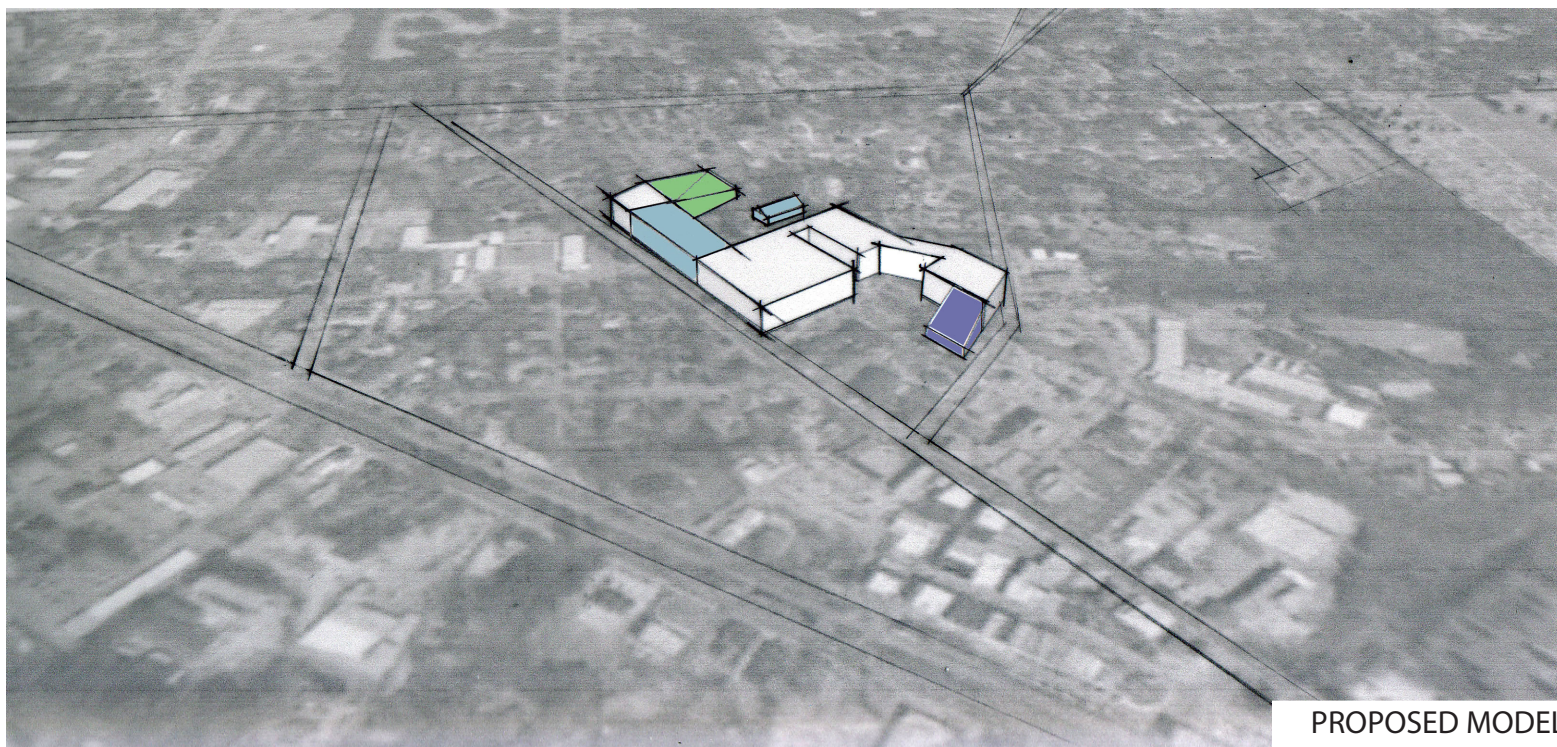
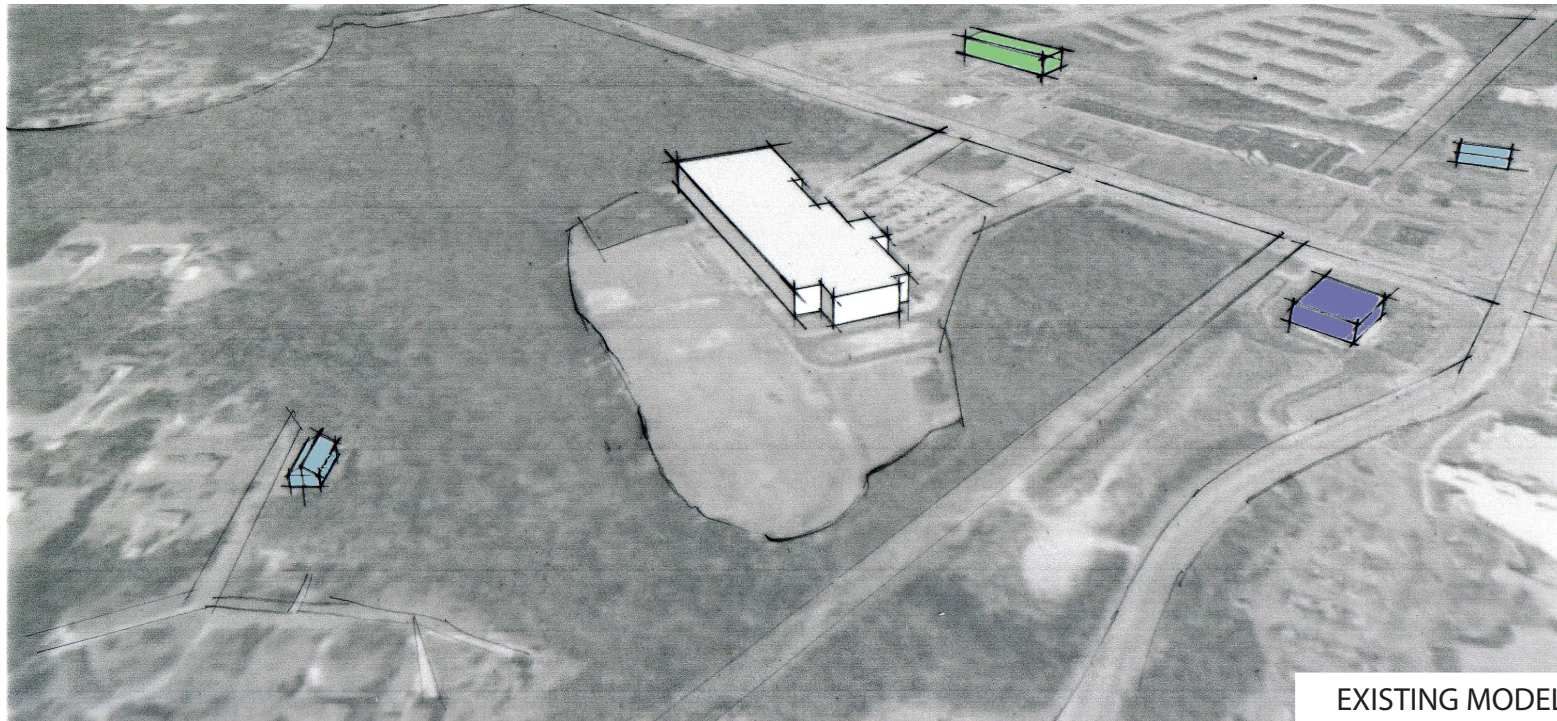


IT TAKES A VILLAGE: FROM ISOLATION TO ENGAGEMENT

Counter to current state regulations regarding educational facilities that allow schools to become isolated from their surrounding environment, the neighborhood would be better served by facilities that create an interdependent relationship between the academic population and the community. This will inform intergenerational interaction, continuous learning, and citizen engagement which will foster the development of a healthy, higher performing student in an attempt to address the disparities in educational achievement and opportunity in low-income suburban neighborhoods in comparison to their counterparts in more affluent neighborhoods.



I believe that architects have a greater social responsibility than that of to themselves. Everyone, no matter what stage of life you are in, will encounter the work of an architect. Sometimes compensating for the lack of comprehensive understanding of their hard work and effort by those not in the profession, architects tend to be experts at egotism or taking credit for their work to the extreme; illustrated by past traditions of carving the architects name into the building for all to see (a tradition that is becoming less prevalent, perhaps due in part to a more integrated project delivery method – the architect is no longer the lone figurehead of the project, instead it is now more of a collective effort from beginning to end). This self-fulfilling element has in some way has often taken precedence over the responsibility to serve the community. It is the built environment that shapes our daily lives, and in my opinion, it is also the built environment that has the foremost ability to change existing conditions to reflect social progress.

Throughout periods of socioeconomic distress, the population who suffers the most may be the children; more specifically, the children of low-income, underprivileged and impoverished households. Often stuck in neighborhoods that perpetuate the cycle of poverty and reliance on government assistance programs, they are often victims of a system that offers little alternatives to the dismal environment to which, sadly, they become. It is no surprise then that children who are products of such surroundings do not perform as well in school either due to severe behavioral problems or a lack of understanding of fundamental concepts. This inevitably results in large disparities in educational achievement and opportunity in low-income suburban neighborhoods in comparison to their counterparts in more affluent neighborhoods.

The disadvantaged family, typically one residing in public housing and headed by a single parent with multiple children has great obstacles to overcome, particularly in the area of education. The majority of society has paid little attention to this growing concern. We, as a whole, have turned our back to those most in need, letting the child, through no fault of his own, slip through the cracks. It is our responsibility as current citizens to foster the development of the future citizens. The community's role in raising the child is invaluable.

In architecture, when designing a new building, we often look to precedents to determine our direction. There is always an existing model for something we want to create. The phrase "It takes a village to raise a child" is one that originated from the Nigerian Igbo culture and proverb "Ora na azu nwa". The Igbo's also name their children "Nwa ora" which means child of the community. It has been in existence in Africa for centuries. In this instance, we may look to the past to inspire a brighter future. A community that takes on the role of raising a child as a collective impacts the child's life for the better. Childhood development is often thought of as something internal - an issue that is solely the responsibility of the immediate family. However, I think that the built environment can help alter the preconceived notions of child rearing into something that involves the collective as the responsible party.

I believe that school development should more closely reflect the environment in which it serves, integrating its program into the fabric of the neighborhood, and adapting to an increasingly flexible and dense environment influenced by urbanism. This notion is largely a reaction to current site acreage standards for new school developments. Currently, the state of Georgia mandates the following site acreage requirements for all new educational facilities:

Elementary School Facilities: 5 acres + 1 acre for each 100 children; Middle School facilities: 12 acres + 1 acre for each 100 children; High School Facilities: 20 acres + 1 acre for each 100 students

Even more discouraging, within the state mandated document, it is also expressed that although minimum acreages are established, large acreages are highly desirable (Georgia Department of Education Guide to Facility Site Selection). Due to these siting requirements, schools have become the biggest contributors to suburban sprawl. The need for large areas of vacant land continually push new school development to the outskirts of cities which in turn attract families with children away from the city core to the suburban zones in an attempt to be closer to a school of their preference or at the least reside within its catchment area. Yet the typical dendritic layout of most suburban residential neighborhoods rarely provides the opportunity for easy pedestrian or vehicle access to these schools. This process, cyclical in nature, perpetuates acceptance sprawl and perhaps more immediately problematic, it discourages social behaviors imperative in a child's healthy development. The school in this scenario becomes analogous to an island, physically and visually disconnected. The systematic isolation of the traditional K-12 educational facility has initiated a chain reaction of consequences that has far reaching affects.

One major consequence of this 'anti-urban' development is the significantly reduced amount of physical activity in children due to the declining numbers of children walking to and from school. Due to the lack of physical activity in general, in addition to an unhealthy diet, over the past three decades the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2-5 years and adolescents aged 12-19 years, and it has more than tripled for children aged 6-11 years ("Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity Among Children and Adolescents: United States, 1999-2002"; Oct. 6, 2004). The act of walking to school is undoubtedly correlated to this statistic. The redistribution of the physical elements of the school, as demonstrated in this thesis proposal, will allow greater access to multiple buildings, which is intended to provide the means for and encourage the behavior of walking to school.

Additionally, the placement of the school will be utilized as a tool for the community for the activation of space in and adjacent to the buildings in which the school is located. The 'campus' of school associated facilities will allow the school to still function as a cohesive unit as well as form a series of implied as well as tangible connections that provide for traffic/people to flow in and out of the spaces, consequently engaging the surrounding community by its design. It is the intent then, for the school to become an anchor for the community, both unifying and activating the neighborhood through local resident awareness and involvement in school activities.

The site of the proposed school is in Conyers, Georgia. This location was chosen for several reasons. The Atlanta Regional Commission conducted an in depth study of Central Conyers for the Living Centers Initiative. The study revealed some disturbing data about the area. Residents of the LCI-area have modest levels of educational attainment, live in single households, and have overwhelmingly modest incomes. In relation to this thesis, the most significant statistic concerns education. Approximately 30% of the population of Conyers (over the age of 25) does not have a high school diploma in comparison to 16% of the Atlanta Metropolitan region. Additionally, less than 8% of the population has a 4-year college degree in comparison to over 20% of the Atlanta Metropolitan region. The discrepancy in educational attainment is an issue that needs to be addressed on a larger more comprehensive scale. However, this thesis attempts to begin to address the issue on a local scale.

With respect to the current population and anticipated need, the chosen educational facility will be a middle school of approximately 800 students. This number is based on the average student populations of the surrounding middle schools in the Conyers area. The square footage requirements for site area and program spaces will be taken directly from the regulations of the Georgia Department of Education in an effort to demonstrate the possibility of developing a traditional learning environment in a non-traditional manner under the framework of the existing regulations.

Using the thesis project as a vehicle, I desire to create a comprehensive facility that engages the school with the community. Aligning with the ideas of John Dewey and the recent experiments in school development by Ron Strickland, I believe the concept of a "city of learning" facilitated by the community school would best serve both the student population and the neighborhood.

The program of the thesis project includes: a **senior center, branch library, outdoor and indoor recreational space, theatres, a community garden, and a middle school** with spatial allocations as dictated by the Georgia Department of Education. The community elements allow and encourage the surrounding neighborhood to use the facility and interact with diverse populations. This is intended to counter the conventional model of school development in which the school becomes merely a destination for a limited population. Even parents, whose only interaction with the facility is the "drop off/pick up" process, experience a disconnect from the school facility. Making the school and community building interdependent entities will mitigate this issue. The school program will be concentrated on the upper levels, giving the students their own individual space and allowing access to a restricted population for security reasons. Much of the classroom spaces are shared with the community after school hours and the cafeteria is shared with the senior center. This sharing of spaces benefits the students, residents, seniors and municipal budgets.