

## A New Approach for Chicago Public Schools

by Stanley Collyer



# An Elementary School Paradigm?

In an era of mergers and consolidation, the small neighborhood school would seem to be a relic from the past. But recent studies indicate that children perform better in more intimate settings. So how does one avoid the "bigness" with all its problems, an all too common characteristic of our present schools? Judging from the entries which were submitted to the "Big Shoulders, Small Schools" competition held recently in Chicago, it is all about clustering. A medium-sized elementary school organized physically into smaller entities—each almost a school within a school—can aspire to recreating a feeling of "smallness." Add to this the fact that at least 20% of the students are in some manner handicapped and a budget limit of \$200 SF (the average cost in Chicago is \$150 SF), you have all the ingredients for a formidable design challenge.

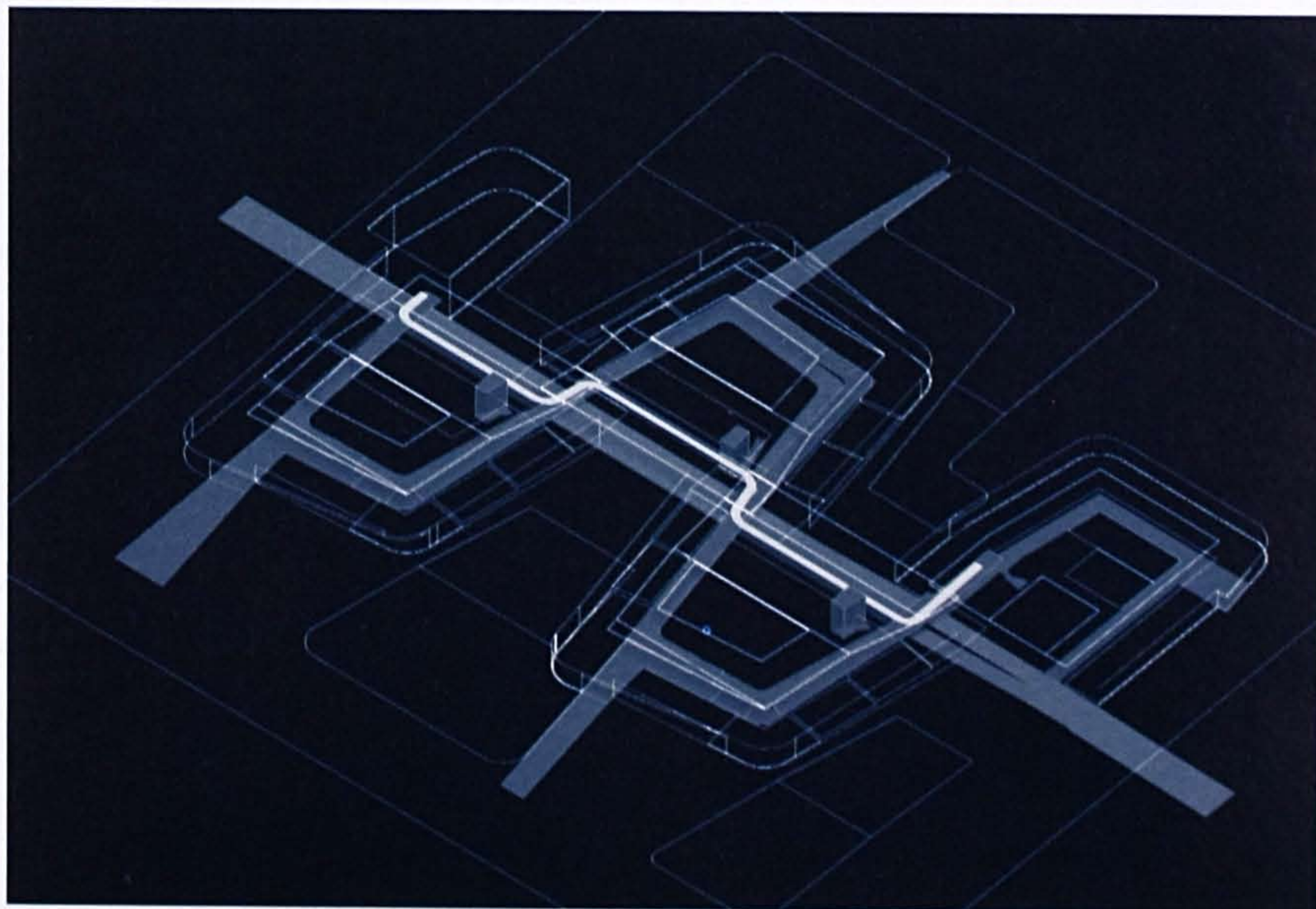
In an effort to relieve overcrowding and improve learning conditions, many school systems have recently embarked on large capital improvement programs. Whereas Chicago may have been dragging its feet on this issue, various organizations within the city have been focussing attention on it for some time. One of the highest profile non-profits leading this charge has been the Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI). Together with Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) and the Small Schools Coalition (SSC) in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, a national design competition was launched in January 2000 for the design and eventual construction of two prototype schools based on universal principles at

two sites in the city—one in the south side Roseland community, and one in the north side Irving Park community.

The competition, which was hybrid in nature, was supported in part through a new program initiated by the National Endowment for the Arts under its Director of Design, Mark Robbins. The hybrid feature of the competition resulted from the NEA's insistence that at least four firms of national stature be invited to participate in a second stage with two winners from the first, open stage for each site. The inclusion of invited firms was stipulated to ensure high design quality. When the entries in the open competition section were unveiled—just under sixty entries each for each site—it was clear that the fears of the NEA were hardly justified. From the theoretical to

the architecturally exuberant, the entries exhibited a high degree of creativity and professionalism. Arriving at a decision on a winner in the open section was not going to be an easy matter.

A strong theoretical entry with with colored squares under a large roof, indicating the desired program and ultimate flexibility, more master plan than complete idea, lacked the design substance to be advanced to the final round. A futuristic scheme by Chicago architect, Joe Valerio, elicited serious consideration by the jury in the final round, just barely failing to make the final cut for the second stage. In one of the great human interest stories from the competition, simple, black ink drawings conceived by former SOM partner, Walter Netsch, while convalescing in a hospital bed after



## Winner

*South Side Site*  
**Marble Fairbanks Architects**  
New York, NY

Aerial perspective  
(opposite, top)  
Circulation plan  
(opposite, below)

Aerial view of model  
(below, right)

a serious operation, made it into the final round for the South Side site.

### The Jury

The competition jury was evenly split among design professionals and educators, with each represented by at least four jurors:

#### *Design Professionals*

**Brigitte Shim, Architect**

Shim Sutcliffe Architects, Toronto

**Ralph Johnson, Architect**

Perkins and Will, Chicago

**Lance Brown, Architect**

Dean, City College of City University of NY

**M. David Lee, Architect**

Stull & Lee, Boston

#### *Educators and Community Representatives*

Giacomo Mancuso, CPS

Dr. William Ayers, UIC/ John Ayers, LOE

Marissa Hopkins, Inter-American Magnet School

Linda Owens, Davis Developmental Center

Dennis Vail, Langston Hughes Elementary School

Dick Smith, The Frederick Stock School

Mixing laypersons and design professionals is often tricky business. The jury process is slowed somewhat by the inclusion of non-designers, for they often have to go through a learning curve to under-

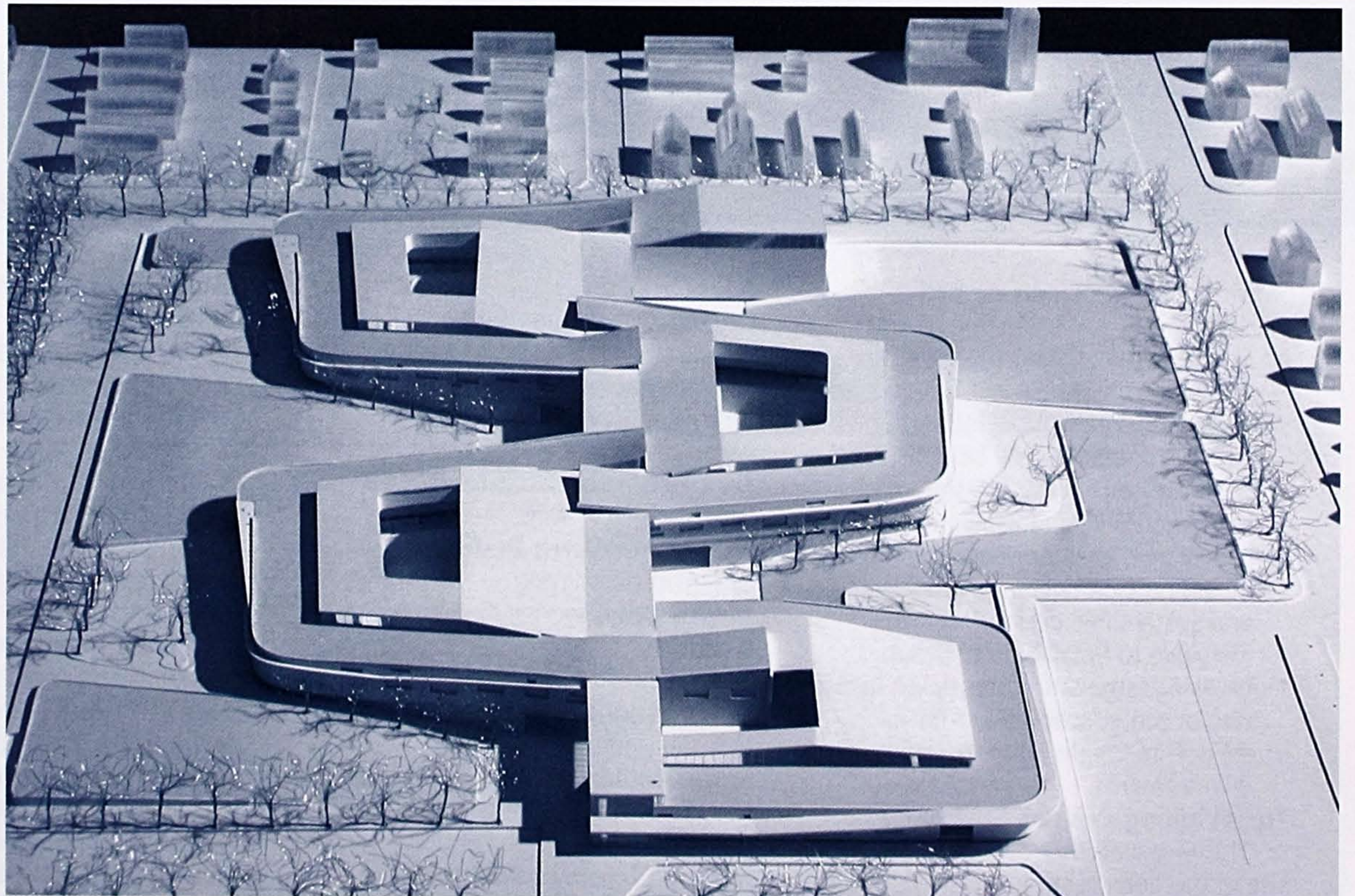
**"The architects first had to decide which site best fit their intended approach."**

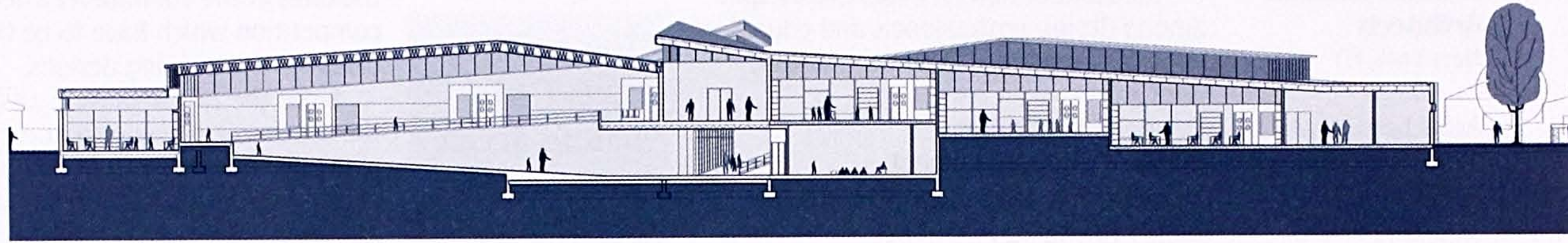
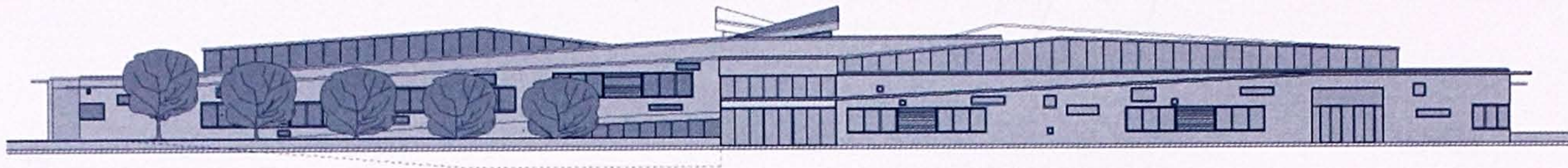
stand what it is exactly that they are looking at (See Brigitte Shim interview, page 45). On the positive side, they are the ones in the community after the competition which have to be the advocates for the winning designs.

Since the two sites were dissimilar—the south side site was square, the other elongated—the architects first had to decide which site best fit their intended approach. Moreover, the South Side site was single level, the North Side site two-level. Karen Fairbanks, South Side site winner, stated that after looking at both sites, only the South Side fit their criteria. This supports the argument that schools, especially in the inner city, can seldom be the result of a standard footprint; each site has its own set of conditions.

The criteria sounded much like those one would find for most competitions, one difference being the strong emphasis placed on handicapped accessibility and sustainability:

- Innovative: bringing architectural creativity and imagination to educational spaces;
- Feasible: buildable for approximately \$200 per square foot, which includes soft costs and furniture but not land,

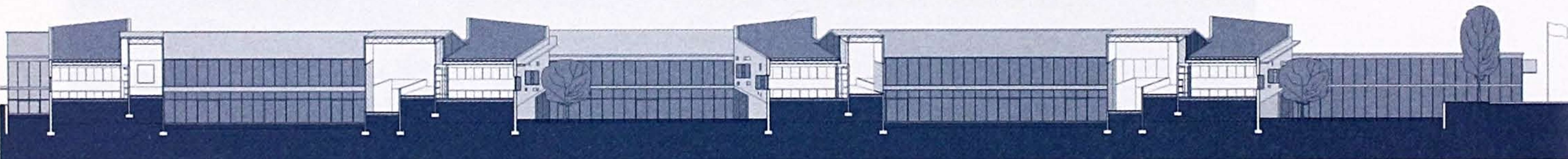
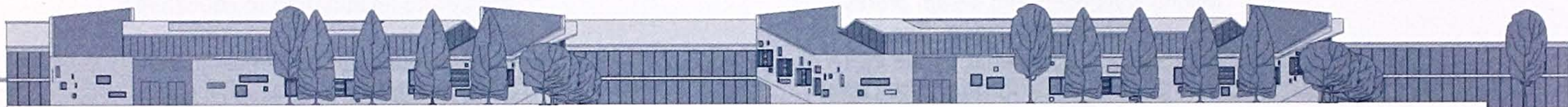
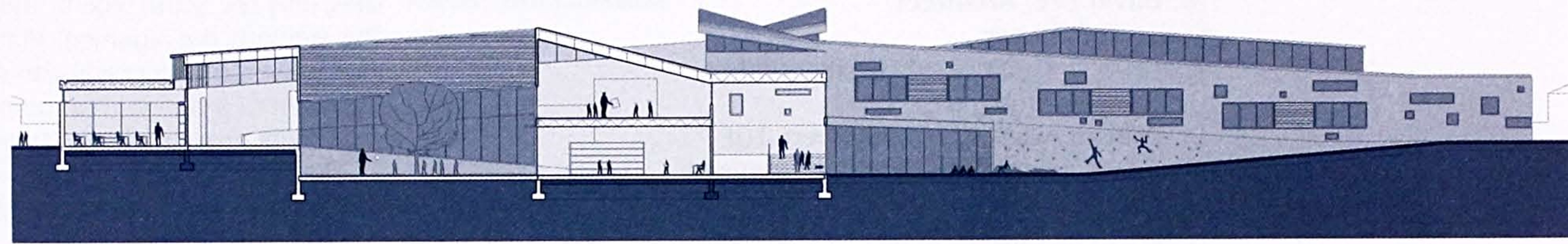




**Winner**

*South Side Site*  
**Marble Fairbanks Architects**  
 New York, NY

Elevation  
 (right, top)  
 Sections  
 (right, middle)  
 Elevations  
 (right, below)



- utilities, remediation, or medical equipment;
- Sensitive to Neighborhood Context: reflecting the ethnic, geographic, and social culture of the neighborhoods where the schools will be built;
- Sensitive to Universal Design: accessible, functional, and usable by people of any age, ability or background—including elements of green design and sustainable design;
- Sensitive to Small School Design: breaking large structures down into two or more "schools-within-a-school" to create intimate educational environments.

**The Winning Designs**

The Jury picked two winners for each site in the open section:

*South Side Site*  
 Ground Zero Design Studio  
 Ann Arbor, Michigan  
**Marble Fairbanks Architects**  
 New York, New York  
*North Side Site*

**Jack L. Gordon Architects**  
 New York, New York  
**Lubrano Ciavarra Design**  
 New York, New York  
 These winners were joined by invited architects:

*South Side Site*  
**Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects**  
 Atlanta, Georgia  
**Smith-Miller Hawkinson Architects**  
 New York, New York  
*North Side Site*  
**Koning Eizenberg Architecture**  
 Santa Monica, California

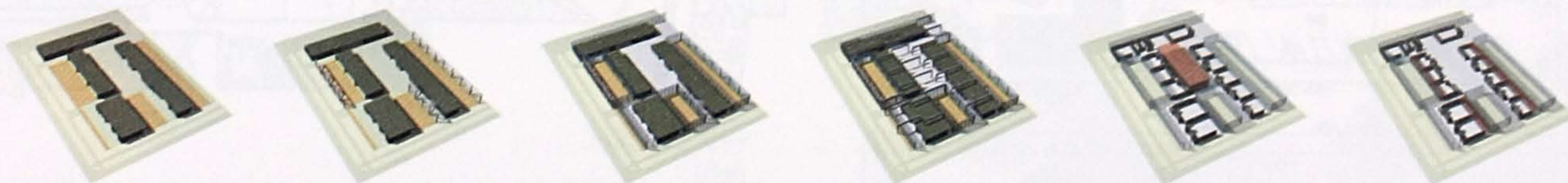
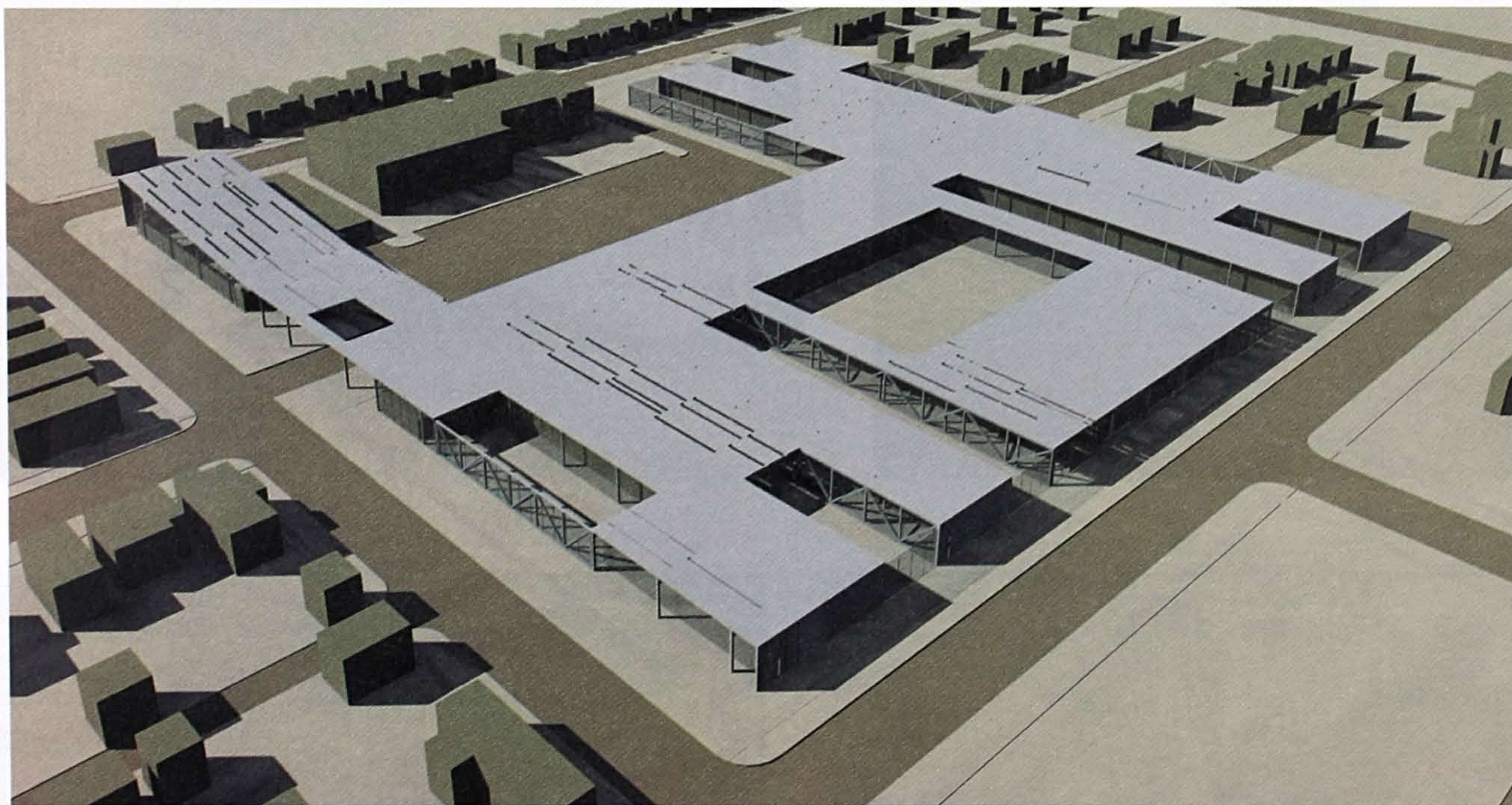
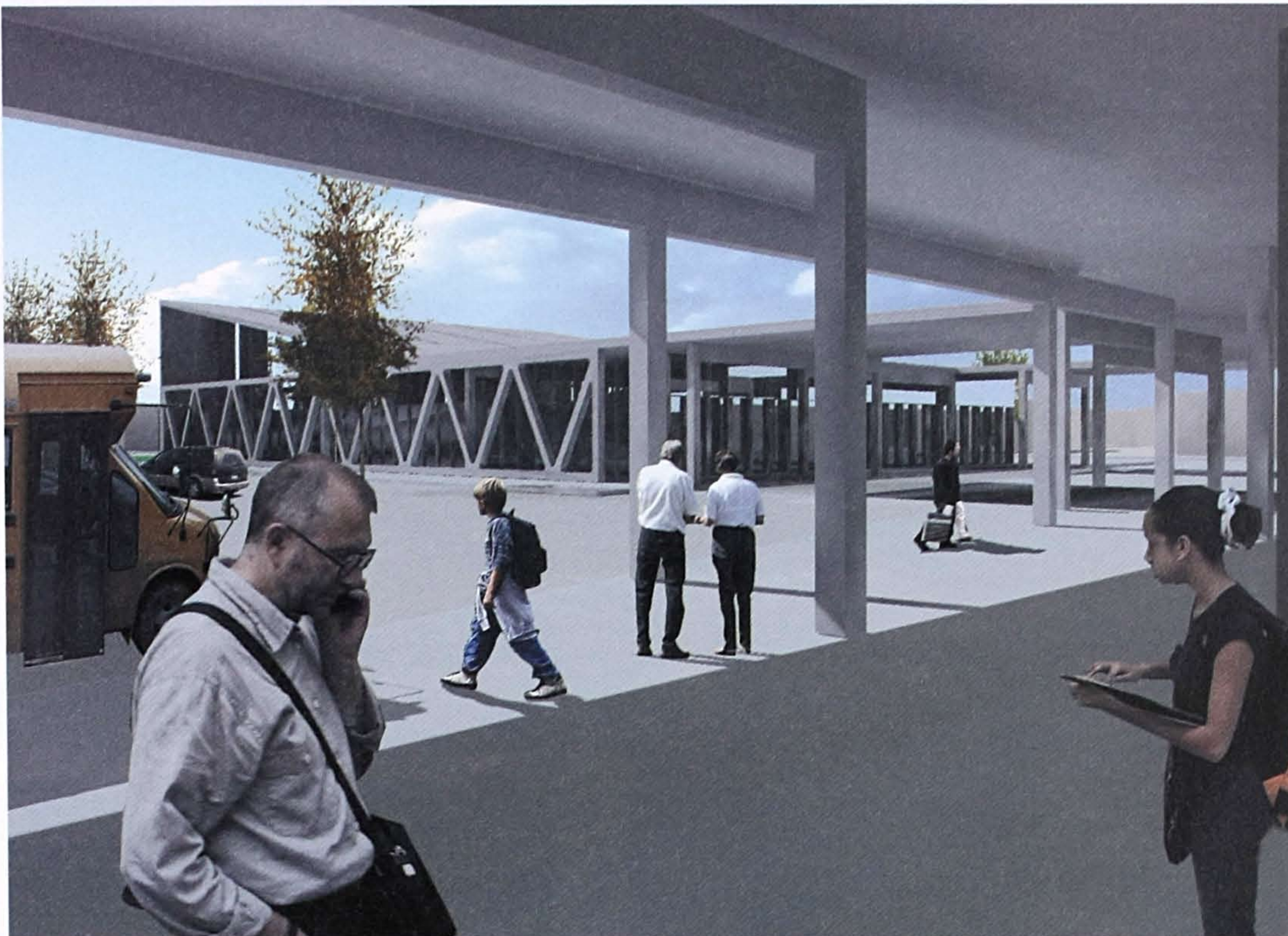
**Ross Barney + Jankowski Architects**  
 Chicago, Illinois

When the open section winners had been selected, preliminary designs from the four invited architects for the two sites were unveiled. The initial impression of the jury, according to several present, was the unenthusiastic response the new designs elicited. This was, of course, before the final stage, which would take place several weeks later. In the interim, architects were to meet with neighborhood leaders and discuss the community's needs. These forums turned out to be extremely useful for both sides. Fairbanks said, "We made changes in our design as a result of community feedback, including turning the site around, creating a single entry for the school, creating more gently  
*(continued on page 20)*

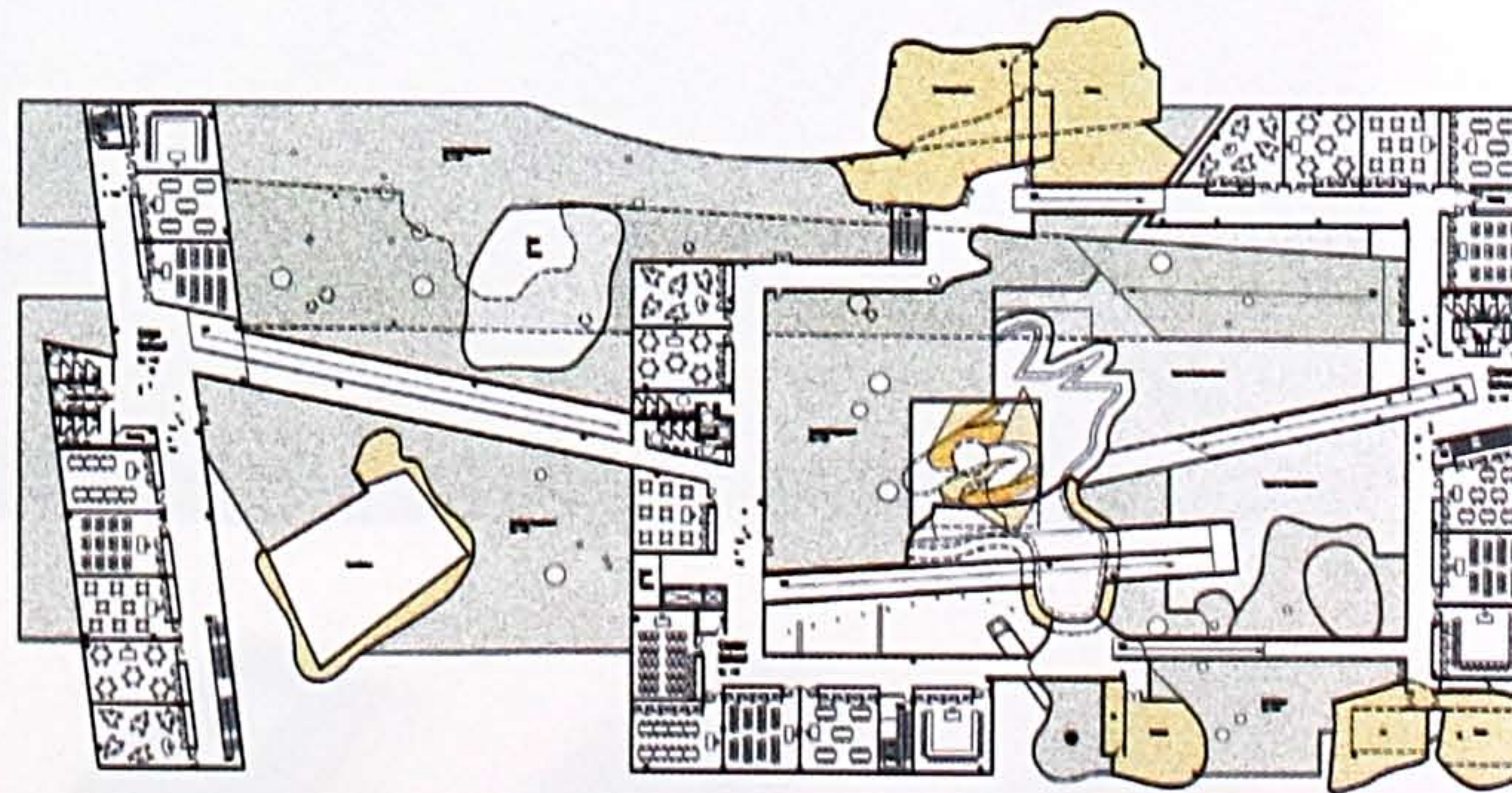
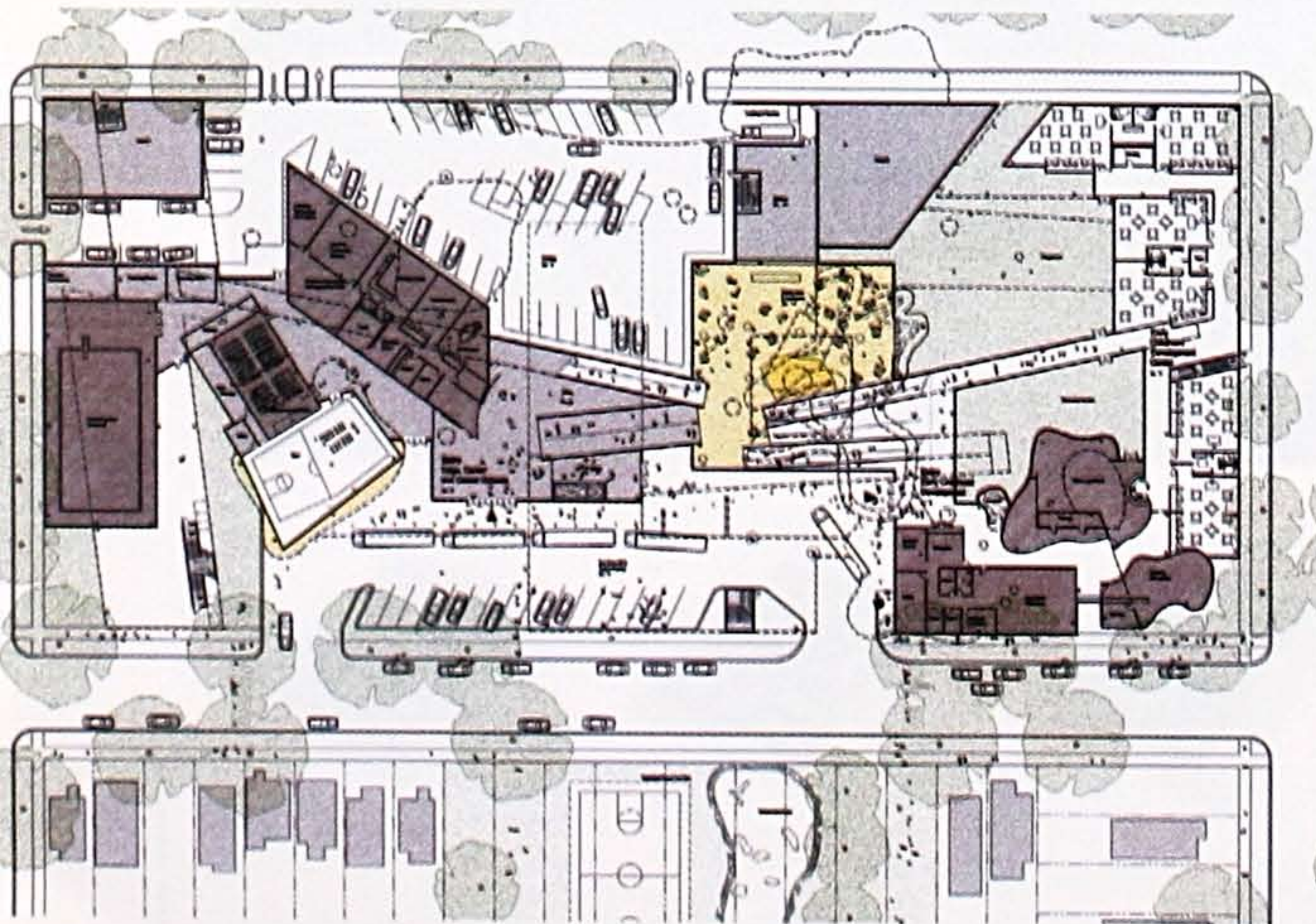
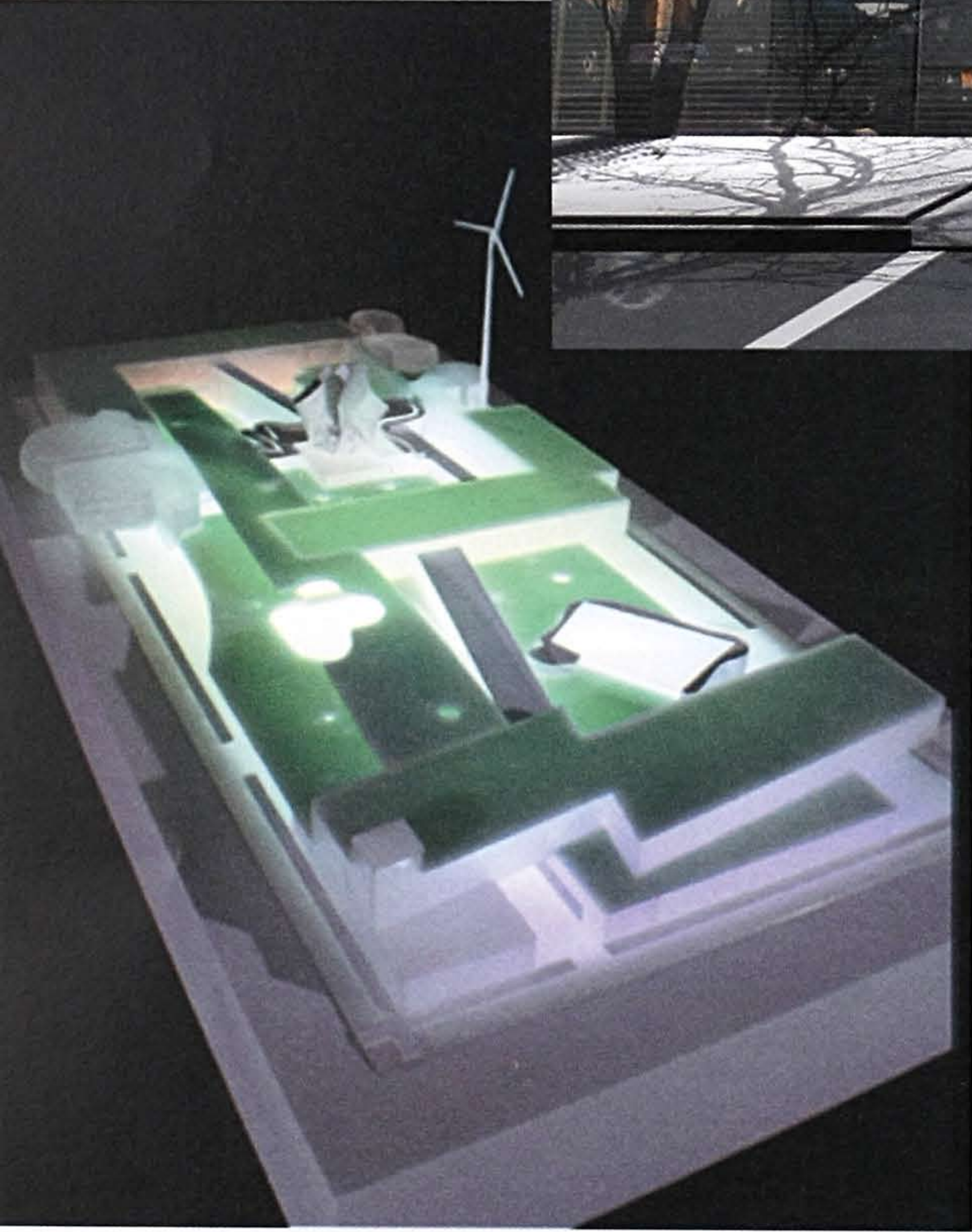
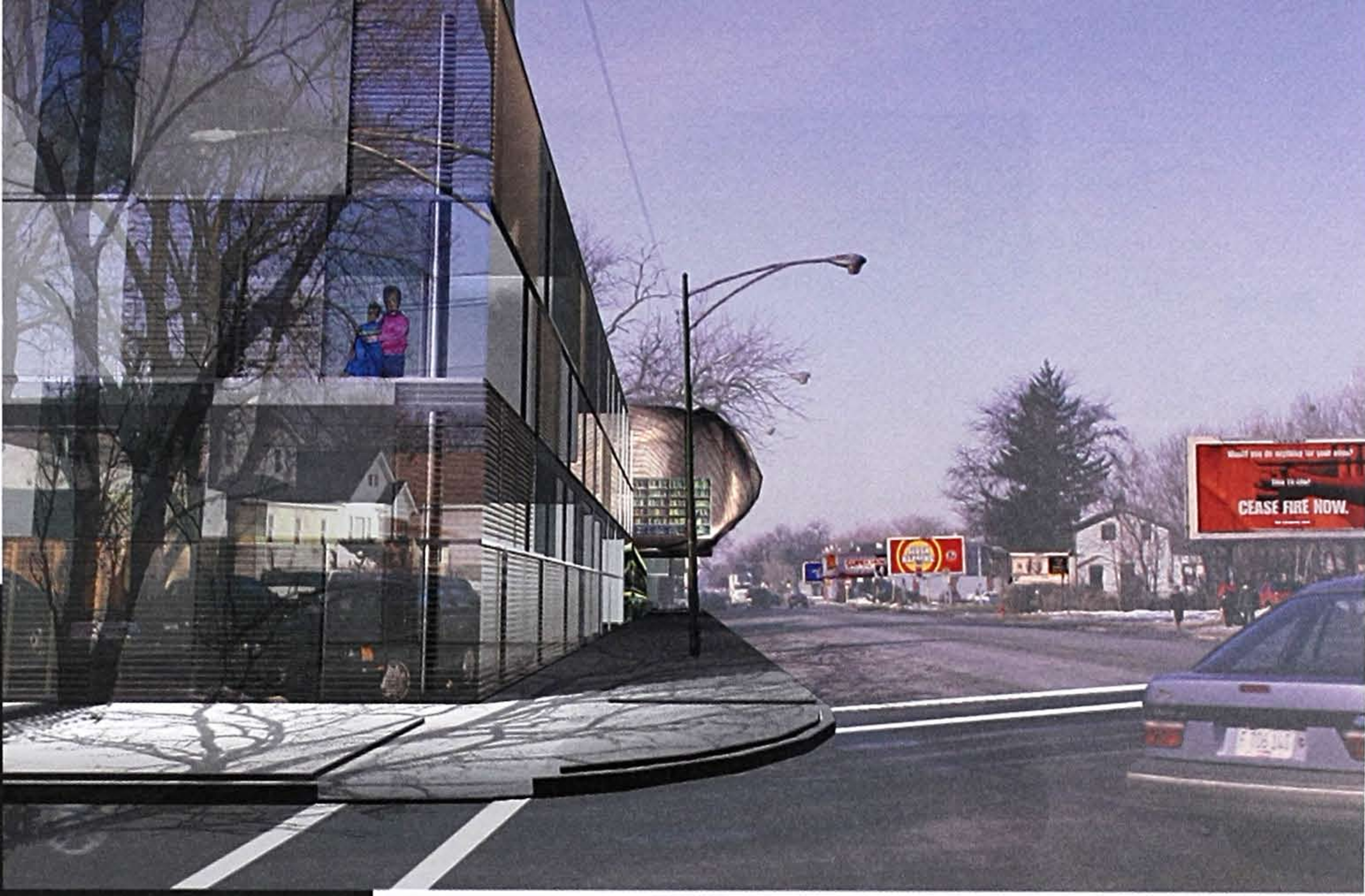
**Finalist**

*South Site Site*  
**Ground Zero**  
**Design Studio**  
Ann Arbor, MI

View from  
entrance  
(right)  
Aerial view of  
model  
(below)



**Finalist**  
*South Side Site*  
**Mack Scogin**  
**Merrill Elam Architects**  
Atlanta, GA  
Corner perspective  
(right)  
Model shot  
(below, left)  
Interior "Hearth"  
(below, right)  
Plans  
(bottom)

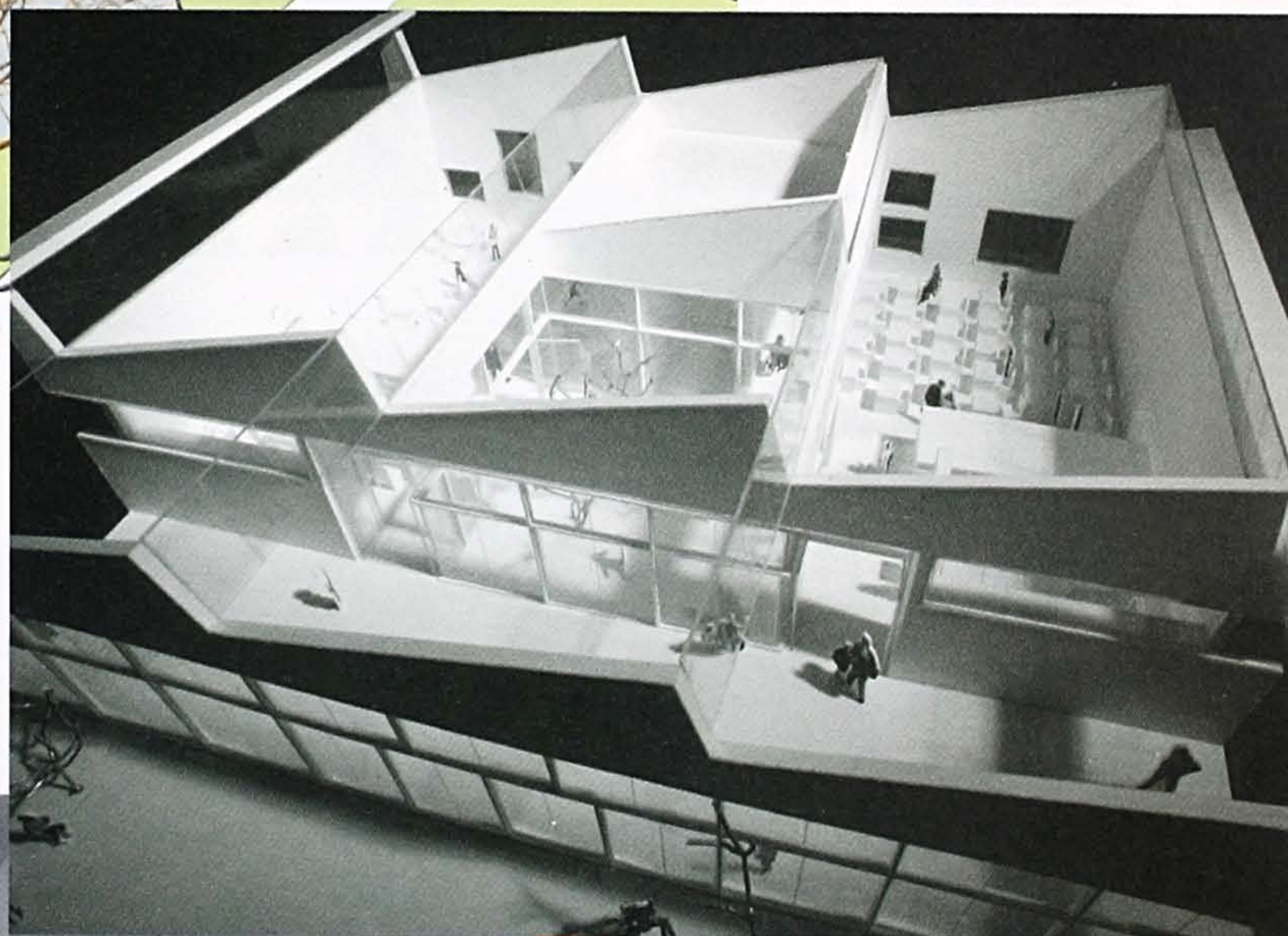
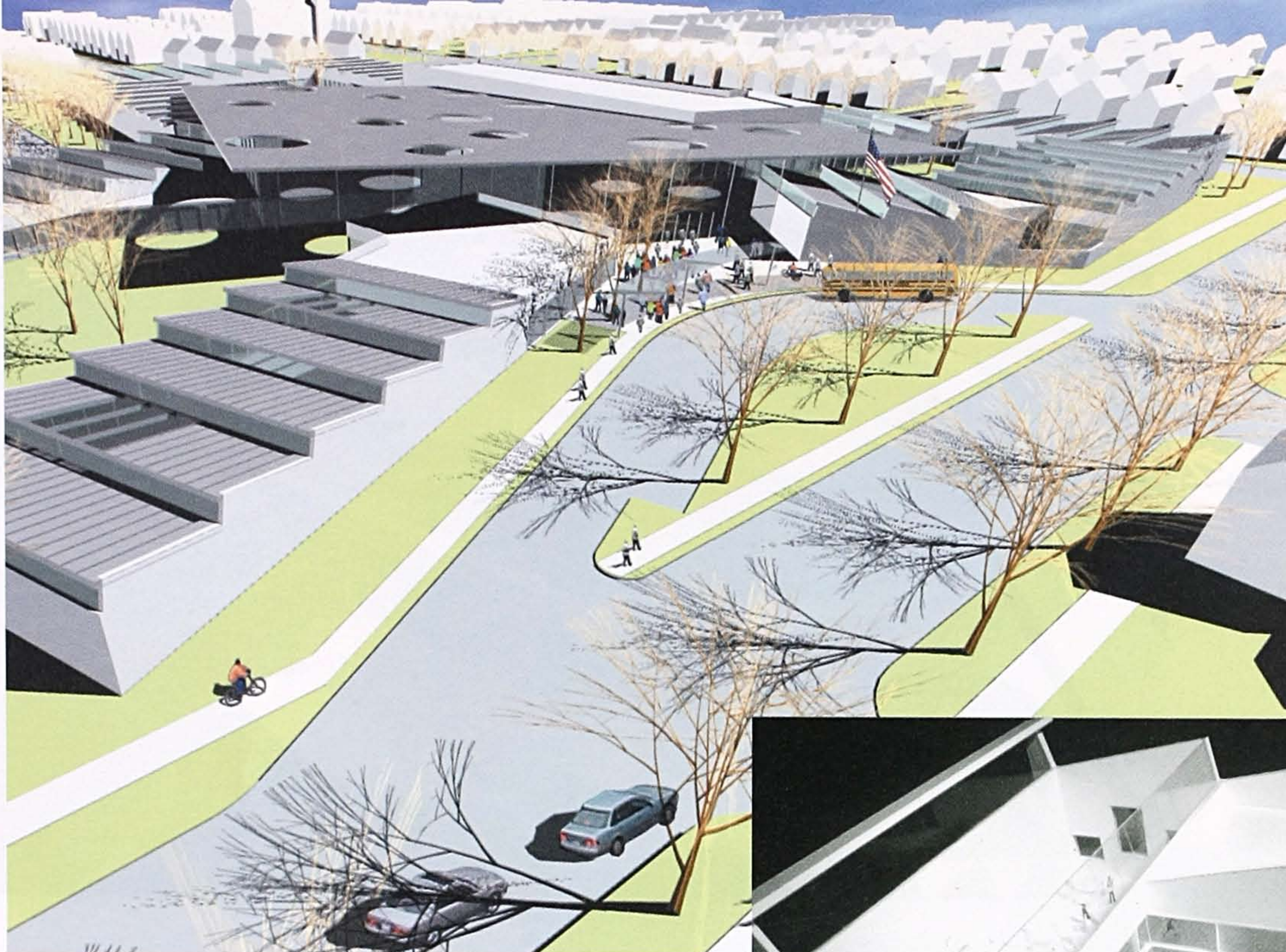


First level plan  
(left)  
Second level plan  
(above)

**Finalist**

*South Side Site*  
**Smith-Miller +  
Hawkinson**  
New York, NY

Aerial perspective of  
school with view to  
entrance  
(left)  
Model interior  
(below, middle)  
Classroom  
(bottom)



**Finalist**

North Side Site  
**Ross Barney + Jankowski Architects**  
 Chicago, Illinois

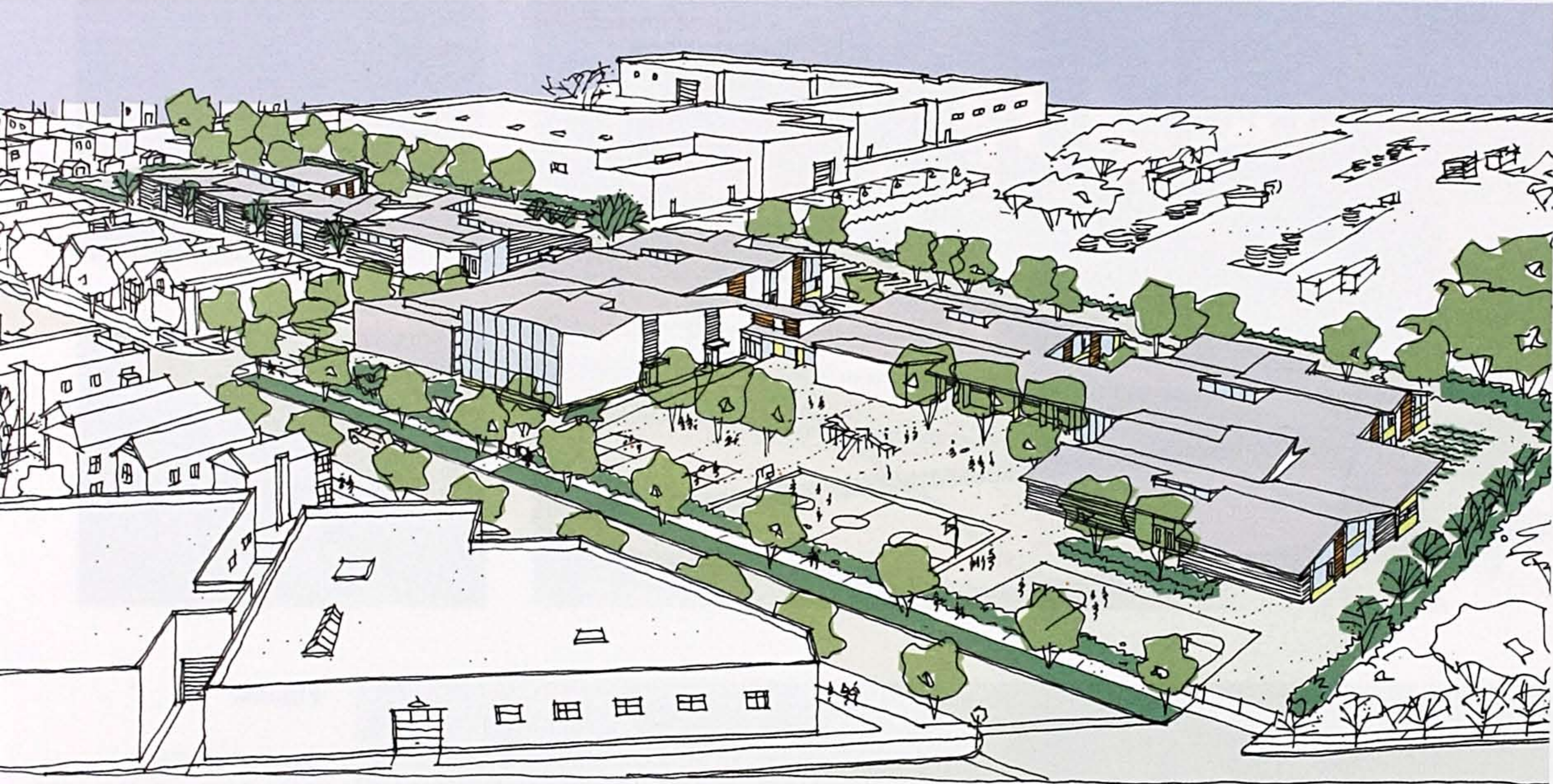
Aerial perspective (right)  
 Pedestrian perspective (middle)  
 View to entrance (bottom)



sloping landscaping and ramping system and increasing the amount of outdoor play space."

As a result of the final evaluation by the jury, Marble Fairbanks was declared the winner of the South Side site and Koning Eizenberg was selected for the North Side site. Both emphasized the "cluster" approach to the school design, with Eizenberg's scheme appropriately labeled "learning neighborhoods." The Marble Fairbanks design featured four interconnected U-shaped wings, each housing pupils in a different age group and each forming protected courtyards. Their landscaped roof was intended to provide the building with a "green" complexion.

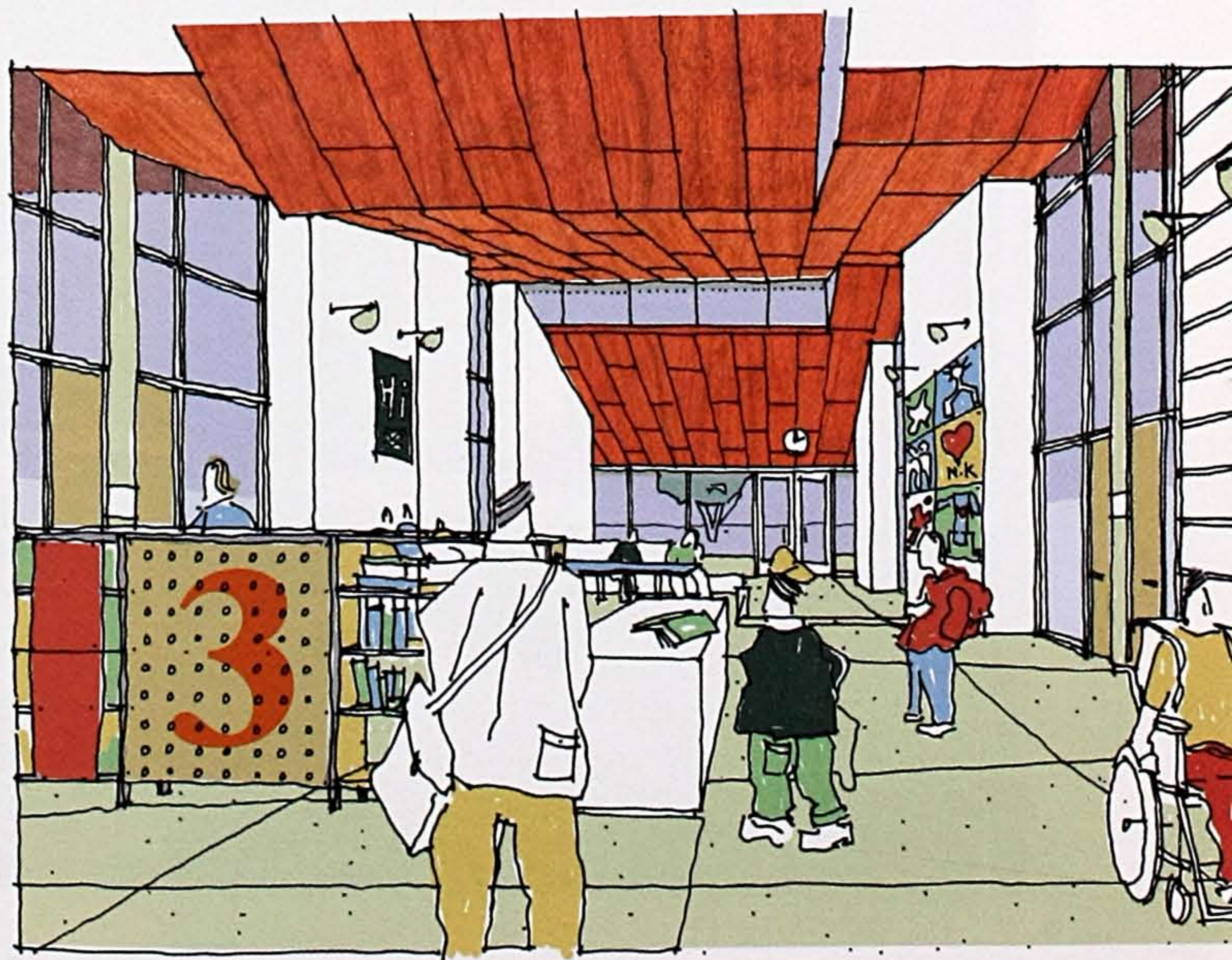
The results of the competition elicited a positive response from the neighborhoods where the schools were to be located. The take on the designs by the local press was less effusive. Whereas Blair Kamin of the Tribune regarded the designs in the context of "strikingly modern plans," Lee Bey in the *Chicago Sun Times* was somewhat critical of the winners, declaring that "the winning designs seem to lack the visual punch of many of their competitors." Whether he was referring to the Mack Scogin Merrill Elam or Smith-Miller Hawkinson schemes is left for speculation. But the jury was looking as much at organization as architectural language, and both designs could turn out to be very attractive buildings assuming the client does not depart too much from the original budget. After all, it's all in the details!



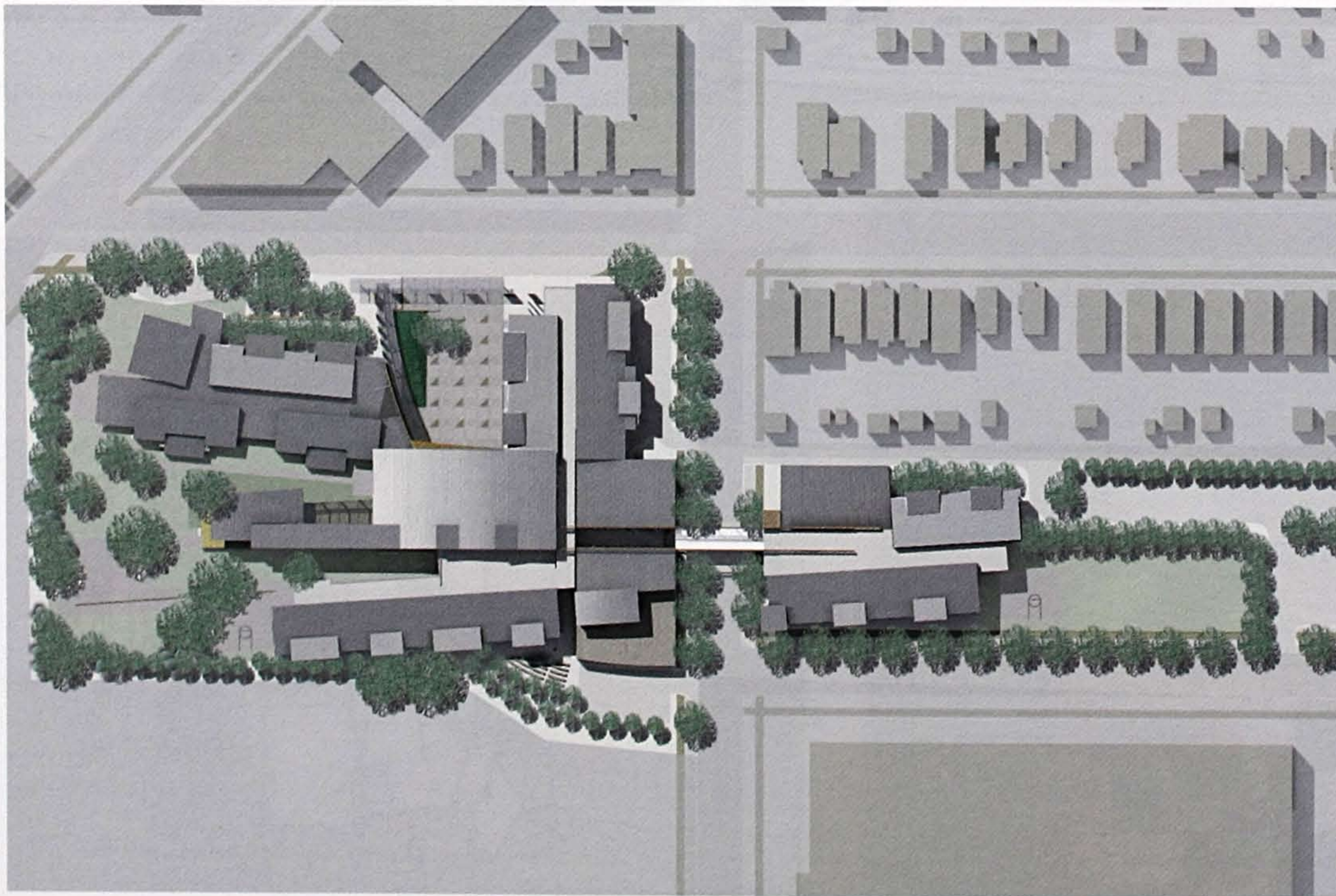
**Winning Design**

*North Side Site*  
**Koning Eizenberg  
Architecture**  
Santa Monica, CA

Section  
(above)  
Aerial perspective  
(left)  
Aerial view of model  
(below, left)  
Interior corridor  
(below, right)



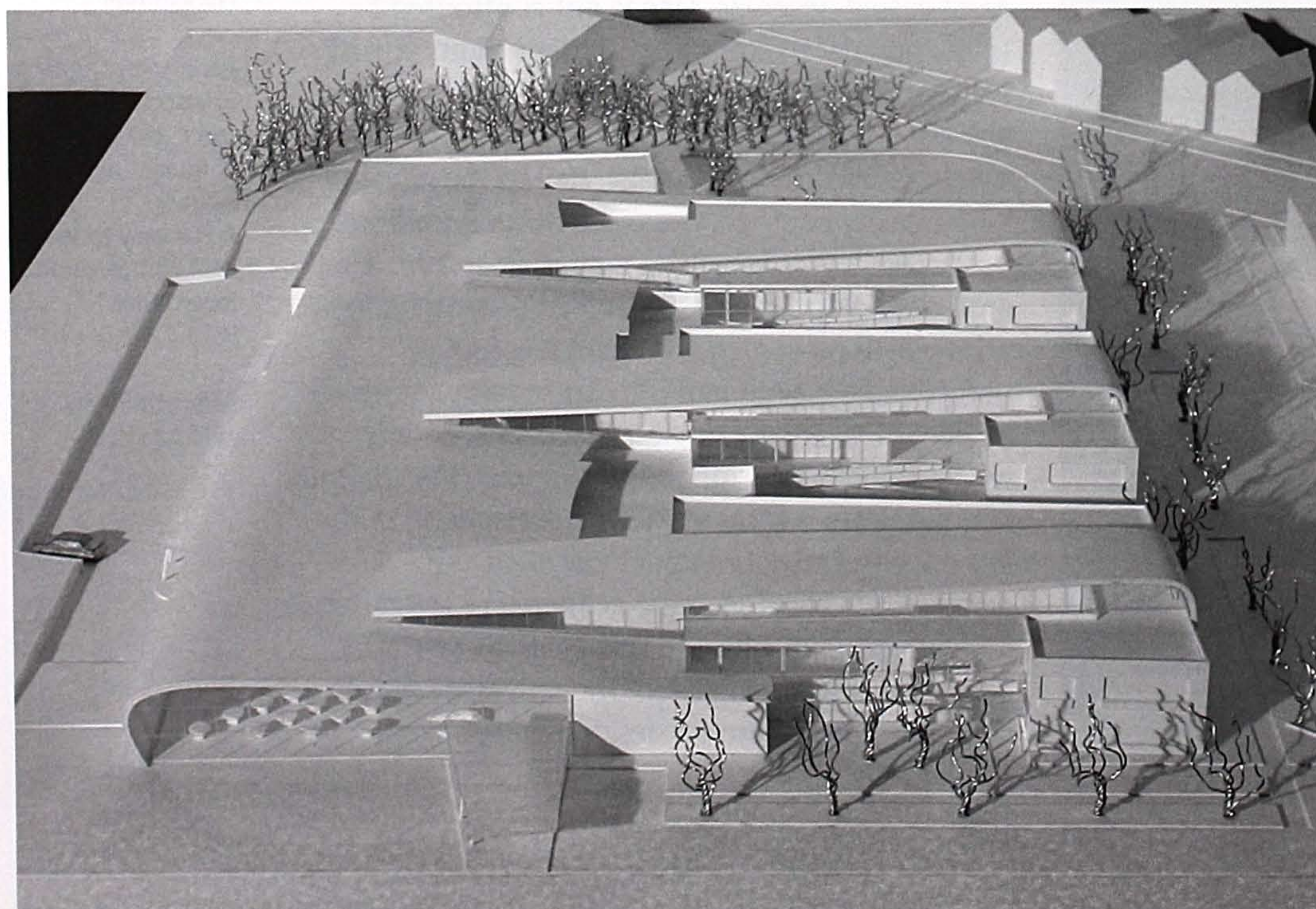
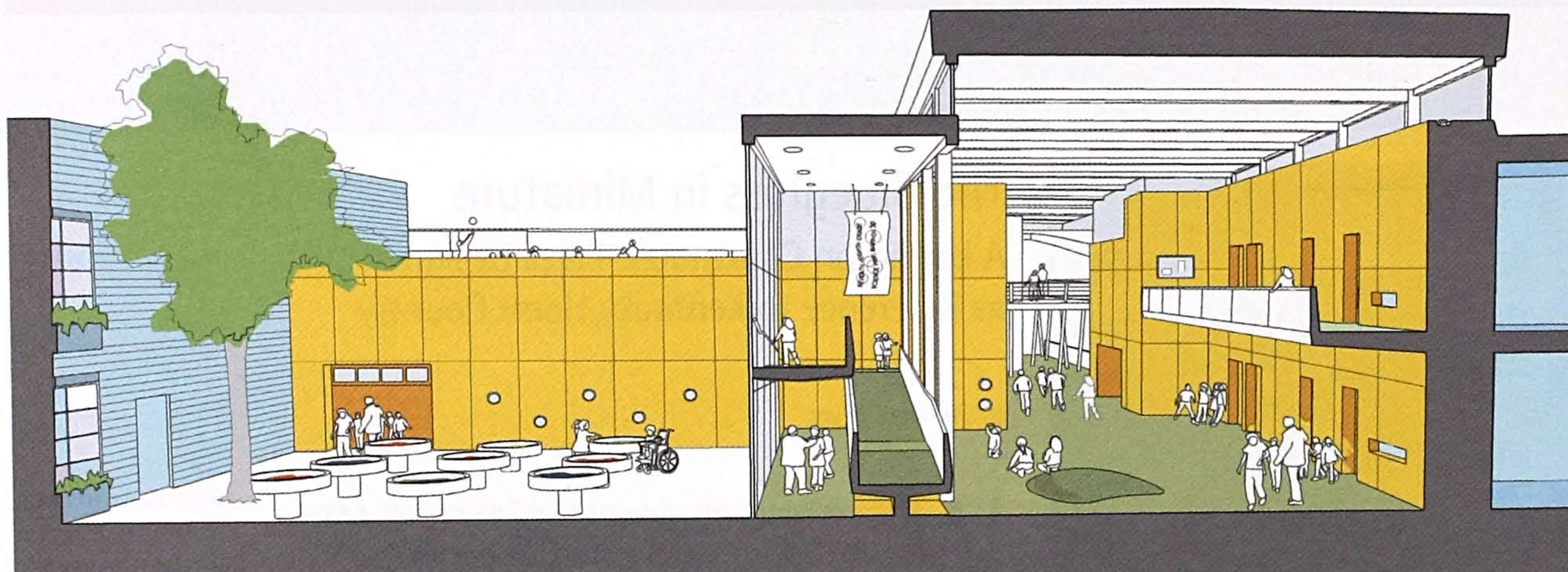
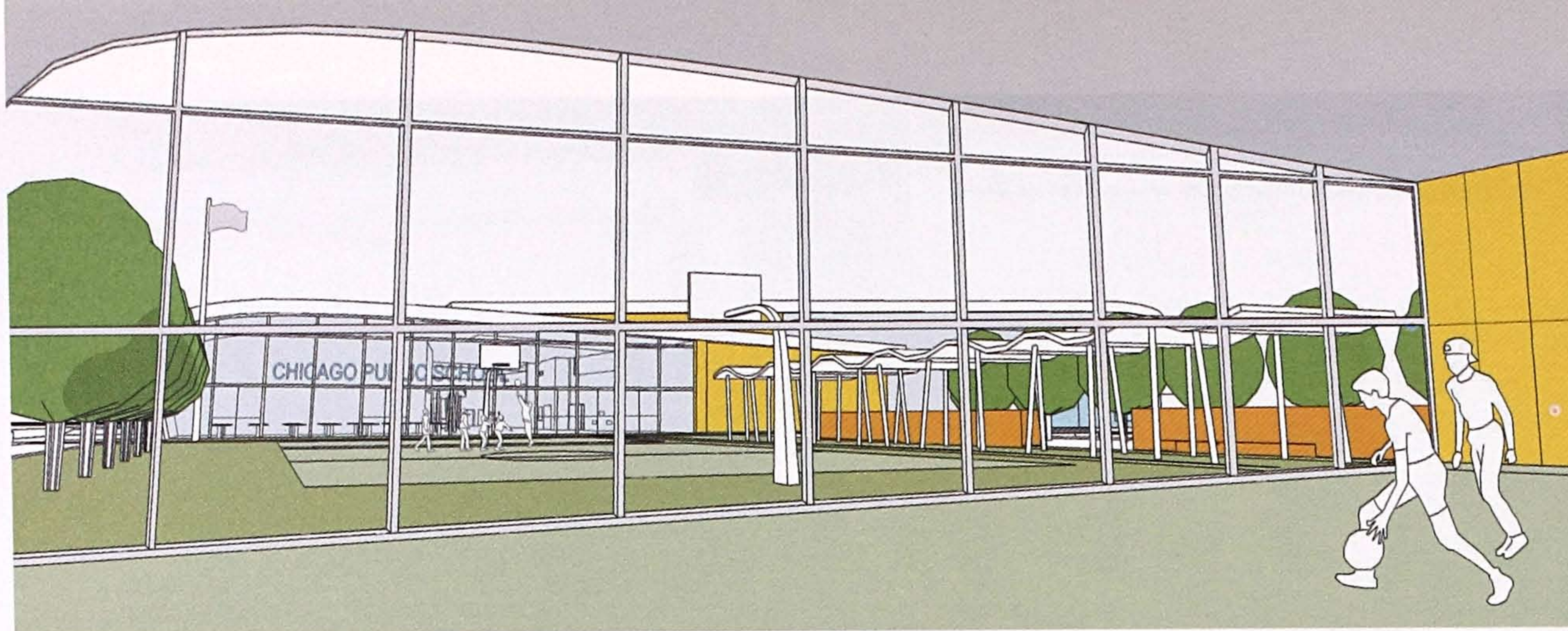




**Finalist**

*North Side Site*  
**Jack L. Gordon Architects**  
 New York, NY

Interior/exterior perspectives (above)  
 Site plan (left)



**Finalist**

*North Side Site*  
**Lubrano Ciavarra  
Design**  
New York, NY

View to interior  
courtyard  
(top)  
Ramping and cor-  
ridor system  
(above)  
Aerial view of  
model  
(left)