

Call of the Wildwood

SPF:a uncovers the past of a Los Angeles warehouse—and goes to the head of the class at the Wildwood School

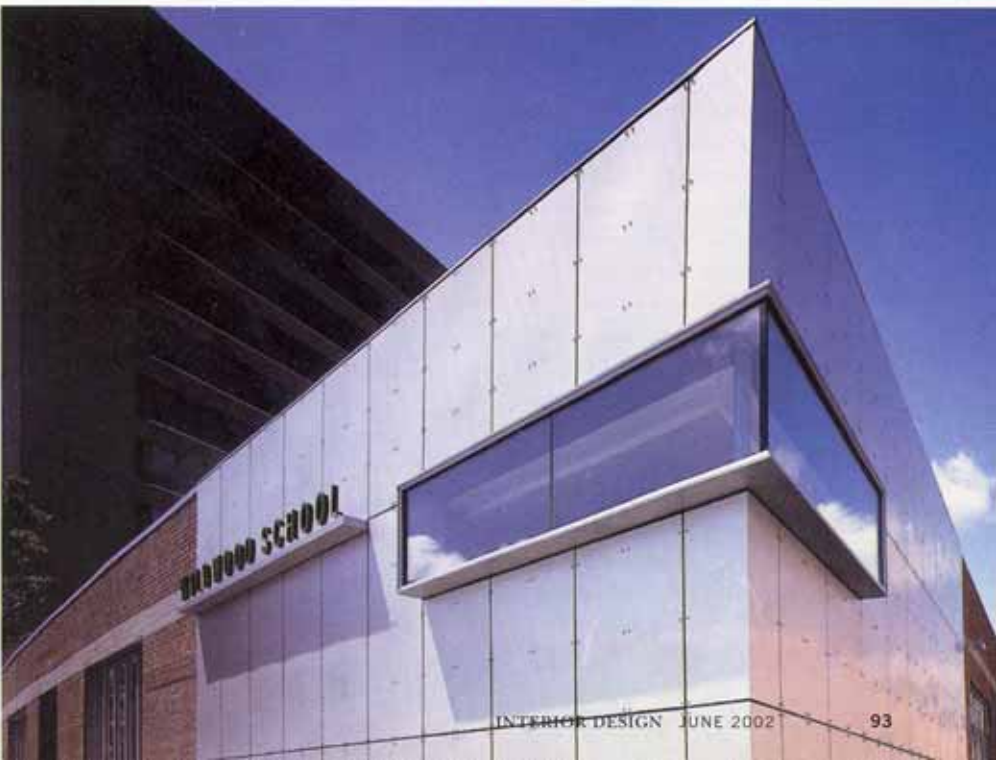
AN ARCHITECTURE FIRM couldn't be blamed for balking at a two-week deadline and a "very tough" budget to plan a 40,000-square-foot remodel job. But the self-described "hard-nosed pragmatists" at SPF:a, the up-and-coming firm that received this assignment from the private Wildwood School in Los Angeles, didn't even flinch. Wildwood, which had been a primary school but was expecting its first secondary-school classes in five months, had recently parted ways with a prominent local architect and needed to move ahead ASAP.

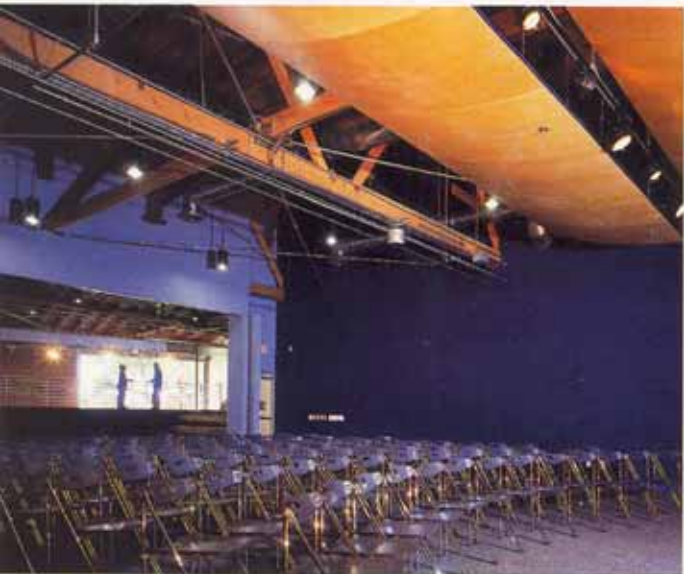
Fortunately, the way SPF:a principal Jeffrey Stenfors casually recalls it, the Santa Monica building itself quickly suggested a solution. Stenfors and partners Zoltan Pali and Judit Fekete saw beyond the 1970s dropped ceilings, installed by a TV production studio, to focus on the 1940s warehouse structure, with its soaring wooden bow trusses. "We looked at the original plans for a few minutes, and the design really revealed itself," Stenfors says. "The structure was perfect." Not every firm would have seen it that way, but appreciation for authenticity comes naturally at SPF:a. Devotees of Louis Kahn and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the trio also has a solid portfolio of historic restorations, including L.A.'s Pantages Theatre.

The firm's simple, functional concept for the Wildwood School was inspired by those iconic Douglas-fir bow trusses. Starting with 12 double bays of trusses spaced 20 feet apart (the ideal classroom width), Stenfors created four semiautonomous "pods," one per grade. Occupying three bays, each →

Above, right: Self-portrait of a progressive school—student art lines the walls of a reception area, furnished with SPF:a-designed tables and modular seating by Don Chadwick.

Right: An aluminum-paneled addition takes a run at Olympic Boulevard in Santa Monica. The double-glazed slot window protects the acoustic sanctity of the music room inside.





pod comprises five classrooms and a stairwell. Interaction takes place along a broad corridor, which connects parking and street entrances, and in an angular, aluminum-clad addition that houses an auditorium, music room, and gathering space.

After a crash course on Wildwood's progressive educational philosophy—eschewing standardized tests and grades in favor of personalized learning, portfolio creation, and internships—SPF: a incarnated these ideas throughout the building. Folding partitions between classrooms facilitate impromptu interdisciplinary lectures. Occupying the warehouse's loftiest central third, a new mezzanine adds 15,000 square feet for independent study and the storage of oversized portfo-

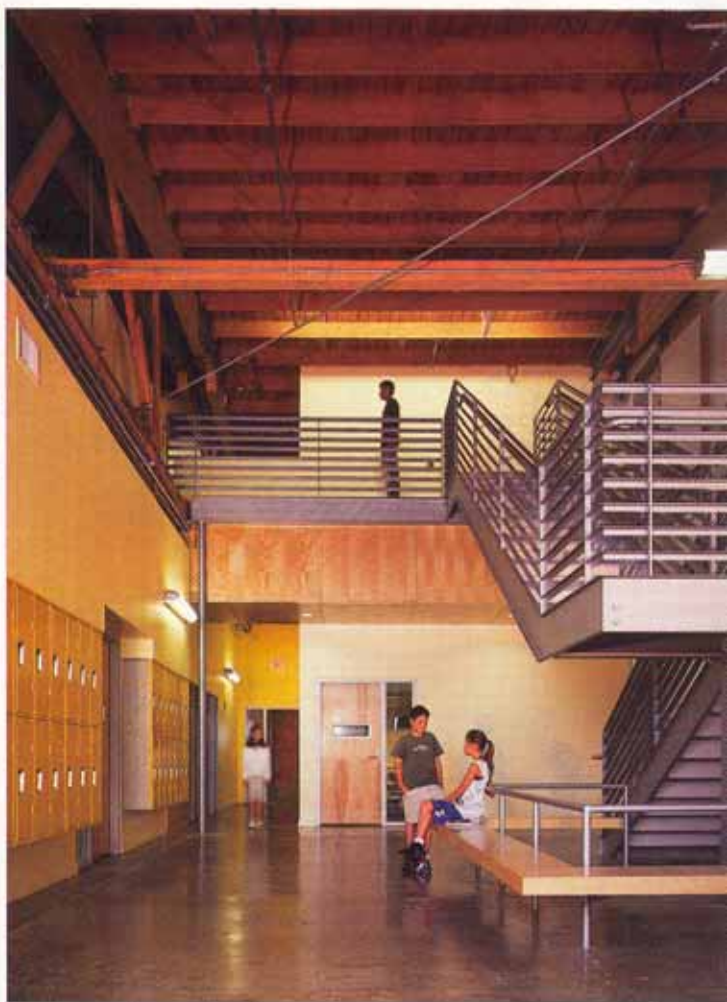
lios. The 12th-graders' pod occupies street-front real estate, a metaphor for the seniors' imminent exit into society. "They were able to take our very abstract vision of the program and make it concrete," raves Hope Boyd, the head of the Wildwood School. "We had talked to a number of architects, but these guys 'got it' at a deep, core level."

Which isn't to say that there weren't →

Top, left: A combination of skylights and dropped fixtures illuminates a science lab.

Bottom, left: Birch-veneered acoustic reflectors help conceal lighting in the auditorium, whose rear wall rolls up for big-event overflow.

Right: SPF: a cut away at the warehouse structure so below-grade areas would receive sunlight.



challenges. To get Wildwood open for business that first September, SPF: a hastily converted half of the existing office space into temporary classrooms and built out the other half during the school year. (The next academic year, SPF: a flip-flopped the students and finished the job.) Charged with delivering natural light to interior, lower-level classrooms, the firm installed acrylic ceilings, or lenses, that diffuse sunshine captured by skylights.

Bringing the project in at less than \$100 per square foot—including major custom furniture, fixtures, and equipment—presented numerous budgetary challenges or, as Stenfors likes to call them, “opportunities.” Sealing the concrete floor as-is created a palimpsest of cracks, paint, and remnants of old flooring materials. Color, liberally applied, identifies each pod and makes primary-hue exclamations in public areas. Sparingly used, birch paneling and maple-

vener benches warm up the neutral industrial concrete, drywall, and aluminum.

Flexible, multiuse spaces will likely be the attribute the student body and faculty come to appreciate the most. “We’ve given them something they can grow into,” Stenfors says. “As their program evolves, the space can evolve with it.” The auditorium’s roll-down rear wall, for instance, can be either closed to create a black-box theater and lobby or fully opened for large events, with overflow seating on hallway bleachers where students normally hang out and eat lunch.

—Susan Enfield

Left: One art studio easily becomes several, thanks to a steel industrial slider on an overhead track.

Right: Downstairs in the freshman “pod,” students hang out by their lockers. Upstairs, a mezzanine addition creates space for studying and storage.

PROJECT TEAM: SIDDHARTHA MAJUMDAR; GREGORY FISCHER; FRANK LOPEZ; DAMON SURFAS; SHAHEEN SETH; BRIAN CAVANAUGH; DAN BENJAMIN; WILLIS KUSUMA.