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Structural Beauty

The underpinnings of a former almshouse become the focal point of a redesigned school library

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HIDDEN FOR MORE than a century and a half, the newly revealed truss system dominates the new library at the International School of Boston.



A giant spiderweb of pine trusses form one of the most remarkable ceilings in New England. Suggesting the rafters of a medieval barn, or perhaps a Paul Bunyan-size cat's cradle, the "roof" above the library at the International School of Boston (ISB) is an architectural marvel. For 165 years, no one saw the intriguing structural underpinning, which was only revealed by a recent restoration.

ISB, a bilingual (French and English) school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, educates 600 students and serves the Francophone community of Greater Boston. The pre-K-through-12th-grade academy initially rented the massive granite four-story building that had variously been an almshouse, orphanage, and parochial school. Then a decade or so ago, the institution bought the property. Desperately in need of more space, the school hired Maryann Thompson Architects of Watertown, Massachusetts, to undertake a study of the physical plant.

"We did a master plan to try to figure out how to fit everything in," says principal Maryann Thompson. The firm was subsequently hired to do a small project, such as a faculty lounge or the lobby, every summer. The most significant of these, and where the concealed roof trusses were discovered, is the library, which occupies the space beneath the dome that unifies the great building's three wings. It is, says Thompson, "symbolically and iconographically the heart of the school."

And what a distinguished piece of architecture the

school chose as its home. Built in 1851, it was the latest in a long line of Cambridge workhouses that sheltered the aged and the infirm, the poor and the mentally ill. This particular iteration, however, was based on the philosophy of the Rev. Louis Dwight, a noted prison reformer. The new library is on the top floor of the main tower, from which extended men's and women's blocks (the women's wing was smaller, hence the truncated T-plan). An 1878 newspaper report says the poorhouse had 14 acres under cultivation; the main industry was the making of offal carts.

The impressive masonry building is an example of Boston's "Granite School" of architecture, a burst of unparalleled civic construction that employed stone from regional quarries and includes projects such as Boston's Quincy Market, Custom House, and Old City Hall. The last was by the designer of the Cambridge almshouse, Gridley J.F. Bryant. An incredibly prolific architect, Bryant was responsible for courthouses, hospitals, churches, colleges, and jails throughout New England. Simultaneous with the Cambridge poorhouse, Bryant designed Boston's Suffolk County Jail, which has been restored as the Liberty Hotel.

Bryant employed elaborate, if hidden, trusses in erecting a promi-



BENEATH THE TRUSS SYSTEM, the library is transformed into a multifaceted space (ABOVE). A wrapper of birch has bookshelves, desks, and study spaces running along the sinuous perimeter. The solid demeanor of the granite exterior (LEFT) has hardly changed since 1851.



PLACING BOOKSHELVES OUT from the original walls creates spaces that offer quiet study carrels, reading nooks, and teaching rooms. A larger classroom can be closed off from the main reading area by a translucent curtain, yet light still spills into the space as the wall above is open to the ceiling. A student lounge (FACING PAGE), along with counselors' offices, is off the library under the rafters of the original men's wing.

nent dome for his almshouse. “We knew something was holding up the cupola,” Thompson says. Project manager Michelle Laboy climbed a ladder, broke through two ceilings, and discovered what would become the school’s signature feature.

Creating the 50-by-50-foot library, which now has a 34-foot-high ceiling with a glazed lantern, was not without challenges. Laboy was determined that the library should not be static. “Space is not a one-liner,” she says. “You have to move through it.” The original octagonal shape contributes movement, but by extending the walls with faceted

Baltic birch plywood, the architects created what Thompson calls a new layer, “an undulating and lyrical wrapper.” She adds: “I love the historical language of that room. You can read the original as well as the layer from our era, and the two are in dialogue.”

The four corners contain a small seminar room, a classroom, the circulation desk, and a piano. In the spaces between are bookshelves and nooks (“a secondary zone of occupation,” says Thompson), which echo the sinuous curves of the wall. Yet the central space with its long reading tables is like a traditional French reading room.

The woodwork and the library tables were designed and built by cabinetmaker and fabricator C.W. Keller + Associates of Plaistow, New Hampshire. Laboy praises the crew at Keller for its ability to employ digital carving without a loss of craftsmanship and for “showing us how to do it cheaper” (continuous curves would have been far more expensive than faceting). A lot is happening visually because of the complicated bookshelves-and-nook arrangement, yet the uninterrupted lintel at the top of the wrapper acts as a unifying device.

There is abundant natural light from fourth-floor windows and the lantern, but the architects wanted to introduce as much brightness as possible to provide what Laboy describes as “layers of light.” Hidden LED fixtures on top of the beams contribute a subtle glow, while cylindrical tube lamps look like luminous wind chimes.

Noting that enrollment has risen since the library opened, France Crespín van Duinen, ISB’s director of development, says, “You get more students when a school is more attractive.” Students and parents feel comfortable underneath the great truss in what is a brilliantly realized space composed of many intimate units. It is hard to believe this project cost only \$1.2 million, but Thompson’s team demonstrated you do not have to spend a fortune to do something right.

“A wonderful, historic space provides the right environment to enhance learning opportunities,” says Richard Ulffers, head of school. If only Ulffers were speaking for every school leader when he declares, “It makes a difference when our community benefits from thoughtful architectural planning.”

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