

Kimball Elementary School

### **Engaging Four Communities**

Early in the process, we recognized that designing Kimball Elementary School meant balancing four essential perspectives—each equally important in shaping the outcome. Together, they guided a design that is both deeply responsive to its community and uniquely grounded in its context.



# The Community of Environment – Sensitivity to the Site

At the first community meeting, we asked, "What do you love most about your school site?" Surprisingly, the answer was: a muddy slope next to the play area. The slope itself wasn't remarkable. But it told us something important: nature mattered.

As continued conversations dove deeper into possible relationships on the site, both constraints and opportunities emerged. Exceptionally steep topography and sensitive slopes posed serious challenges. However, a beautiful grove of trees that occupied the center of the site, but had been overlooked by the previous building's layout, offered untapped potential.

We asked ourselves, **Can we completely** transform the relationship to nature—without changing the land itself?



# The School Community – Culturally Responsive Design

Kimball Elementary School serves a highly diverse student population. Such rich cultural diversity called for a design approach that could embody and express the community's values and heritage. To support this, we partnered with a Culturally Responsive Design Committee to elicit and gather the most inclusive input possible.

Through a series of meetings, conversations, and surveys, we learned that culture at Kimball is lived through foods, languages, colors, and the stories of the previous school. These elements form the palette that give the new Kimball its unique identity.



Kimball Elementary School required



Previous condition: A student looks down on portables at lowest terrace.



# The Teacher Community – An Open Floor Plan Interpretation

Teachers at the former Kimball building valued its open floor plan. It allowed teachers to quickly interact, see what others were doing, and learn from one another. Despite acoustical challenges, they wanted to preserve that collaborative environment in the new school.

The district's educational specifications required a shift to individual classrooms, but we saw an opportunity to reinterpret the former open plan. The result blends defined classrooms with a large array of spaces to foster collaboration and openness—offering the best of both worlds.



# The Neighborhood Community – Establishing a Civic Presence

Located in a long-established residential neighborhood in Seattle, Kimball's site is blocks away from recent mid-rise multifamily housing developments. The scale of these buildings heightened neighborhood concern about the project's proposed 3-story massing, compared to the onestory building it would replace.

As community approval is needed for a zoning variance in height, we met multiple times with neighborhood groups, sharing how the new design is sensitive to its scale by carefully weaving the building with the natural setting. Supported by the natural feel of its durable materials and drawing on the qualities of the site, the new design creates a civic building that feels grounded and respectful of its surroundings.

weaving poetry amidst the four communities.

### SCOPE OF WORK AND BUDGET

Kimball Elementary School is a replacement of the original school on the same site, built in 1971. The school is located along the slope from Beacon Hill to Rainier Valley on a small parcel of 4.78 acres with the new school being twice as large as its predecessor. Design began in 2019, and the new school opened to students in Fall 2023.

Design Capacity: 650 students

Building Area: 97,084 SF

Lot Size: **208,217 SF** 

Construction Cost: \$59.97 Million Total

Location: Seattle, WA

### Key Challenges

## Weave the building into a steep, natural site

Design within challenging topography while enhancing student connection to nature

# Balance civic presence with neighborhood scale

Create a visible, lasting civic identity that fits sensitively into a residential context

# Honor collaboration within a new classroom model

Preserve the open-plan spirit while meeting district requirements for

individual classrooms

## Celebrate a shared identity across cultures

Engage a diverse community to express collective values through meaningful design elements

# Make every element support learning

Ensure that space, materials, and experience all contribute to inclusive and flexible learning environments

### Response

### Kimball Elementary is shaped by its landscape and community.

The building weaves into steep topography and mature trees, preserving the site and creating new connections to nature as part of daily learning. The design celebrates the school community's diversity through a shared symbols of food, color, language, and history—creating an identity that is both inclusive and unique.

Learning spaces combine the openness of the original school with the structure of individual classrooms—offering flexibility, collaboration, and choice.

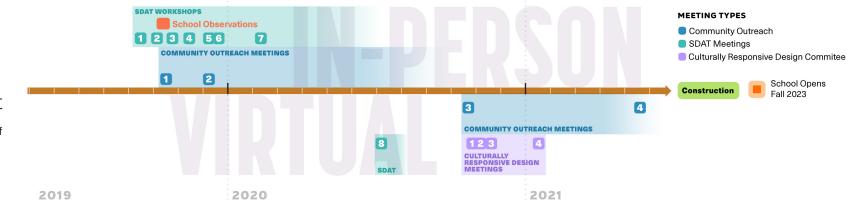
Durable, natural materials and a stepped massing respond sensitively to the neighborhood, giving the school both a respectful scale and a lasting civic presence.

### "The Earth has music for those who listen."

—The first verse of a poem provided by the community

### Sustained Community Engagement

A multitude of methods of engagement across the planning process.



### **School and Community Planning Process**

The district's established planning process ensures each school project aligns with strategic goals. At Kimball Elementary, this framework was adapted to reflect the school's unique community and context—including a shift to remote engagement during the early stages of COVID-19. A School Design Advisory Team (SDAT) consisting of parents, educators, and community members worked closely with the design team to establish shared values, goals, and design direction.

### Seattle Public Schools Strategic Plan

Supporting students of color who are furthest away from educational justice

2019-2020 focus on three goals:

- Students will read at grade level by 3rd grade
- Safe and welcoming schools
- Culturally responsive instruction

# School Design Advisory Team (SDAT) Process

- Representative of diverse school community including traditionally under-represented people
- Engaged SDAT process series of 8 workshops
- Tours with SDAT
- School/site observations
- Community meetings



### **Kimball SDAT Design Guiding Principles**

- Transparency and Accountability
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Sense of Family
- Helping Others/Learning from Others
- This Site is Special

First community meeting



SDAT meeting



### **Community Outreach**

To reflect the voices of Kimball's richly diverse community, the design process prioritized sustained and inclusive engagement. Four public outreach events over three years—shifting to virtual formats during the pandemic—fostered vibrant participation from many perspectives. As trust grew, the design team experienced firsthand the community's deep affection for Kimball, which fueled meaningful and heartfelt dialogue. Shared values were translated into clear goals early in the process and carried through to the final details of the design.

# Community Outreach 10.15.2019 (in person)

Station 1: Building Blocks

Station 2: Drawing the Future

Station 3: How I Arrive at School

Station 4: Wishes and Wonders

Station 5: Building Tour Slide Show

Station 6: What We Know So Far



**Building Blocks:** A hands-on activity invited families to design the new Kimball using blocks and a site map, giving the design team clear insight into community concerns and aspirations.







### **Engaging Diversity**

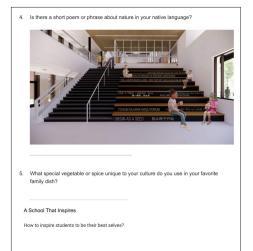
To reflect the richness of Kimball's diverse community, the design process included a wide range of engagement activities aimed at reaching all ages and cultural groups. A dedicated Culturally Responsive Design Committee met four times to help guide this effort.

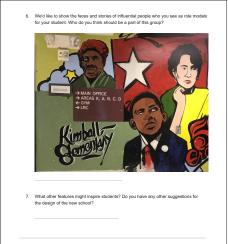


Invitations to community events were shared in multiple languages and formats—including QR codes—to ensure accessibility and make everyone feel welcomed and included.

### Engagement During the Pandemic

The School Design Advisory Team brainstormed inclusive strategies for gathering input. A digital survey was shared with the community to ensure busy families could easily participate and share ideas. We also held virtual community meetings to provide design updates and invite feedback.







**Drawing the Future:** a sketch exercise asked families to draw their ideas of how the new school will look and what spaces it will contain.

### Community Outreach 12.05.2019 (in person)

Concept Design 1: Wrap

Concept Design 2: Two Towers

Concept Design 3: Compact









The Neighborhood Community

# **Establishing a Civic Presence**



View from a house across the street



Roof height relative to the street



As part of the departure process, the community had to approve a higher building than the zoning allowed. The original one-story school allowed unimpeded views to the east (above). The proposed three-story building (below) raised scale concerns from the neighbors.

New three-story building seen from across the street





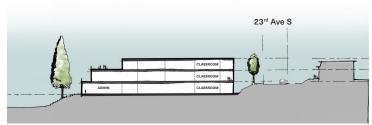




Neighborhood approval of taller building required frequent interaction to explain design.

Recessing the ground floor into the slopes significantly reduced a perception of a much larger school.

Materials of natural tones and qualities were a major factor in tying the large school to its site and resonated with the neighbors.

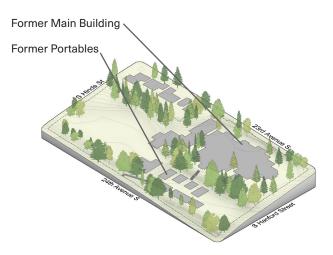


Schematic Design Section

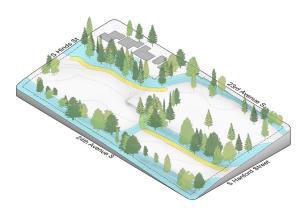


The new three-story school navigates its much larger scale through careful massing nestled into the site's topography and by providing narrower massing to the neighborhood street. Material's natural tones enhance the sensitive addition of a new civic quality to the long-established neighborhood.

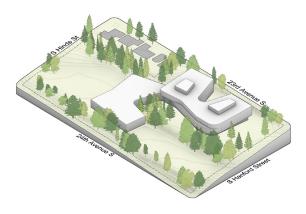
### **Urban Nature Oasis**



The previous building was an introvert at the top terrace. The school's design had no relationship to the trees, slope, or views from the site.



The locations of existing tree groves were tied together with the most challenging slopes. A light touch was needed to navigate the topographic changes while preserving the groves.



The new building traverses the slope and embraces the mature grove of existing trees, engaging them in the daily experience.





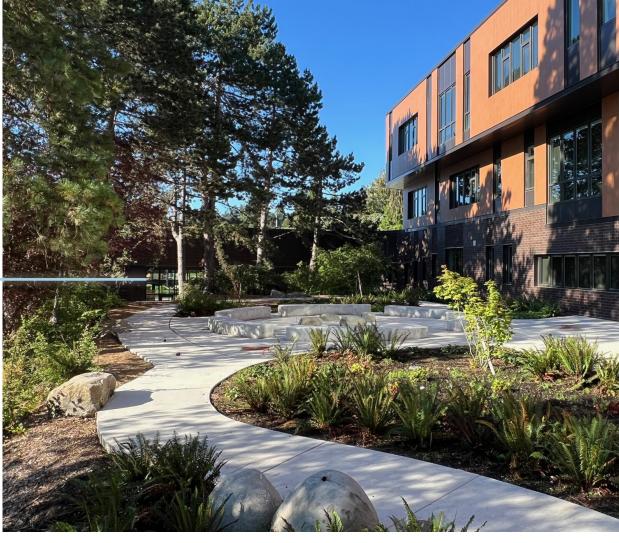
Old school didn't engage the site, the hill,or the surrounding tree groves.



New school embraces the natural amenity. Teachers: Every classroom feels like a tree house!



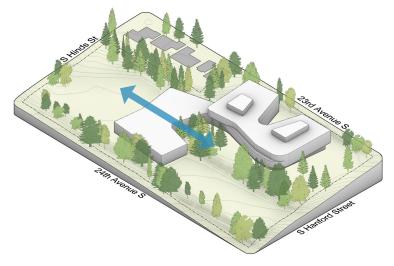




PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

### **Nestled Into the Site**

The school straddles two higher terraces, gently navigating descent towards the cafeteria on the lower one. Building layout enhances visual connections throughout the site.



### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT



### **Connection to Nature**

A top community goal, connection to nature, is embedded throughout the design—socially, educationally, and environmentally. The building nestles into the site, with outdoor learning spaces, a rain garden at the entry that creates a cooling micro-climate and neighborhood amenity, and repurposed materials from the original school. Sustainable strategies include passive design, a high-performance envelope, and ground source heat pumps. **Every element reinforces environmental awareness and educational opportunity.** 

### Site Plan & First Floor



- A. AdministrationB. Family Room
- E. Kindergarten
- F. Stage
- C. Preschool
- G. Commons
- D. Music H. Gym

- 1. Bioretention
- 2. Outdoor Learning
- 3. Hillside Deck (bottom right image)
- 4. Garden (bottom left image)

**Hillside Decks** – A favorite student play area, the hillside is now enhanced with accessible decks that preserve water flow to tree roots.



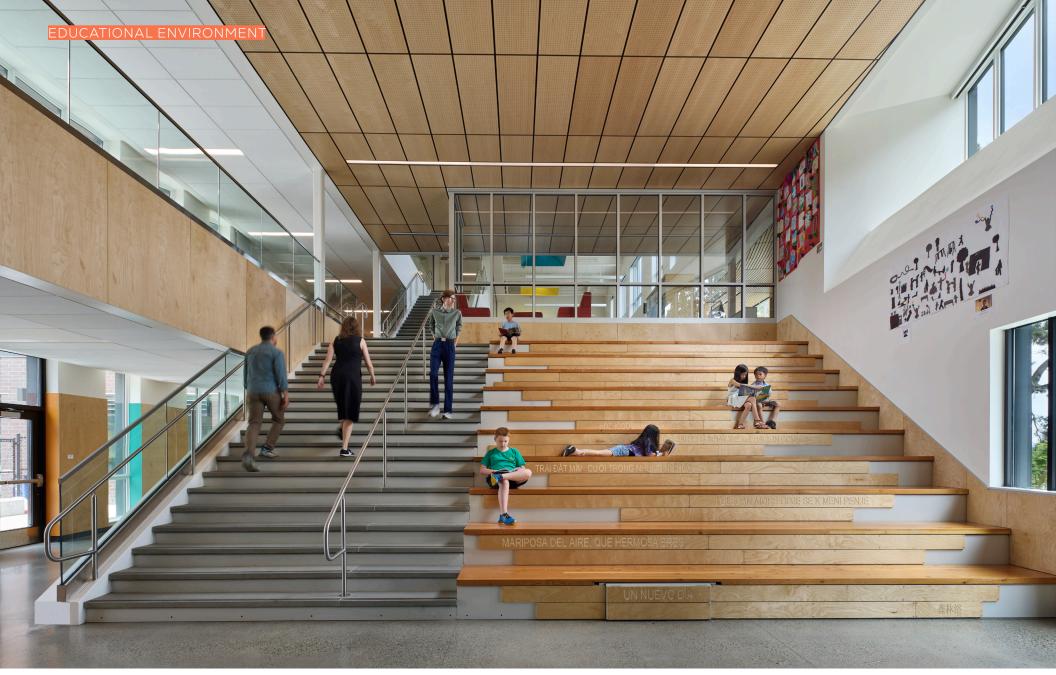


### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT



The Community of Environment







# **Culturally Responsive Design**

Language is Culture

Hózhóogo Naasháa Doo

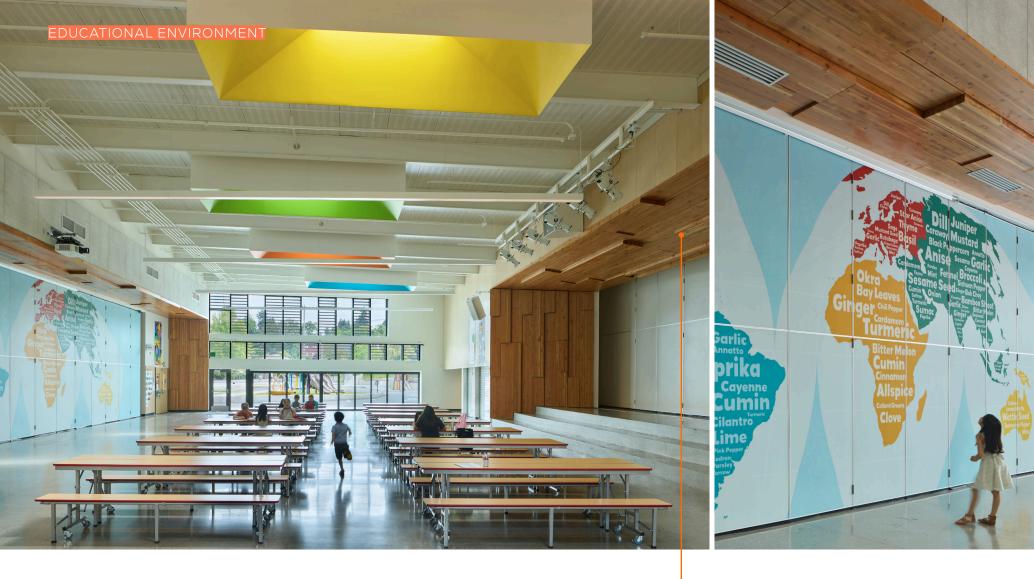
This earth is what we have in common

Trái đất mỉm cười trong những nụ hoa

如沐春风

Un nuevo dia

The community provided nature-based poems from the many languages spoken by Kimball families. The first verses of these poems were inset in the risers.





# **Culturally Responsive Design**

### Food and History are Culture

We asked Kimball students and families, "What special vegetable or spice unique to your culture do you use in your favorite family dish? The responses spread around this world map show all the places these plants appear in different regional foods.





Sustainable reuse preserves the memory of the previous building. Large glue-laminated beams from the old school were re-imagined and showcased in a new function and pattern at the stage proscenium and gym opening to the cafeteria.







# **Culturally Responsive Design**

### Color and History are Culture

The school's original mosaics showcase a vibrant color palette that very much expresses the diverse student body. The new design palette is drawn from these mosaics, relating the school colors to students' homes and cultures.





The mosaics legacy: It's a rite of passage for students to take photos at the old mosaic on their first day of school. Our design team got to witness this tradition happening on a site visit.

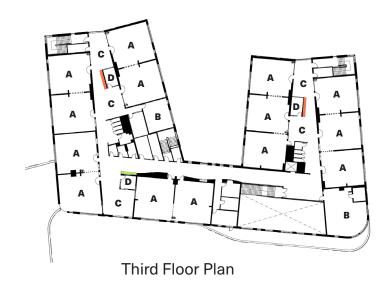
### EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

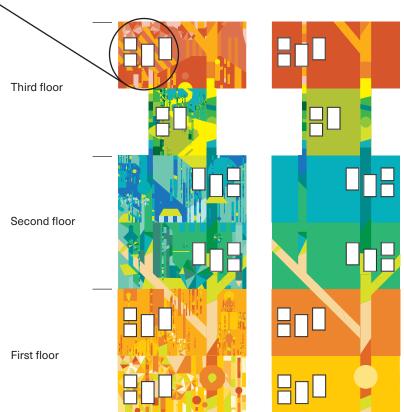
### Color is Culture



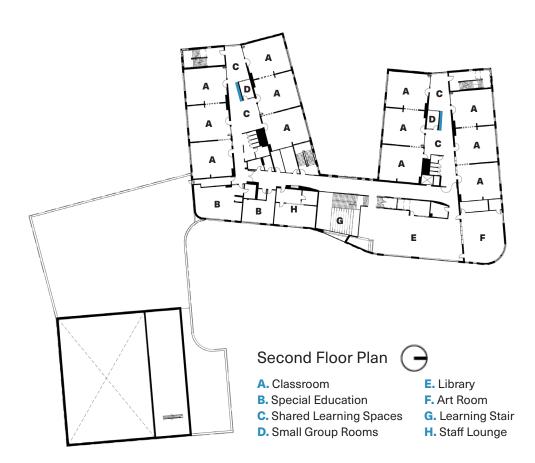
This vibrant color palette is also used on the interiors, including corridors and mural walls in the shared learning spaces.

The nature motifs span across three floors in the form of a living tree.





Stacked Murals





The Teacher Community

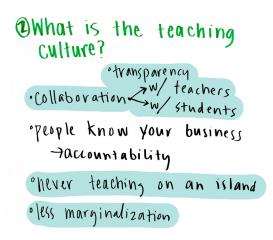
### **An Open Plan Interpretation**

### Teaching Culture

Original school had an open floor plan, resulting with a much-loved teaching culture.

Teachers' appreciation of their collaboration was very high, while recognizing the acoustical challenges.

Rigorous conversations delved deep into what favored aspects of teaching culture where enhanced and stimulated by an open plan they had, so that design could interpret those aspects in a new plan organization that balances the district ed spec.





Three classrooms were spatially connected.

### "We can see what others are doing and learn from each other"

-A teacher at early school community meeting with School Design Advisory Committee (SDAT)



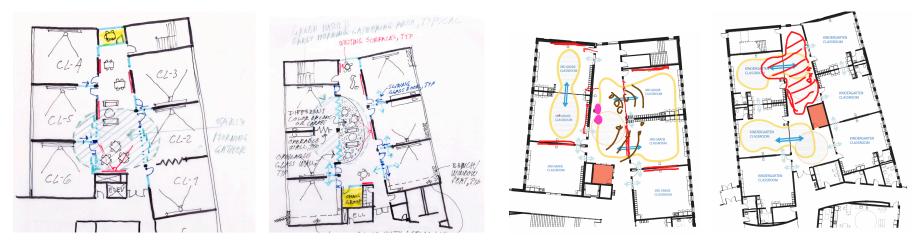


Thorough explorations of design possibilities started in person in Fall of 2019.

Previous floor plan with 3 classroom pods and open library at the center.



### Open Plan Interpretation in a New Form



Close examination of explored options for academic neighborhoods with school teachers continued throughout the pandemic.

### Seeking a Perfect Balance



New design established a variety of connections between the classrooms and varied break out areas.

Design explored multiple ways in which the new plan organization can support teachers' interactions through varied large and small group activities.



The Teacher Community

**Open Plan Interpretation in a New Form** 

### Transparency and Connectivity

Ability of teachers to keep close visual and physical connections to their peers, enhancing students' collaboration, helped design to settle on the design that provided a multitude of spatial choices.

Final design embodies the wishes of school teachers about keeping the spirit of their teaching culture, and districts' ed spec based on defined classrooms augmented with conference rooms and other breakout areas.

### Third Floor Plan



- A. Classroom
- B. Special Education
- C. Shared Learning Spaces
- D. Small Group Rooms







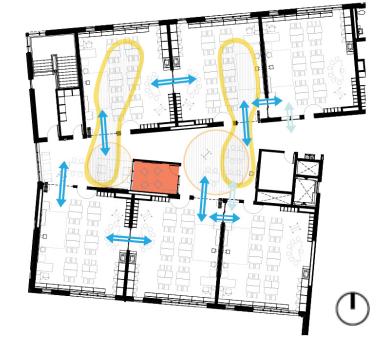
### The Teacher Community

# **Open Plan Interpretation in a New Form**



"We are grateful that the new design is allowing us to still see each other, learn what others are doing, and collaborate, enhancing our student interactions."

-Teacher's comment at recent community meeting



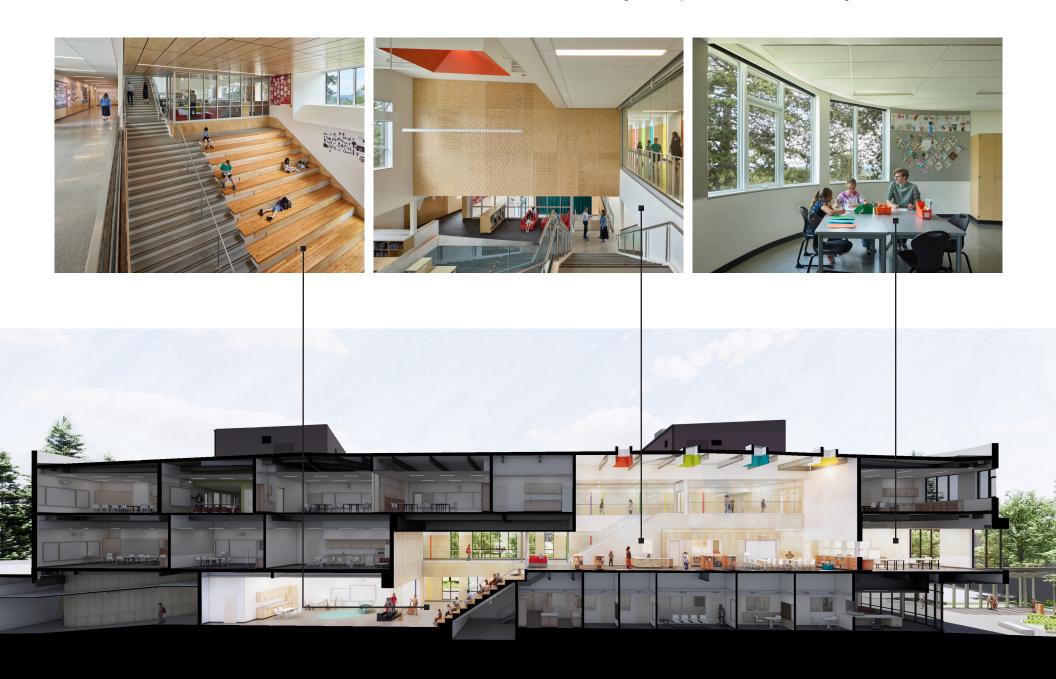






Heart of the Building: Library

The library served as a central literacy point and social hub in the old school. The new design reinterprets its role as a connecting heart across three floors.





Heart of the Building: Library

