

WEAVING COMMUNITY, IDENTITY & OPPORTUNITY

2026 A4LE James D. MacConnell
Award Submission



Montbello High School
Denver, CO



UNITING A COMMUNITY THROUGH DESIGN

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Montbello High School is more than a new educational facility, it is the restoration of a community through architecture, education, and shared identity. Located in far northeast Denver, Montbello is one of the city's most culturally diverse and historically resilient communities. Originally developed in the 1960s as Denver's first large-scale affordable housing communities, Montbello evolved into a richly multicultural neighborhood shaped by generations of residents advocating for equity, opportunity, and community investment.

Since 1980, Montbello High School served as:

- A civic landmark
- A source of neighborhood identity
- A center for youth opportunity
- The symbolic heart of the community

When Denver Public Schools voted in 2010 to close the original high school, the loss extended far beyond the building itself. Residents described the closure as the fragmentation of the community's social fabric. Students were dispersed, alumni traditions dissolved, and the neighborhood once again felt disconnected from broader systems that had historically overlooked far northeast Denver.

But the Montbello community never stopped fighting to get their school back. After a change in school board leadership, their wishes were granted with a 2018 bond initiative to rebuild the school. The new Montbello High School was conceived as an act of restoration:

- Honoring dignity
- Restoring educational opportunity
- Reimagining a neighborhood institution deeply tied to community identity

Through a highly collaborative engagement process, students, educators, alumni, families, community organizations, and district leaders worked alongside the design team to create a school that is unmistakably Montbello.

Throughout the process, the idea of the "Cultural Quilt" emerged as a defining framework for the project. Residents described Montbello as a diverse community woven together from shared traditions, languages, stories, and lived experiences. That idea became the conceptual design framework for the school. While the origin of the name "Montbello" remains debated, the word translates to "beautiful mountain"—a metaphor for aspiration, resilience, and collective identity. Inspired by this interpretation, the design team looked to the layered colors and textures of Colorado's Maroon Bells mountain range to inform the school's architectural palette and material expression. Distinct learning neighborhoods are woven together through transparent collaborative spaces, protected learning environments, and Warrior Plaza, the civic heart of the campus.

The resulting process transformed the project from a school designed for Montbello into a school designed by Montbello.



2. SCOPE OF WORK & BUDGET

OWNER Denver Public Schools	BUILDING AREA 277,694 sq ft
SITE AREA 30 acres	211,953 sq ft (new construction)
GRADES SERVED 9-12	61,975 sq ft (renovation)
STUDENT CAPACITY 1,200	3,766 sq ft (existing, no work)
CONSTRUCTION COST \$150M \$540/square foot	

TODAY, MONTBELLO HIGH SCHOOL STANDS AS:



The largest project to-date in Denver Public Schools history



The only comprehensive neighborhood high school in far northeast Denver



A center for wellness & opportunity



A community gathering place



A future-ready learning environment



A national model for restorative educational design

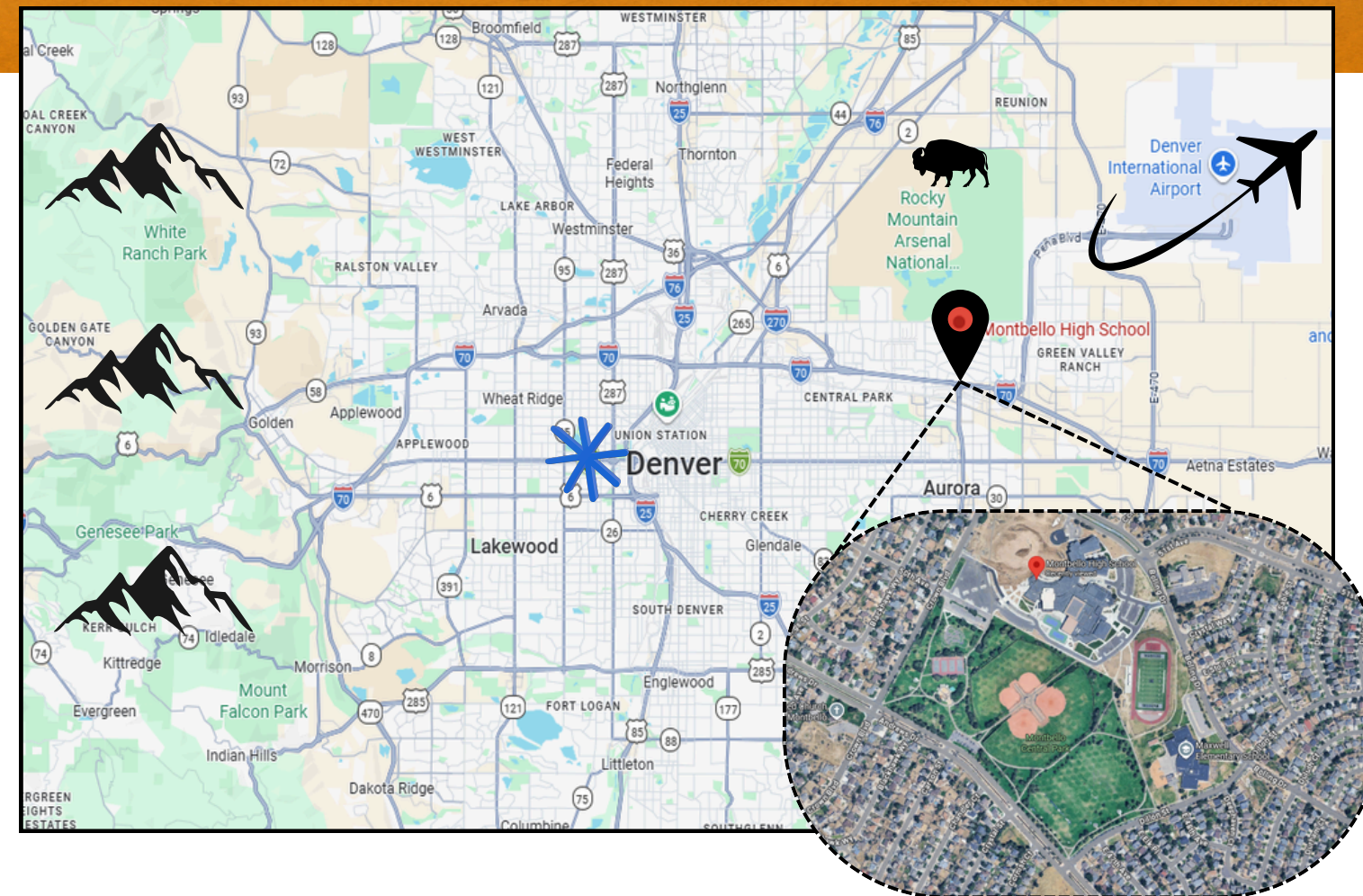
3. SCHOOL & COMMUNITY RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT



THE STORY OF MONTBELLO

Montbello is often described by residents as a “city within a city”—a northeast Denver community annexed in the 1960s and shaped by generations of cultural diversity, civic advocacy, and collective perseverance.

As Denver’s first large-scale affordable housing communities, Montbello was intentionally planned as a complete neighborhood with single family homes, schools, parks, industry, and civic infrastructure.



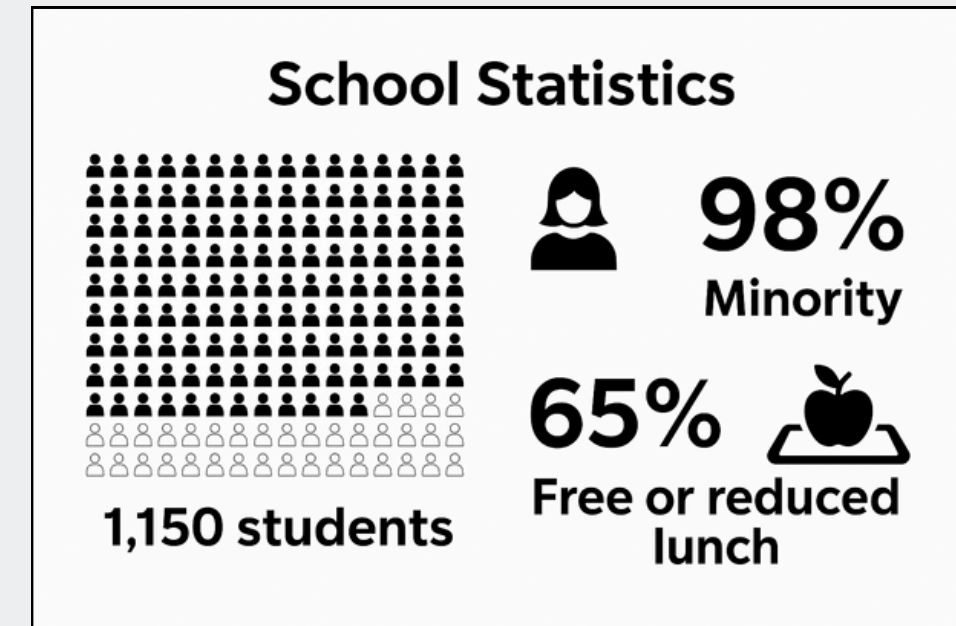
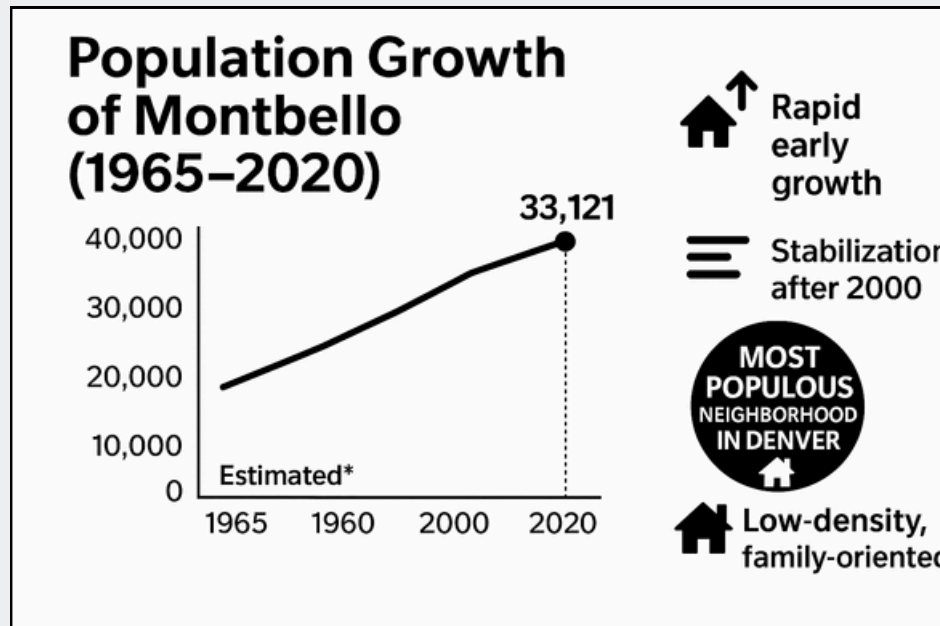
Over time, Montbello evolved into one of Denver's most diverse communities. What began as a predominantly white suburban neighborhood transformed into a majority African American community and today is predominantly Latino, reflecting decades of demographic and cultural change.

Despite persistent underinvestment and negative public perception, Montbello residents continuously organized to advocate for:

- Schools
- Recreation
- Transportation
- Grocery access
- Healthcare
- Youth opportunity

The original Montbello High School opened in 1980 after years of community advocacy and quickly became the symbolic and cultural heart of the neighborhood. Its closure in 2014 fractured a deeply valued community institution and intensified longstanding concerns around equity and representation. An already deep distrust between the school district and community was heightened to a tense atmosphere of abandonment and deceit.

The reopening and reunification of Montbello High School represented far more than a capital project, it became an opportunity to restore community connectedness, pride, and belonging.



1970

NOW OPEN

SIX NEW ONES IN Montbello

PRICED \$2,000 TO \$5,000 BELOW THE MARKET BY PERL-MACK NO.1 IN DENVER

1980

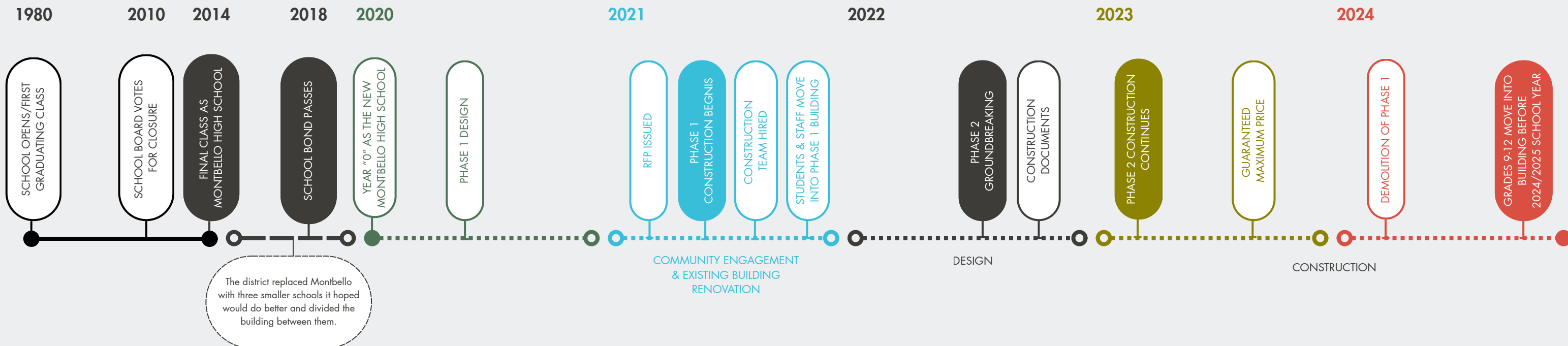


2010



ORIGINAL SCHOOL TIMELINE

REIMAGINING MONTBELLO



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT A GLANCE

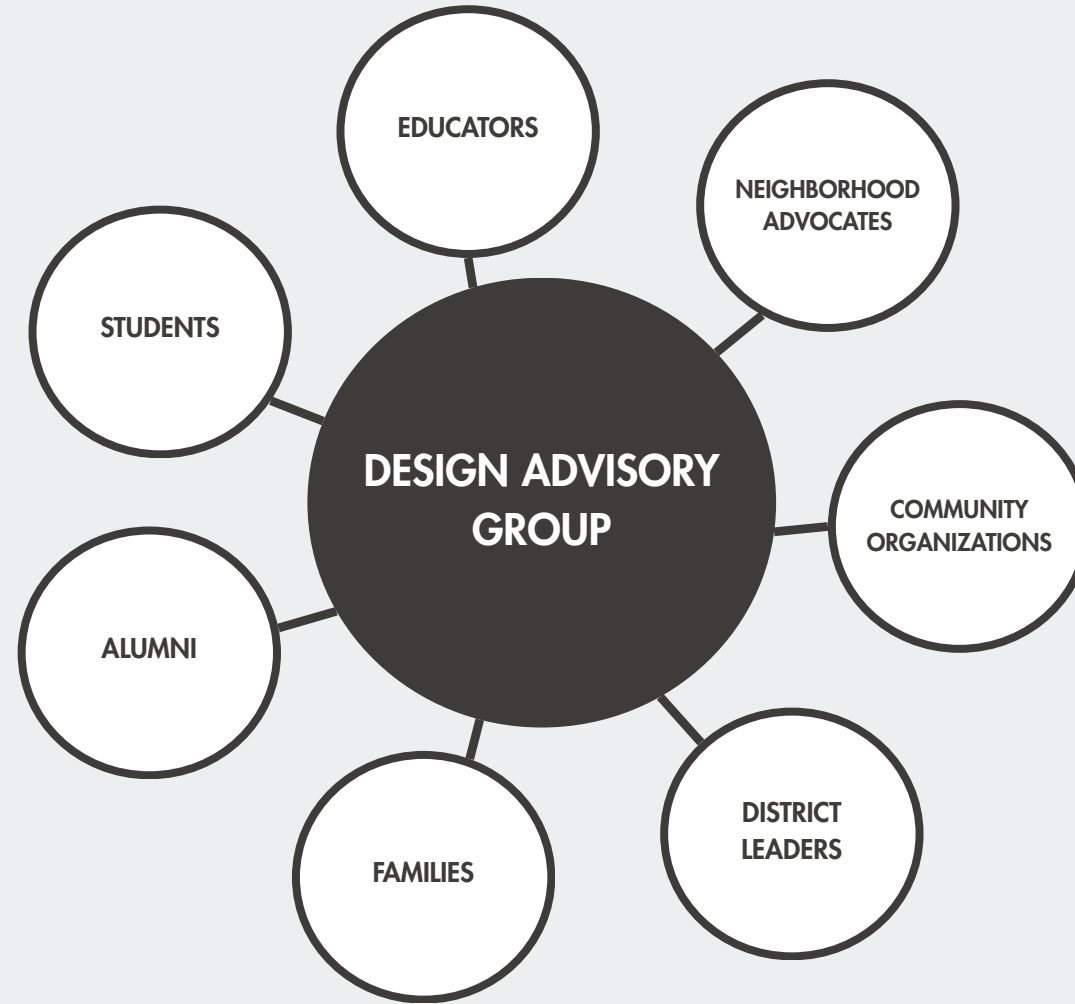
10 DESIGN ADVISORY GROUP MEETINGS

4 MAJOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

25 STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

4 ALUMNI REPRESENTATIVES

6 MONTHS OF STRUCTURED ENGAGEMENT



THE PROCESS INTENTIONALLY PRIORITIZED



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & SHARED OWNERSHIP

An important first step by the school district was allowing the community a strong voice in choosing the architect for their school, as well as giving them a voice in whether or not any or all of the 1980s building should be retained.

After being selected by the community through multiple rounds of public interviews, and with approval by the school district, the design team created a collaborative engagement process that empowered residents to shape the future of their school directly.

The design team immersed themselves in Montbello life through engagement with the following stakeholder events:

- Montbello Alive
- Farmers markets
- Neighborhood gatherings
- Community workshops
- Student leadership sessions
- And informal conversations



CHALLENGES

- Rebuilding community trust between all stakeholders
- Addressing educational inequities
- Supporting multilingual and diverse learners
- Balancing historic identity with future readiness
- Overcoming negative public perceptions
- Allowing 9th - 12th grade students to attend school on campus during the entire construction process



COMMUNITY ASSETS

- Strong alumni pride
- Engaged community
- Rich cultural diversity
- Deep tradition of community advocacy
- Performing arts legacy
- Existing neighborhood partnerships
- Career pathway opportunities



DESIGN RESPONSES



ALUMNI PRIDE

HALL OF FAME CORRIDOR



PERFORMING ARTS LEGACY

AUDITORIUM PRESERVATION



CULTURAL DIVERSITY

DISTINCT LEARNING NEIGHBORHOODS



COMMUNITY ADVOCACY

WARRIOR PLAZA & CIVIC GATHERING SPACES



MUSIC LEGACY

SONY PARTNERSHIP & MEDIA PATHWAYS

RESULTING VISION

The design vision for Montbello High School emerged after 3 months of intense community engagement and countless focus group discussions, our central theme was clear. We needed to artfully unite the rich cultural communities of Montbello into a single unified whole, without losing the identities of the groups that make Montbello unique. Like a colorful quilt, each piece can be stitched together to create a more beautiful whole: **Montbello is a cultural quilt.**

Distinct identities, histories, cultures, and aspirations are woven together into a stronger collective school community.

Throughout the engagement process, students, alumni, educators, and community members repeatedly returned to three defining values established in the 1980s:

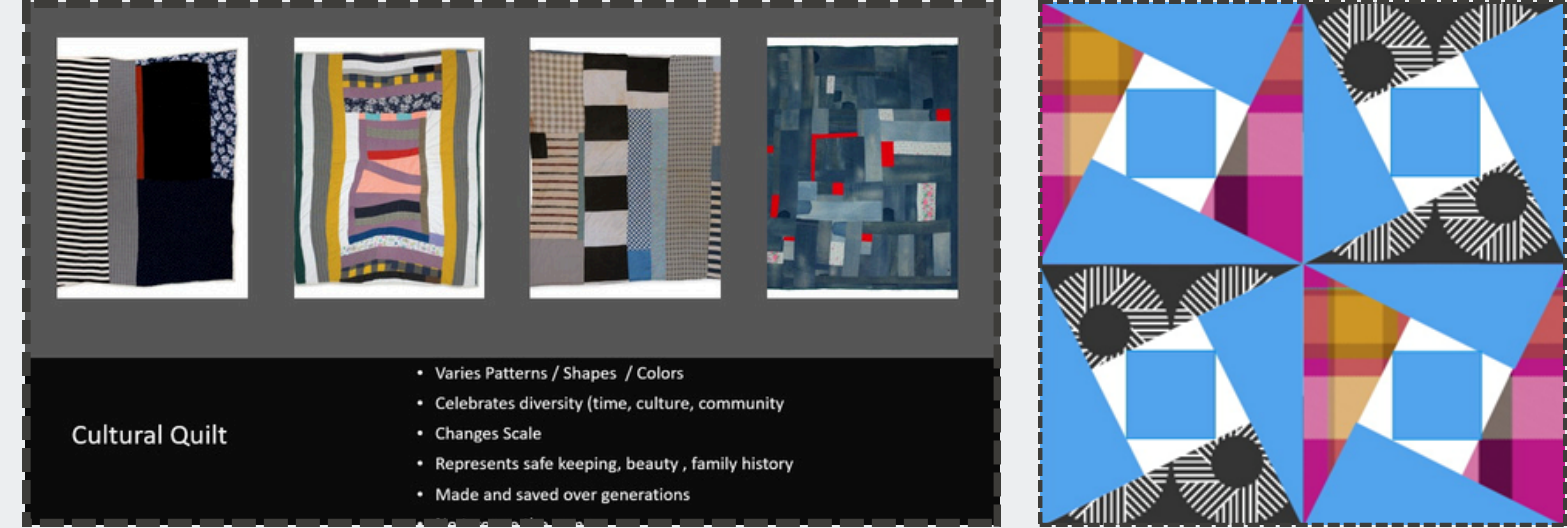
- **TRUTH**
- **HONOR**
- **DIGNITY**

This idea of a quilt and the need to convey the importance of these powerful words influenced every design decision.

Like the Maroon Bells, defined by layers that overlap, connect, and create depth, the school weaves the cultural quilt into architecture through interconnected learning neighborhoods, layered materials, collaborative commons, and shared civic spaces.

The learning neighborhoods are articulated through distinct colors and crenelated corridor walls that echo the vivid personalities and sharp cultural facets of the community itself. Each learning neighborhood possesses:

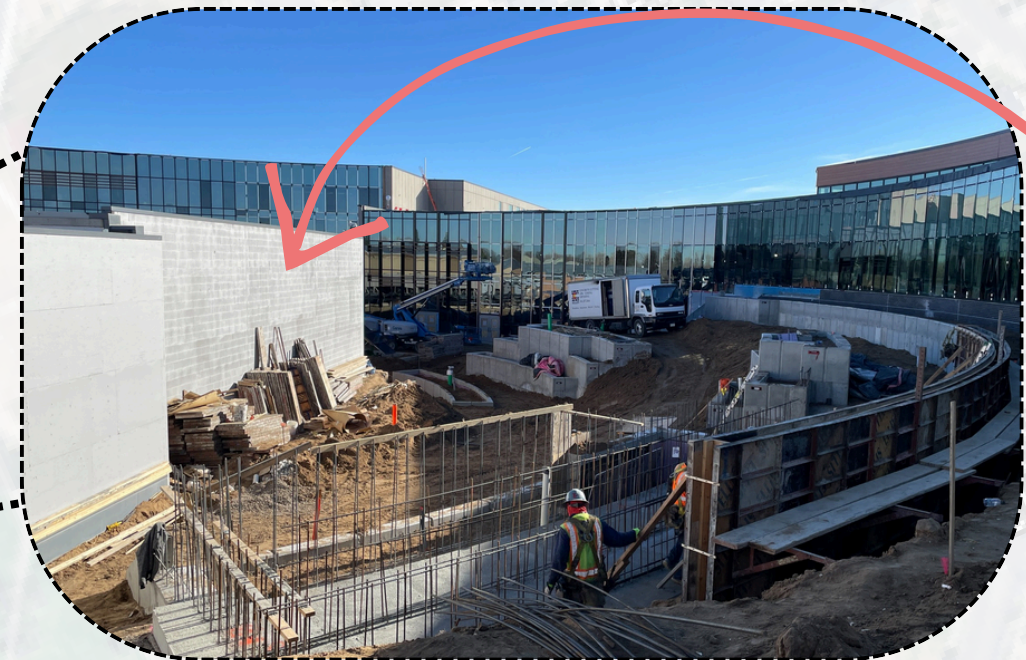
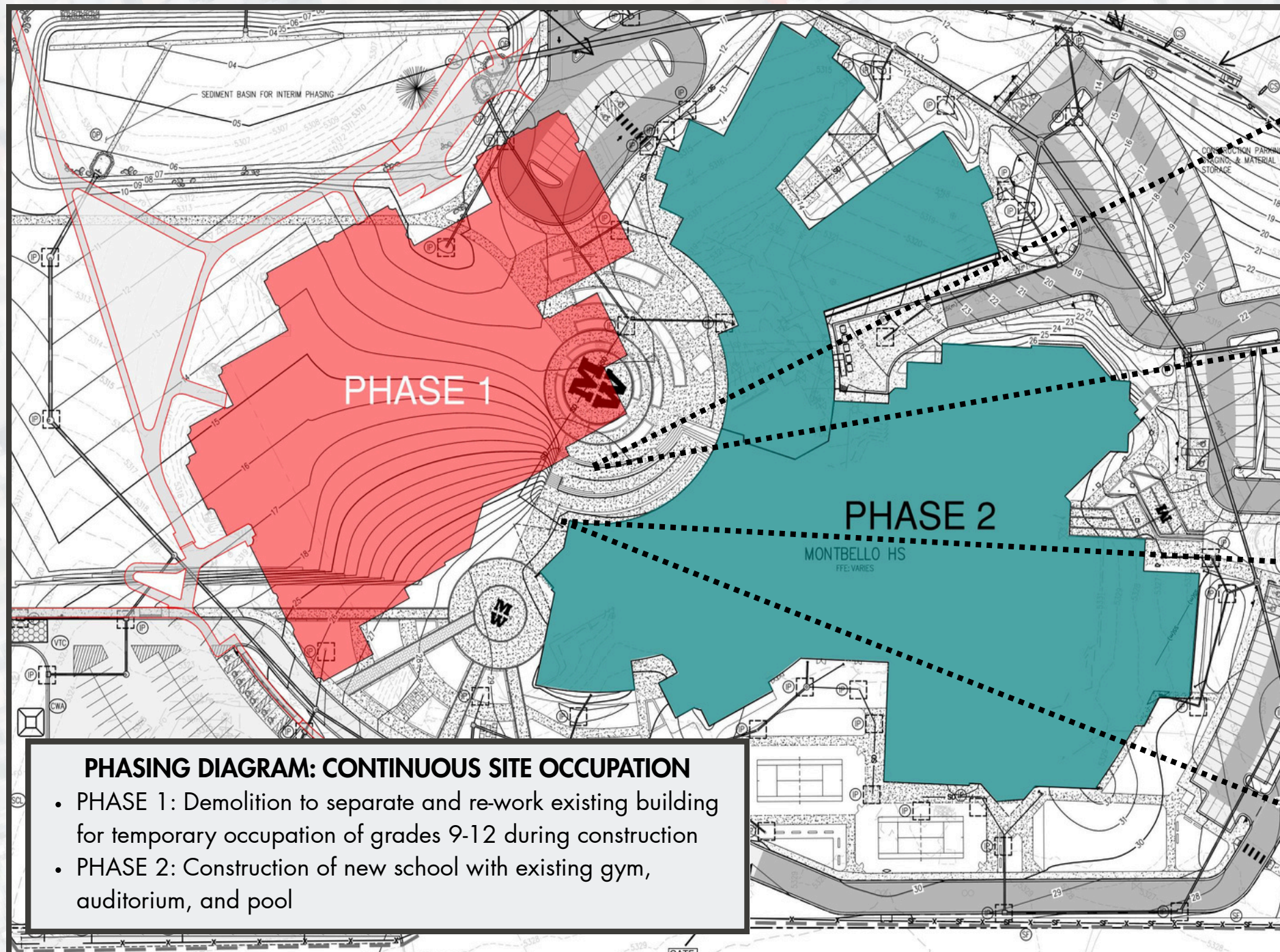
- Its own color palette
- Academic focus
- Student culture, while remaining connected through the larger community fabric of the school



4. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

PHASED CONSTRUCTION ON AN OCCUPIED CAMPUS

Montbello High School is nestled within a tight-knit residential neighborhood in far northeast Denver, just beyond the city's urban core. For the Montbello community, this site has always represented far more than a school campus. It is home, a place deeply tied to neighborhood identity, memory, and belonging. After the original high school closed, the community spent more than a decade advocating for its return. When Montbello High School relaunched in 2022 with a full freshman through senior class, district leaders and the design team recognized that reopening the school anywhere other than this historic site would undermine the very purpose of the project. While it may have been easier to temporarily relocate students offsite until construction was complete, the community made clear that students needed to return to Montbello immediately, even as the new campus was still being built around them.



PHASE 1 WHERE OLD & NEW BUILDINGS ARE SEPARATED



SHORING EXISTING BUILDING FOR USE IN NEW SCHOOL

BUILDING IN PLACE: LANDLOCKED CONDITIONS

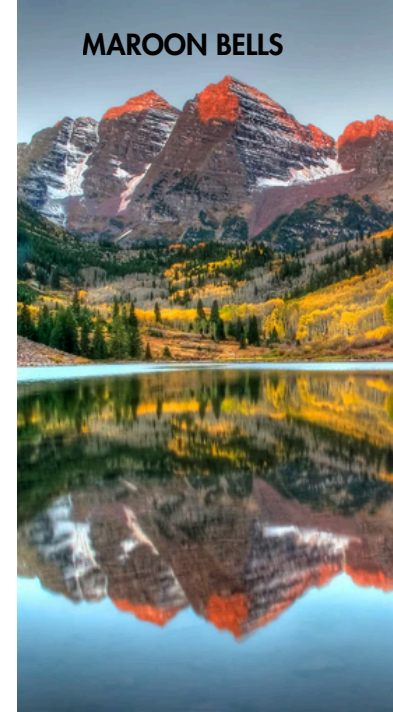
The project site itself presented significant logistical constraints. The campus was effectively landlocked within an established residential neighborhood, limiting opportunities for staging, expansion, construction access, and temporary operations. Delivering a major multi-phase construction project while operating a fully occupied high school therefore required extraordinary coordination and trust.

The existing building was effectively divided in half, with students occupying renovated portions of the campus while the remainder of the new state-of-the-art facility was constructed adjacent to active learning environments. Managing student safety, construction logistics, deliveries, circulation, and daily school operations within an active job site presented ongoing challenges for the district, contractor, and design team.

Yet despite the inconveniences and complexities of construction, the community overwhelmingly embraced the process because what mattered most was that students were finally back where they belonged. As the new campus rose around them, the project was simultaneously laying the physical and symbolic foundation for the future of Montbello.



--- PRE-EXISTING SPACES



ARCHITECTURE AS THE BINDING FIBER, WHERE DIVERSE STRANDS OF COMMUNITY ARE GATHERED, LAYERED, AND HELD TOGETHER.

The physical design of Montbello High School transforms architecture into an act of belonging.

The sweeping curved form of the building wraps around Warrior Plaza in a symbolic gesture of welcome, gathering students and community together within a shared civic heart.

The architecture reinforces the idea of the Cultural Quilt: Distinct identities woven together through shared spaces, transparent connections, and visible community life.

Drawing from the Maroon Bells, a renowned alpine destination near Aspen, CO known for its towering peaks and reflective lake, the palette captures the depth, contrast, and seasonal color of the surrounding landscape:

- Deep maroon
- Earth clay
- Aspen gold
- Forest green
- Warm neutrals
- Deep purple

KEY DESIGN STRATEGIES

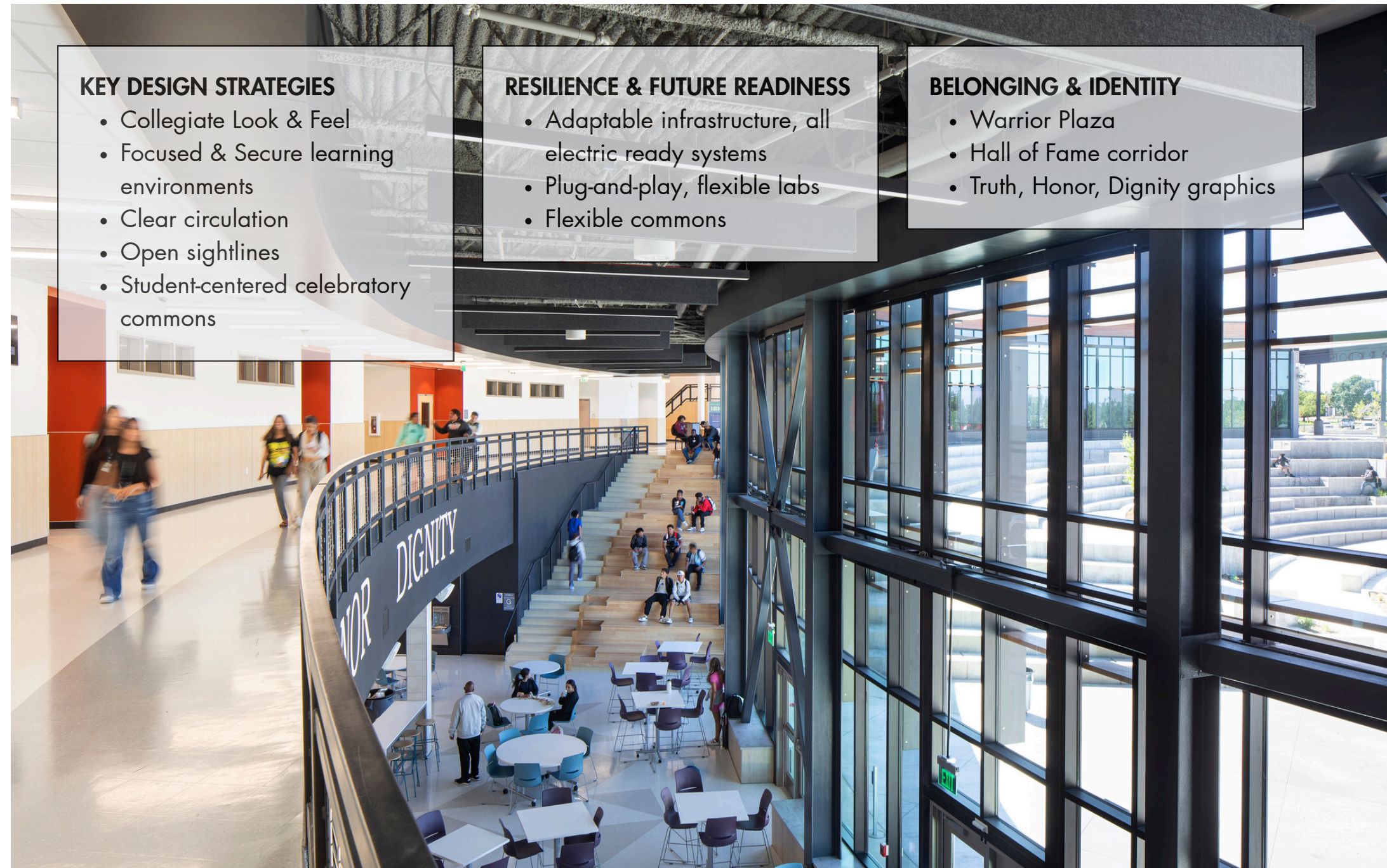
- Collegiate Look & Feel
- Focused & Secure learning environments
- Clear circulation
- Open sightlines
- Student-centered celebratory commons

RESILIENCE & FUTURE READINESS

- Adaptable infrastructure, all electric ready systems
- Plug-and-play, flexible labs
- Flexible commons

BELONGING & IDENTITY

- Warrior Plaza
- Hall of Fame corridor
- Truth, Honor, Dignity graphics





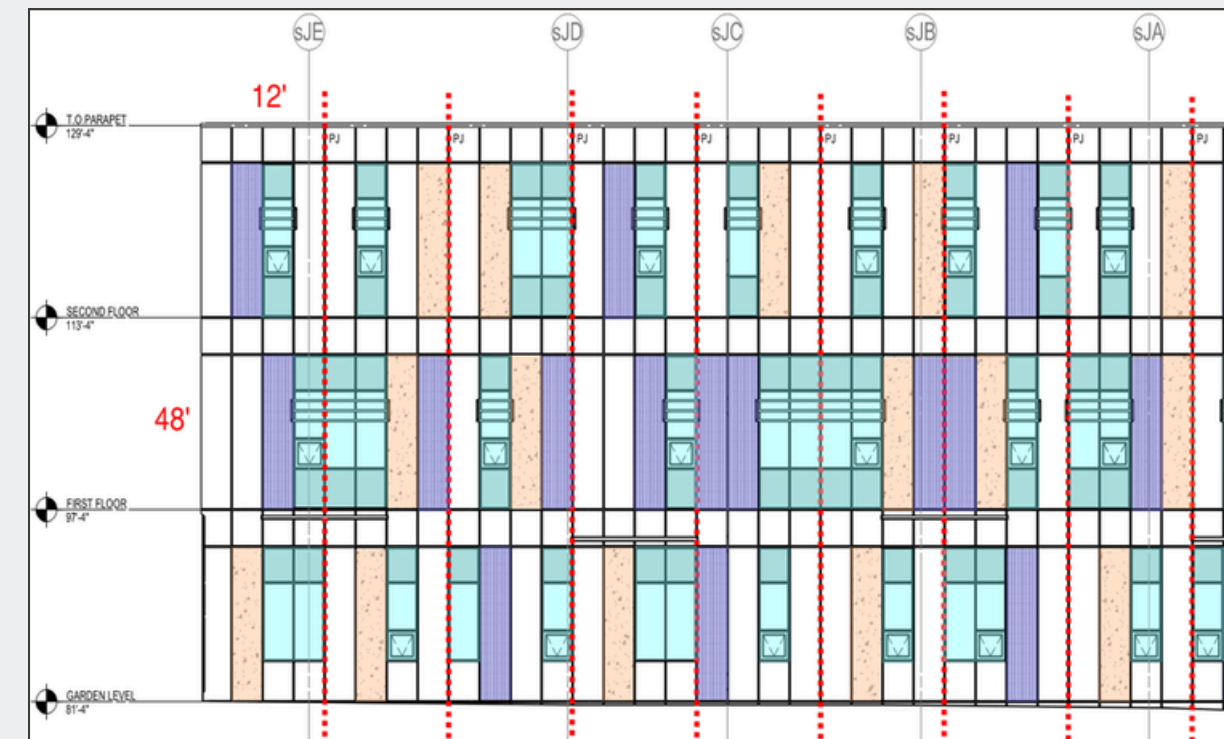
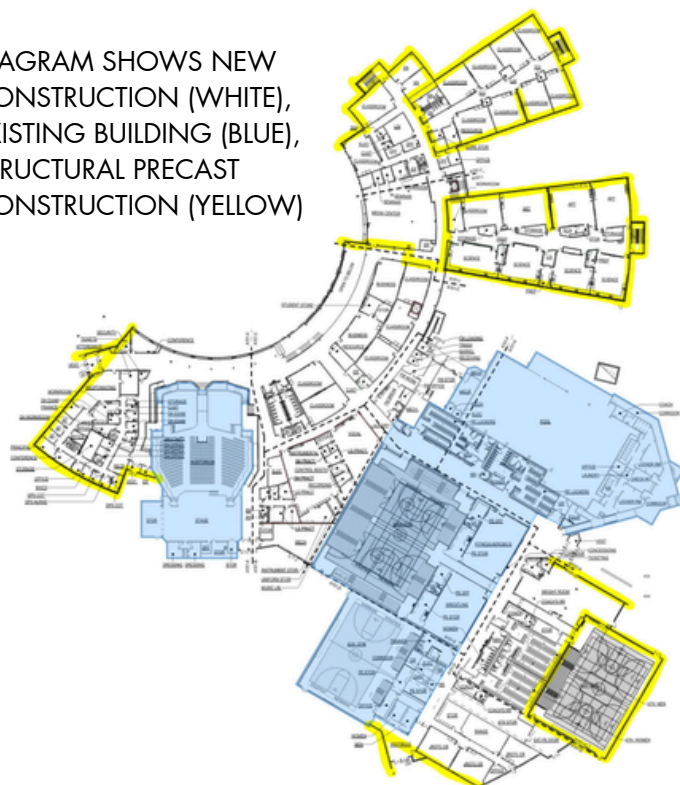
PRECAST AS PERFORMANCE & EXPRESSION

Precast concrete panels, the factory-fabricated wall systems delivered and installed on site, served as the primary enclosure for Montbello High School's new additions. Selected for speed, durability, and minimal disruption, the prefabricated system allowed construction to occur around an active academic calendar while meeting tight budget and schedule demands. Insulated, load-bearing panels improved energy performance and integrated efficiently with the building structure.

Beyond performance, precast enabled a cohesive design response. Through varied finishes, thin-brick accents, and patterned formliners, the panels create depth, texture, and visual rhythm. These layered expressions support the project's "cultural quilt" concept, stitching together new and existing elements into a unified whole. The result is a modernized campus that reflects community identity through a durable, high-performing material system.



DIAGRAM SHOWS NEW CONSTRUCTION (WHITE), EXISTING BUILDING (BLUE), STRUCTURAL PRECAST CONSTRUCTION (YELLOW)



DRAWING SHOWS PATTERN OF DIFFERENT PRECAST PANELS TEXTURES AND GLAZING

A SCHOOL WOVEN INTO THE COMMUNITY: MONTBELLO HIGH SCHOOL WAS DESIGNED AS BOTH AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND A CIVIC DESTINATION.

Warrior Plaza

Serves as the social heart of the campus, hosting:

- Community gatherings
- Cultural celebrations
- Performances
- Career fairs

The campus supports learning and community life beyond the traditional school day.

Denver Health Partnership

The student-based health clinic removes barriers to care and supports the belief that wellness and learning must go hand in hand.

Services include:

- Physical healthcare
- Mental health counseling
- Wellness support
- Reproductive healthcare
- Chronic condition management

Sony Music Publishing Partnership

The partnership connects students to creative industries rooted in Montbello's identity and alumni legacy.

Inspired by alumnus Jon Platt, students gain:

- Mentorship
- Music and media exposure
- Creative tech experiences
- Career pathways
- Access to underrepresented fields

It expands opportunity while celebrating Montbello's creative culture.



“For this school to be so well thought out and designed with the details down to the last bit, it is always amazing and spectacular.”

- Rodine Sekide, Montbello Student, Class of 2027

SCAN HERE: DISCOVER MORE FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS ON THE REIMAGINED MONTBELLO



WELLNESS + SUSTAINABILITY WOVEN INTO THE ENVIRONMENT

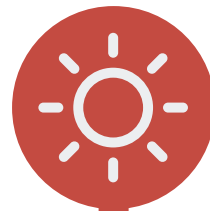
Sustainability at Montbello High School is rooted in creating a healthy, resilient environment that supports both student wellness and responsible stewardship.



NATIVE/ADAPTIVE LANDSCAPING
Low-water plants reduce irrigation needs and support local ecology



EXTERIOR SUNSHADES
Reduce solar heat gain and enhance energy performance



NATURAL DAYLIGHTING
Thoughtful design maximizes daylight to support learning and wellness



SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES



CONSTRUCTION WASTE DIVERSION
Diverted waste from landfill through recycling and responsible practices



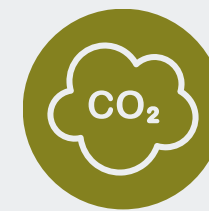
WATER-CONCIOUS LANDSCAPING
Smart irrigation and efficient fixtures conserve this vital resource



RESPONSIVE VENTILATION
Demand-controlled ventilation adjusts to real-time occupancy



MERV 13 FILTRATION
High-efficiency filtration improves indoor air quality



CO2 MONITORING
Continuous monitoring creates optimal indoor air and comfort



LOW-VOC MATERIALS
Materials selected to support healthier environments



ELECTRIC-READY INFRASTRUCTURE
Prepared today for a sustainable tomorrow

5. EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

WEAVING TOGETHER PATHWAYS OF OPPORTUNITY

Montbello High School was designed to support a wide range of learners, aspirations, and educational journeys.

Educational Strategies

Flexible Learning

- Movable furnishings
- Writable surfaces
- Collaborative commons
- Outdoor learning
- Non-transparent classrooms ensuring the trauma-informed design principle of a quiet, protected classroom environment. (Transparency happens at the common spaces)

Student Agency

- Multiple seating types
- Choice-based learning environments
- Collaborative and independent settings



The 9th grade academy has shown success with 90% on track to graduate.

RESEARCH-INFORMED DESIGN

Research shows that student achievement and wellness are strengthened by environments that foster belonging, flexibility, and cultural identity. These principles shaped the Montbello design through three interconnected layers: Student-Centered Spaces, Shared Spaces, and Community Collaboration.




Student-Centered Spaces include calming classrooms, natural light, and quiet de-escalation areas that support focus, emotional regulation, and trauma-informed care.

Shared Spaces such as the auditorium and gymnasium are designed for both student and community use, supporting events, athletics, and gathering while maintaining secure student zones.

Community Collaboration is expressed through the circular arc of Warrior Plaza, whose welcoming form draws the community inward and establishes the school as a connected civic destination.

A LAYERED APPROACH TO INFORMED DESIGN

Montbello was designed to draw the broader community into welcoming, collaborative shared spaces while thoughtfully transitioning into intentional, student-centered environments that prioritize safety, belonging, and trauma-informed support.

-  CONNECTING COMMUNITY
-  SHARED SPACES
-  STUDENT CENTERED



TRAUMA INFORMED DESIGN IN ACTION

PHYSICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Students must feel safe before meaningful learning can occur.

CHOICE, CONTROL & AGENCY

Trauma often involves loss of control. Design can restore it.

PREDICTABILITY, LEGIBILITY & ORDER

Predictable environments reduce cognitive load and stress.

Calm Sensory Environment

Many students are hypersensitive to noise, light, and visual overload.

Connection to Nature (Biophilic Design)

Nature supports emotional regulation and reduces stress.

Belonging, Identity & Cultural Affirmation

Trauma-informed schools reinforce that students matter.

Relationship-Centered Spaces

Healing happens through relationships, not isolation.

Flexibility & Adaptability

Schools must respond to changing emotional and learning needs.

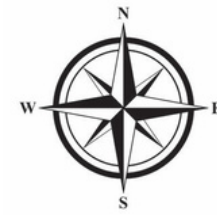
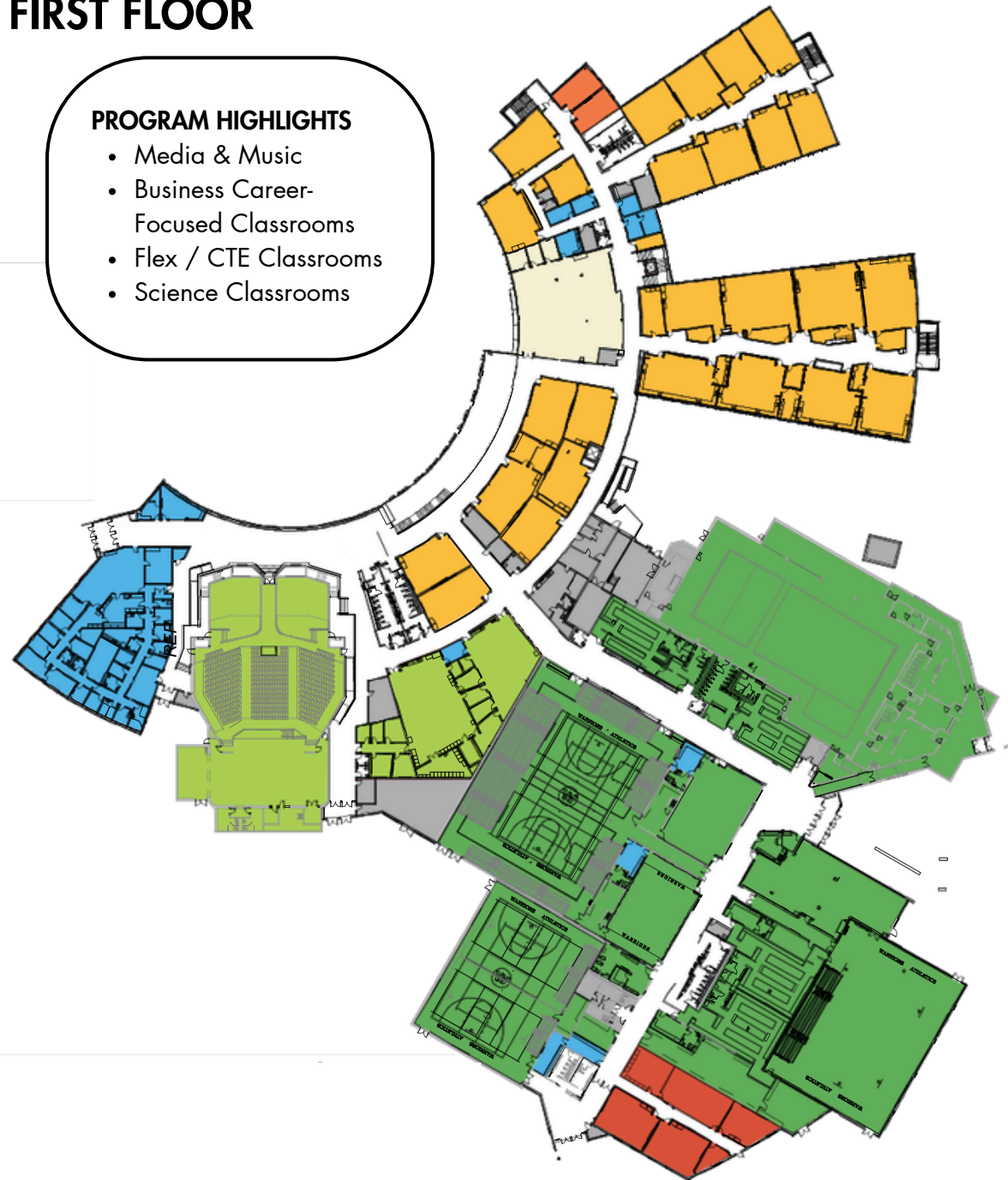


MONTBELLO LEARNING COMMUNITIES

FIRST FLOOR

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Media & Music
- Business Career-Focused Classrooms
- Flex / CTE Classrooms
- Science Classrooms



Common Spaces

Core Instruction

Special Education

Elective + Explore

Visual + Performing Arts

Athletics

Administration

Support + Building Services

GARDEN LEVEL

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Crime Lab
- CTE Spaces



SECOND LEVEL

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Art Classrooms



WHOLE CHILD SUPPORT



The health clinic, operated by Denver Health in partnership with Denver Public Schools, serves students, families, and young children by removing barriers to healthcare and reinforcing the belief that wellness and learning go hand in hand. Through accessible medical and mental health services, the Denver Health School-Based Health Clinic supports student wellness, improves attendance, reduces chronic absenteeism, and helps students stay healthy and prepared to succeed academically.

SERVICE OFFERED	STATISTICS / RESEARCH FINDINGS	BENEFIT TO STUDENT WELLNESSs & SCHOOL SUCCESS
Primary Medical Care	Students with access to school-based health centers (SBHCs) had significantly fewer absences than students without access. A 2025 study of 66,000+ students found students with SBHC access were 12–15% less likely to be chronically absent.	Students can receive care quickly without missing an entire school day, improving attendance and reducing untreated illness.
Mental Health Counseling	Nearly 48% of students reported depression, anxiety, or stress made it difficult to succeed in school. Schools with mental health services showed improvements in attendance and engagement.	Counseling reduces anxiety, depression, and behavioral crises, helping students stay in class and improve focus and emotional regulation.
Asthma & Chronic Disease Management	Research shows students with asthma treated through SBHCs had fewer ER visits, less activity restriction, and better school attendance.	Managing chronic illness keeps students healthier, prevents emergency absences, and increases participation in school activities.
Sports Physicals & Preventive Exams	SBHCs increase access to preventive healthcare and immunizations, especially for underserved students.	Early detection of health issues keeps students medically cleared for athletics and reduces long-term health problems.
Immunizations & Vaccinations	School clinics improve vaccination rates and provide easier preventive care access than traditional clinics.	Fewer outbreaks of illness means fewer missed school days and healthier school communities.
Reproductive & Sexual Health Services	SBHCs improve access to STI screening, contraception, and pregnancy support for teens.	Students receive confidential healthcare that can reduce health risks, support healthy decision-making, and improve graduation likelihood.
Health Education	Studies show SBHCs help promote healthier behaviors and stronger health literacy among students.	Students make healthier lifestyle choices, improving long-term physical and mental wellness.
Community Health Advisors & Insurance Help	SBHCs reduce healthcare access barriers for uninsured and low-income students.	Families gain access to healthcare resources they may otherwise miss, improving equity and continuity of care.
Same-Day Access to Care	In one statewide study, 96.7% of students returned to class the same day after visiting a school health center.	Students avoid losing an entire day of instruction for routine medical appointments.
Overall Academic Outcomes	Research links SBHC access with improved attendance, fewer disciplinary problems, stronger school connectedness, and improved graduation outcomes.	Healthier students are more likely to stay engaged academically and socially.

6. RESULTS

OUTCOMES & IMPACT

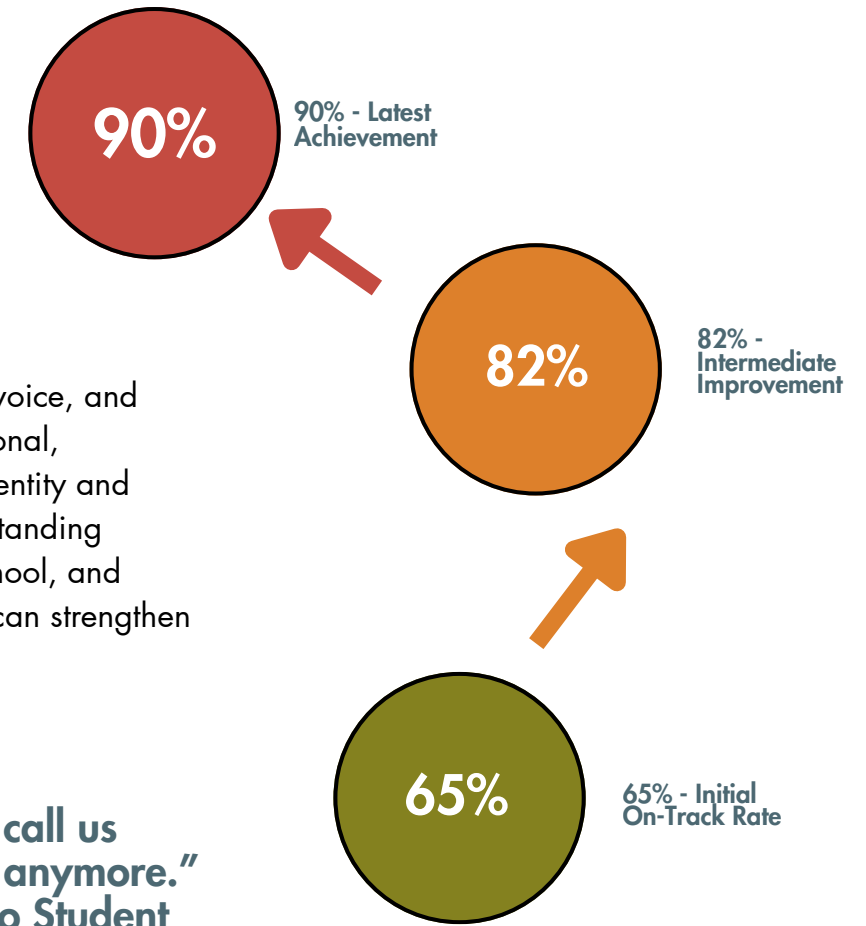
Montbello High School supports educational success through environments that foster belonging, flexibility, visibility, collaboration, and wellness.

REVITALIZATION WITHOUT DISPLACEMENT

Montbello High School demonstrates how educational investment can catalyze neighborhood improvement without gentrification when equity, community voice, and long-term resident stability are intentionally prioritized from the beginning. Through strong community engagement, coordinated planning between educational, transportation, housing, and civic stakeholders, and a commitment to community benefit, the project reinforced neighborhood pride while protecting the identity and continuity of the families it was designed to serve. The reopening of Montbello High School has helped reclaim neighborhood identity and challenge longstanding negative perceptions of the community. The project contributed to renewed public investment, improved sidewalks and park connections, safer routes to school, and expanded access to opportunity and wellness resources. Rather than accelerating displacement, Montbello High School became a model for how schools can strengthen neighborhoods through reinvestment that uplifts existing communities instead of replacing them.

Preliminary Outcomes:

- 9th Grade On-Track rates improved from 65% to 82% to now 90%
- Attendance rates consistently met or exceeded district goals
- Montbello High School was named a national CHSS Demonstration School
- Student population has grown 17% in the last two years



“I have never been prouder of my tax dollars.”
— Community Member

“They can’t call us Montghetto anymore.”
— Montbello Student

COMMUNITY IMPACT-

THE SCHOOL HAS BECOME:



A source of neighborhood pride



A community destination



A center for wellness and opportunity



A symbol of restoration



LONG-TERM VALUE + STEWARDSHIP

Montbello High School was designed to provide long-term educational, environmental, and community value.

Stewardship Strategies:



Durable low-maintenance materials



Flexible infrastructure



Future-ready systems



Shared community spaces



Efficient construction strategies

Precast Concrete Systems



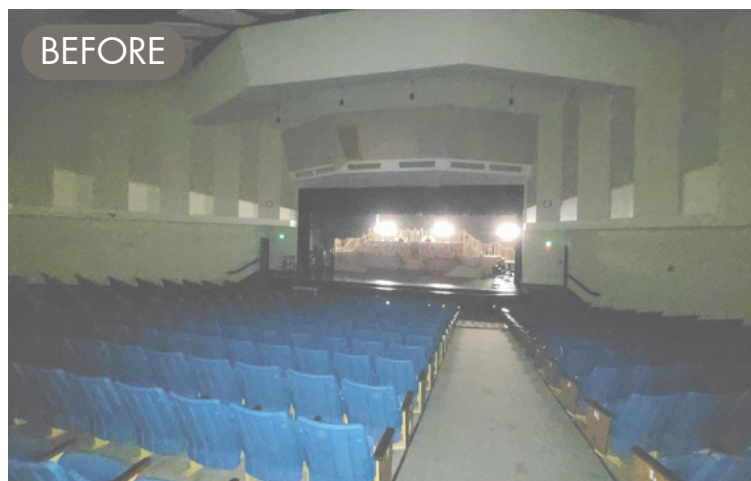
BEFORE



AFTER

Precast concrete systems reduced neighborhood disruption while supporting construction efficiency and long-term durability.

Auditorium Preservation



BEFORE



AFTER

The preservation and modernization of the original auditorium honored community history while maximizing both cultural and financial value.

COMMUNITY RESULTS

The most successful new high schools don't just solve a facilities problem, they strengthen community, equity, identity, and opportunity when aligned with:



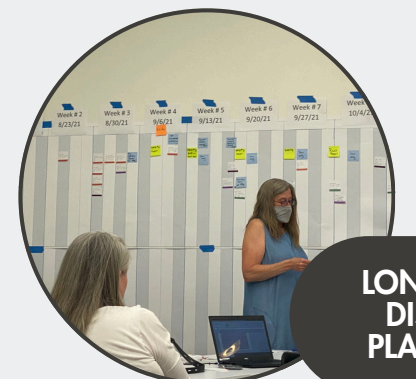
COMMUNITY VOICE



PROGRAMMIC INVESTMENT



TRAUMA-INFORMED DECISION



LONG-TERM DISTRICT PLANNING

New schools can become sources of healing, pride, and possibility.

A COMMUNITY WOVEN BACK TOGETHER

Montbello High School **demonstrates the power of educational design to do far more than support learning.**



It demonstrates how architecture can restore identity, rebuild trust, strengthen belonging, and weave together an entire community through shared vision and purpose.



Inspired by the cultural quilt of Montbello and the layered beauty of Colorado's Maroon Bells, the school transforms diversity into a visible and celebrated strength.



Every learning neighborhood, gathering space, pathway, and plaza contributes to a larger story of connection, dignity, and opportunity.



What was once a symbol of loss has become a national model for restorative, community-centered educational design.



MONTBELLO HIGH SCHOOL IS NOT SIMPLY A BUILDING,
IT IS A COMMUNITY WOVEN BACK TOGETHER.



