



Endangered: **Mid-Century Modern Public Schools**

Owner: **Recovery School District, Paul Vallas, Superintendent**

Phillis Wheatley Elementary School, 1955  
2300 Dumaine Street, New Orleans, Louisiana  
Charles R. Colbert, architect  
*Progressive Architecture citation*

Thomy Lafon Elementary School, 1954  
2601 Seventh Street, New Orleans, Louisiana  
Curtis and Davis, architects  
*AIA Honor Award<sup>1</sup>*

George Washington Carver Junior - Senior High School, 1958  
3059 Higgins Boulevard, New Orleans, Louisiana  
Curtis and Davis, architects  
*Progressive Architecture First Design Award*

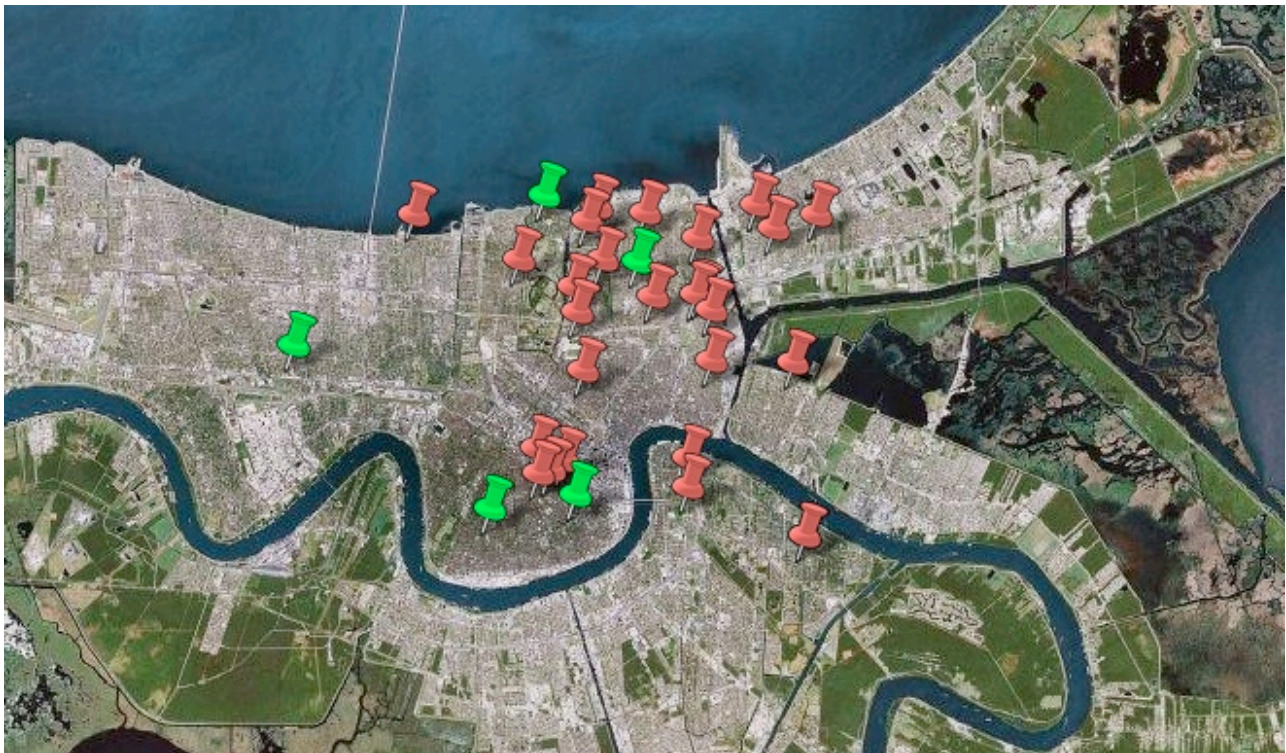
McDonogh No. 39 / Avery Alexander Elementary School, 1952  
5800 St. Roch Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana  
Goldstein, Parham and Labouisse; Freret and Wolf; Curtis and Davis, architects  
*First modern public school in New Orleans*

<sup>1</sup> In 1954 Curtis and Davis also received an AIA award for St. Francis Cabrini Elementary School, demolished 2007.

## THREATENED: MID-CENTURY MODERN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

### WHAT ARE THE THREATS TO THE PROPERTIES?

The Recovery School District is in the process of finalizing the School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish (SFMPOP).<sup>2</sup> After reviewing the Building Summaries, it is apparent that the plan may effectively erase the mid-century modern school facilities from the map.<sup>3</sup> In *A Guide to the Architecture of New Orleans 1699-1959*, Samuel Wilson, Jr. cites twenty-five of the thirty public schools which were built in the 1950s. Of these, ten have been demolished or are slated for demolition.<sup>4</sup> Of the remaining fifteen mid-century modern schools, fourteen were assessed as “complete replacement.”<sup>5</sup> While many of these buildings were clearly damaged by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent inundation, some are merely victims of neglect. The Recovery School District is indeed in the process of recovering. However, that is not an excuse for the wholesale demolition of mid-century modern public school architecture from the city of New Orleans. These schools were designed with respect to the city’s environment and the structures are ripe for sustainable rehabilitation and reuse.



### MAP OF SCHOOLS LISTED IN SAMUEL WILSON’S *A GUIDE TO THE ARCHITECTURE OF NEW ORLEANS 1699-1959*

Red pins represent schools that have been demolished or are threatened by “complete replacement.” Schools represented by the green pins are all safe. They are private schools. Of note, Brother Martin High School in Gentilly managed to renovate and re-open by February 2006. Google map by Francine Stock.

<sup>2</sup> For the School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish see: <http://sfmpop.org>

<sup>3</sup> ‘RSD Plans 47 School Demolitions,’ *City Business*, February 25, 2008. See: <http://www.neworleanscitybusiness.com/viewStory.cfm?recID=30008> SFMPOP Building Summaries. See: <http://sfmpop.org/home/section/124-134/schools>

<sup>4</sup> Demolished: Hynes, White, Kohn, Henderson. Replaced in mid-1980’s: McDonogh 40 (Jordan), Moton. To be demolished: Abrams, Jefferson Davis, Hardin, Edwards. Alfred Lawless High School (Charles Colbert, 1960) is also slated for demolition, but is not listed in Wilson’s *Guide*, as it was built after 1959. For Recovery School District Press Release see: <http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/comm/pressrelease.aspx?PR=968>

<sup>5</sup> Only one public school of those cited by Mr. Wilson was spared this assessment. McDonogh 36 / Mahalia Jackson Elementary School, was assessed as a “major renovation” by the SFMPOP. However, as the New Orleans Public Schools has released an RFP for the “selective demolition” of Mahalia Jackson Elementary, this building should also be considered endangered. See: <http://www.nops.k12.la.us/pages/purchasing>



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### PROPERTIES CURRENT CONDITION

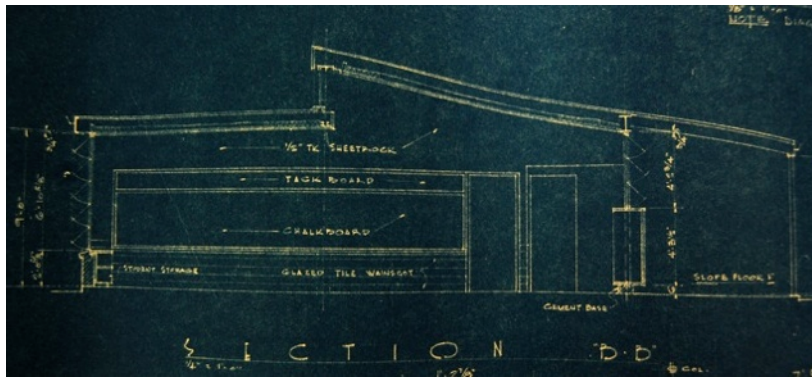
All of the schools suffered from deferred maintenance and general neglect under the governance of the Orleans Parish School Board. The primary structures at the Phillis Wheatley and Thomy Lafon Elementary Schools are elevated, but ground floor adjunct spaces were inundated. McDonogh No. 39 /Avery Alexander and George Washington Carver Schools were heavily inundated. The school facilities were cleared of materials and have been boarded up. These buildings have all been vacant since the storm.

APPROXIMATE AGE OF PROPERTY: 50+ years

### WHY ARE THESE PROPERTIES SIGNIFICANT?

In 1952, Charles R. Colbert was named the architect in charge of the new Office of Planning and Construction. He initiated a study of physical plant and invited local firms to submit designs for review in architectural competitions for the new schools.<sup>6</sup> Architecture firms involved in this mid-century modern renaissance include: August Perez and Associates; Burk, LeBreton and Lamantia; Charles R. Colbert; Curtis and Davis; Favrot, Reed, Mathes and Bergman; Freret and Wolf; Goldstein, Parham and Labouisse; and Ricciuti Associates.<sup>7</sup> Several mid-century school facilities were recognized by national architecture journals and organizations for their design merit. The Thomy Lafon School (1954, Curtis & Davis) received the AIA Honor Award.<sup>8</sup> *Progressive Architecture* recognized the Phillis Wheatley School (1955, Charles R. Colbert). In 1957 Curtis & Davis earned *Progressive Architecture*'s highest honor, the First Design Award, in for the innovative George Washington Carver Junior and Senior High Schools. New Orleans mid-century modern architects were not just making headlines and history. They were creating models of a regional modernism, inventive designs which are of a place, by a place and for a place.

While McDonogh no. 39 Elementary School in Gentilly did not receive any awards, it was nonetheless recognized as a model facility and was the first modern school built in New Orleans.<sup>9</sup>



**MCDONOGH NO. 39 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL** Section. Detail from Blueprints. New Orleans Public Library City Archives

<sup>6</sup> The alliance between Charles Colbert of the Tulane School of Architecture, and Jacqueline Leonhard of the Orleans Parish School Board was profiled in *Time* Magazine in 1953. Through their efforts a plan was developed and embraced to create "ultra modern" schools in New Orleans. "Mrs. Four-to-One" *Time*, March 16, 1953.

<sup>7</sup> *A Guide to the Architecture of New Orleans 1699-1959* by Samuel Wilson, Jr.

<sup>8</sup> In the same year, Curtis & Davis received the AIA Merit Award for St. Francis Xavier Cabrini Elementary School. This school and the St. Francis Cabrini Church (Curtis & Davis, 1959) were demolished in 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *New Orleans Public School Review*, 1950

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McDonogh No. 39 is a “finger school,” with four lengths of classrooms connected at one end to a broad wing of administrative offices.<sup>10</sup> The bands of classrooms are connected by an exterior corridor on one side. Both sides of the classrooms and the hall have operable aluminum and glass windows, so they benefit from ample natural light and ventilation. In addition, the hall also filters the sunlight from the classroom, reducing heat gain. Grassy courtyards fill the space between the stretches of classrooms. While the school flooded post-Katrina, the design of the structure is historically significant and appropriate to our climate. The architects of record were Goldstein, Parham and Labouisse, in association with Freret & Wolf, and Curtis & Davis.<sup>11</sup>



**MCDONOGH NO. 39 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL** Google map. Photos: Francine Stock

<sup>10</sup> John A. Ferguson in *Crescent City Schools*.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Wilson, Jr. *A Guide to the Architecture of New Orleans: 1699 – 1959*. Arthur Q. Davis recalls the school as the design of Douglas Freret. Mr. Davis said that Curtis and Davis were required to participate as associate architects on a school building before they could be given their own to design. Conversation with the author, 3/4/2008, Tulane School of Architecture.



## THREATENED: MID-CENTURY MODERN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Phillis Wheatley Elementary School is by far one of the most compelling monuments of the era. It is the culmination of a series of design innovations produced by Charles R. Colbert, one of the primary instigators of change in the public school facilities.<sup>12</sup>



PHILLIS WHEATLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL photo by Frank Lotz Miller

Colbert describes how the formal structure of the Phillis Wheatley School was informed by the desire to create additional play space for the children on a relatively compact urban site.

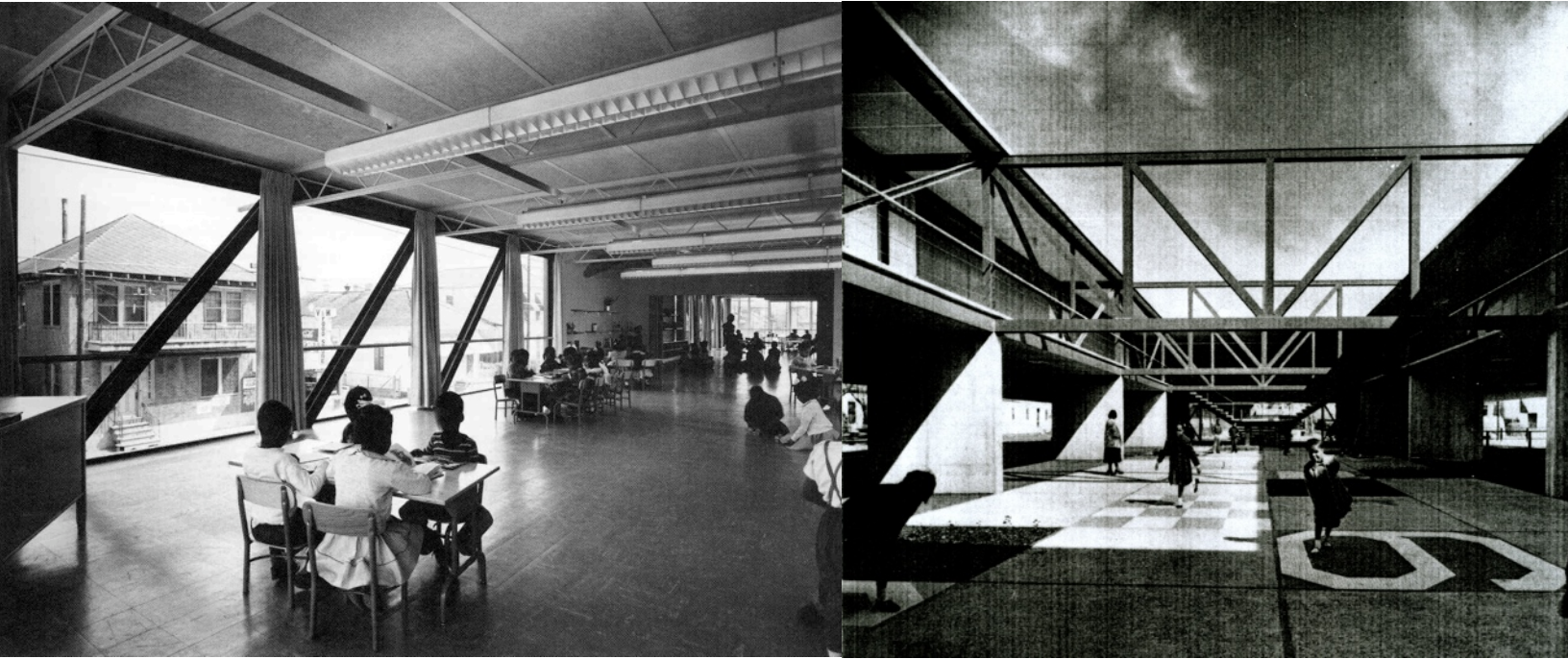
"The city building code was interpreted to allow Wheatley to be a one-floor structure. Because of this decision, the design could combine the advantages of an exposed steel structure, without fireproofing, while concentrating its reduced weight on pile supports. The entire classroom structure was raised above grade to allow the enlargement of a diminutive play area and to create a play yard. Conventional post-and-beam construction would have created a field of hazardous columns throughout the play area while the use of the full effective depth of the cantilevered steel trusses eliminated most of these obstructions. The entire classroom structure was housed within twelve shop fabricated trusses and the twenty-two classrooms were located within this simple floor-to-ceiling structural envelope. Secondary steel joists spanned from truss to truss and supported the horizontal roof membrane, while floors consisted of six inch deep double tongue and groove wood decking that spanned between trusses. The truss, better recognized in bridges, thus became more than the support for a roof system. This old and widely used structural assembly allowed efficient shop fabrication, simple assembly, and a reduced job site construction period. The *raison d'être*, to free the play yard, developed into something more.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Colbert previously designed McDonogh 36 / Mahalia Jackson Elementary School (1954) and the Hoffman Elementary School (1954). Sol Rosenthal was the architect of record. Hoffman uses a truss structure to span the roof and McDonogh 36 uses a truss structure to span an elevated corridor.

<sup>13</sup> *Idea: the Shaping Force*, Charles R. Colbert, pp. 73-74.

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The result was stunning. Airy, light-filled classrooms, elevated from the street, gave the effect of a modern tree-house, an appropriate and poetic setting for a child's classroom. The elevation of the Phillis Wheatley School protected the classrooms from the post-Katrina inundation of the city. Sadly the building is a victim of decades of neglect. The facility does require some intervention. The steel trusses could certainly benefit from a coat of paint. Also, the clear glass was replaced long ago with cheaper opaque plexi-glass panels. Improvements in glass and automated HVAC make it possible to renovate Wheatley to perform better than originally.



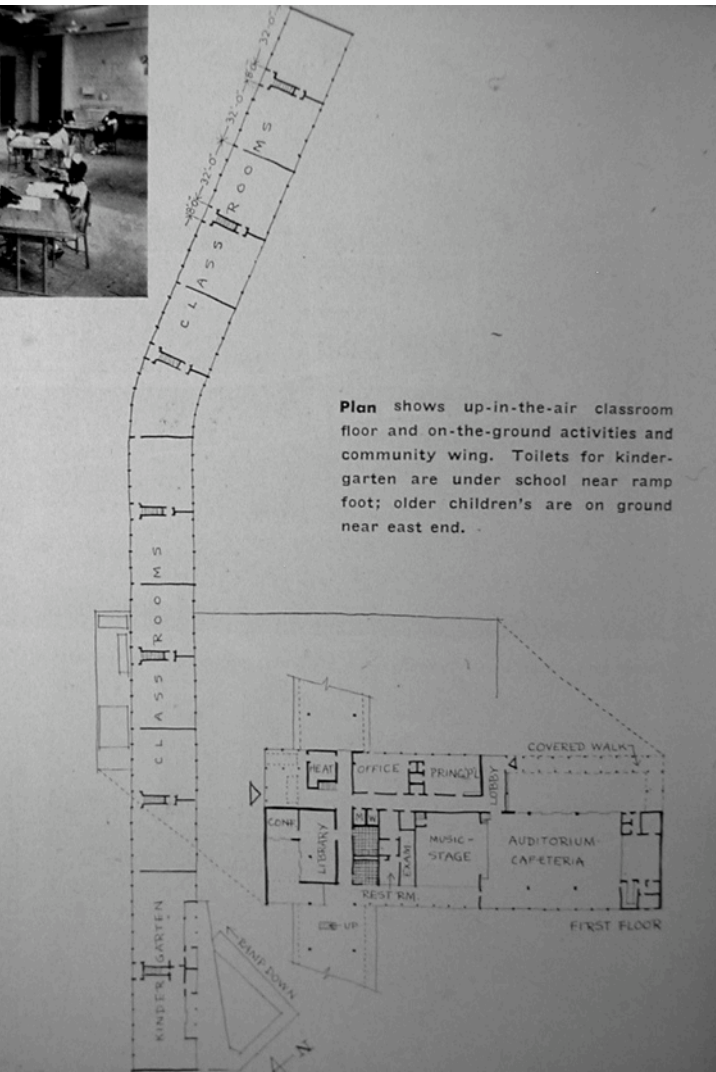
PHILLIS WHEATLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL vintage photos by Frank Lotz Miller, contemporary photos by Hilairie Schackai





## THREATENED: MID-CENTURY MODERN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Both Phillis Wheatley and Thomy Lafon Elementary Schools were built on raised piers that saved them from the floodwaters after Hurricane Katrina. The open space underneath the elevated structure helps cool the building in our climate. This structural conceit is borrowed from the French Colonial tradition. Breezes naturally cool an elevated structure. In the case of Wheatley and Lafon, the elevated structures also created a wealth of covered play space, protected from the elements. Both schools were built with a sensitivity to local environmental conditions. The exterior walls were glass in Wheatley, mostly glass in Lafon. This gave the children new perspectives, as well as an abundance of natural light and ventilation. It is tragic that so many of the later generation of school buildings were designed as nearly windowless detention cells.<sup>14</sup> Colbert encouraged his fellow architects to consider the “emotional and spiritual needs of children” in their design of school buildings.<sup>15</sup>



**THOMY LAFON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**  
vintage photo by Frank Lotz Miller  
contemporary photo by Francine Stock  
plan, Architectural Forum April 1953



<sup>14</sup> See: Cohen High School.

<sup>15</sup> “Today’s Criteria of Design for School Buildings,” *18 Talks*, Charles R. Colbert, pp. 117

## first design award

### *High School, New Orleans, Louisiana*

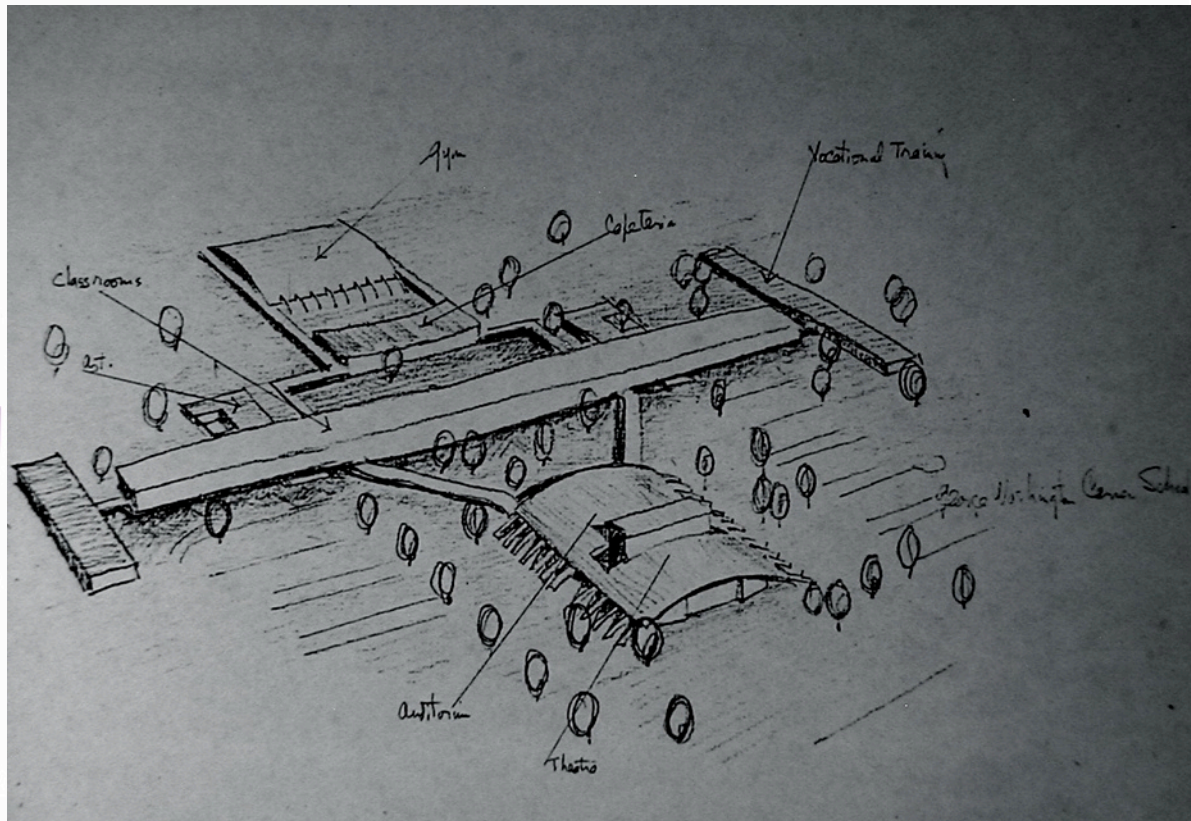
Curtis & Davis, Architects-Engineers

In a period when the need for well designed high schools is extremely pressing and when architects are increasingly confronted with this intricate design problem, it is reassuring that this junior-senior high school has won top honors in the Design Awards Program of 1957. Granted that the design of the high school plant is complex—there is no reason why time and, above all, building experience should not bring the design level of the high school to the general architectural competence displayed by today's elementary school. Curtis & Davis have done excellent spade work in this field, beginning with their preliminary report addressed to the school board. Though directed to the architectural layman this report is of equal interest to the professional, and its prepara-

tion must have had considerable value in clarifying the architects' own thoughts. The report is in the form of an illustrated brochure, stating the basic requirements and presenting the architects' design development of the plan—their thoughts and decisions. In logical sequence, the basic structural units are analyzed in relation to quiet and noisy uses, and properly placed with respect to site conditions and student circulation. Classroom arrangements, for instance, were debated and weighed with considerable care. For economy, the double-loaded corridor was chosen. A system of partial partitions will permit the flow of air at corridor floor and ceiling levels. Natural light in this two-story scheme will be supplemented with artificial light, necessary in any case. In many

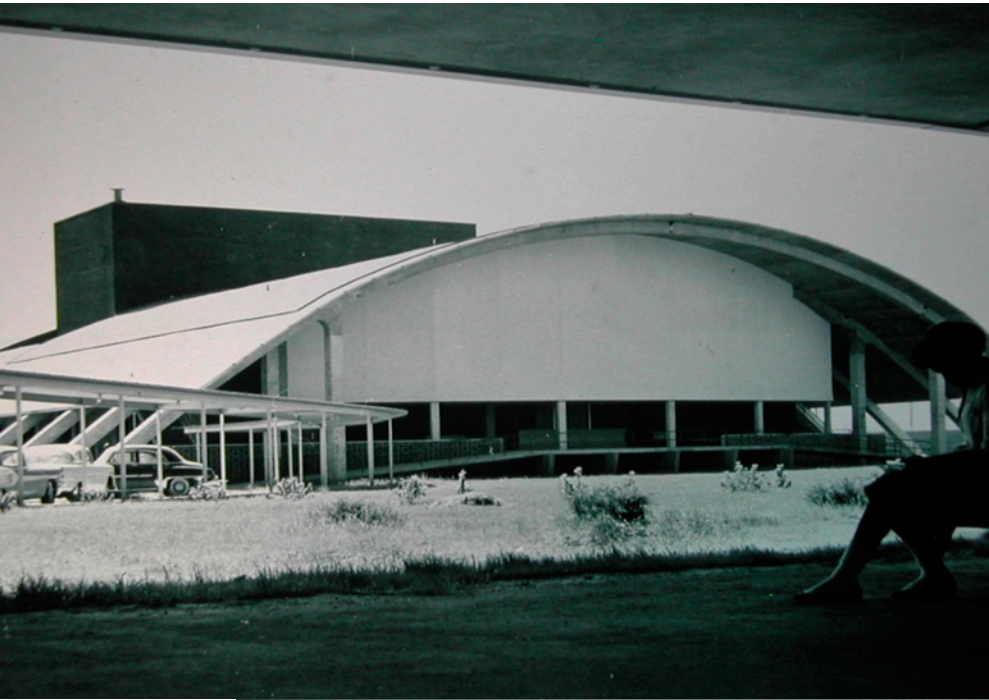
phases of the design, according to the report, the architects have drawn liberally on earlier experience. In the selection of a sun-and-glare screening device, for example, a lightweight masonry screen which proved satisfactory at the Sako Clinic (*November 1955 P/A*) was selected in preference to vertical louvers, wide overhangs, heat-absorbing glare-proof glass, and even solid walls—all of these tried in earlier buildings. However, it was not only the logical presentation of a design and its plan organization which made the Jury vote unanimously in favor of this school, but also the blending of the elements of the structure into a masterful composition.

"It is architecture," said one of the Jurors—and no greater compliment could have been paid.

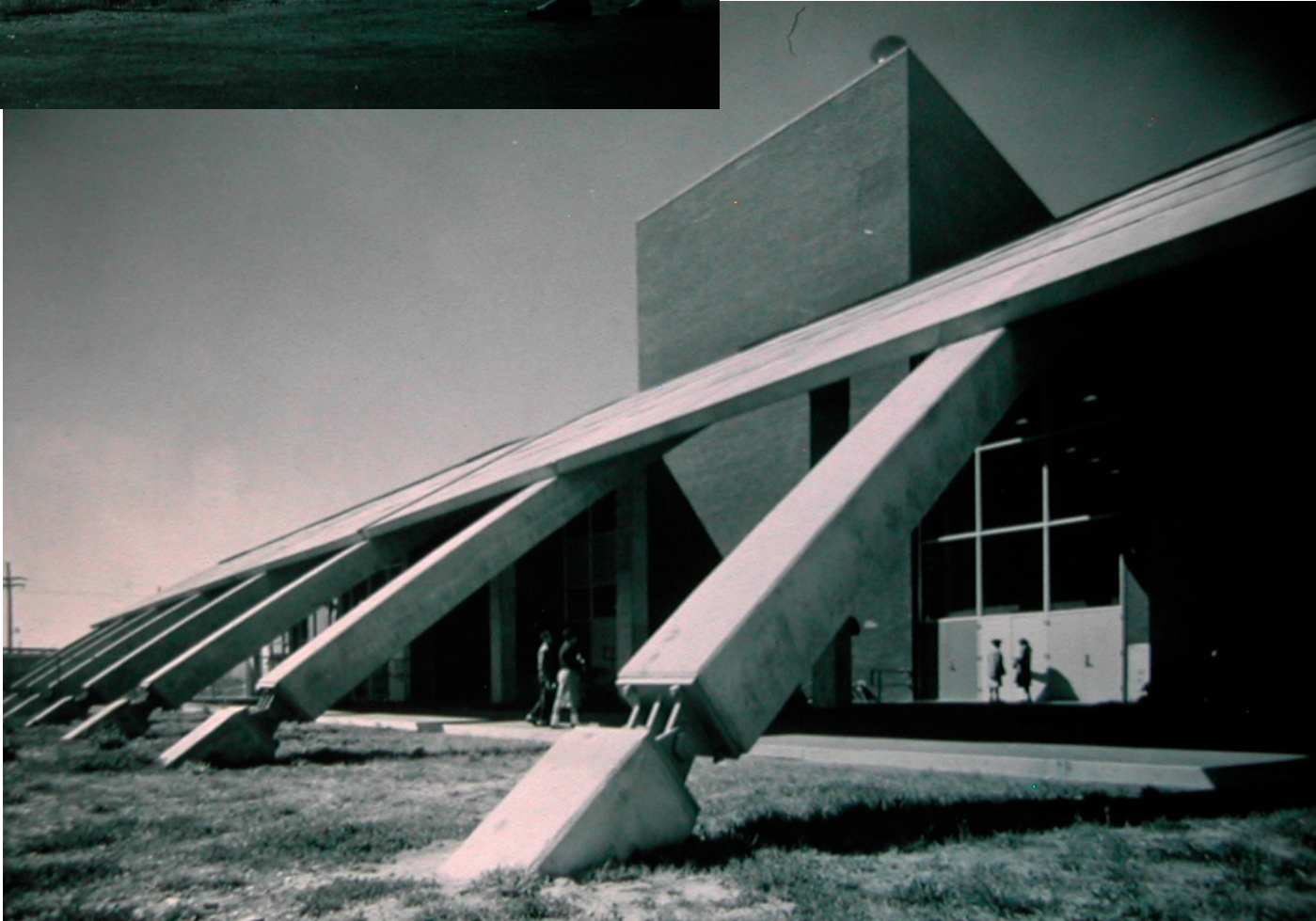


GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER JUNIOR-SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL Progressive Architecture, January 1958; drawing from the collection of Arthur Q. Davis.





The George Washington Carver Junior-Senior High School was praised as a model school for the nation. Integrating a junior and senior high school on the same campus as an elementary school allowed the schools to share some common facilities.<sup>16</sup> The striking design of the auditorium with its concrete vault and hinged bridge-like buttresses helped establish Curtis and Davis as architects on the international stage. Progressive Architecture's recognition of this school with its highest design award in 1958 is a tribute to the architectural quality of Carver High School as well as the design reforms set in place by Charles Colbert.<sup>17</sup>



GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER JUNIOR-SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL photos by Frank Lotz Miller

<sup>16</sup> Curtis and Davis also designed Helen Sylvania Edwards Elementary School on the site. Edwards Elementary was approved for demolition in December 2007. See: [http://blog.nola.com/news\\_impact/2007/12/masterplan122007.gif](http://blog.nola.com/news_impact/2007/12/masterplan122007.gif)

<sup>17</sup> Colbert first articulated the idea of the “school village” in 1952. *Idea: The Shaping Force*, p. 48.

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### HOW CAN THE THREAT BE ELIMINATED?

Buildings dating from the modernist era are currently entering a period of extreme vulnerability. Their architectural and mechanical systems are reaching the end of their life cycle and are in need of re-investment. The clean and clear modernist vision is likewise marred by neglect and unsympathetic alterations during the past decades. While 19th century buildings sometimes become more romantic as they decay, the results of deferred maintenance on mid-century modern buildings are unflattering at best. In addition, the modernist style has yet to reach an era of broad understanding and appreciation by the general public. In New Orleans, the economic argument for demolition and new construction inevitably prevails. We need to preserve the most significant buildings of the twentieth century for our city's future.

DOCOMOMO/NOLA has been established to advocate for the documentation and preservation of buildings of the modern era.<sup>18</sup> Continued education and advocacy for these structures will raise awareness of their significance, quality and importance to the architectural and social history of New Orleans. Increased acceptance of modern buildings as legitimate structures to be maintained, rehabilitated, preserved and restored will help eliminate the threat of demolition. Conservation and re-use of existing buildings is also a widely acknowledged strategy for the increased overall sustainability of a city's building stock.

### IS THERE ANY OPPOSITION TO THE PRESERVATION OF THE PROPERTY?

Modern and contemporary architecture has been seen by some as having had a negative impact. In particular, historic cities that lost significant urban fabric through urban renewal have been averse to the buildings that came in its place. While there has been opposition to their retention, attitudes have been changing. There is a growing appreciation for their role in the urban fabric as a record of diverse values and cultural movements.

The Recovery School District is in the process of finalizing its School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish. Only five new school plans have been revealed while 47 school buildings are threatened by demolition. New Orleans' current population is approximately half of its 1960 population, so there is less need for so many facilities. It appears that the plan is to clear the lots while FEMA funds are available for demolition and rebuild as necessary. However, in that process, struggling neighborhoods are deprived of a potential community center, artists' studio complex or musicians' practice space. These buildings are ripe for adaptive re-use and they belong to the people of New Orleans. Their structures are solidly engineered, designed in sympathy with our climate, and have become part of our cultural and historic fabric. The renovation of a modernist school that was built in a moment of sheer optimism can serve as a symbol for the city's rebirth. We can recover the future from the past.

### HOW WOULD LISTING THIS PROPERTY AS ONE OF NEW ORLEANS' MOST ENDANGERED HISTORIC PLACES HELP?

DOCOMOMO/NOLA seeks to increase the understanding and appreciation for the modern architectural fabric of the city of New Orleans. Any and all attention paid to this issue assists DOCOMOMO/NOLA with its mission, as well as its long term goals: the conservation and adaptive reuse of New Orleans modern architecture.

### OTHER THAN LISTING THESE PROPERTIES AS ENDANGERED, WHAT CAN THE LLS DO TO ALLEVIATE THE THREAT?

The Louisiana Landmarks Society can assist by engaging in programs and lectures that highlight the significant contribution of modernism to New Orleans.

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<sup>18</sup> DOCOMOMO is the international working party for the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the modern movement. DOCOMOMO/NOLA is our local chapter.



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OTHER PERSONS, ORGANIZATIONS, OR GROUPS WHO WOULD ALSO SUPPORT THIS NOMINATION.

Scott Bernhard, interim dean, Tulane University School of Architecture

Arthur Q. Davis, F.A.I.A, architect

J. Richard Gruber, director, Ogden Museum of Southern Art

Karen Gadbois, founder, Squandered Heritage

Walter Gallas, director New Orleans field office, The National Trust for Historic Preservation

Melissa Urcan, executive director of New Orleans chapter of the American Institute of Architects

NOMINATION SUBMITTED BY **DOCOMOMO/NOLA**

Written by Francine Stock, with the assistance of Eleanor Burke, Graham Owen and Ellen Weiss