the sciences, politics, or “post-Fordist” economic models – which emphasize flexibility, just-in-time delivery, low inventories, speed, networks, interactivity, teamwork, and image-and information-intensive flow?
Today, smallness includes and responds to diversity, mixtures, and even conflict. Small things and events happen in the context of networks, some of them reaching across continents, and can be linked together in unexpected ways. To be small is not just about size but also about space, about the delimitation of territory. Smallness can offer comfort – intimacy, security, focus – without re-creating bunkers and fortresses. With new methods of organization, small units can remake obsolete and inflexible administrative structures. Taking advantage of speed to overcome distance and delay, small things can extend their reach and impact disproportionately. Being small opens up new opportunities and new possibilities for attention, responsiveness, and responsibility.

Being small is about marking off something separate, distinctive, worth protecting. It’s about creating (and making) a difference, engendering new identities. It can foster pride without encouraging prejudice, and establish rules and accountability by working more flexibly.
As the adjective indicates, size is the determining characteristic of a small school.

And yet small schools are about much more than simply a small number of students and limited physical size.

Educators agree on their success, and about how to measure it. According to scholar Mary-Anne Raywid, the substantive benefits of small schools have been established “with a clarity and level of confidence rare in the annals of education research.”

Students are not treated as mere statistics, but as individual learners, and teachers can respond to their success or failure as it happens, not long afterwards.

This report, therefore, does not promote small schools as an idea or a practice. We have taken them for granted, and instead sought to re-evaluate – in architectural and design terms – the ways in which “small” has been conceptualized and practiced in the ten-year history of the small schools movement.

While many architects and planners have responded to the small schools movement with elegant buildings, new spatial organizations, innovative furniture designs, or site-specific renovations, the Bronx New Century Schools initiative requires an altogether different approach to the project of creating small schools.

Given the impossibility of simply building new buildings to replace failed or troubled schools, small schools are being “assigned” to, or nested within, large schools. Sometimes the small schools are free-standing entities within larger environments, while at other times this results in small school “campuses.”

This poses a unique set of design challenges and opportunities, and offers rich possibilities for re-thinking some basic ideas about architecture and about education.
Failing schools seem to stand their ground.
Failed housing experiments, most famously Minoru Yamasaki’s Pruitt-Igoe housing project (St. Louis, 1955–1972), are often demolished outright, taking their organizational flaws and social ideologies down with them.

Failing schools, however, seem to stand their ground. While constantly evolving in theory, school buildings do not seem to be granted the same privilege of disposability and reconstitution. Perhaps, in the end, it is too shocking to demolish a school.

Over the years, schools remain as representatives of various architectural and political eras, forming a heterogeneous system of buildings. While they stay more or less the same, they have no choice but to weather changes in their student body, staff, technology, and curricula.

What happens?
Too often, they are subjected to a largely unplanned and ad-hoc process of revision, by means of which they are asked to cope with the problems presented to them by history.

Nowhere is this more visible than the landscape of schools in the Bronx into which the thirty New Century Schools have been placed since the 2002–2003 school year.

Despite variations in age, style, and spatial hierarchy within the existing layout of each high school, they share one heightened obsession: security.

Under the 1989 Board of Education guidelines, primary attention in most Bronx high schools has been paid to the front door. A secure front door, the thinking goes, is a single means of entry, with point-of-entrance metal detectors and a continuous security presence. The door invariably leads to a series of long open corridors, with their arguably clear lines of sight. These two simple elements are thought to be the basis for safe school environments.

In fact, they function as the opposite, a stark confession of the failure of security. Hallways in large high schools are, at once, the most banal and the most volatile zones for students. They are boring highways for student traffic, designed to be as blank and uninteresting as possible. The fear of fire and vandalism even strips them of all decoration.

Instead they are the scene, simultaneously, of random violence and intensive policing. They propose a martial psychology of ingress, creating a siege mentality and serving as a constant reminder of vulnerability and the potential for violence within urban high schools. No one sees in them the possibility of a public space, an open field for interaction and exchange.
The Educational Landscape, The Bronx
Morris High School was built in 1899 as the first public high school in the Bronx. All students, teachers, and administrators pass through security barriers.

Morris did not have an incoming freshman class in the 02–03 school year due to overcrowding.

A clinic has been added to offer medical care to students. A dentist is also present in the building.

Some special space is taken over by general classroom needs.
In 1998, the NYPD took over responsibility for school safety from the Board of Education.

A childcare facility has been located on the ground floor.

Other large spaces are underused and empty for most of the day.

What happens here?
MORRIS, established 1899
large school space distribution

TOTAL: 95,880 sf

- classroom: 32,200 sf (34%)
- circulation: 21,970 sf (23%)
- administrative: 8,220 sf (9%)
- shared: 29,040 sf (30%)
- miscellaneous: 4,450 sf (5%)

CLAIMING SPACE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS
John F. Kennedy High School

Escalators do not work and students are not allowed to use the elevators.

The yellow bricks are the same color as those used at Rikers Island Jail.

Students cannot use lockers.

Hallways have been stripped of all decoration.

The original design and the current use are often incompatible.

Classroom space has been converted into administration space.
John F. Kennedy High School was built in 1972 to accommodate overcrowding.

4,200 students enter through this door daily, although the building has three entrances.

All students, teachers, and administrators pass through security barriers.

A cafeteria whose moveable partitions always remain open.

Student movement is strictly controlled.

Fire extinguishers have been removed from the hallways to protect against vandalism.

The library is underfunded and in disrepair.

The sports field has undergone recent refurbishment.

Extra classrooms and security offices are located in “portables.”
JOHN F. KENNEDY, established 1969
large school space distribution
TOTAL: 468,240 sf
CLAIMING SPACE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

8th Floor
49,590 sf

7th Floor
49,590 sf

6th Floor
49,590 sf

5th Floor
49,590 sf

4th Floor
49,590 sf

3rd Floor
49,590 sf

2nd Floor
48,430 sf

1st Floor
122,270 sf

entrance
Reinvent your schools around the needs of students.
Reclaiming Space

OUR INITIAL RESEARCH took place over six months from June to December 2002. Together with Rosemarie Rizzo-Tolk, then the Director of Facilities for the Bronx High Schools, we visited and documented the small schools of the New Century Schools project, which was opening that semester.

We looked at the spaces occupied by the schools that year, and the administrative spaces that surrounded them, not only inside the buildings, but outside as well. We opened the doors, looked in the closets, went up and down the stairs, photographed the classrooms, measured the hallways, and walked back and forth through the metal detectors.

We were struck by the ways in which the small schools were dominated at once by the sheer size and the historical weight of some of the buildings in which they found themselves. We tried to recognize the mechanisms and pathways through which the small schools interacted with their larger hosts.

And we interviewed all the students, teachers, staff, and administrators who would talk to us. We asked about the attitudes of the inhabitants of the large schools towards those of the small ones, and vice versa. We wanted to know what worked and what didn’t, what was useable space and what wasn’t, and what made the intersections between the small and the large schools successful and unsuccessful.

Based on these observations we have organized our findings into a set of design principles.

ACCORDING TO Eric Nadelstern, the Deputy Superintendent for Bronx High Schools and then the director of the small schools initiative, small schools work best when the numbers are right: twenty-five students for each teacher, and twenty-five teachers per principal. Large school buildings were built with classrooms designed for a ratio of thirty-four students to one teacher, so some creative reshuffling was required if the new targets were to be met.

One phrase dominated this work of reorganization: “reclaiming space”.

“75% of this past summer was spent in reclaiming administrative spaces and obsolete spaces for classroom space,” Ms. Rizzo-Tolk told us that fall. She continued passionately: “In Kennedy, for instance, the administrative space has grown to almost a whole floor of the building, from one office in the original plans. There are now three guidance counselors, police in the detention facilities, and security guards. There are rooms and rooms filling up with adults, rather than kids – too many adults taking up valuable classroom space.”

Small schools, she argued, are about reclaiming space for children. “These schools need to redefine the role of adults, from specialists to generalists. One goal, simply put, of the small schools movement is to decrease administration and increase teacher-to-student ratios.”

The first and most important task in school re-design, we learned, is finding seats. In already overcrowded schools, designed for too many students to begin with, the New Century planners started with the selective erasure of obsolete functions, removing the remnants of bygone days. They eliminated typing areas, science labs, and drafting rooms, not to mention years of neglect manifested in disorganized boxes, old copying machines, and acres and acres of student records. What had been storage space was reclaimed for classrooms.

Dead spaces were revived, and new ones were created, using the oldest of methods: taking down walls.

Architect Rose Diamond, working with New Visions for Public Schools, reported that she found 1,600 seats simply by walking through the school buildings and identifying unused, badly used, and obsolete spaces, primarily in already-existing classrooms.

There are bigger spaces as well: we noted the multiple gymnasiums and cafeterias, mostly un- or under-used, vast spaces open to reconfiguration and rescheduling once the surrounding context – the one big school – is transformed.

THE NEW CENTURY SCHOOLS are now a reality in the Bronx, begun with optimism, energy and creativity – and with no master plan in any ordinary architectural sense of the word.

Retroactively, we can sketch the strategy – claiming or re-claiming space – in a few moves: discover space and find seats in forgotten zones, knock down a few walls, insert new furniture and equipment, and make sure the school will open at the beginning of September. Then, add more kids and fewer adults.

If half of the process involves finding space for classrooms and building or taking down walls, what is left?

For starters, there’s the rest of the (big) building, and the requirement is at once to separate and to integrate the new small school into its much larger host. The small schools have needs and pedagogical programs which require careful handling. The new schools must remain distinct and also form part of networks (within the building’s walls and beyond), which often share large facilities like cafeterias, libraries, gymnasiums and sports fields.

In this second half of the process, schools have largely been left to their own devices and have adopted a variety of ad hoc strategies, customized and localized from school to school.

These responses are also architectural, in another sense of the word, and can be formalized, at least loosely. Our research suggests one thing clearly: small schools should be allocated space in large schools buildings with a formula that fits. How?
An Open Invitation to Educators, Parents, Student and Community Members to Join the Bronx New Century High Schools

We are thrilled to invite your participation in Bronx New Century High Schools, the most far-reaching and exciting school reform initiative in the nation. With the help of a planning grant of $750,000 from New Visions for Public Schools, representing a consortium of funders composed of the Gates Foundation, Open Society Institute, and Carnegie Foundation, we plan nothing less than a borough-wide effort to re-imagine high schools for the benefit of those who work and study within them. The central premise of this work is that more students are more successful, in small, personalized learning communities.

Over the next two years, we plan to enlist and unleash the creative talents and energy resident in our schools to develop as many as 15 new small schools, and to redesign others in whole or in part. Our dream is to create a powerful network of small successful schools and learning communities throughout the borough, providing every student and family with an outstanding array of educational choices. In the process, every one of our schools will be encouraged and supported to rethink practices to better meet students’ academic, cognitive and affective need and to provide teachers and supervisors with the professional authority required to accomplish this vital task.

The district office will need to rethink our structure and practices as well. If we expect you to reinvent your schools around the needs of students, then we must reinvent ourselves around the needs of schools. Our ability to reorganize to better serve your needs is critical to the success of this vital endeavor.

We invite your active involvement and participation in shaping and implementing this plan. Your intelligence, experience and commitment are essential.

Your questions should be addressed to Eric Nadelstern, Superintendents’ Liaison to New and Small Schools at (718) 430-6325.

We hope you will agree that this represents a real opportunity to create the kinds of schools you have always wanted to work in, and the kinds of small school communities that make a real difference in the lives of students and their families. Join us in changing the map of secondary education for ourselves, and our colleagues in schools throughout the city and across the country.

Reprinted from http://www.bxhs.org/newcenturyschools.html
New Century High School Design Characteristics

1. rigorous instructional program: Effective schools enable students to develop a deep understanding of complex problems. Students must be engaged in an in-depth course of study through inquiry-based instructional strategies that build on specific strengths, needs and experiences.

2. personalized relationships: Teachers or administrators should know about the social and familial condition of every student, their academic and developmental strengths, and their individual aspirations.

3. clear focus and high expectations: In effective schools, staff develop a clear internal culture focused on a shared vision of teaching and learning. Successful redesigned schools have a coherent vision for the entire school building that includes all the component parts.

4. instructional leadership: Students’ problems and successes have school-wide implications. Leaders have a direct impact on improving the school culture and promoting teaching and learning. Decision-making is collaborative.

5. school-based professional development & collaboration: Effective small schools use on-site professional development to promote continuous assessment, reflection and involvement by the entire school community.

6. meaningful continuous assessment: A variety of performance indicators and assessments establish clear expectations regarding student work, provide students with opportunities to show evidence of understanding, and serve as diagnostic tools that enable teachers to effectively tailor education accordingly.

7. supportive community & parent/care-giver engagement: Successful schools engage in extensive collaborations with parents/caregivers, community-based organizations, and the private-sector.

8. student engagement: Young people have meaningful roles in the school planning and transformation process.

9. effective uses of technology: In effective high schools, teachers and students are comfortable using a wide range of technologies and technology is used throughout the curriculum as a means of enhancing learning opportunities.

Reprinted from http://www.bxhs.org/newcenturyschools/design.html
I started kindergarten.

My first graduation.

My first boyfriend.

About me.

2001

Graduation from eighth grade.

2000
South Bronx Campus

The standard construction of South Bronx High School embodied post-WWII models of efficiency. South Bronx has been reorganized in order to host three small schools. Barriers are foregone at the doors in favor of familiarity and responsibility.

Students work in small groups. The schools try to stay up to date in a world of rapidly changing technologies. Private spaces for students have been restored.
The new schools proudly display their identity along otherwise undifferentiated hallways.

Standard classroom furniture is creatively arranged.

School identities are redefined along common academic interest rather than demographics.

A bus bench recalling 9/11 reminds students of their connection to city and national events.
The reorganization has had minimal effects on the distribution of space. Can significant reclamation for small school campuses be accomplished by rethinking other categories of space?
CLAIMING SPACE FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

building floor plans, c. 1950

Information from Rosemarie Rizzo-Tolk Masterplan

campus master plan*, c. 2002

# classrooms

17 | SPORTS ACADEMY
19 | NEW EXPLORERS
17 | MOTT HAVEN

one classroom:
25-29 students
in 600-650 sf

1st Floor
21,020 sf

entrance

2nd Floor
8,120 sf

3rd Floor
9,190 sf

entrance

4th Floor
9,190 sf

5th Floor
9,190 sf
Everything is a matter of design.
With small schools, everything is a matter of design.

The Bronx New Century Schools initiative is conceptualized as a matter of school design: hence its creators insist on the “design characteristics” of their school programs.

We have sought to explore not only the design of the curriculum, but also the design of the space in which learning happens.

Our aim therefore, is to build upon the principles – the design principles, precisely – of the Bronx New Century school design to offer a vision of and a set of strategies for the redesign of the school buildings into which they have been placed.

School design and building design are obviously different projects, but our research has convinced us that they must be pursued in a linked and coherent way. As big things are divided into small, and both things change in the process, the reorganization of the existing fabric of school buildings must be as innovative as the restructuring of the schools themselves.
Inexpensive media, usually thought of as secondary to architecture, like graphic design, information technologies, and furniture organization have become our essential design tools. Beyond the imposition of walls and barriers, these soft interventions quietly establish the individual identity and territory of each school within its host building.

Obviously, physical work with the spaces of the schools is always required, but perhaps less of it is necessary than might be thought. Even if we do have ambitious plans for the renovation of the buildings, there may well be more effective ways to accomplish the goals. When resources are limited, how can you get the most out of your budget? And how can you respond to the spontaneity currently found at the thresholds of each school, and in the classrooms?

After the space is found and the walls rearranged, what are the essential components for assigning small schools to large buildings?

We propose a very limited set of moves, or perhaps tactics, which serve to make a set of larger strategies actual and effective.
**Tactics**

A basic menu of soft operations includes:

1. Graphic design and high-impact visual material

2. New technologies, particularly wireless ones

3. “Recombinant” furniture

4. Hubs and outsourcing

5. Flexible scheduling
Bronx Guild
1. Graphic design for distinctive logos, insignia, and other markers of identity, as well as high-impact visual material in the classrooms.
2. New technologies, particularly wireless ones, to leapfrog deficiencies in physical infrastructure, free up machinery from its wired tethers, and create new spatial arrangements, ranging from new models of small group work to new spaces for learning in a networked environment.
3. Distinctive and “recombinant” furniture for customized learning spaces which are driven by the school’s instructional mission.
4. Transform administrative space into multi-use space, and reconceptualize the central Principal’s Office as a hub with links to a wide set of networks, including a variety of external resources (supplies, materials, machines, information) too specialized for a small school but available through outsourcing.
5. Introduce temporal flexibility – just-in-time principles, sequencing, phasing, and creative scheduling – in order to take advantage of the remaining economies of scale which large buildings allow.
**Strategies**

Using these tactics, we aim to create:

- Meaningful and readable new identities
- Clear and fluid boundaries
- A different sort of security
- A campus environment with a shared sense of purpose
Create **meaningful and readable new identities** for students, teachers, and staff (what might be called visual branding).
Marble Hill High School for International Studies

Academy for Careers in Sports

Marble Hill School for International Studies

Mission

The mission of the Marble Hill School for International Studies is to provide each student the necessary skills to acquire and apply knowledge. We believe in an emotional and physical environment that is nurturing, challenging, and conducive to learning. We are committed to becoming self-directed, life-long learners inspired by their understanding of themselves. We will foster respect and understanding of cultures and equip students to function effectively in their society in which they live.
Clearly mark the borders of the territory occupied, while retaining a porous and interactive relationship between inside and outside to create **clear and fluid boundaries**.
Create **a different sort of security**, based not in guards and barriers but in the shared use of open space – clustered teaching and learning spaces marked by transparency and collaboration – that offers a sense of engagement and allows the assumption of personal responsibility by students together with staff.
Where an ensemble of small schools share one building, construct a **campus environment** which unifies the shared sense of purpose while underlining and celebrating distinctive identities.
CONGRATS
PERFECT
ATTENDANCE
NOVEMBER 2002
The landscape of schools is being transformed.
Conclusion

SMALL IS NOT WHAT it used to be. It has certainly at times functioned as a synonym for a retreat to values of homogeneity and privacy which have had less than fortunate outcomes.

The New Century experiment offers another vision of the virtues of smallness. It seeks to foster and acknowledge diversity in communities by offering students new points of identification (their school) rather than defending old ones (block, neighborhood, ethnicity, language) and by encouraging individual achievement. And it begins to reconstitute a more truly public space in the public schools, by creating spaces for involvement with others, encounters with things and experiences that are different from one’s own, and opportunities to resolve conflicts by learning from them.

AS THE 2003–2004 academic year begins, fifteen months after the creation of the New Century Schools, the landscape of high schools in the Bronx is being transformed: four thousand of the borough’s fifty thousand high school students are enrolled in thirty small schools. Each year for the next three years, all of these schools will add a grade until they grow to capacity of nine thousand. Something like thirty percent of the high school students in the Bronx will be enrolled in small schools by the year 2006. This project has been undertaken with remarkable energy and speed.

This report documents and demonstrates the vitality and complexity of these new school programs. It pays special attention to the spontaneous ways in which they have constructed their spaces and addressed their architectural needs, often far outside conventional understandings of space and architecture. They are, among so many other things, a design experiment.

Spontaneity and experimentation have a force of their own, but cannot sustain themselves indefinitely. This report seeks to formalize what has happened in the schools themselves, in a way that will allow future growth and transformation to take account of the rich inventiveness of the schools and build on it. It can also form the starting point of a more comprehensive architectural vision for reorganizing large schools into small ones.