



Sandy Hook School

Design Narrative

Project Type and Size:

- + Pre-K-4 Elementary School
 - 464 K-4 students
 - 42 Pre-K students, morning and afternoon
- + New Construction – approximately 86,800 SF

Schedule:

- + September 2013: Architect & Construction Manager selected
- + Fall 2013: Community Programming
- + January - September 2014: Design & Construction Documents
- + October 2014: Site Construction began
- + March 2015: Building Construction began
- + August 2016: School opens for the 2016-2017 school year

Project Website:

- + www.sandyhook2016.com



Design Philosophy: Collaboration, Community and Creativity

Schools are an essential resource of the entire community. They not only offer a vibrant and nurturing environment for children to learn, but also places for community activities of all kinds. Given this mission, *there is a need and an opportunity to create a facility that truly emerges from the very particular time, place and spirit of the community in which it will live.* In creating the new Sandy Hook School, this aim was realized through an actively engaging process which drew upon the broad array of constituencies that the school will serve.

An inclusive and collaborative process was initiated through the various Town institutions, bringing together in multiple forums: town officials, governing boards, community groups, neighbors, parents, teachers and school administrators. The collective belief was the more inclusive the process could be, the more meaningful the architecture could become. Indeed, the inherent knowledge, care, and creative potential of this broad spectrum of participants assured that the design would be an inevitable expression of the needs, aspirations, and spirit of Newtown, and Sandy Hook in particular.

At the heart of this process was the School Based Building Advisory Committee (SBBAC) composed of Teachers and Staff of Sandy Hook School, Parents, Newtown School District Staff, members of the Board of Education, Town Staff, Community Representatives, and the Design/Construction team. Through a series of workshops facilitated by the Design Team, members of the SBBAC shared their voices through various engaging activities which resulted in a shared voice for the project. Directions which evolved from these meetings included the placement of the school on the site, the internal orientation of the plan, and the overall expression of the school. Security concerns were carefully analyzed and were seamlessly integrated into the architecture, providing a safe learning environment while supporting the educational mission of the school.



Through the workshops it was evident that the local ecology and geography of the area were important aspects to the community's identity and sense of pride. The Design Team worked diligently to take advantage of the inherent natural features of the school site in the re-design, and these features helped to organize the site to address security, vehicular access, pedestrian connections, views and day lighting, adjacencies to fields and outdoor areas, and establishing physical and symbolic connections with nature.

The school site is characterized by its topographic features: a relatively level plateau bounded by a wooded hill along the north edge and wooded low lying wetlands to the south and east. The re-design of Dickinson Drive brings traffic in at the very north and center of the site, allowing a clear panoramic view as you enter. This orientation of the drive and natural features suggested the placement of site elements:

- + The sub-divided parking lot is located immediately upon entering the site at the north end – allowing the parking lot to stretch out along the hill from west to east, and creating a natural buffer and good sightlines to the school.
- + A dedicated bus loop wraps around the parking lot and loops in front of the school, allowing enough length to safely queue 12 to 14 buses. The bus loop provides another buffering layer to the school, and then exits out the former drive.
- + The larger parking area to the west provides for 100 staff parking spaces. The smaller parking area to the east provides for a parent drop off loop and 50 visitor parking spaces.
- + The school building stretches out along the southern edge of the site, allowing the classroom wings in the rear to reap southern daylight and views into the wooded wetlands beyond.
- + The ball fields, a Little League softball field and an enlarged regulation soccer field, are overlapped with each other and nestled into the southwest corner. New plantings will help buffer and screen the fields from Crestwood Drive and the neighboring residential area.

Watery mosaic tile adorns the concrete cistern which collects rainwater runoff from the roof and releases it into the rain garden.





Design Inspirations and Expression: Forest, Water and Treehouses

Several compelling themes surfaced amidst discussions of the qualities of Newtown and Sandy Hook. One was the view of the Town from a distance, buildings and spires appearing above an undulating horizon of trees. The other was how the geology of water courses created the “sandy hook” after which the area was named.

As students from grades Pre-Kindergarten through Fourth grade arrive at school, they will be embraced by the curving plan of the school reaching out across the site as arms in a welcoming gesture. The undulating wood facade creates a backdrop to the rain garden in front of the building as students cross three metaphoric bridges into the school. Gabled “houses” emerge above this facade evoking the Town image from afar while the rain garden and bridges recall the Pootatuck River and its bridge in the center of Sandy Hook.

The gently curving “Main Street” inside organizes all elective and administrative programs along the north side of the school with the classroom wings on the south radiating towards the woods and to views of the natural environment. The Cafeteria, performance Platform, and Gymnasium are grouped together at the west end for ease of access after school hours and their proximity to the playing fields. The library is located at the east end, providing another destination to anchor both ends of the school.

The three classroom wings, two of which are 2-stories, radiate out from the “Main Street” corridor like side streets. The classrooms are distinguished with sunny yellow “porch” roofs and “welcome mats” in the bio-based tile flooring. Separating each wing are three courtyards – with the largest central courtyard landscaped with two amphitheater-style classroom spaces to serve outdoor learning. Overlooking the central courtyard from the second floor are two small breakout spaces – imagined as treehouses to create an alternate intimate learning environment for the students.

The light-filled main central lobby connects to the main corridor at a hub of activity. Beginning with the main entry and a colorful view through the 2-story wall of glass to the courtyard, the school community is invigorated with the convergence of the Administration office, flanking stairs to the second story classroom wings, and a bridge above that allows students and teachers to see and interact with each other as they migrate through the school.





KidsBuild! Workshop, May 2015

Integrated Art Strengthens Community Identity and Stimulates Imagination and Play

At Svigals + Partners, the integration of architecture + art is our method of working towards a world of prosperous, compassionate communities. We choose to create environments that inspire communities and organizations to thrive and bring out the best in the people that live, work, and play in them. In the design of Sandy Hook School, community workshops gave rise to a variety of themes that inspired artistic expression through features linking the exterior and interior for a cohesive learning environment.

Light Pole Banners

Gracing six light poles along the new entry leg of Dickinson Drive, these colorful banners greet students, staff, and visitors with line drawings by 2nd-4th grade Sandy Hook students who participated in a KidsBuild! workshop in May 2016. The workshop imagined what the world would look like in the future, and inspired drawings of animals, flying cars and flying houses, fantastical food, and robots. These wonderful images were paired with six themes: Nature, Future, Friendship, Home, World, and Imagine.

Engraved Wood Panels

Another KidsBuild! Workshop explored natural items from the site, such as leaves, branches, stones, and flowers. Participants traced the shadows cast by shining a light source over an object. Guest workshop leader and graphic designer, **Randall Hoyt**, repeated this exercise in a workshop with the School Based Building Advisory Committee. Randall used the resulting line drawings from both sessions to create patterns for engraved wood panels that are inlaid under windows on the front façade of the school. These wood panels evoke the age-old carvings made on tree trunks, denoting love trysts and “X was here.”



Weathervanes

New England buildings abound with cupolas and gables adorned with a weathervane. With this inspiration we have adorned the three gable forms peeking above the undulating wood façade of the school with whimsical creations by **SkyArt Studio** of Meriden, Connecticut. The three weathervanes depict: an eagle, which is the current school’s mascot; a mama duck with ducklings are a call to the families of ducks that inhabited the former school site; and the cub bear climbing a tree is a playful expression of local wildlife.

Swimming Fish

One of the ecological considerations woven into the design of the school is a giant concrete cistern that holds rainwater runoff from the roof of the school. This cistern sits at the east end of the school and is covered in a watery tile mosaic. A staff event by Svigals + Partners created 30 hammered metal fish forms to decorate the cistern.

Bulletin Boards

Ordinary tack boards are turned into colorful expressions of the aesthetic themes of the school with the wood base recalling the front façade of rolling hillsides, with trees and sky above.



Bells

The members of the Newtown Public Building and Site Commission purchased and donated three bells from **Cosanti** in Paradise Valley, Arizona: the bronze and ceramic studio of the renowned late architect **Paolo Soleri**. These three bells are hanging at the main entrance to the school and were selected to represent important aspects of the legacy of Sandy Hook School. As described by the studio:

- + **Our Children Our Future** – Our children are the promise of future generations and our most cherished resource. Cultivated with education, nurtured with guidance and love, our children will provide the foundation for future societies.
- + **Literacy Bell** – Reading is a skill that lasts a lifetime, and is the most important and valuable ability a child can acquire. Unfortunately, millions of Americans of all ages lack this basic skill, and as a result are excluded from the vast universe of ideas that are readily available in writing. This bell supports causes that promote literacy for all people.
- + **Nature Conservancy Bell** – The nation’s largest and most effective citizen’s lobby is dedicated to preserving the wilderness and protecting the natural environment. The Nature Conservancy seeks to reduce the impact of our population on the world around us and prevent the exhaustion of our natural resources.



Soaring Flock of Ducks

Relief sculptures flanking both sides of the school’s central lobby were inspired by the site’s resident duck population. Large fiberglass panels created by architect and sculptor **Barry Svigals** depict the birds soaring south, toward the sun. Mention of the ducks became a theme in early meetings with the committee – with many members hopeful that families of waterfowl will return after construction completes.

Wall Mural

Local fine artist, **Robert Reynolds**, designed a large-scale, custom painting for the school’s main office. Expanding upon the theme of birds in flight, Reynolds captured a bright, lively flock, rising above the landscape into a vivid blue sky. The final piece, printed on vinyl, measures 8’ square and can be seen in juxtaposition with the fiberglass ducks in the lobby.



Tree Theme in Metal and Glass

Inspired by the natural beauty of the site, the aluminum tree trunks that dance in front of the two story window wall invite the outside in. The autumnal-colored glass panels reinforce the season of excitement, renewal, and hope that begins each new school year. Students, staff and visitors are embraced by the joy of falling “leaves” as the colored light splashes across the lobby.

Kinetic Leaf Sculpture

Having created sculptures for major corporate clients around the world, including a 200-foot-long vermilion sculpture for the Bradley International Airport, the Cromwell, Connecticut-based sculptor **Tim Prentice** contributed the gently rotating kinetic mobiles of metallic leaves that add to the tree theme of the lobby.



Building Perspective



The re-design of Dickinson Drive, with a new route into the site, brings traffic in at the very north and center of the site, allowing a clear panoramic view as you enter.

Main Entry Perspective



Several compelling themes surfaced amidst discussions of the qualities of Newtown and Sandy Hook. One was the view of the Town from a distance, buildings and spires appearing above an undulating horizon of trees. The other was how the geology of water courses created the “sandy hook” after which the area was named.



Courtyard Perspective



The potential of up to 548 students will be distributed between three classroom wings, two of which are 2-stories, which extend like fingers of an open hand on the site. Separating each one are three courtyards – with the largest central courtyard landscaped with two amphitheater-style classroom spaces to serve outdoor learning. Overlooking the central courtyard from the second floor are two “treehouses” – small breakout rooms for an intimate learning environment.

Main Lobby Perspective



The light-filled main central lobby connects to the main corridor at a hub of activity. Beginning with the main entry and a colorful view through the 2-story wall of glass to the courtyard, the school community is invigorated with the convergence of the Administration office, flanking stairs to the second story classroom wings, and a bridge above that allows students and teachers to see and interact with each other as they migrate through the school.