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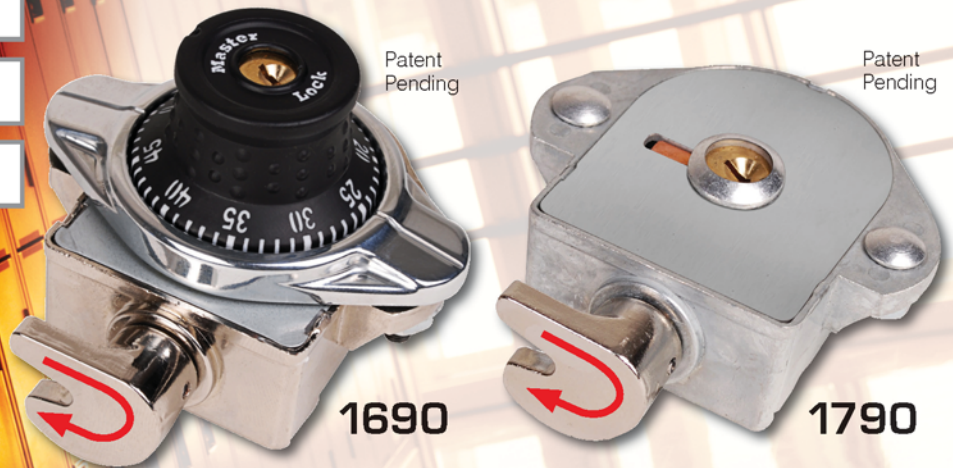
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CRISTO REY JESUIT HIGH SCHOOL | **CASE STUDY** ■

Designing Personalized Spaces That Impact Student Achievement

By Randy Fielding

Drawing from Plato's concept of the "Agora" meaning marketplace in Greek, the Cristo Rey Jesuit High School offers highly personalized learning spaces in a truly communal setting.

Yes we can!" Those famous three words of the Obama campaign could serve as the theme for the culture of hope and excellence at the Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. Many of the students arrive in the 9th grade with reading and math skills at an early elementary school level. Others lack the basic life skills to look an adult in the eye, shake hands, dress neatly,

and show up for school and work on time. The kids come from all across Minneapolis, many from gang-dominated neighborhoods.

The school is part of the Cristo Rey Network, featured in a 60-minute documentary and in *Newsweek*. The network has transformed the graduation rate in under-performing neighborhoods from 20 percent to over 90 percent.



Students collaborating in the Freshman Academy during the morning independent learning block.



Students enjoy step dancing in the “Agora,” a curving public commons that connects the Cristo Rey Learning Communities to spaces shared with the Colin Powell Youth Leadership Center, including a 500-seat auditorium, a gymnasium with four competition courts, a full teaching kitchen, and a cafe that spills out into the Agora.

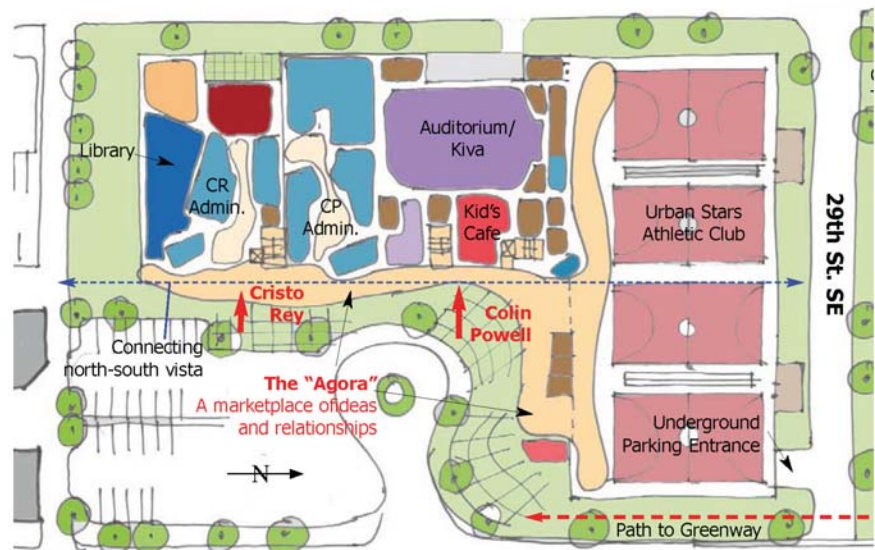
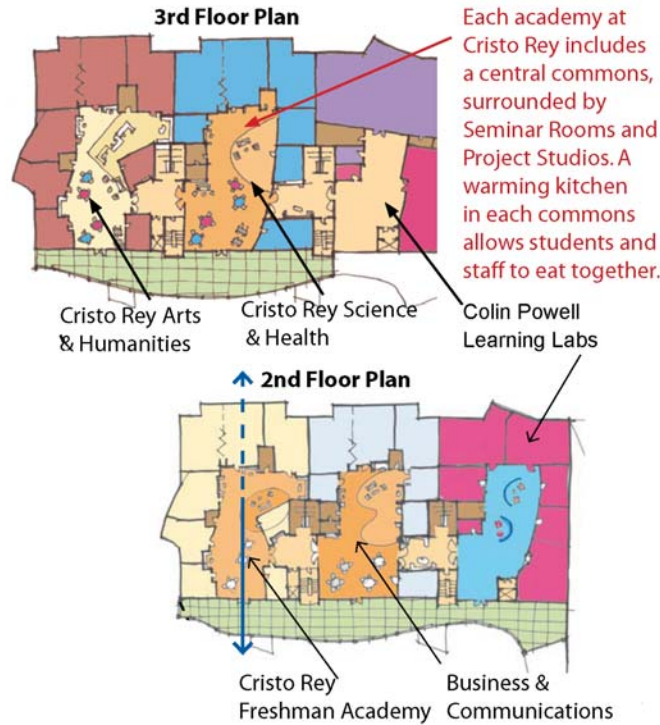
Each student has a corporate internship, coordinated by Cristo Rey, and spends one to two days per week off site, honing professional skills.

Four students share one full-time internship, and the income funds more than 70 percent of the tuition. The 500-student Minneapolis school is personalized through division into four 125-student academies. A rigorous academic emphasis is rounded out through an athletic program made possible by collocation with the Colin Powell Youth Leadership Center.

Each commons has natural light and open vistas to the city on the east. Learning Suites on the West open with glass overhead doors to the commons, allowing a clear vista from east to west, and offer a sense of light and openness to the largely interior commons.

Not A Citadel

In colder climates like Minneapolis, it’s a stretch to ask inhabitants during winter to navigate outside between academies and shared resources. Compact buildings are efficient connectors and they minimize heat loss. However, they are more “Citadel-like” than a campus of individual buildings often enjoyed in warmer climates. At Cristo Rey, a combination of projecting bays and the curvy Agora break down the Citadel massing to a more personal scale.



Site Plan Concept Sketch

The Agora: A Connector That’s Not a Corridor

At Cristo Rey, we took a cue from Plato, who refers to the city and public marketplace as the most vibrant centers for learning (“Agora” means marketplace in Greek). Unlike the smaller common areas in each academy, the Agora is a more public realm, connecting all of the learning communities, the

Colin Powell Center, and the public itself. The space was designed to accommodate project work, local artwork, student-run incubator businesses, project displays, and a cafe.

Why 125-student Academies?

In wealthier districts, with high test scores and graduation rates, the value of small learning communities is less obvious. However, in lower

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income areas with at-risk students, a secure, family-like community is a foundation for improved learning outcomes. The Fielding Nair International’s design experience with personal learning communities extends over two decades. We drew from past successes such as Avalon School in St. Paul, and Harbor City International School in Duluth, Minnesota. Our anecdotal experience reviewed research that goes back for four decades. For instance, in her research on Brazilian tribal culture, anthropologist Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man*, writes about the critical size of 60-70 person groups for maintaining a cohesive unit. Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, writes about professional learning communities with a maximum number of 150 people “for a group to function efficiently and happily.”

Structure & Freedom

The transition from a culture of isolated classrooms to an interdisci-

plinary and project-based pedagogy is sometimes a battleground. Lines are often drawn between the chaotic, ill-defined open classroom of the seventies and the rigidity of the traditional classroom. The best solution may lie somewhere in between. For Cristo Rey, a mix of seminar rooms for enquiry-based learning, studios for collaborative, interdisciplinary, and project-work, and an active commons fosters both structure and freedom.

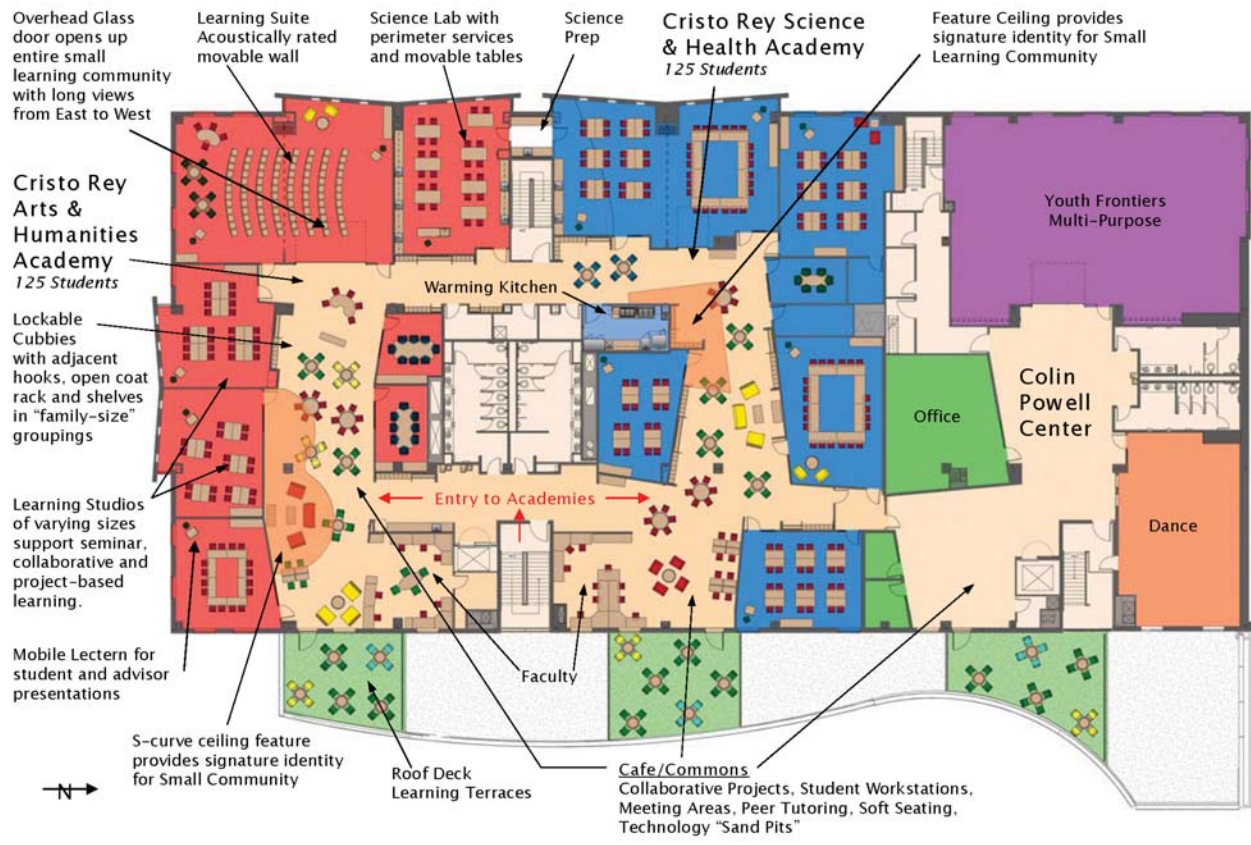
Learning Studios & Learning Suites

Mention the word “classroom” and many students think of long days of captivity, waiting for the bell. A “Studio” brings to mind an active, project-based environment where students take more responsibility for their use of time and learning. One might build something in a studio, or rearrange the tables, or capture a corner or bay and make it their own for a particular project.



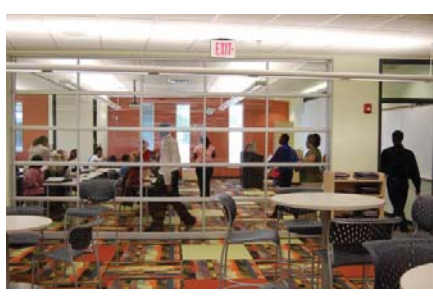
Students participate in a math graphing exercise in the common area, after a 20-minute introductory lecture in a smaller adjacent learning studio. The commons is also valuable for theme-based, interdisciplinary sessions, where Social Studies, English, Science and Math advisors collaborate to integrate topics that authentically engage students.

Put two studios together and you get a Learning Suite. Students at Cristo Rey call the Learning Suite in the freshman academy the



Final Upper Level Plan

"Garage" because of the large glass overhead "garage" door into the commons. This is one of the best liked spaces in the school, because



The "Garage" Learning Suite

of its spaciousness and flexibility. When opened, it can accommodate the entire learning community in a meeting or presentation. One "teaching wall" has a large pull down screen and a solid, angled ceiling overhead to improve acoustics for presentations.

At Cristo Rey, students and advisors meet, eat, work collaboratively and independently in the cafe/commons.

High Tables, Low Tables, and Soft Seating

Look across a prison or school cafeteria and you are likely to see rows and rows of hard chairs or benches, all at uniform height. In contrast, your favorite restaurant or

coffee shop probably has booths and tables of varied sizes. Having visited coffee shops around the world, ranging from Starbucks in Abu Dhabi to The International Café in Prague, it's apparent that these informal, varied spaces have become vital work centers in the global economy. We surveyed students on environmental preferences, and respondents invariably selected these coffee shop-like envi-



Advisor led breakout groups in a learning studio.



Serving kitchen and high tables; couches and upholstered chair groupings can be found around the corner.

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Betty Fairfax High School, Phoenix



Students perform at a building dedication in 2007.

ronments for both independent and collaborative work ambience.

Lockers and Open Closets in Small Family-like Groupings

We all need to feel connected to the people immediately around us, and we want to be able to visually survey who is coming and going. Long rows of metal lockers along

corridors fail to meet our most basic needs for territory and space. It's uncomfortable to have one's back facing a corridor while digging into a locker. In the noisy traffic flow, it's a poor environment for socializing. At Cristo Rey, small family-like groupings of lockers and open closets are distributed in each academy. Locker or "cubbies" are large enough to store a purse, Ipod and books. The open closets, shelves and hooks adjacent are intended for backpacks, coats, and athletic bags.

Building a Culture of Excellence – an Ongoing Mission

Cristo Rey's Principal, Dr. Kristine Melloy, helped to plan the school while serving as a tenured professor in the University of St. Thomas College of Education. She agreed to take a leave of absence to launch the school and get it on its feet along with the school's present, Rev. David Haschka.

After the first year, Kristine realized that the development of a new school culture was a multi-year

commitment, and left St. Thomas to give Cristo Rey her full commitment. It's an unusual story to see an educator leave a tenured position to become a high school principal. It's just that kind of commitment that is needed to build a culture of excellence that will grow into the new facility.

When I visit Cristo Rey, I can hear Kristine, Rev. Haschka, her dedicated group of advisors, and the students all saying "Yes we can!" ■

Randy Fielding is the design director of Fielding Nair International, architects and change agents for creative learning communities. He is also the founder and creative director of designshare.com and a winner of the Planner of the Year Award from CEFPI.