



2011 James D. MacConnell Award

Project Narrative – Su Valley Jr/Sr High School

Following the destruction of the old school by fire in June 2007, the Mat Su Borough acted decisively to meet community needs. Prior to fall semester a temporary facility was established and a planning team was in place to design the new school. With less than 2 months to explore new directions, create an educational specification and develop a concept design, the project team adopted an integrated approach combining concept design activities with visioning exercises in a series of interactive user driven workshops. Breaking from the usual linear progression this process created unique opportunities and insights as design and program discussions evolved on parallel tracks. The more than 200 participants included a broad range of school and community partners and every student in the school.

Due to past conflicts the initial planning session began with an air of tension and concern. The initial exercise simply asked each participant to discuss their *hopes* and *apprehensions*, an activity that was scheduled to last less than an hour. 4 hours later (30 minutes of hopes and 3.5 hours of apprehensions) there were smiles and anticipation. The community had aired their concerns directly to key Borough officials, those officials had communicated their support for creating a great community school and the planning team had displayed their flexibility and concern for community values. One of the most telling statements came from Sandra Dawn White, the local representative on the school board:

“I want the design team to understand who our kids are...when they aren't in school they are hiking on the tallest mountain in North America, flying airplanes and landing them on lakes, pulling fish half their size out of the river, riding snow machines to school...if we want our kids to be excited about coming to school, it has to be an exciting place.”

Located 100 miles north of Anchorage, the Talkeetna area is an eclectic community in a spectacular but unforgiving environment. The local economy centers around tourism and outdoor activities focused on nearby Mount McKinley. Despite its small population Talkeetna has a surprisingly vibrant art scene with local galleries, a theater and many prominent artists. Additionally, a substantial segment of the population subsists primarily ‘off the land’ with households that are not connected to modern transportation and utility and telecommunications systems. Specific goals identified in the planning process included:

- **Integrate Middle & High School Programs:** effectively combine both programs in a way that respects the age and maturity differences of students while taking full advantage of limited resources in this small school.
- **Expand Educational Opportunities:** develop creative solutions to allow for more efficient utilization of limited space. Due to State reimbursement guidelines and the insurance settlement process the size was limited to the original school’s 50,000 gsf. At the same time the community identified many programs that were not well served by the old structure such as performing arts, physical education and career/technical learning.

- **Honor Community Use:** accommodate robust after-hours uses without disrupting school operations. As a rural area with a small population the school is a primary gathering place and focus for community activities.
- **Reflect Local Culture:** be a lively exciting expression of the community focus on art and the natural environment.
- **Create History:** offer opportunities for students to leave something permanent behind to mark their passing and create a continuum of memory and place over the life of the school.
- **Celebrate Place:** utilize the challenges of climate and environment to create a uniquely responsive and expressive school that celebrates the community and its pristine natural setting.

Design Response

Focusing on the school's specific education programs and unique character the planning/design team crafted a facility that honors the independent artistic spirit of a community that is grounded in the wild landscape of Alaska. A natural outgrowth of the project vision and planning process, the building plan organizes programs to optimize learning relationships, creating an efficient and effective school. At the same time it creates dynamic social spaces to foster meaningful interaction between students, staff, teachers, parents and community.

- **Diverse Learning Spaces:** multiple configurations allow learning to occur in a variety of settings. L-shaped classrooms, small group rooms, and the applied learning labs are grouped around informal student areas.
- **Connected Spaces:** scalable spaces can combine or separate throughout the day to meet multiple program needs. A prime example is the welcoming entry where lobby, library, multipurpose room, stage and music rooms flow together to create a flexible, multifunctional environment that accommodates everything from quiet study to community banquets. Although the school is designed to support 225 students, and the building area is allocated accordingly, the synergy provided by the planning relationships allows the school to provide opportunities normally found only in larger schools.
- **Community Service:** the expansive and flexible commons creates an excellent after-hours venue where community interaction can be easily accommodated while maintaining building security.
- **Memory Squares:** overhead wall mounted panels provide opportunities for each graduating class to leave a permanent mark with an artistic expression of their choosing. The initial design has more than 40 locations to assure the continuation of the tradition for the life of the structure.
- **Environmental Response:** learning spaces are strategically arrayed around the path of the winter sun maximizing solar exposure in a daylight challenged environment. The school is one of the most northern LEED certified facilities in USGBC's inventory incorporating a full range of sustainable features.
- **Learning with Art and Nature:** local stone and wood are set in an integrated earth themed color scheme. More than a dozen nature based works from Alaskan artists populate the school creating a lively dialogue between art, architecture and the Alaskan environment.
- **Inspiring and Motivating:** this bold facility brings the power of the Alaskan landscape and the community together. The new school creates a positive and visible focus that is at once fun and serious, provoking student and community pride in its strong sense of purpose and unique expression.