

Public Art for Public Schools

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DONNA DENNIS, *Dreaming of Far Away Places: The Ships Come to Washington Market*, 1988

P.S. 234
292 Greenwich Street, Manhattan

CHAPTER 7

Reshaping Schools

Improved Design and Percent for Art

The 1980s brought both an economic upswing and changes that affected the way New York City designs and builds schools. At this moment in New York City's history, there was a dynamic confluence of new ideas about pedagogy, political will, creative school design, and a renewed enthusiasm for public art.

Mayor Edward I. Koch gave the underfunded public school system some much-deserved attention and resources, ultimately resulting in a new city agency—the New York City School Construction Authority (SCA)—and with support of the Koch administration, the city's cultural leaders established the Percent for Art program. Simultaneously, new dimensions were added to architectural requirements as educators continued to advocate the benefits of small learning environments and the Art Commission asked the Board of Education to find an alternative to the temporary corrugated-steel minischool.

Percent for Art

Before the passage of the Percent for Art legislation in 1982, city agencies were able to choose whether to allocate money for art as part of new construction. School architects C. B. J. Snyder and Michael Radoslovich had both requested that a percentage of construction funds be set aside for art, but it was not until 1965 that Mayor Robert F. Wagner issued an executive order encouraging, but not mandating, a similar policy for all city agencies. Up until the implementation of Percent for Art, the Board of Education continued to commission art for

schools, often working with art consultants to select artists. Projects include *Untitled* (1975) by Francis Bevilacqua for the New Eastern District High School (renamed Grand Street Campus); *John Wayne* (1982) by Knox Martin for P.S. 380 in Brooklyn; Harriet Hyams's *The Seasons* (1982) at Staten Island's New Dorp High School; *Timeless Spirit* (1984) by Seong Moy at I.S. 131 in Chinatown; and Marisol's *Creativity* (1986) for Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. The Percent for Art law mandates that up to one percent of the base cost of eligible capital construction is dedicated to public art. This legislation formalized Mayor Wagner's executive order and introduced a mechanism and process for guaranteeing that art would be part of the design of certain eligible city buildings that are accessible to the general public.

Percent for Art has influenced the school art program in two key ways. Its panel process, which brings together art professionals and project stakeholders, has invigorated the democratic basis for commissioning public art in schools, broadened the pool of prospective artists, and helped build project consensus. Percent for Art also promotes a model of collaboration between artist and architect and adds a creative spark by challenging architects, artists, and school users to reexamine standard building features and incorporate art into schools in imaginative ways, as demonstrated at P.S. 7 (Kingsbridge) in the Bronx, where Justen Ladda designed tile patterns for stairwells, corridors, and even bathrooms.

The Percent for Art law, coupled with the Art Commission's initiative to inventory and conserve all city-owned art, led to



ABOVE

FRANCIS BEVILACQUA, *Untitled*, 1975

GRAND STREET CAMPUS

880 Grand Street, Brooklyn

OPPOSITE

HARRIET HYAMS, *The Seasons*, 1982

NEW DORP HIGH SCHOOL

465 New Dorp Lane, Staten Island

be designed by committee.”¹ The program has consistently sought the best artists to undertake work with the aim of taking the museum experience out of the museum and engaging building users and visitors and passersby in a visual dialogue with the city’s municipal buildings and public spaces.

New School Art Paradigms

In the years just prior to the establishment of the SCA, two new schools were being designed and constructed for lower Manhattan, stimulated by the creation of Battery Park City. These projects reinvigorated the conceptual approach to art in schools, offering ways public art can fit into a school building, and both became models for subsequent projects. Tribeca’s P.S. 234 (Independence School; 1988) and Stuyvesant High School (1992) in Battery Park City dramatize public art’s transformative effect on a school building. At P.S.

234, the entire fence is art, and at Stuyvesant High School, glazed block corridors are layered with artistic content.

At P.S. 234, the client was a committee consisting of the Public Development Corporation (now called the Economic Development Corporation), community representatives, and the Board of Education, engendering a dialogue that shaped architect Richard Dattner’s approach and concept of a protective environment scaled for young students, what he has described as “a pearl in an oyster.”²

Dattner suggested siting the playground on the north rather than the more conventional south side of the building, anticipating shadows that would be cast by future high-rises. He also took cues from the neighborhood of nineteenth-century brick warehouses, and the result is an elementary school that blends effortlessly with its surroundings. Dattner maximized the teaching potential of the building itself, making its architecture, mechanical systems, and site history legible in the final product. The more fortresslike tower at his earlier

