



creative density

an urban prep school in west los angeles adapts
a warehouse for learning. by jennifer doublet



The Wildwood School's adaptive reuse of a bow-truss warehouse in medium-density urban Los Angeles is a model for contemporary high-school design. Rather than radically altering the existing structure, architect SPF:a organized small pedagogical components within the large shell and added a new fenestration system and cladding to the exterior.

Like the famed 1926 Petersschule project by the Bauhaus architects Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer, the Wildwood School's new campus by SPF:a is an educational vision springing to architectural life through the reality of a local real estate market and an architect's approach to act as a constructive and effective problem-solver. Aside from some programmatic exchanges and an existing parking deck standing in for Petersschule's heroic suspended playground platforms, the design process for Wildwood aims in much the same direction as that for the unbuilt Meyer/Wittwer icon, which renounced monumental formalism in favor of inspired functionality.

The new facility, which serves about 270 students in grades six through 12, opens at a time when Los Angeles is ripe for invigorating new school typologies. The lack of available, affordable, and even remotely appropriate 55,000-plus-square-foot spaces in which to build new public or private schools has driven recent projects by Morphosis in Long Beach, Daly Genik in Koreatown, and Gary Paige Studio downtown. There is clearly a vital, ongoing design dialogue for educational institutions requiring an exploration of space, form, and real estate territories. Traditional visions



of elementary and secondary schools in Los Angeles with rows of low-slung modules, miles of chain link, and the sprawling asphalt yards of Dogtown and Z-boys skateboard films—or, for that matter, the sequestered enclaves of pride and privilege in longstanding private schools—are either no longer possible, or for Wildwood, not desirable.

Previous schemes for Wildwood by other architectural firms proposing formally exciting, yet traditionally grounded, school models neither met the institution's budget constraints nor matched its pedagogical philosophy. It was only after exploring the advantages of a proactive retrofit solution with Los Angeles-based SPF:a that Wildwood itself came to realize what an ideal match it made with their mission to create inquisitive, self-reliant citizens.

"They are incredibly good listeners," says Wildwood's head of school, Hope Boyd. "SPF:a just got us, and their scheme really, really works for the students." She also credits the architects with encouraging and educating the school to understand the larger urban context of their existing structure, the broader landscape of the city, and the advantages of searching for the cleanest and most efficient solution that is least intrusive to the given building. With this in mind, the socially relevant and functional antiformalism of the SPF:a project is an inventive embrace of programming, city context, and thoroughly considered issues of what makes a dynamic urban campus.

Conceptually, SPF:a principals Zoltan Pali and Jeffrey Stenfors treat the existing building structure as a kind of loom upon which to weave the fabric of the Wildwood curriculum. The commercial warehouse, which previously housed television production facilities, features a double bow-string truss roof assembly that divides the overall space of the existing building into symmetrical 20-foot by 70-foot bays. This assembly straddles the original brick envelope from front to back and adjoins a previously added concrete parking deck in the rear.

The diagrammatic engine driving design and the rallying force that kept everyone's eye on the ball through a tight and complex project

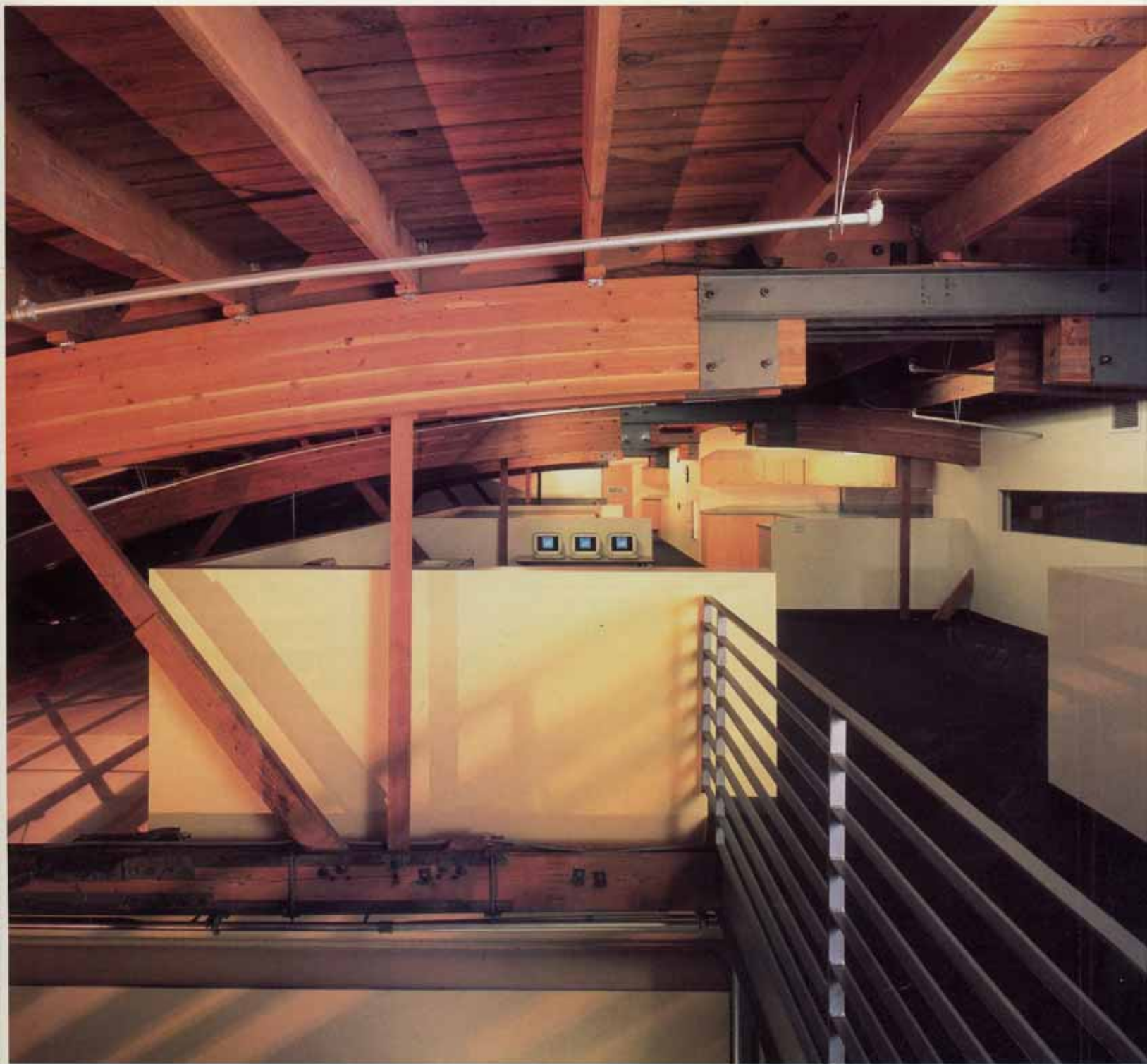
schedule is articulated in the architects' physical model. This design scheme provides for a great hall running north to south on either side of the column line supporting the trusses above. The client's and architects' early premium on natural daylighting generates a strategic series of skylights, clerestory windows, and translucent interior ceilings throughout the building. The western half of the building follows the rhythm of structural bays with color-coded academic "pods" for pairs of grades from seven through 12, and a stand-alone pod for grade six. Stairways between alternating pods circulate students to the mezzanine level, which houses a portion of the administrative offices and banks upon banks of flat files for the students' portfolios. (At Wildwood there are no grades and the student work, stored in portfolio format, is up for review on a regular and cumulative basis.) The eastern half of the building expands the structural bay rhythm to allow for the larger double-bay and double-height performance, visual arts, and science lab spaces. The pods serve as an intimate localized home base for given age groups, while the wide interior courtyards invite cross-pollination between the grade divisions and the academic disciplines.

As in the Petersschule project, functionality becomes pedagogy at Wildwood. Easily the most engaging aspect of the campus building, for students with inquiring minds, is the tightly knitted exposed construction. In many ways a cost saver, it not only reveals the success of the original diagrammatic scheme but also the clever solutions to unexpected field conditions. These construction techniques provide a dynamic and textured backdrop that emulates the spirit of the school, which considers its students as "inventor/explorers." The result offers the opportunity for a rich scavenger hunt, in which curious students can seek out how and why, when and where, and by what means their school is put together. ■

Based in Los Angeles, Jennifer Doublet is an architectural designer and writer who has recently been studying for her registration exams.



After entering the high school (opposite, left), circulation—like the curriculum—is organized by interdisciplinary “learning pods” that flank a wide main corridor (opposite, right). Stairways between the pods (above) connect learning areas to administrative and study areas on the mezzanine, as well as flat files for the students’ “portfolios,” or coursework.



A mezzanine of study spaces and administrative areas are carved into the belly of the bow-string trusses (above), with operable skylights for improved ventilation. Larger double-height spaces include art studios and a music room (opposite, left and middle). The great hall ends with a student gallery and lounge wrapping offices and classrooms with translucent partitions for improved lighting (opposite, right). Throughout the spaces, the exposed construction offers a dynamic and textured backdrop for students.



WILDWOOD SECONDARY CAMPUS, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
CLIENT: Wildwood Schools **ARCHITECT:** SPF:a—Jeffrey Stenfors, Zoltan Pali, Judit Fekete (principals in charge); Dan Benjamin (project manager); Siddhartha Majumdar (job captain); Damon Surfás, Gregory Fischer, Frank Lopez, Brian Cavanaugh, Derek Fisher, Willis Kusuma, Shaheen Seth (project team) **ENGINEERS:** Ismael Associates (structural); Kerr-Pali Associates (M/E/P); G&W Electrical Engineers **GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** T. Viole Construction **CONSTRUCTION MANAGER:** Nancy Epstein **LIGHTING DESIGNER:** Parviz Electrical **COST:** \$6.3 million **AREA:** 55,000 square feet **PHOTOGRAPHER:** John Edward Linden

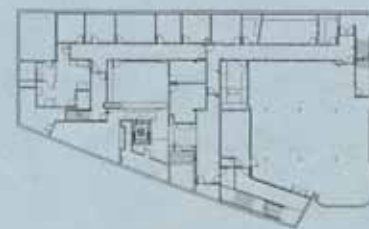
SPECIFICATIONS
CONCRETE: Associated Ready-Mix **TRUSS JOISTS:** Standard Structures **POST-TENSIONED GLULAM:** Dywidag **ALUMINUM STOREFRONT:** U.S. Aluminum **METALS:** Weiss Sheet Metal **WOOD:** Parklex/Finland Plywood **SLATE:** Dal-Tile **BUILT-UP ROOF:** U.S. Intec **INSULATION:** Pyrox/Appache **GLASS:** AFG industries **PLASTIC GLAZING:** Lexan, Plexiglas **SKYLIGHTS:** Bristol Fiberlite **METAL DOORS:** Cookson **WOOD DOORS:** Solid-core birch veneer **DOOR FRAMES:** Alumatone/Timely **FIRE DOORS:** Won-Door **LOCKSETS:** Yale, Corbin-Russwin **HINGES:** Cal-Royal **CLOSERS:** Norton **CEILING:** Armstrong **INTERIOR PANELS:** Armstrong, USG, Lexan **DEMOUNTABLE PARTITIONS:** Chasedoor **CABINETRY/MILLWORK:** WilsonArt, Kewaunee **PAINTS/STAINS:** ICI, Frazee, Dunn Edwards **FLOORING:** Tarkett **CARPET:** Design Weave **GYM FLOORING:** L'Air **ACOUSTICAL PANELS:** La-Vigne Muffie **LOCKERS:** Republic **FURNISHINGS:** Herman Miller, Paoli **INTERIOR AMBIENT LIGHTING:** Metalux, Focal Point, Paramount **UPLIGHTS:** Corelite **DOWNLIGHTS:** Spectrum **TASK LIGHTING:** Focal Point, Ruud **EXTERIOR LIGHTING:** Ruud **SPECIALTY LIGHTING:** LSI, Paulsen **ELEVATORS/ESCALATORS:** TRE **PLUMBING FIXTURES:** Kohler, American Standard, Elkay



Ground floor plan



Mezzanine plan



Basement plan | 130' ^

- 1 entry
- 2 arts and performance
- 3 typical learning pod
- 4 laboratories
- 5 administrative offices