Raising a MicroSociety School Improves A Community

The lawns are looking greener and the paint is looking fresher on many of the houses in J.O. Ford Elementary School's Richmond, California neighborhood. This is no coincidence. Richmond, a predominantly socioeconomically challenged community, has responded to the extreme makeover its school received with the design expertise of Sally Swanson Architects Inc., combined with the unparalleled construction management and overseeing provided by Lew Brower, of SGI Construction Management, and Chris Chierici of Alten Construction respectively, as well as the innovative visioning of the school's principal Barbara Penny-James, who sums up the excellent project results in the words, "Our new school environment is a place where students can thrive both academically and socially as they practice real life skills in the MicroSociety program."

Prior to the redesign, Ford was far from the beacon of hope it is today. Students from the local high school climbed up onto the roof for mischief and the bathrooms were filled with graffiti. Concerns over safety were dominating. Thanks to a bond referendum and California State funding, plus funds for CHPS points, the district gave permission for the old building to be leveled and a brand new building to be constructed.
new $18.6 million dollar elementary school to be erected. Says architect, Sally Swanson, "Stepping into the new J.O. Ford is truly a wonderful experience." The 68,000-square-foot building contains 26 classrooms and houses 384 students on its two acre site across the bay from San Francisco. It boasts large open spaces, event and community facilities, stimulating colors, and wide hallways that are transformed into child-scaled streets that create a sense of a place all the children's own -- the perfect backdrop for their MicroSociety.

Swanson's favorite feature is the tower. "It is really the node of the building," she says, "It can be seen from the freeway and really speaks to all who drive by as a beckoning point. We incorporated the tower to provide a sense of congregation, hope, and leadership. The overall design was created with both flexibility and environmental sustainability in mind. We wanted to create a true 21st Century building, requiring a design that can easily adapt with rapidly changing demands and needs. In California, 10.4% of children 5-17 have asthma. We wanted to promote a safe, quiet, and healthy facility. An air displacement system, a rainwater filtration system, cotton insulation, cork tack board, and linoleum flooring help eliminate toxic materials."

Sally Swanson Architects emphasized four design principles to nurture the whole child: cultivation, comfort, community and sustainability.

In terms of cultivation, the community and Ford's integration with it were addressed from the start. "We brought in the community for bilingual meetings to their concerns before we made any decisions. It was essential that they felt not only ownership but comfort and sense of place in this new community structure. They are very much reflected in what stands on this site today.

First and foremost, the architecture was done in an imaginative interpretation of the Spanish Mission style to blend in with surrounding structures and honor the community culture. There is one classroom just for community members as well as a community kitchen. In terms of sustainability, the facility is recognized as a California High Performance School(CHPS) leader which received the second highest points in the state of California in 2012. There are community gardens, (which present the students
opportunity to grow their own fresh produce), an outdoor classroom, structured play area per grade, as well as a mini soccer field. A courtyard with 35 student-designed tiles expresses security, unity, and love -- the very things this community wanted to see."

As a result, neighbors spend an average of 5-6 hours a day on campus and Ford Elementary School has over 50 community certified staff supporting its MicroSociety curriculum. The MicroSociety citizens have a sanctuary where they can dream big dreams...and take the steps to make them reality.

If your school is interested in speaking with Sally Swanson Architects, please contact Dorit Fromm (DFromm@swanarch.com) to schedule a conversation.

Additionally, if you'd like to take a tour of the New J.O. Ford please contact principal Dr. Barbara Penny-James (BPenny-James@wccusd.net) to arrange a visit.