



## A New York Parking Garage is Cleverly Adapted as a Charter School

The WHIN Music Community Charter School, designed by local firm GLUCK+, features a sheet-music inspired façade that hints at its unique curriculum.

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PHOTOS Here and Now Agency

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**Walking down 162nd Street** in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighbourhood, a silver form rises above the residential fabric, its protruding yellow window frames dancing above the rooflines. Just a few years ago, you might have walked right past it. The nearly hundred-year-old building used to be a three-storey parking garage. Its transformation, courtesy of New York firm GLUCK+, has adapted the aging structure into the Washington Heights and Inwood (WHIN) Music Community Charter School — the city's first to employ the El Sistema program, which utilizes the musical ensemble as a tool for academic, character and leadership development.





WHIN is a public charter school using a lottery-based system — and operates tuition-free, allowing students of all backgrounds to benefit from its unique program, which teaches choir and orchestra every day in addition to the state curriculum. The school's pedagogical approach is rendered in plain sight on its façade: Three different profiles of industrial metal siding create horizontal bands that evoke the staves of sheet music. The yellow-framed windows, then, are the notes, and their patterns reflect the academic progression of students through the school (The classrooms are organized by grade level, starting with kindergarteners on the first floor). To that end, the window placement is more uniform on the lower levels to reflect the fundamentals of music, becoming increasingly complex as students ascend and broaden their skills.



Built in the early 1900s, the building used to serve as a three-storey parking garage, clad in white painted brick.

PHOTO: Courtesy of GLUCK+







The glazed lobby makes clear that music is the heart of this school. From the street, passersby can see right into the 330-seat concert hall, which holds pride of place on the ground floor. Flipping the traditional arrangement on its head, the stage is positioned at the front of the theatre, allowing the city to serve as the backdrop for rehearsals. During performances, a curtain can be drawn over the glass partition to minimize unwelcome distractions. While the design move has the added benefit of fostering a more engaging and animated public realm, it originated from a practical question: how to accommodate the existing column structure without reducing seating capacity or obstructing stage views?



As it turns out, that wasn't the only concern. The school would need five additional floors to accommodate its growing student body, but the cast iron columns were already at their load capacity. An addition would require some structural gymnastics — literally. Rather than reinforcing the columns, which would have been expensive, or adding new ones on the upper levels, which would have interfered with the classroom layouts, the architects designed the eighth-floor gymnasium as a full-height lightweight truss that spans the width of the site. The fifth, sixth and seventh floors are then suspended from the truss. The whole scheme is made possible by a large grillage beam, which spreads the weight of the new extension across the original building, transferring the load to the garage's original brick perimeter walls.



PHOTO: Courtesy of GLUCK+



From the inside, you'd never know the hurdles overcome to bring the space to life. And that's thanks to thoughtful planning by GLUCK+, informed by a longstanding relationship with the client. "It's not uncommon for us to work with an institution for seven to ten years before a project kicks off — helping them find space, helping them with interim space, helping them program and figure out what they need," explains principal Thomas Gluck. "It gives us a real understanding of who they are and their culture so we can design buildings that reflect that."



Located just above the auditorium, the second-floor music department is a case in point. The architects had some complicated logistics to contend with: Each of the 450 students would need a place to safely stow their instruments. And because they would be moving back and forth between home and school (and the associated fluctuations in temperature and humidity), the instruments would need to be tuned by faculty each morning. That being so, a central storage location was key.





The solution looks deceptively simple — bespoke wooden cubbies run from floor to ceiling in the hallway — but determining which instruments would fit where amounted to a game of musical Tetris. “There’s cellos, violins, violas, clarinets... we had to figure out how to distribute all the instruments they need at heights that the kids could reach. It was a huge puzzle,” Gluck recalls.



Given the atypical layout of the school, wayfinding was another important consideration. Blue and yellow strips on the floor indicate the location of the two colour-coded stairwells located at either end of the floor plate, helping students orient themselves on each floor. "We've visited the school, and the kids are jumping from strip to strip in the hallway. We'd conceived of it as wayfinding, but it's rewarding to see them make more of it than we had even anticipated," he says. That same playful quality is echoed in the eighth-floor gymnasium, where the truss is deliberately expressed in vibrant blue. With the home and visiting team benches nestled between the chords, the structure becomes a design feature in its own right.





The architects' ingenuity has paid off. Adapting the existing building saved the client around \$50 per square foot in construction costs — not to mention the embodied carbon. A shining example of adaptive reuse, WHIN's new home demonstrates that challenging the industry to build less might just invite opportunities to build better.

