

**CEFPI**  
**JAMES D. MACCONNELL SUBMITTAL PACKAGE**  
**Student Sanctuary at the Union City High School, Union City, New Jersey**



**UNION CITY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT SANCTUARY FOR EDUCATION INSPIRATION**

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**A. Executive Summary**

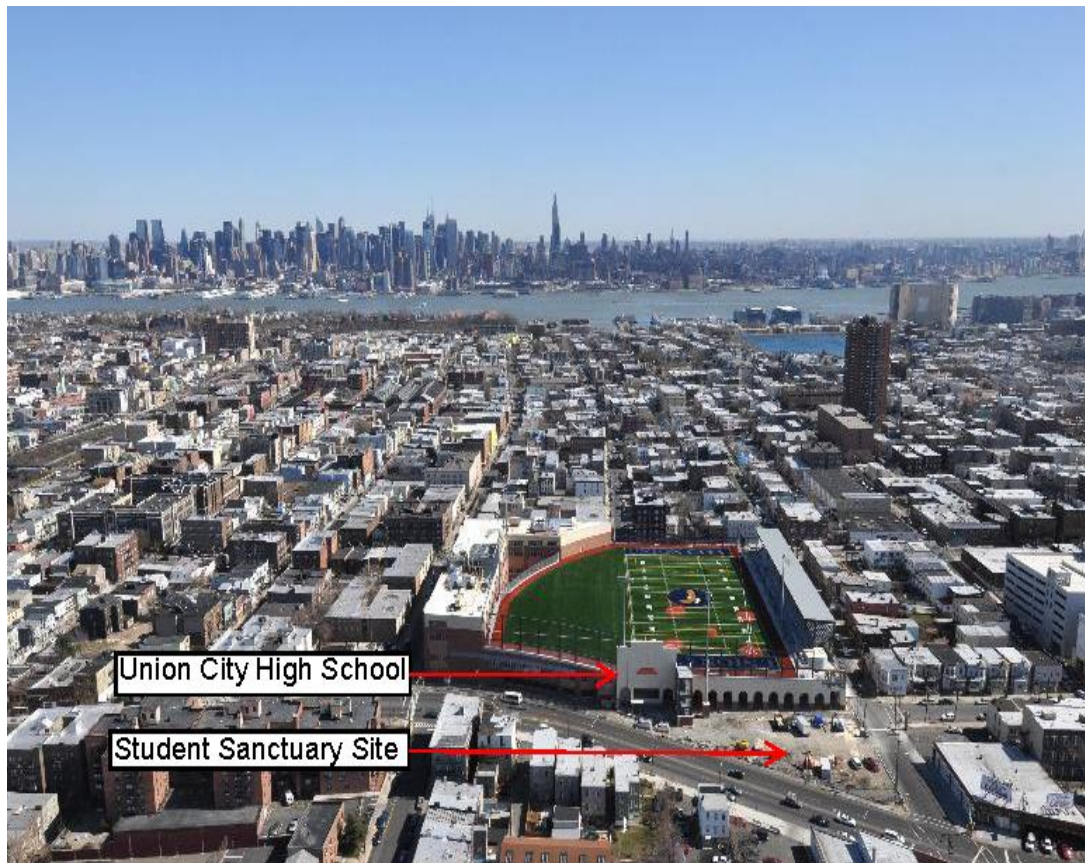
Union City High School is located in Union City, New Jersey, two miles east of New York City. A multi-cultural and financially distressed area, the city has a high population density of over 78,000 residents within a 1.4 square mile. Due to the socio-economic stress, the Union City Board of Education provides supplemental services to both students and parents, with over 87% of the students eligible for the free and/or reduced lunch program and 54% of the total student population are limited English proficient or have special needs. The Governor's School of Excellence Award, Title 1 Distinguished School – US Department of Education, Best Practices Schools by the New Jersey Department of Education and Blue Ribbon School by the US Department of Education are among some of the District's accolades and successes. The District's philosophy, "Provide every child with an opportunity to learn in a safe environment, using higher order thinking skills and differentiating instruction strategies" is evident in every school. The Union City Board of Education oversees nine elementary schools, two middle schools, one ninth grade academy, and one senior high school. This senior high school, Union City High School, was selected as the site for the Student Sanctuary.

The overall goal of this project was to create an 'urban oasis' for the community and provide students and faculty a quiet refuge before, during or after school. The outcome of the project resulted in the 'Student Sanctuary', a 17,000 square foot outdoor pedestrian plaza. The plaza was officially named 'Union City High School Student Sanctuary for Education Inspiration' and was designed to capture the quiet and reflective nature and sense of place.



## **B. Scope of Work**

The site for the Student Sanctuary is located on a triangular piece of land located on the corner of Kennedy Boulevard and 24<sup>th</sup> Street, a dense urban and financially deprived area of the city. The Sanctuary marked the completion of the new Union City High School and Athletic Complex, which officially opened in 2009, and was selected almost a decade ago by the State of New Jersey as one of three ‘demonstration projects’ for the state’s school construction program.



**SITE LOCATION**

The innovative design features landscaped and hardscaped areas to foster student gatherings. A small amphitheater, sculpted lawn, and great lawn with a decorative raised pergola provide the setting for impromptu outside classroom experiences. A waterfall and fountain provide a relaxing oasis from the urban surroundings creating soothing background sounds. The decorative brick paved serpentine walkway, bluestone paved patios, and concrete ramps provide barrier free access to all landscaped elements.

Evergreen and deciduous trees, flowering shrubs and perennials, decorative all-season grasses and sculpted lawns provide changing year round color and textures. Decorative metal security fences and gates section off the plaza from adjacent Kennedy Boulevard and 24<sup>th</sup> Street. A security system, cameras, wi-fi internet access, emergency bluelight stations, and audio system speakers connect to the building’s security and technology departments.

**C. Budget**

Total budget, including costs to cover unforeseen site challenges: \$1,586,718.

**D. Community Engagement Process**

a. Identify Stakeholders

Union City Board of Education, Superintendent, Stanley Sanger  
Union City, New Jersey, Mayor Brian Stack

b. Describe Challenges

During the five year construction period of Union City High School, the adjacent neighbors were very understanding of the disruption. However, the idea of further construction was not palatable. Upon knowing the site would be developed as an urban garden, the neighbors ultimately embraced the idea.

c. Describe available assets

The land acquisition and project financing was completed by the Union City Redevelopment Agency, the grant authority, as part of the site for the Union City High School and Athletic Field Complex. The District also utilized their design resources including their landscape design, civil engineering, and architectural teams.

d. Describe value of process and project to community at large

The original concept for the triangular piece of land was for an Early Childhood School. During the planning process, the proposed costs escalated and it was determined that the plan would be scaled back and the Early Childhood School would not be constructed. It was then decided to transform the parcel into a park. After two years of predevelopment meetings, the initial conceptual design plan of the park showed the area 97% covered with pavers and only six trees. This plan did not demonstrate the vision of the District's Business Administrator, Mr. Anthony Dragona, the driving force behind the project. After meeting with the Strategic Planning Team and the Union City Board of Education, the notion that the team could create a special place for the students was born.

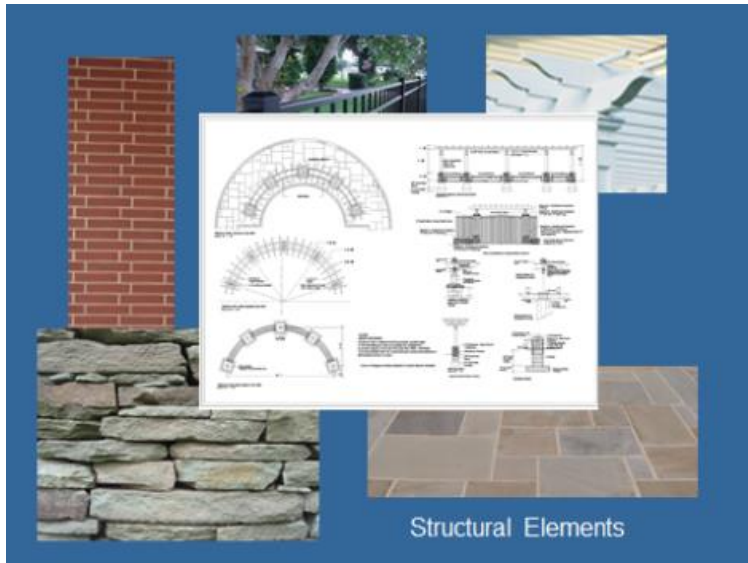
The planning and programming process determined the Design Objectives: Provide an educational refuge away from the crowded, bustling urban center, that promotes safety and security, sustainable design, and open space for groups and individuals to sit or gather.



## CONCEPTUAL DESIGN PLAN



The conceptual design plan included structural elements, natural elements and featured elements as depicted below:



Once a conceptual design was approved, the construction documents were developed. The final design was presented by Mr. Anthony Dragona and Terry McMahon, Senior Landscape Designer with Borst Landscape and Design, to CEFPI at their conference held in Philadelphia, on May 7, 2010. On May 22, 2013, the Student Sanctuary was dedicated with members from the Union City Board of Education, officials from Union City, select faculty and students, members of the design team, and the community in attendance.

During the dedication ceremony Mr. Anthony Dragona stated, “Today we dedicate a sanctuary – a place of hope and peace for our students and faculty to ponder what is and what will be. This is a place where dreams are made”.

The Hudson County Planning Board selected the Union City Board of Education Student Sanctuary as the recipient of the 2011 Smart Growth Gold Award. Applicants were evaluated based on site selection, site design and proposed green infrastructure criteria from a number of sources including the American Planning Association, The U.S. Green Building Council and New Jersey Future.

#### **E. Educational Environment**

a. Describe and illustrate how the environment supports the curriculum.

According to Superintendent Stanley Sanger, “The Sanctuary will serve as an outdoor extension to the school’s classrooms and provides a tremendous opportunity and learning experience on so many different dimensions”.

The Science curriculum utilizes the Sanctuary for the study of horticulture, biology, micro biology, botany, landscape design, sustainability, and effects of weather on plant life cycles. Observations of the rain garden ecosystem, photosynthesis, and the study of organisms, climate change, solar energy and environmental studies are also conducted. The Sanctuary provides the basis for a plethora of Science fair projects and experiments, and observations for the school’s environmental and horticultural clubs. As an extension of the Art curriculum, the Sanctuary provides the opportunity for students to photograph, draw and paint garden plantings and design elements. The Music and Dramatic Theatrical Arts curriculum utilizes the amphitheater for performances.

All subjects can be taught within the ‘urban oasis’ providing a break from the mundane classroom setting. The physical sanctuary space can support large group presentations, small group interactions, and individual quiet studies. Wireless internet access as well as an audio visual system enables both teachers and students to play music and transmit speeches.

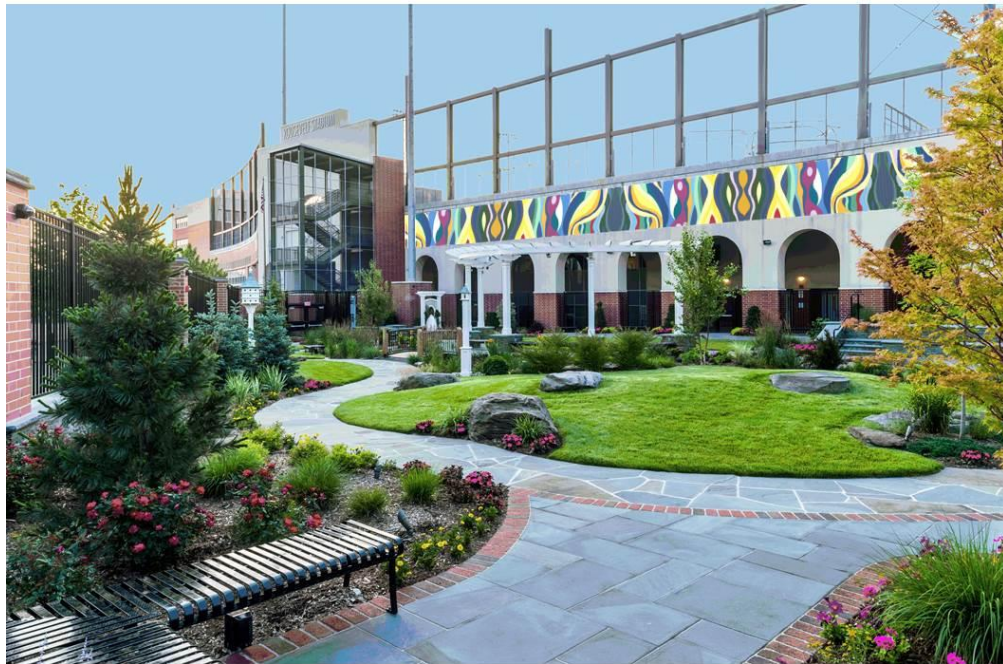
b. Describe and illustrate how the environment supports a wide variety of learning and teaching styles.

According to John Bennetti, Principal of the Union City High School, “We can extend the classroom to the outside of the building and make learning come alive”. In addition to the hands-on learning in the Science and Art classes, the sanctuary also provides students with an environment that promotes active learning. For example:

- For an honors’ English assignment, students will be holding a 1920s-themed garden party in the Sanctuary, working in conjunction with the novel *The Great Gatsby*.
- To support active learning in History, Social Studies, Human Behavior Studies, Union City High School’s Bilingual At-Risk

Leader, Chris Abbato, worked with students to create a 50-year time capsule buried on the site. The aim of the time capsule was to capture what life was like for Union City High School students in the year 2012. In 2062, the time capsule will be opened, and the same objects will be viewed, in perfectly preserved mint condition and as artifacts from the past. Mr. Abbato stated, “It’s really important to us that when it’s opened, it looks like something that was made by a community, a family, not just a group of students”.

- As part of a student initiative, the students donated a bird house to study ornithology and a rain water gauge adjacent to the rain garden to visually measure rainfall.
- As part of an extra-curricular art program, a mural - ‘a real world project’ designed by the students and school’s Graphics Arts teacher, and painted by a professional artist will be installed on the façade of the high school facing the Sanctuary at the end of April, 2014.



**CONCEPTUAL IMAGE OF MURAL**



## **F. Physical Environment**

### **a. Describe and illustrate the physical attributes of the environment.**

The innovative plan includes a facility incorporating unique design elements.

#### **i. Featured/Structural Elements**

The Sanctuary features an amphitheater, a decorative raised pergola, waterfall and fountain, a decorative brick paved serpentine walkway, bluestone paved patios, and concrete ramps.



**WATERFALL**



**AMPHITHEATER**

#### **ii. Natural Elements**

The Sanctuary features over one hundred species of plantings including evergreen and deciduous trees, flowering shrubs and perennials, decorative all-season grasses, a rain garden and sculpted lawn.



**SERPENTINE WALKWAY AND PLANTINGS**

### **iii. Sensory Elements**

Visual elements include year-round changing colors of seasonal plantings and various textures of bluestone and brick paving. Sound effects include sounds of bubbling water, birds, bees, urban white noise, and streamed music. Elements of scent include the fragrances of flowers and flowering shrubs.

#### **b. Describe and illustrate how the facility fits within the larger context of the community.**

The Union City community has embraced the Sanctuary. The plaza is available for the public's use for gatherings and special events including concerts, parties, weddings, and government award ceremonies. This spring the Sanctuary will be the backdrop for the Cooperative Business Education work-study program Career Day luncheon, a faculty reception for the Middle States Evaluation meeting, and a Community Partnership luncheon. Additionally, field trips provide students from neighboring schools an opportunity to experience the Sanctuary and everything it has to offer. Currently the school has a master calendar to keep track of the myriad of Student Sanctuary events.

#### **c. Describe and illustrate how the project inspires and motivates.**

The physical design of the Sanctuary serves as a background to help inspire individuals to pause and reflect. Landscape elements, seasonal decorations, and all school and community events are on display and can be seen from Kennedy Boulevard. The site encourages individuals within the community to engage in the activities that take place at the Sanctuary. In addition, the design may inspire the development of additional urban parks, gardens, and places of refuge throughout the city.

### **G. Results of the Process and Project**

#### **a. Explain how the project achieves educational, school, and community goals and objectives.**

The design of the Student Sanctuary achieves the following goals and objectives established by the Union Board of Education:

- Create a “sense of place”, an educational refuge, to promote hands-on learning.
- Create a landscaped park to beautify a corner of a city block along a major County road, in a dense urban community.
- Create “an urban oasis” where the community can gather and foster a stronger sense of community and pride.

Mayor, Brian Stack, who was instrumental in acquiring the state funding for the project, stated, “The Student Sanctuary is a fitting and unique addition to the new Union City High School. The beautiful gardens not only enhance the atmosphere of the high school and the surrounding neighborhood, but they provide a beautiful outdoor space for our students”. The site provides a much-needed refuge for students and residents, helping beautify the urban surroundings and brings a stronger sense of community and pride.



**STUDENT SANCTUARY TIME CAPSULE SITE**





**STUDENT SANCTUARY—VIEW FROM THIRD FLOOR OF UNION CITY HIGH SCHOOL**





## STUDENT SANCTUARY





## A SENSE OF PLACE