

**Lessons Learned: A Symposium on School Design
LAUSD / USC School of Architecture / J . PAUL GETTY Trust**

Session: 1A - Site Zoning and Service Access

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Preface:

It is important to note that as the city of Los Angeles continues to grow, that its method of growth is different from most traditional cities, which tend to grow from a center out. As it has been frequently pointed out, Los Angeles is a city of edges and though its edges are constantly being re-defined outward as well as within, much of the city's growth is also taking place inwards from these edges, filling in the gaps that have been left as a result of rapid expansion. Like an adolescent growing into an adult suit, much of the space in between is being accounted for by various forces which creates a new urban condition for the city, and thus by connection for the sites of LAUSD projects - a condition of increased density that will continue to confront the schools of this District.

This was the driving reality behind much of the discussions that took place at this Symposium Session on site zoning and service access. With the intent of equipping the District to better address and tailor solutions for the facility challenges it faces as Los Angeles matures into the premier city of the 21st century, this Panel had the following observations and recommendations for the District.

Section A:

The Panel identified the following issues as those that defined the present site condition for many LAUSD projects:

1. Project site size is continuing to be reduced relative to the size of program desired. This is leading to a condition of higher density both in the planning of the site and the building(s).
2. Project sites are becoming increasingly land-locked with 2 or less public thoroughfares at the perimeter, thus necessitating on-site access roads that can further reduce the buildable area for the project's various program functions.
3. As the location of potential sites today do not always have the benefit of a pastoral context (very few do anymore), a paradox has been developing where a school needs to still present a friendly public face while providing for an increased level of perimeter security.
4. The reduced size of exterior space makes the ability to create an open exterior environment increasingly difficult.
5. The location of potential sites is increasingly in contexts where the project needs to mitigate and form the transition between several different communities of varying physical scales.
6. The increasingly limited number of potential sites has led to fewer sites with the opportunity for advantageous building orientation as it relates to natural light and energy consumption.
7. Need for public access to certain multi-use functions of the school has impacted architectural planning strategies. These multi-use functions are available primarily to the public during the nighttime.
8. Community meetings that solicit more feedback from those with self-interests as opposed to the neighborhood users can negatively impact the site and architectural planning strategies of schools.

9. Small to almost non-existent landscape and landscape maintenance budgets are depriving schools of a valuable tool in addressing many exterior grounds issues.

Section B:

The Panel recognizes that the cause for a majority of the issues stated in Section A is due to the increased scarcity of available sites for school projects. As such, the Panel accepts this reality and chooses an attitude of embracing it as a platform for making the following recommendations to the District (number preceding each recommendation below corresponds to the number preceding each of the issues in Section A above.):

1. Recognize that school buildings of higher density can have the following benefits: more efficient planning; relatively more open exterior space by concentrating the building within a smaller portion of the site; a more close knit social community that comes from a denser physical environment; and given the appropriate neighborhood context, a multi-story building could be of a scale that gives the school a more public presence and identity befitting of a civic institution. Also consider the strategy of stitching together various smaller sites within close proximity to each other with pedestrian bridges and/or thoroughfares. In extreme cases of density, rooftops of schools could also be better utilized; presently the District's policy of primarily relegating rooftops for HVAC units prohibits them from being better used - more serious consideration for central plants or relocating the HVAC units to parking decks could help liberate rooftop space for a variety of exterior program functions.

2. Locate on site access roads within the property setback zones so as to preserve the maximum buildable area of the site. Have shared vehicular circulation for on site access roads whereby they provide for fire, service, as well as parking access, thereby minimizing access points off public thoroughfares. Consolidate but still keep separate public points of vehicular entry - public drop-offs and bus stops - to maximize the use of the common edge(s) between the school and public thoroughfares. The separation between service and public access still needs to be maintained but public surveillance of both is preferred. Given the appropriate context, exterior playgrounds can also serve as service and fire access ways creating another layer of shared use. Where possible, consideration needs to be given to extending the spirit of shared use to adjacent community parks and playfields. A positive collaboration with the Parks and Recreation Dept. would benefit this cause; the issue of who maintains these shared parks and playgrounds would need to be determined.

3. In the appropriate context, use the buildings to form the security edge by pushing them out to the site's street edge. This approach would also provide sound buffer benefits as well though it may require the budget for these buildings to be increased. Such a strategy would also provide the opportunity for the school to gain more of a civic identity as well as minimize the perimeter fencing that can communicate an unfriendly neighborhood presence by creating a no-man's land for trash and other unsightly elements between the street and the buildings. Use of landscape can soften the edge between the building(s) and the street, and ground level security on and natural lighting for the public side of the building can be addressed with clerestory windows and the like.

4. The reduced size of exterior space calls for a different attitude towards the character of that exterior space; exterior space can take on a denser character, such as an outdoor room, but one must take care to control where that dense exterior space is. It is advantageous to locate such exterior space(s) along a major exterior circulation route for the school, perhaps within public view of the street, and/or adjacent to classrooms whose functions can utilize this space as a break-out area. Such strategies will help insure that this space is used and thereby be active as an enlivened public exterior space for the student body.

5. Where possible, attempt to locate the buildings in those areas of the site that border the larger scale public/commercial buildings and locate the fields and playgrounds adjacent to the residential scale neighborhoods.

6. Serious consideration needs to be given to making sure that if the site does not accommodate the proper orientation, that the project budget allows for the provision of adequate passive solar elements; not doing so can result in higher operating costs due to energy consumption. Sites that offer the opportunity for proper building orientation is still preferred.

7. Locate these multi-use functions on or near the street, and establish clear zoning for them by designing the building(s) to form spatial thresholds between the multi-use functions and the rest of the school. This spatial "pinch" (as referred to by the Panel) would ideally then necessitate only a gate at the threshold and thus minimize fencing. Direct access to public parking is a paramount to the success of these multi-use functions. The strategy of site planning the school around the concept of separate pavilions to isolate the building(s) which serve the public after hours was explored, but it was commented that such a site planning strategy could increase fencing for site security reasons and thus detract from the benefits stated in Section B, Item 3 above.

8. The spirit and purpose of community meetings needs to be maintained, but attempt to schedule them in the afternoon and not in the evenings. It was observed by the Panel that afternoon meetings tend to draw more users, which makes for a more constructive dialogue; evening meetings tend to be dictated by those members of the community who are governed by their own self-interests.

9. Landscape budgets for both construction and maintenance needs to be increased. Increased use of landscape is a cost-efficient and constructive method for upgrading the school's outdoor environment and community identity while providing other practical benefits such as security and acoustics

Conclusion:

The above recommendations are to serve as guidelines, not rules as the Panel recognizes that they may not all be applicable to every site under the District's consideration. As the available sites for future LAUSD projects become more restrictive, their unique conditions can become more numerous, and allowances need to be given to schedule, budget and the like to account for them. Thus the Panel believes that it may be in the District's best interests to enlist the services of the architectural profession to examine the sites under project consideration on a case by case basis for the following reasons:

- To assist the District in using these guidelines to determine which sites are more appropriate for future projects.
- To advise the District as to which of the above guidelines are applicable to any given site.
- Once the above is established, to assist the District in determining the appropriate budget for a given project given its particular site conditions.

This all said, one of the most important questions still facing the Panel is how to best disseminate the above information to the District; beyond the White Papers for each of the 16 sessions, a forum with the District where these issues could be discussed in a focused and directed manner deserves serious consideration.