

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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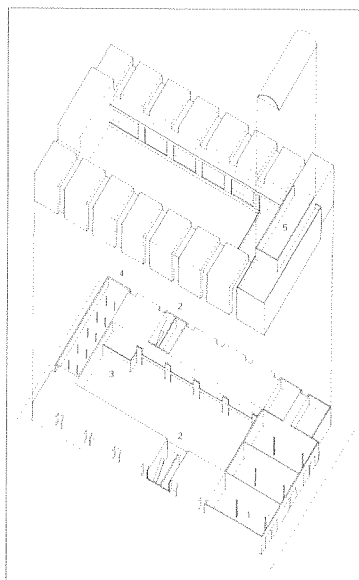
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A black and white photograph of a city street. On the left, there are multi-story brick buildings with many windows. Some windows have air conditioning units. A motorcycle is parked on the sidewalk in front of one of the buildings. The street is lined with trees on the right side, and several cars are parked along the curb. The overall scene is a typical urban neighborhood.

# Neighborhoods for Learning

**Roy Strickland**



Left: One of several new building types developed in the “Neighborhoods for Learning” proposal. The bays of this workshop–classroom–residential building allow extensions and combinations of activities to vary with the site.

Graphic: MIT New American School Design Project

The U.S. government estimates that during the next ten years the nation must spend a minimum of \$112 billion on capital improvements to public schools — not to mention the cost of building new schools to accommodate the anticipated increase in public school enrollments. This enormous investment presents an opportunity to improve not only schools but also the communities that surround them. By directing school capital projects toward the broader goal of creating “neighborhoods for learning” — a long-held ideal of school reformers — the theme of learning could become a powerful tool in urban design and place making.

Although the term “neighborhood for learning” comes from Ernest Boyer’s 1991 book, *Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation*, the concept is implicit in much educational literature. John Dewey, in the classic *School and Society*, presents diagrams showing the ideal school integrated with surrounding domestic, business and university life. More recently, Howard Gardner, in *Multiple Intelligence Theory*, calls for “contextual learning” coordinated by “school-community broker[s]” while TheodoreSizer, in *Horace’s School: Redesigning the American High School*, proposes the school setting itself should be at the heart of education reform. He asks: “[W]hat sort of... community context is required for schools that graduate admirable young people?” As if in reply, Boyer proposes a neighborhood consisting of “spaces and places that spark the imagination,” pre-natal and early-childhood centers where high school students can provide services, pre-schools, parent edu-

cation centers and proximity between schools and institutions like museums and libraries.<sup>1</sup>

But if educators have articulated an ideal, the actual form of neighborhoods for learning remains undefined. This issue is being explored through the New American School Design Project, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture and Planning. This article describes two workshops that developed concepts for neighborhoods for learning. The first, an academic project for Boston’s South End, establishes planning and design principles for such neighborhoods. The second, sponsored by the Union City, N.J., Board of Education, applies these principles to real-world conditions.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Programming the South End for Learning**

The South End workshop was organized to develop a concept for a neighborhood for learning in a typical

urban community. Its goal was to establish program and design principles that could be translated for use in real projects, as would occur later in Union City.

The South End is a complex community of high- to low-income people, including African- and Asian-Americans, Latinos, whites, immigrants of different backgrounds. There are many children, especially in low- and moderate-income families. Such a population could use a neighborhood for learning in many ways, from acculturation programs to child-through-adult education to economic development.

Physically, the South End is also typical of many urban neighborhoods. It features row houses, tenements, apartments, post-World-War-II housing projects, industrial and commercial buildings, and abandoned lots and blocks where the elements of a neighborhood for learning might be inserted.

The workshop, fourteen weeks long, frequently visited the South End, interviewed local social, cultural and educational service providers, and analyzed census data. It developed a neighborhood-for-learning concept through four interrelated activities:

- identifying educational priority areas, or those neighborhood census tracts with high numbers of children and low-income families, where learning facilities would have the greatest benefit,
- developing an educational program from community resources of the type identified by Dewey, Boyer, Gardner, et al. (such as libraries, theaters, museums and work places where both children and adults can learn),
- shaping a network of streets and public spaces that would connect and highlight these resources, and
- proposing learning facilities in both existing and new buildings.

The workshop considered options for funding and managing such a project, although it depended on subsequent, real-world studies like Union City to explore these issues further.

In developing the project program, the workshop sought to provide learning opportunities to the broadest cross-section of people and to link, wherever possible, learning with neighborhood activity, economic activity and development. The program included:

*Arts and culture*, suggested by Tremont Street, the South End's major commercial street, and the adjoining Boston Center for the Arts, Boston Ballet Center, public library, galleries and artist housing. (Cohort: pre-schoolers through adults.)

*Business*, suggested by the entrepreneurial efforts found throughout the South End, from the shops, services and restaurants of Tremont Street to the start-up technology companies east of Harrison Street. (Cohort: grade schoolers through adults.)

*Horticulture and botanical study*, suggested by the residential squares and community gardens spread throughout the community. (Cohort: grade schoolers through adults.)

*Urban management*, suggested by the parks, squares and streets where the South End's diverse behaviors and tastes are exercised, leading to mediation, public safety and public-space maintenance and management as learning and career options. (Cohort: middle schoolers through adults.)

*Recreation*, suggested by community parks located primarily along Washington Street, including Washington Square, one of Boston's largest neighborhood squares. (Cohort: pre-schoolers through adults.)

*Technology*, suggested by the start-up technology companies east of Harrison Street. (Cohort: grade schoolers through adults.)

*Hands-on, vocational training*, suggested by the small-scale industries and service shops east of Harrison Street. (Cohort: middle schoolers through adults.)

*Health services*, suggested by the Boston City – Boston University Hospital campus, located in the South End's southeast corner at Massachusetts Avenue. (Cohort: middle schoolers through adults.)

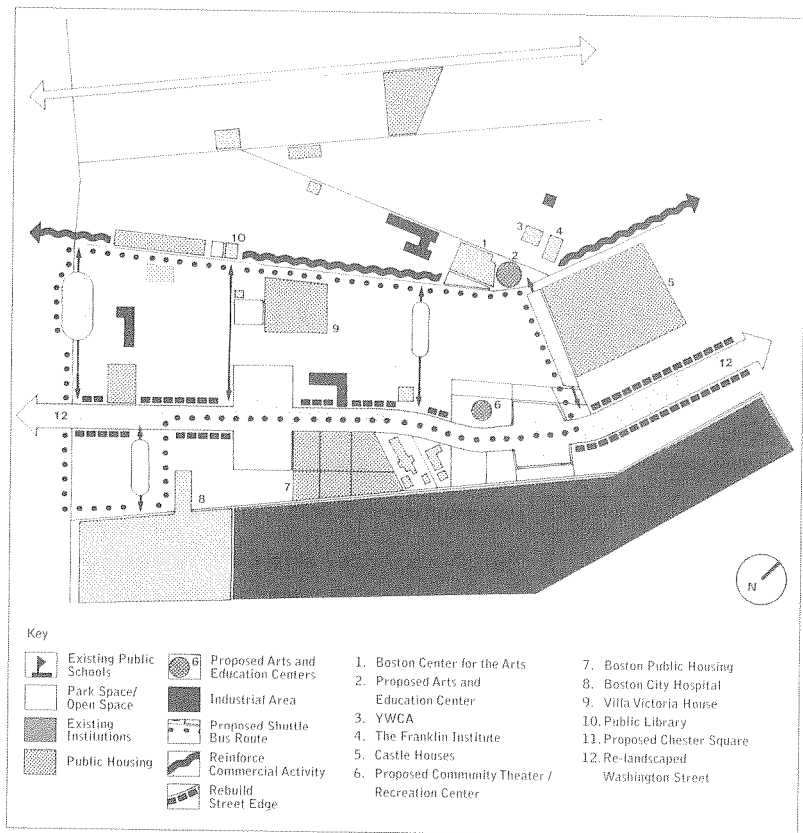
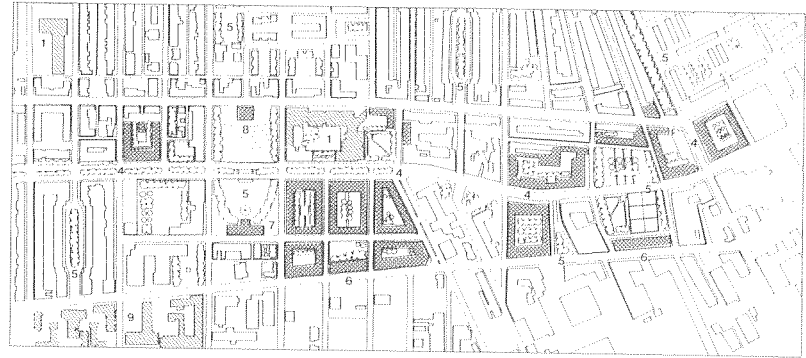
### The Street as Organizational Device

Because the project's educational elements were largely implicit and scattered across the South End, it became the workshop's goals to make them explicit and integrated. To accomplish this, the workshop used one of the South End's most powerful organizing features, its street system. If facilities such as the Boston Center for the Arts and Boston City Hospital could be considered among the neighborhood for learning's destinations or rooms, the street system would be their connector or corridor. The workshop exploited opportunities to reinforce educational themes through new rooms while strengthening and enlivening the corridor.

Along Tremont Street, this strategy suggested building an arts and education center on the empty lot adjacent to the Boston Arts Center, expanding the neighborhood library and converting selected empty retail shops into drop-in learning centers. Near the Boston City Hospital, the strategy suggested renovating empty buildings for health-service education centers. New loft spaces for vocational and technological training were proposed along Harrison Street. New parks and open spaces (which would also provide places for horticultural training and botanical study) were proposed along Washington Street. A shuttle bus would link these facilities by traveling along Tremont Street, Massachusetts Avenue, Washington Street and East Berkeley Street.

### Proposed Facilities

To accommodate new learning spaces, the workshop proposed both renovating vacant, available buildings and constructing new, mixed-use buildings. These buildings were identified and designed with three concerns in mind: making learning spaces visible and readily accessible from streets and public spaces; supporting safe and positive use of streets, squares, parks and public spaces through spatial and visual linkages to learning spaces; and integrating learning spaces with other uses, such as housing, workplaces and shops to encourage life-long learning.



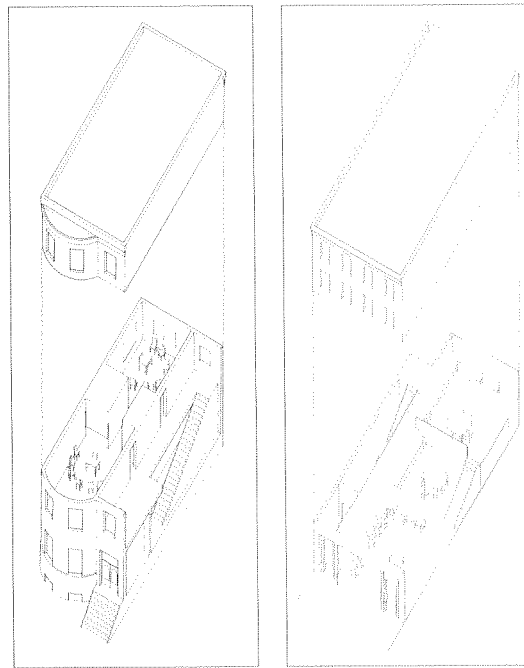
Top: Project plan. The South End's streets organize the components of the neighborhood for learning.

Above: Learning space network concept plan. Community resources, such as cultural facilities, schools and open spaces, shape the concept for infill development, street improvements and loop transit.

Graphics: MIT New American School Design Project

Row house. The South End's prevalent building type, it readily lends itself to classroom use.

Graphic: MIT New American School Design Project



Buildings to be renovated were:

*Empty row houses*, whose spatial flexibility, easy street access and integration with adjacent housing make them potential classroom facilities, day-care centers or combinations of classrooms and teacher housing.

*Vacant retail shops*, whose large windows on the street and flexible interiors make them suitable for drop-in study centers, computer work stations, exhibition spaces and day-care or meeting facilities.

*Partially-occupied loft buildings*, whose large, open spaces would accommodate classrooms, shop facilities, art studios, performance and recital spaces, recreation spaces, offices and housing to create mixed-use facilities.

Proposed new buildings were:

*Arts and education center*: The gateway to the project, this building would provide day care, arts instruction by resident artists, culinary arts and business training in a community restaurant, continuing education and health and counseling services that would be coordinated with Boston City Hospital and provide internships for local residents.

*Apartment-loft buildings*. These buildings would help knit together the South End's learning spaces by filling empty lots. The loft spaces would be suitable for education, job training, business and light industry.

The apartments would serve as models for redeveloping public housing between Washington and Harrison streets.

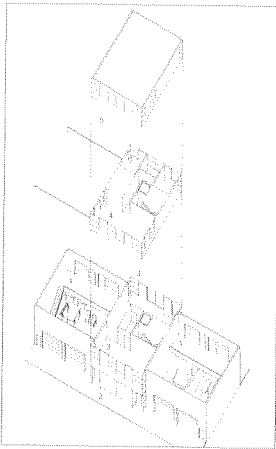
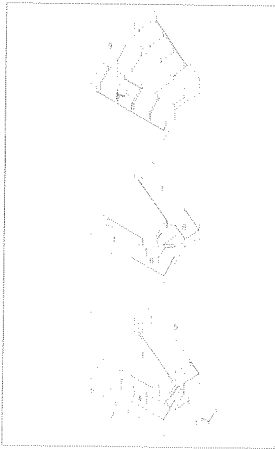
*Workshop-classroom-residential buildings*. These buildings, proposed for Harrison Street, were targeted for adolescents and adults, including teachers who wish to live where they work, and homeless or at-risk youth who need dormitory space. On the ground floor, the buildings feature shop areas with space for vocational and business training and for community services. Above, they include classrooms (on the second floor), apartments for resident teachers or "house masters" and their families (on the third floor), and temporary or permanent shelter for students (on the top floor).

### Public Spaces for Learning

Public space was integral to the project. The uses near the South End's streets, squares and parks helped determine the neighborhood's educational program. By design, these public spaces would play an enhanced role in neighborhood learning.

The education program was related to public space in formal and informal ways. Because learning spaces were dispersed throughout the South End, public spaces were designed to serve as the connecting fabric and to make the movement of people among learning spaces a visible and integral part of neighborhood life. This visibility, coupled with the street-level transparency of the learning spaces themselves,<sup>3</sup> would turn South End streets and squares into displays for educational and career possibilities. Public spaces would be powerful agents in informal learning that would become formalized as children and adults selected among options.

The project also programmed public spaces themselves for learning. On Tremont Street, in front of the arts center, an open-air vegetable and flower market that sells produce from community gardens would offer small-business training. A restored Washington Square would provide a stage for outdoor performances and a greenhouse for botanical study. Community gardens and squares offering horticultural programs would be integrated with programs in public-space management and maintenance.



Above left and right: Arts and education center, organizational diagram and street view. Multiple uses—commercial, cultural and residential—are mixed in the building, sometimes on the same floor. The building completes the cultural triangle that includes the existing Boston Ballet Center and Boston Center for the Arts, and leads pedestrians into Tremont Street.

Left and right: Apartment-loft building, organizational diagram and street view. By combining housing with learning and work spaces, the building reveals academic and career options to residents. In this example, ground-floor commercial space helps support the community economy while upper-floor learning and work places are visible through large windows.

Graphics: MIT New American School Design Project

### Neighborhood for Learning Principles

The workshop identified funding and management options that might help turn the South End project, and similar proposals, into reality. For Boston, these included the city's \$300-million capital budget for new and renovated schools and early childhood centers; existing private-development linkage programs that support construction of affordable housing on scattered sites throughout the city; the Department of Housing and Urban Development's proposed redevelopment of South End public housing under the HOPE VI initiative; and alternative, pilot and charter schools operating in the Boston area (often in non-traditional facilities).

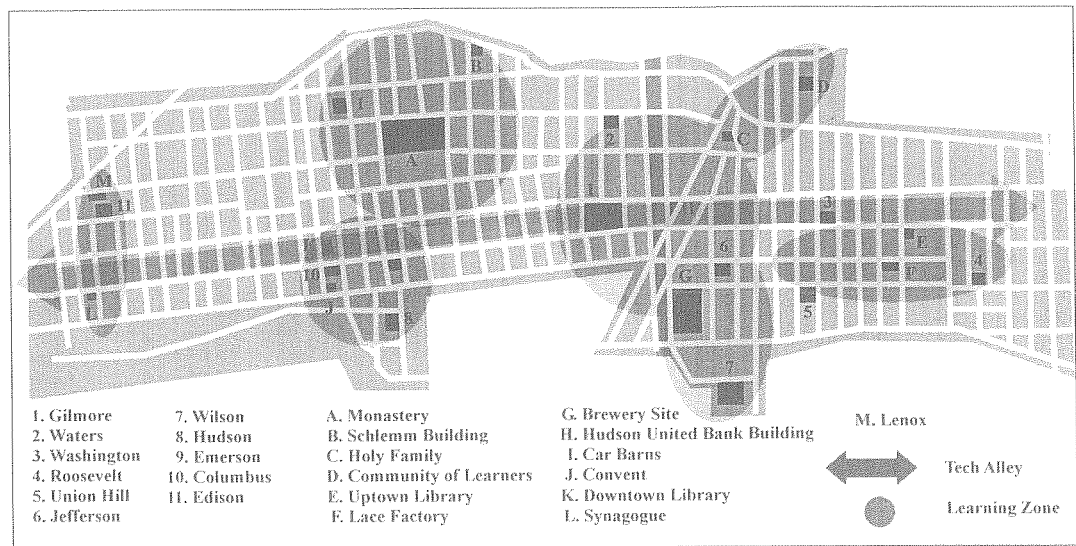
These options, familiar to many American cities, could support a neighborhood for learning if they were part of a coordinated effort. Linkages among the funding sources would multiply the limited amounts of capital normally available for school projects and extend learning opportunities to all members of the community.

The workshop recognized that the specifics of any real project — the relative space allocated to various program elements, cost, phasing, management, etc. — would inevitably be subject to negotiation among community constituents, government agencies, institutions and developers. Nevertheless, the workshop established fourteen program and design principles for neighborhoods for learning. These were:

- Plan for life-long learning and encourage cross-generational relationships in learning.
- Integrate community activities into the neighborhood for learning's curriculum.
- Use the architectural and spatial characteristics of existing buildings to suggest the role they will play in the curriculum.
- Include learning spaces in new buildings of all types.
- Use public open space as places for learning.
- Make learning visible — as visible as neighborhood commercial and retail activity.

Conceptual plan for a “city of learning” in Union City, N.J.

Graphic: MIT New American School Design Project



- Mix uses — including housing, work places and learning spaces — so that they may operate synergistically.
- Encourage learners to participate in neighborhood activity and management as part of the learning process.
- Use technology to help distribute learning throughout the neighborhood.
- Make transportation part of the plan, but encourage pedestrian movement between learning places.
- Coordinate agencies, programs and funding sources that can contribute to planning and capital projects.
- Consider alternative management strategies for delivering learning.
- Make work visible to help learners identify career option.
- Integrate project stakeholders in the programming and design process.

### The Principles Applied

One of our first opportunities for applying these principles has emerged in Union City, N.J., which sought help in devising the concept for a state-of-the-art, 1,200-student elementary and middle school. As a result of our consultations with the Union City Board of Education (UCBE), charrettes with school stakeholders and community members, the city is exploring ways to become a “city for learning.”

Union City, a working-class town of 60,000 people opposite midtown Manhattan, was a likely site for applying the concept. The public school system benefits from court-ordered budget increases that are helping it achieve funding parity with suburban districts.

It had recently applied educational reforms and new technology to a failing school system, with noticeable effect, making it a model for urban school districts. And the school district is the largest agency, employer and landowner in the city.

Union City also enjoys a vibrant urban culture; it remains a first stop for many immigrants arriving in the U.S. and has a strong Latino community, primarily Cubans and Dominicans, that is integrating itself into most aspects of the city’s life and governance. It is a small city, approximately one-and-one-half miles in size, so it is compact and easy to traverse on foot. And a strong, clear relationship exists between its street grid and building stock, which includes numerous handsome (although often abandoned) examples of industrial and institutional architecture.

Through site visits, discussions, charrettes with UCBE and public-school stakeholders, and analysis of UCBE’s pedagogical philosophy, we concluded that an alternative to a large, 1,200-seat public school would be appropriate. Smaller schools would reinforce the district’s child-centered learning approach. Dispersed schools would bring education closer to neighborhoods. New schools in formerly abandoned buildings would reduce the city’s blight. Preserving all or part of the proposed school site as open space — the only major open space in the city — would enhance the quality of life for the city as a whole.

Now UCBE, together with NASDP, is developing a concept for not just a neighborhood but a “city for learning” that would use the school’s \$35 million capital cost to renew several sites. By spreading the capital investment across several sites and combining it with other sources of funds — for day care, a new library and commercial street development — learning will become a



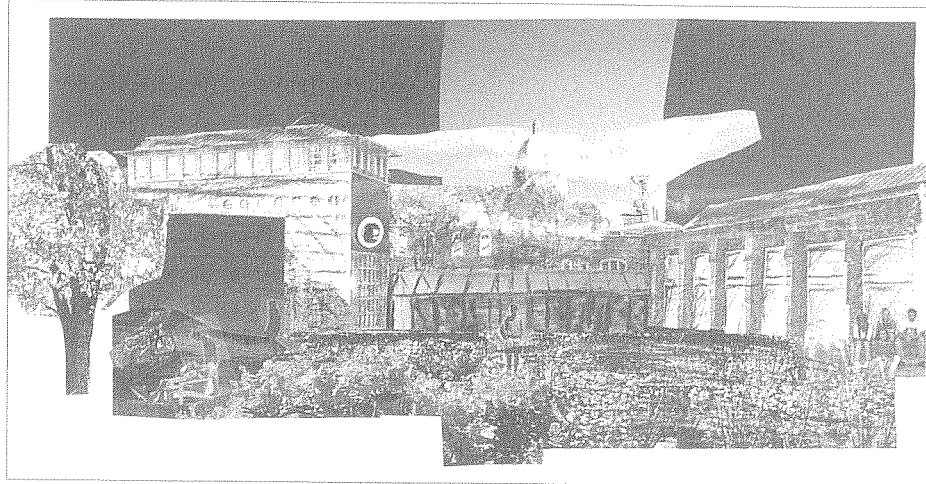
tool in the town's revitalization. Key elements of the concept include:

- Preserving as much of the original school site as possible for a learning and recreation park for the entire school system and city.
- Renovating underutilized or empty properties available for sale or lease to UCBE as schools and/or resource centers. These properties include a neo-Georgian funeral home, a Bauhaus-inspired factory building, a Victorian brewery, the upper floors of a neo-classical bank building and an historic trolley barn.
- Programming clusters of existing schools and new facilities as learning zones that offer early childhood, primary, secondary and adult education, job and technology training, and resources in the arts and sciences.
- Connecting learning zones with an arts and technology alley, where existing and new facilities would combine with Urban Enterprise Zone and Community Block Grant initiatives to reinforce private and commercial development along Union City's major avenues.

The Union City case study demonstrates the ability of the neighborhood for learning concept to adapt to real urban conditions. As part of NASDP's continuing work with the Union City Board of Education, the concept will be developed architecturally and presented to the State of New Jersey, which is committed to building new educational facilities for Union City.

### Conclusion

The South End and Union City projects may serve as examples for developing neighborhoods (or cities) for learning. Different urban conditions, such as location, morphology, physical resources and socioeconomic characteristics, will necessarily produce different plans that require varying levels of design intervention and capital investment. Nevertheless, as NASDP workshops demonstrate, learning may serve as a powerful medium for community design and place making as America confronts its educational challenges.



View of the school as a community center.

Graphic: MIT New American School Design Project

### Notes

1. See: Ernest Boyer, *Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation* (Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning), 91-97; Martin S. Dworkin, ed., *Dewey on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959), 77-85; Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) 68-80; and TheodoreSizer, *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 12.
2. NASDP addresses an issue largely overlooked in the current, nationwide discussion of public-school reform: the design of physical facilities that will help bring primary and secondary education into the 21st century. Through graduate-level studios and workshops NASDP generates concepts for learning facilities which are made available for use by school systems and their architects. NASDP is underwritten by the A. Farwell Bemis and Ernest A. Grunfeld Funds.
3. Examples include a drop-in study/computer station behind the window of the converted retail store, a community-restaurant kitchen and its culinary training visible through a plate-glass window on the ground floor of the arts center; an automotive service center and its instruction revealed by rolled-up garage doors, and a brightly decorated classroom behind the row house's windows.

#### South End Case Study

*Faculty:* Roy Strickland. *Students:* Samuel Desollar, Audrey Godwin, J. Van Lewis, Raj Singh

#### Union City Case Study

*Faculty:* Roy Strickland, William L. Porter. *Research Scientist:* Turid Horgen. *Students:* Singh Intrachooto, Ching-Yi Lin, Nilay Oza, Hector Perez, Geraldine Ramos, Rashmi Venkatesh, Akemi Yoo, Jing Yu