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THE 1•5•10 ISSUE

What we must do immediately
and in the near and long term
to preserve our future



THE PRIDE of EAST 103rd STREET by Suzanne LaBarre

A new middle school in Harlem is the product of its stubborn and visionary founders and the building's equally stubborn and visionary architect.

Peter Gluck and Partners took a tight urban site and turned it into a vibrant middle school. Students gather daily in the playground for a school-wide meeting called "circle."



Photos by
Theo Morrison



Ivan Hageman wasn't sold on the design. He feared anything modern. He didn't like the method the architect was pushing—design-build, in which a single firm stewards everything from the first conceptual drawing to the last layer of paint. It seemed foreign and vaguely suspect. And above all, he thought that the architect, Peter Gluck, was a bit of a jerk. “Peter was somewhat loutish, somewhat rude, somewhat devil-may-care: ‘Either you're going to go with me or not,’” Hageman says in his second-floor office, which overlooks, like a happy panopticon, the street outside the private school he helms. Recalling their first meeting, in 2004, with the school's board of trustees, he says, “At the end of the meeting . . . the chair of the board said, ‘I agree with you, Ivan. He does seem kind of difficult. He reminds me of someone you've worked closely with over the years.’ I said, ‘Who?’ She said, ‘You.’”

Out of this grew the most striking new school building East Harlem has seen in years, if not ever. It's defiantly modern. A black, gray, and white pixelated facade gathers triumphantly over a translucent base, echoing the surrounding row houses. Little filmic windows loom over a street that 15 years ago would have made West Baltimore look like Epcot. Inside, rakish furnishings and circles are thrown up all over the place—in the lighting, around the circulation vents, even on the lockers. They make for an aesthetic that's both fun and dead serious, which is precisely how the school sees itself.

The \$10.6 million building owes everything to the visions of these two men: Hageman, a 50-year-old born-and-bred Harlemite with the résumé of an American saint, who returned to the ghetto after attending Harvard to cofound a radical middle school (the sort where you'll sooner find students meditating than brushing up on their algebra); and Gluck, a 70-year-old New York City architect every bit as ornery as Hageman says. Slamming the profession, he'll make your ears bleed, so dead set is he in his conviction that building projects work best when architects control all aspects of production. (Though few actually do.) “The question is: What is the role of an

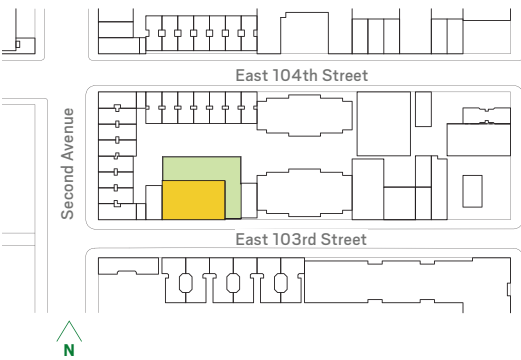


PIXELATED FACADE

Trespa panels screwed onto an aluminum subframe make up the cladding. The architects took field measures, generated shop drawings, and used their own carpenters instead of traditional facade installers—all cost-saving elements of design-build.

SITE

The school (below, in yellow and green) rises over a surge-prone swamp in East Harlem. The difficult site added \$750,000 to the cost of the project, forcing the architects to reconsider their original scheme.



“What is the role of the architect?”

Peter Gluck says. “Architects have reduced their role. It’s a whole litany of what they don’t do. Our position is the opposite.”

architect?” Gluck says. “Architects have reduced their role. It’s a whole litany of what they don’t do. Our position is the opposite. We like to partner with our clients. We become their total advocate.” Here, the partnership—which was less a perfect duet than a system of checks and balances—produced that rare thing in inner cities: architecture with humanity.

Angel Romano and Leilani Lopez tumble into the school’s lobby, grinning. “Are you ready for the tour?” Leilani asks. The “tour,” if this were any other private school, would be a hurried march through some fusty brick building, the sort that makes parents reach deep in their pockets, then deeper. Not at this school. Led by students (Angel and Leilani are eighth graders), the tours are open to just about anyone: parents, donors, even Skinny, the drug dealer down the street. And they begin with an exquisitely unconventional history lesson. “The site you see was a drug-rehabilitation facility started by our head of school, Ivan’s, parents,” Angel says matter-of-factly, gesturing around him. “It was later turned into a school.”

That’s the short version. The longer story is this: Hageman’s father, Lynn, was

Drawings, courtesy Peter Gluck and Partners; portrait, Theo Morrison



IVAN HAGEMAN

PETER GLUCK

COLLABORATION

The project owes its success to the push-pull partnership between the architect, Peter Gluck, and the school's principal, Ivan Hageman, pictured here in Hageman's office.



NATURAL LIGHT

Randomly arranged windows loosen up the aesthetic. They're practical too: each classroom can be re-configured and still get plenty of natural light.

Gluck's insistence on design-build gave the school pause. They worried that conflicts of interest would arise—a common concern about the method, which is why it isn't practiced more often.

a white minister and civil-rights agitator who earned the highest of all generational honors—he did time in the clink with Martin Luther King Jr. He had his first date with Hageman's mother, Leola, at a Paul Robeson concert. They wed, then headed for East Harlem after the Methodist Church denied Lynn a parish in his hometown for the sole reason that his wife was black.

The couple founded Exodus House in 1963. It was the first residential drug-treatment center in a neighborhood devastated by addiction. Hageman and his siblings grew up there. He lifted weights and played ball with the ex-junkies, black and brown men under siege and trying to rebound from battles on the street or in Vietnam, who were there by choice or, more often, by court order. "It was like having a bunch of big brothers," Hageman says. On weekdays, he and his brother by blood, Hans, schlepped across town to Collegiate, an all-boys prep school in a fusty brick building, where John F. Kennedy Jr. was a classmate. "We knew we were hugely privileged relative to the people across the street, and I was going to a school where people were hugely privileged and had no sense of it," Hageman recalls. "The juxtaposition of these two worlds made us yearn for justice in one way or another. Growing up here is the reason I came back."

The brothers opened the East Harlem School at Exodus House in 1993, with 13 students. (Their continued on page 73

CLASSROOM

The architects used carpeting instead of vinyl tile. Painted drywall along the north- and south-facing interior walls mimics the school's Trespa facade but at a fraction of the cost.

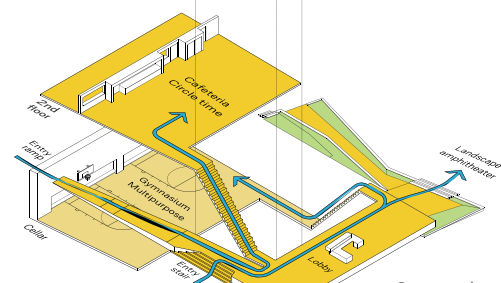
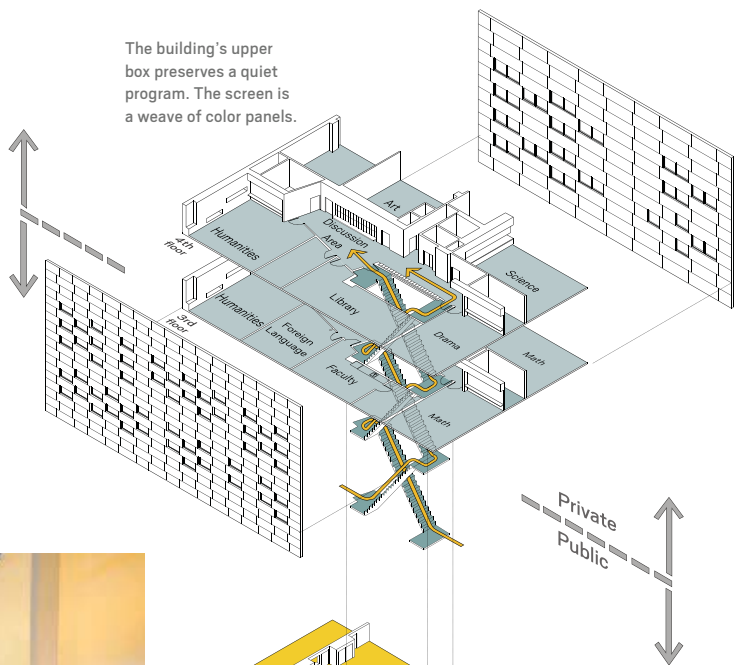




Right two photos, Erik Freeland; drawings, courtesy Peter Gluck and Partners

CIRCULATION

Right: Lengthy ramps and stairwells stretch out the school's entrance (yellow diagram), giving it a processional feel. Upstairs (gray), where students spend most of the day, scissor stairs and short hallways tighten the configuration, creating more classroom space.



Communal programs are concentrated in the lower box, which uses glass to connect to the outside community.

UPGRADES

With leftover cash, the architects were able to make several design upgrades, including this translucent acid-etched glass that shields students from noisy neighbors.



CIRCLE THEME

Air vents in the cafeteria double as overhead lights; they also riff off the school's daily "circle" gatherings. The theme is repeated throughout the building.



GYMNASIUM
 The architects managed to squeeze both outdoor and indoor play areas into a site that is less than half an acre by stuffing a half-court gym (below) into the basement. Clerestories keep it bright. The architecture team (from left, with East Harlem School students): Mark Gee, Peter Gluck, and Stacie Wong.



parents' ill health and a growing group of untreatable crack addicts doomed the clinic. It had been shuttered and turned into an after-school program several years earlier.) The conceit was simple: provide an education with the social and academic rigor of a Collegiate, but for East Harlem kids whose parents could never afford the cost. JFK Jr. helped secure seed money. Hans was the back-of-the-house bureaucrat, and Ivan the principal. Soon they were teaching 40 students a year in the old cinder-block structure where their "big brothers" once gathered.

Angel and Leilani pause in the school-placement office, a light-flooded room with a Hotchkiss pennant tacked to the wall. They tick off the boarding schools they're applying to: Kent, Westover, Putney, Loomis Chaffee. "Plus some Catholic schools for backup," Leilani says.

The East Harlem School was and remains an aspirational place. Though the neighborhood has surrendered, in recent years, to improvident developers hawking bargain-counter gentrification, it's still a fortress of public housing with few attendant amenities. Many of the kids have endured extreme personal trauma—domestic violence, sexual abuse, parents with drug problems, destitution—and they're incapacitated by a public-school system that doesn't know what to do with them. About 60 percent enter the school reading below their grade level. Under Hageman's direction (Hans has since taken on other nonprofit work), the school acts as an eight-to-five, five-day-a-week, ten-month-a-year corrective.

The remedy is a reflection of the man himself. Hageman, equal parts hard-ass and mystic, has a penchant for kung fu, Eastern philosophy, and second chances. He drops references, from Malcolm Gladwell to Montaigne, the way the rest of us say "um," and he's just as likely to meditate in his office as he is to beat the stuffing out of the boxing dummy in the faculty

Under Hageman's direction, the school acts as an eight-to-five, five-day-a-week, ten-month-a-year corrective.

Below and lobby image, Erik Freeland



CAFETERIA
Large sections of the ceiling go without duct-work to accommodate these circular recesses, which lighten the institutional feel.



LOBBY AND HALLWAYS
Circular perforations in these custom-built, lock-free lockers (below) playfully eliminate the temptation to stow contraband. Below left: The school's lobby.



gym. His school is a place to learn about lofty things like community (students participate in a daily school-wide gathering called "circle") and contemplation (the end of each class is heralded by a student banging on a bowl, while classmates sit in silence) but also how to use a comma. Back in his office, Hageman explains the school's philosophy by way of the Rudyard Kipling poem "If." "To walk with kings or queens," he recites, paraphrasing a little, "but keep the common touch."

The old building wasn't suited for kings or queens, or anyone else, for that matter. It flooded at the first sign of rain clouds. The board of trustees agreed in 2004 to rebuild and expand the school to accommodate 140 students. It started interviewing architects, including Rogers Marvel, 1100 Architect, and Butler Rogers Baskett, all solid candidates. (Hageman liked the latter; it dealt in the fusty brick architecture he knew well.) Gluck, whose 40-person firm leans unapologetically modern, was a last-minute recommendation from a board member at the Bronx Preparatory Charter School, which Gluck's firm designed four years ago. "What I loved immediately about Peter was that he had no issue pushing back with Ivan," says Dede Brooks, the chair of the East Harlem School's board and herself one of Hageman's redemption stories. (Brooks, you might remember, was the Sotheby's CEO who pleaded guilty to a price-fixing scandal in 2000, then spent six months in an ankle bracelet. Hageman took her in and gave her a volunteer job. continued on page 81



A daylight-filled classroom at the East Harlem School, in New York City. The design-build expertise of Peter Gluck and Partners allowed the charter school to replace institutional flooring with sound-dampening carpet.

Today, she's among the school's top private donors.) "There was a banter between them that was at times a little heated," she continues. "I found that enormously appealing."

But Gluck's insistence on design-build gave them pause. They worried that conflicts of interest would arise—a common concern about the method, which is why it isn't practiced more often. For instance, a design-build firm could specify, as architects, a mechanical system that cost \$100,000 and then, as contractors, sneak in a model for \$20,000. The East Harlem School, which subsists on private and foundation money, couldn't afford the risk.

“What I loved about Peter was that he had no issue pushing back with Ivan,” Dede Brooks says. “There was a banter between them that was at times a little heated. I found that enormously appealing.”

Gluck took Hageman to see Bronx Prep. A big campus done on the cheap, it's a meat-and-potatoes kind of place, with generous, boxy volumes and corrugated metal that goes on for days. Hageman hated it. Gluck pointed out that his firm had only designed it. Things might have been different if it had built the school too. (The contractors might not have tangled with the legal authorities, for instance.) They visited another building. This one, a low-slung synagogue school clad in horizontal bands of zinc, looked like some sort of Miesian sanctuary. Hageman was smitten. "Gluck had done work on this sacred space in a very modern way, evocative of a desert religion," Hageman says. "It was beautiful, stark, austere, and spiritual. I was like, 'This is what I want.'"

Had the East Harlem School chanced it with another architect, the project might have limped along like this: the designers would have labored over a set of drawings and delivered them to the school, then toddled off to the next thing while contractors readied their meat cleavers. Inevitably, costs would have stretched beyond estimates, and the contractors would have hacked away at the design, then congratulated themselves on value engineering.

Design-build à la Gluck flips the process on its head. The initial concept for the school was an Edenic five-story building, with grass-covered playgrounds tiered whimsically over the top floors. Everyone loved it. Unfortunately, the architects had to scrap the whole thing. The school rises above a sludgy swamp that easily floods; as a result, new buildings have to be as airtight as submarines. Because Gluck's staff members are trained as both architects and construction managers, they invited cost estimates from subcontractors early on. Bids for waterproofing came in absurdly high. Rather than move ahead with a design the school could no longer afford, the project architects, Stacie Wong and Marc Gee, pared it back—lopping off a floor here and a green roof there while sparing the classroom space the school needed to grow. "Value engineering traditionally happens when the drawings are done, the **continued on page 83**

building's been bid, the schedule is approaching, and they find out they're way over the budget," Gluck says. "The only thing a contractor can do is make things cheaper, but he can't change the building. The proper way to value engineer is to completely change the animal. . . . Had we not done that, the project would've been a disaster."

"The only proper way to value engineer is to completely change the animal," Gluck says. "Had we not done that, the project would've been a disaster."

Their early restraint gave way to later splurging. With leftover cash, they upgraded the pixelated facade from concrete board to Trespa, a tough laminate that's easier to clean (and much sharper looking), and replaced some of the clear windows with acid-etched glass, which transmits a soft, translucent glow. The latter choice pleased Hageman, who worried that too much transparency would sacrifice students' privacy. Indoors, they replaced standard-issue institutional floors with sound-absorbing carpet and recycled-rubber flooring. Afterward, there was still \$520,000 left over, which Gluck returned to the school for its then-nascent endowment. The firm also played real estate consultant, leaving a school-owned vacant lot that's hard by the new building and can be sold or developed. (Today it's an outdoor basketball court.) These are the particulars that elevate the East Harlem School from a meat-and-potatoes operation to a sacred place. Gluck calls it his "extended service." Others might call it humane.

Not that it was all moonlight and roses. Gluck's camp feuded with the school over security and privacy, with Hageman and his staff generally favoring more of both. The entrance, which carves gently into the school, was supposed to be a welcoming gesture to both the students and the surroundings. Hageman feared it would be too welcoming. (The front door of the old building was a popular urinal.) Weeks into construction, Hageman started stumping for a fence. The architects pushed back, insisting that it would actually invite vandalism. "We felt strongly from other projects we've done that once a project like this is built, the neighborhood will take care of the school," Gluck says. "If you try to put barriers like that up, they'll try to break them down." He was right. The school has been open a year without a trace of graffiti. No bricks have gone barreling through its windows. And its entrance remains, auspiciously, urine-free.

"We didn't smile at our first meeting," Hageman says. We're perched in his office, surrounded by low-set Eames and Modernica furniture, as a photographer arranges equipment for a shoot. Gluck is here too, and later he will join the students in the gym for circle, huddling among them in silence while their classmate ritualistically bangs the bowl. "Peter didn't at least," Hageman goes on. "I probably did."

"I didn't," Gluck says. **continued on page 85**

THE PRIDE OF EAST 103RD STREET

continued from page 83

The project was a pairing of titanic personalities, and their polarity produced something extraordinary. Gluck's method made it possible. By cutting out the waste and the various compromises of traditional construction, design-build allowed for clarity of vision in a sector that desperately needs it. School architecture has always been an expression of institutional aspirations, which makes it especially depressing to visit urban schools. Each crumbling wall or shoddy portable classroom bears aloft the

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failure of the education system. The rare exceptions have nothing to do with students and everything to do with the swaggering architects who designed them. (Consider Coop Himmelb(l)au's \$232 million "waterslide to nowhere" in downtown L.A.) The East Harlem School doesn't scream or whimper. It articulates a youthful audacity that does justice to its founder, mission, history, and surroundings. "These guys are like my architectural gurus," Hageman says, referring to Wong and Gee. "And Peter's the Dalai Lama."

Both Wong and Gluck ended up spending more time at the school than they expected. Wong, 37, tutors students on Saturdays. Gluck joined the board of trustees and has recruited several speakers for the school's Friday lecture series, including his wife, who teaches Asian studies at Columbia University. "Here the school is like a family, so it's very easy to get committed," he says, caught in a rare moment of sentiment. A few minutes later, Hageman's Dalai Lama pads into the school's bright-yellow lobby and through those ungated front doors, and descends onto a restless East 103rd Street, which now sits contentedly in the shadow of his school. From the street, the building manages to look both stately and inviting. It walks with kings, yet keeps the common touch. ●