

St. Austin Catholic School

Austin, TX



ST. AUSTIN CATHOLIC
Bringing the Word of God
to life
WELCOME
PROPERTY CENTER & SCHOOL

St. Austin
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01 Executive Summary

BACKGROUND The redevelopment of St. Austin Catholic Parish and School represents a faith-based institution's creative stewardship of limited urban land to strengthen education, community presence, and long-term sustainability. Facing many challenges, parish leaders pursued a comprehensive redevelopment strategy capitalizing on the prime location of their historic campus located directly across from the University of Texas at Austin.

INNOVATIVE STRATEGY Central to the project is an innovative 99-year ground lease that allowed a portion of parish land to be developed into a 29-story residential tower for UT Austin student housing (with 20% designated for affordable housing). This approach enabled the parish to retain ownership of its land while generating a stable revenue stream to help finance new facilities. The result is a vertically integrated campus where the church, school, and residential development coexist on a single site.

SCHOOL The new six-story St. Austin Catholic School anchors the redevelopment. The innovative school includes:

- Flexible classrooms supported by collaborative and shared spaces.
- Purpose-built labs for science, art, music, and making
- A gymnasium with an elevated walking track
- Outdoor areas including a ground-level courtyard, a third-floor outdoor learning space and a sixth-floor rooftop play area.

COMMUNITY In the heart of downtown Austin on a major commercial corridor known locally as "the Drag," the school and church draw more than 2,000 families from the greater Austin metro area. The community is diverse, and the site sits in the shadow of UT Austin - one of the most respected universities in the world. At the same time, there is a need for affordable student housing and outreach for the homeless in the area.

Together, the development strategy and new school demonstrate how thoughtful design and real estate innovation can sustain Catholic education within a dense urban context while also addressing Austin's homeless challenges and need for affordable student housing.



02 Scope & Budget

GRADES SERVED

Pre-K - 8

STUDENT CAPACITY

500

CONSTRUCTION COST

\$44.9M (School)

BUILDING AREA

100,500 SF (School)

SITE AREA

2-Acre Urban Site Shared with Church & 29-Story Residential Tower

COMPLETION DATE

2024

UNIQUE FEATURES

SIX

Stories

THREE

Outdoor Levels

PASEO

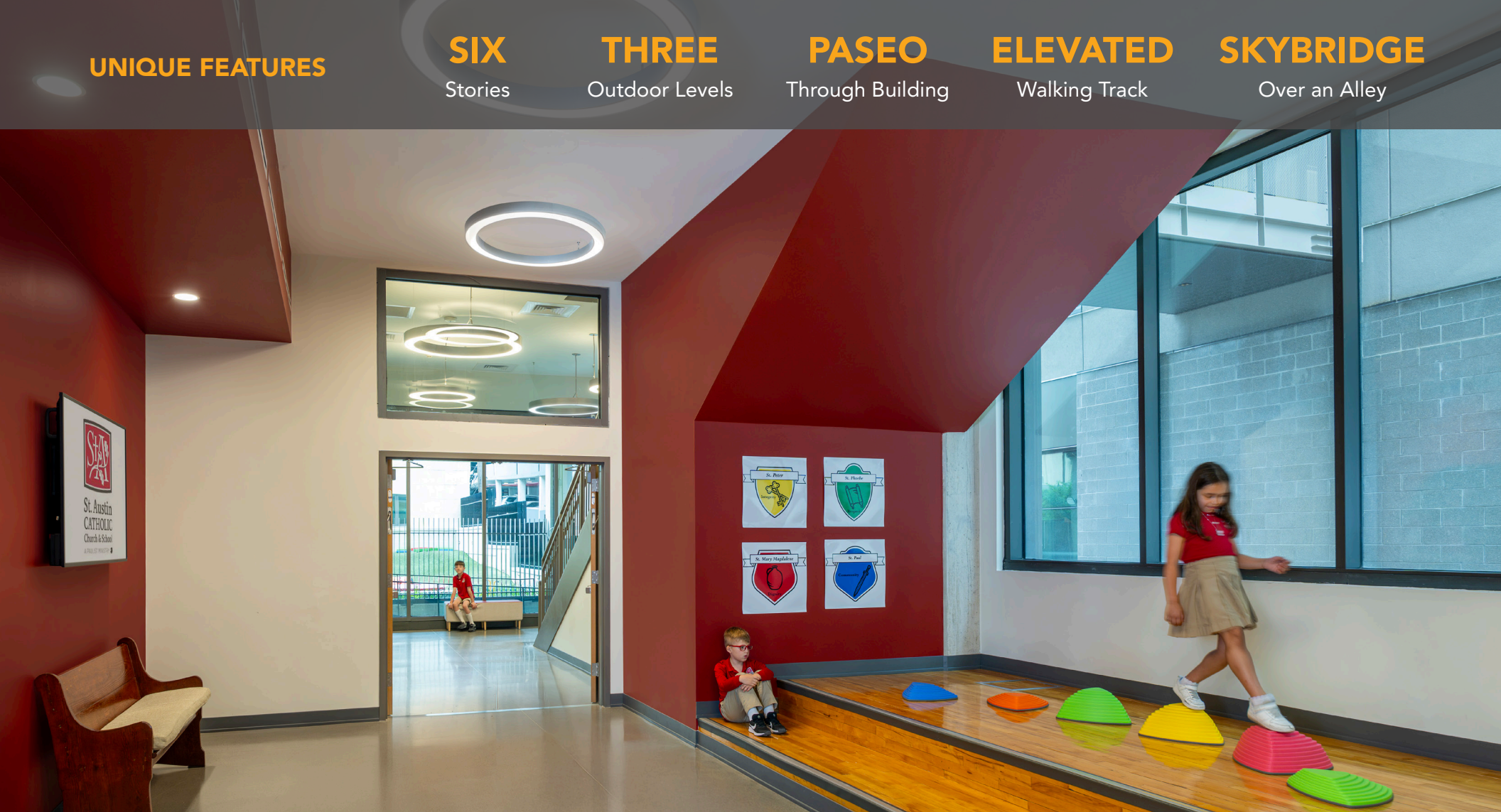
Through Building

ELEVATED

Walking Track

SKYBRIDGE

Over an Alley



03 School & Community Research and Engagement

THE COMMUNITY

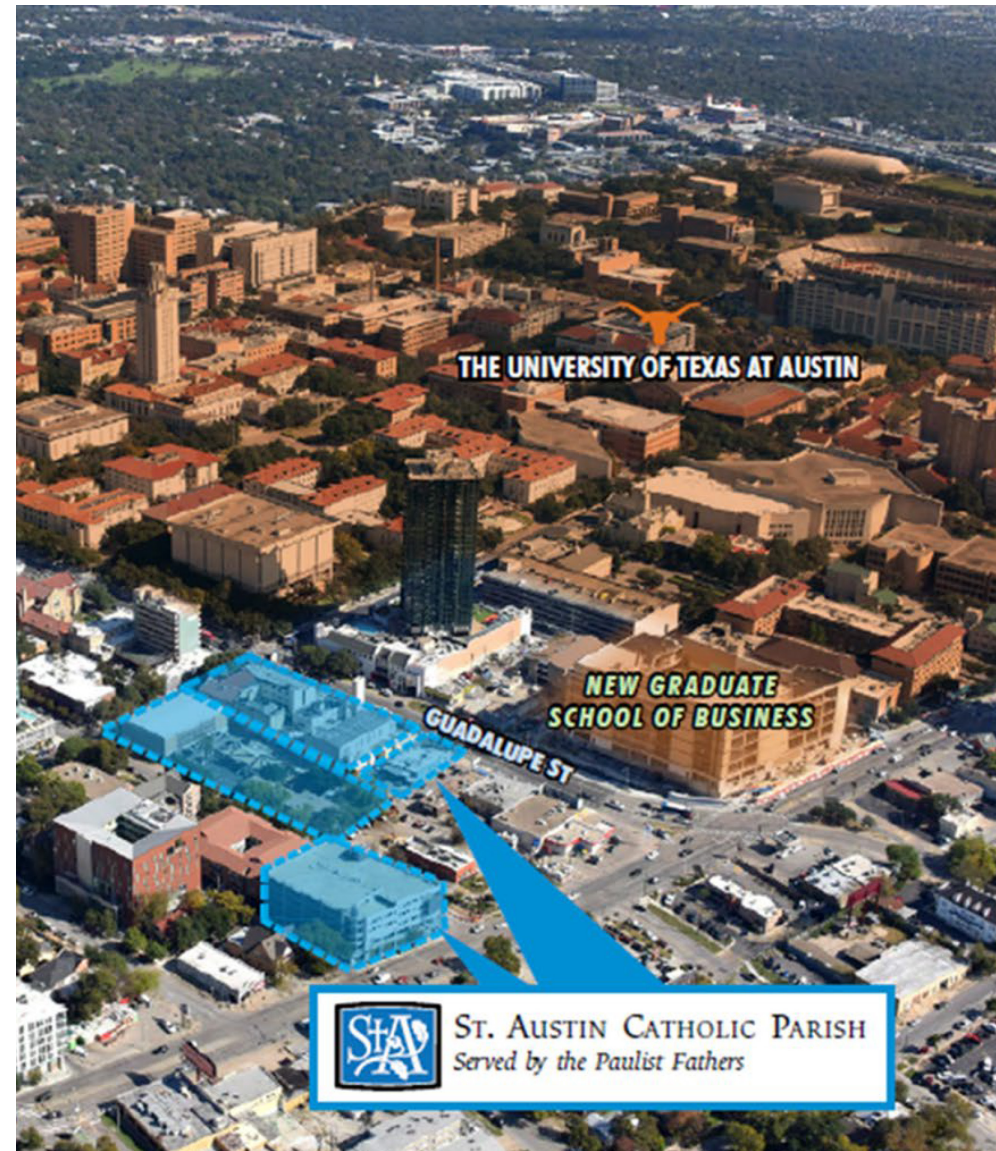
“Community” for this project thus extends well beyond the school’s stakeholders and encompasses a large part of downtown Austin and the UT Austin fabric. The project initiator was the St. Austin Catholic Parish, an urban Catholic community served by the Paulist Fathers, a society of Catholic priests committed to being a welcoming presence for all. Located in Austin, Texas, the school draws roughly 2,000 households from the greater Austin metro area. St. Austin’s site is located directly across from the University of Texas at Austin, on a major commercial corridor known locally as “the Drag.” An active street showcasing multiple modes of transportation, the Drag is home to bookstores, clothing stores, restaurants and coffee shops. An important part of this project was the 29-story housing development, serving a community of UT Austin students and the general public, with a certain number of units set aside for affordable housing per the Parish’s wishes. Embedded in a rapidly growing urban neighborhood, a homeless population is also actively served by the St. Austin congregation.

AUSTIN’S HOUSING CRISIS

In 2022, Austin rents increased 40% — more than any other metro area in the country and nearly three times the national average. As a result, Austin’s homeless population increased 36% within two years. Additionally, UT Austin’s high demand for housing means that 40% of freshman have to live off-campus. This project seeks to provide student housing, affordable housing and church ministry to the homeless population.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

- St. Austin Catholic Parish and School community
- Paulist Fathers, who lead the parish and guide mission decisions
- Third-party developer with whom the parish entered a 99-year ground lease for part of its land
- Diocese of Austin, which approves major parish property decisions
- City of Austin, which benefits from economic activity and tax revenue associated with the redevelopment



The St. Austin location for over 100 years: a dense, urban site across “the Drag” from UT Austin

STUDENT COMMENTS

What is the best thing about our new school?

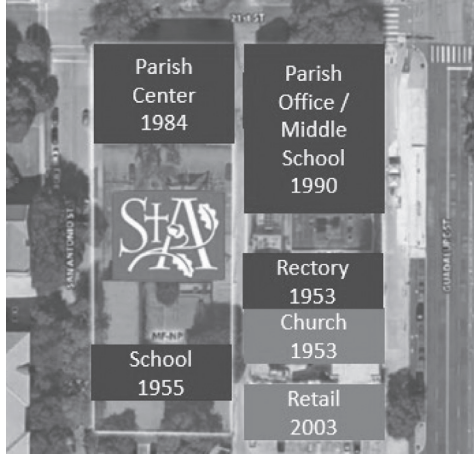
"being able to look out the windows and see UT and the Austin skyline"



Music Room overlooking UT Austin

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Challenge	Description	Solution
Aging Infrastructure, Maintenance Burden and Inadequate Space	Existing facilities were poorly adapted to current educational and ministry needs, and the cost of maintaining and repairing outdated facilities threatened financial sustainability.	<i>A rethinking of incremental renovations in favor of a long-term redevelopment.</i>
Community Need for Housing	Following the highest rent increase in the nation, downtown Austin lacked affordable housing, contributing to a homeless population crisis. UT Austin housing demand is also exceptionally high, requiring 40% of freshmen to live off campus.	<i>The 29-story residential tower provides much-needed student housing. Additionally, 20% of units were intentionally set aside for affordable housing to support vulnerable members of the community.</i>
Large Developer Team and Multi-Faceted Development Approach	The team included a Private School/Parish and for-profit Housing developer, two Architecture firms (one leading design for the Housing Tower and Parish School Exterior, and one leading the Parish School Interior), a Program Manager and Contractor.	<i>Alignment of goals among the School/Parish and Housing developer was critical, along with careful collaboration and coordination among the design and construction team.</i>



**Previous site usage (left)
School, church office, and rectory buildings (right)**

AVAILABLE ASSETS

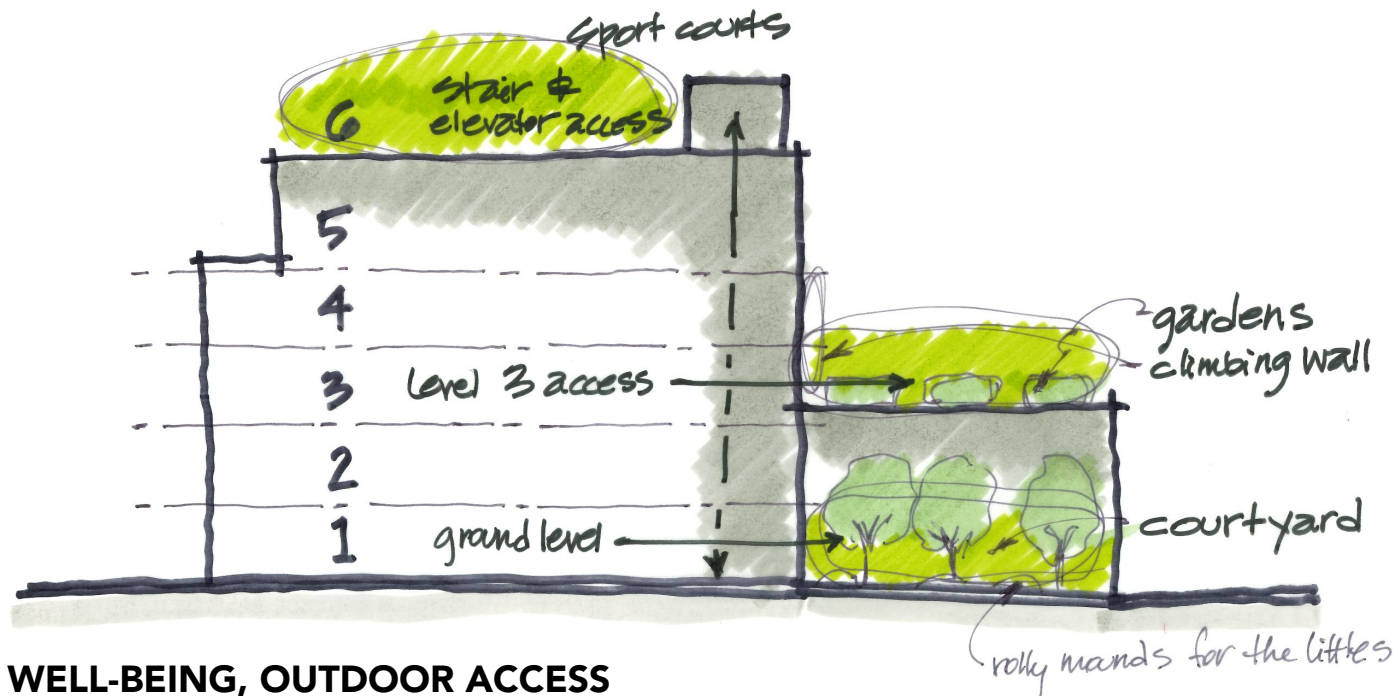
St. Austin's primary assets included:

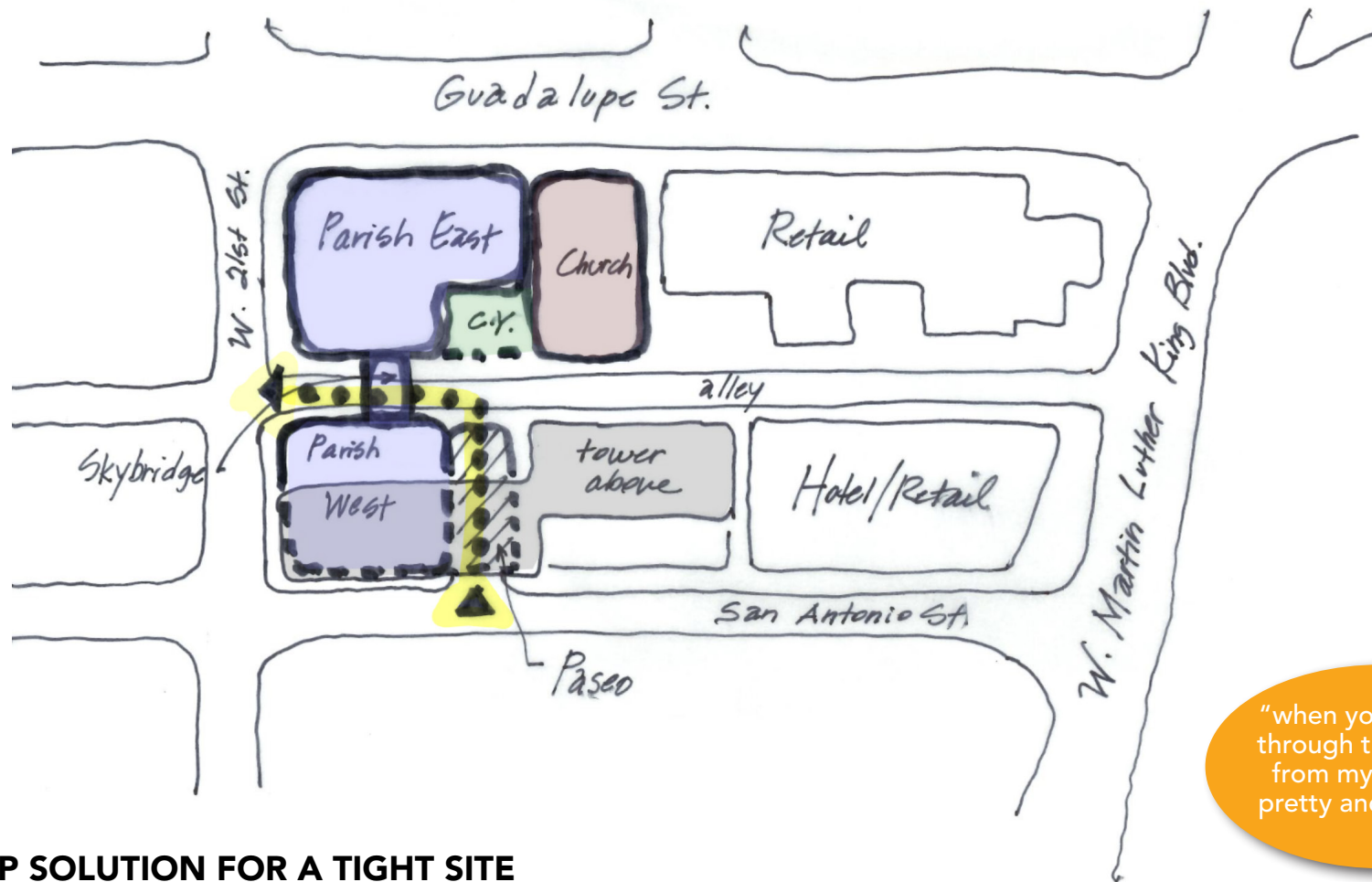
- Urban land adjacent to the University of Texas, highly attractive to developers due to market demand for high-density residential use
- A cohesive parish community with professional expertise among members, enabling internal leadership in project planning and execution
- Existing property value that could be monetized through a long-term ground lease to fund new facilities

Recognizing these assets, parish leaders creatively pursued a strategic redevelopment model that provided new parish and school facilities on their existing established campus while also benefiting the broader community.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

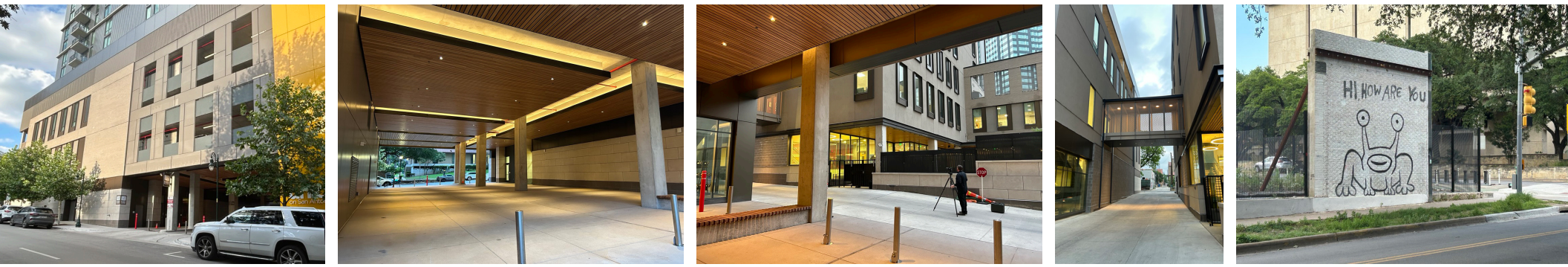
Challenge	Description	Solution
Constrained Site	The small parcel limited building design options and created pickup/drop off/parking challenges.	A vertical design with garage parking and a skybridge make best use of the space, while a paseo through the residential tower connects the alley to main streets for dropoff/pickup.
Safety	Safety for students in the urban area was paramount. The project's church portions needed to be open to passersby, while ensuring security for the school.	Designers prioritized safety in all decisions, with a multitude of needs considered due to joint use of school spaces with the church. Doors, gates, circulation paths and security systems were carefully considered.
Well-Being, Outdoor Access	Though located on a tight urban site, the school wanted to provide plenty of outdoor educational and play opportunities. Designers also had to carefully consider sound transfer between the school and residences.	Designers looked vertically, creating outdoor activity spaces on three separate levels. An acoustical engineer was added to the team to mitigate sound issues.





PARENT PICK-UP SOLUTION FOR A TIGHT SITE

The tight site required creative solutions to the parent drop-off and pick-up: a paseo through the residential tower connects San Antonio Street to the alley accessing the courtyard and school office. Exiting under a skybridge, the exit brings you into view of one of Austin's favorite murals.



VISIONING PROCESS

Visioning for this project was initiated in early 2020, resulting in the challenge of paused in-person meetings once the pandemic hit. Color selections became challenging, as colors look different on computer screens. Once in-person meetings resumed, the design team printed all renderings in black and white and invited stakeholders into their office for a series of color meetings to pull real samples from their sample library and be able to build consensus around color decisions. Additionally, in-person precedent tours had to be postponed. When they could take place, the school requested to swap the Library and Art locations as well as include livelier wall tiles after seeing live examples. School leaders often speak now of the importance of seeing other projects in person.

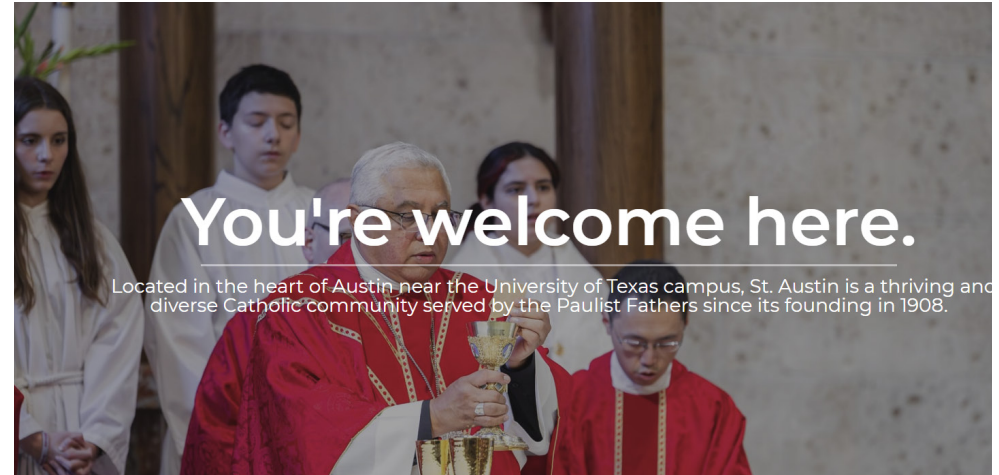


With visioning beginning in early 2020, designers navigated the challenge of viewing materials online. Once in-person could resume, b&w prints presented a blank canvas for color samples chosen live.



FOSTERING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

From its beginnings in 1915 as a one-room school for immigrant children from Mexico, St. Austin school has supported diversity, equity and inclusion throughout its history. As a Catholic institution served by the Paulist Fathers, the school takes seriously their mission to welcome everyone, and the buildings are designed to serve with inclusivity. From decor choices that feel welcoming to thoughtful design that incorporates safe space for the church to serve the area's unhoused population, the school embodies DEI principles. As part of the residential development, St. Austin insisted that a portion of the housing units be set aside as affordable units for underserved populations.



*"As a school founded in the traditions of Catholicism, but also the Paulist Fathers, our approach at St. Austin is framed through the lens of an apostolic mission which recognizes the Paulist tradition of **inclusivity**. You are loved and welcomed for who you are, where you are in your life. There is no need to change you into something that they feel like is the more ideal version of who they think you should be. You are allowed to be who you are."*

- St. Austin School website

“What I fear is that if we're not smart, we will create an intergenerational inequity where my generation and some of your generations are able to make the decision to stay [in Austin], but others will not. Partnerships like this, visionary ideas like this, is exactly what we need to keep this place the place we love.” - Mayor Kirk Watson



VALUE OF PROCESS AND PROJECT TO COMMUNITY AT LARGE

The process and project generated multiple community assets:

Sustainable financing: A 99-year ground lease with a developer created long-term revenue streams for the parish and diocese, helping fund a new state-of-the-art school and ministry facilities.

Enhanced facilities: New school and ministry space better supports contemporary educational and parish needs. The new school is able to accommodate more than twice the number of students as the previous facility, with open shell space on the fourth floor serving as room for expansion.

Model for other communities: The project serves as a national model for how urban church land can be leveraged to address maintenance challenges and mission goals.

Broader economic benefit: The redevelopment supports financial contributions to local civic infrastructure through lease revenue and secondary economic activity. Maintaining the church's services enables continued services to the area's homeless population, and the location enlivens a well-traversed main thoroughfare.

Supports area housing need: The 29-story residential tower provides much-needed housing in a growing area, for both University students and the general public. A portion of units are set aside for affordable housing to support vulnerable members of the community.



Sixth Level Rooftop Play, Carefully Contained

04 Physical Environment

PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Given the school's urban Austin proximity and 100-plus year history, it was deeply important that the school architecture be appropriate for the next 100 years. A neutral palette of carefully selected masonry, limestone, and metals provide a timeless approach. The connections to the street, existing church that remained, and the University housing celebrate unison or distinction at strategic points. Walking through the school, the views of downtown Austin and the University of Texas play an undeniable role in the interior architecture.

The school itself is six stories including the roof top play area. With an exterior courtyard on the ground level, roof top play, and an outdoor area on the third level, students are never more than one floor away from outdoor access. The interior architecture of the school intentionally encompasses biophilic design, an approach that connects people with nature and enhances well-being. Real wood panels are used in student collaborative areas providing nature connections in addition to wayfinding. The interior colors selected include nods to nature with hues of blue, green, and honey. Abundant windows bring the outdoors in.

STUDENT COMMENTS

What is the best thing about our new school?

"I really love the new commons and classrooms"

"the commons area"

"spacious and multiple commons areas which are good for reading and relaxing"



Grade-Level Neighborhoods Feature Commons Areas and Biophilic Design

PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT



GYM & ELEVATED TRACK



ROOFTOP PLAY



SKYBRIDGE



SMALL COMMONS



Gym & Music & Housing Tower Above

School & Parish Building



HOW THE FACILITY FITS WITHIN THE LARGER CONTEXT OF THE COMMUNITY

How St. Austin fits into the larger context of the community is truly unique. Occupying the original St. Austin Church site chosen over 100 years ago, it is deeply embedded in the community. The University of Texas (UT) across the street is a constant reminder of high academia. The Library and Science Lab on upper levels inspire students daily with spectacular views of the UT campus. The well-traversed urban area also has a large population of homeless individuals for whom the church provides outreach programs. Designing for safety was a constant throughout the design and construction process, with a multitude of needs considered for many of the spaces.

St. Austin's core values are Respect, Dignity, Integrity, and Community. With the school's distinctive location, students see firsthand high academics on display along with the plight of those in need. St. Austin's physical place provides unique opportunities to deeply think about their core values.

HOW THE PROJECT INSPIRES AND MOTIVATES

- St. Austin inspires in so many ways, from its humble beginnings in 1915 as a one-room school for Mexican immigrant children to the current highly-rated PK-8 school in the heart of Austin.
- The views from the school to the University of Texas campus across the street and the State Capitol are awe-inspiring.
- The redevelopment story has been an inspiration to urban land-locked parishes/schools seeking to expand.

INNOVATIVE ASPECTS OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- A dynamic roof top play area with a basketball court and provisions for outdoor movies
- Maker space with interactive Lego wall
- Dedicated music, art and science labs
- Outdoor area on the third level with gardens, sport court, rock climbing wall and benches for reading or quiet reflection
- Gymnasium with elevated walking track
- Unique design of a 6-story vertical expression responding to the constrained site, with a skybridge connecting to the gym and music rooms
- A successful design and construction team collaboration, with many players involved



"I love how we can sit 6 to a table instead of 4 because it means less people have to be discluded"

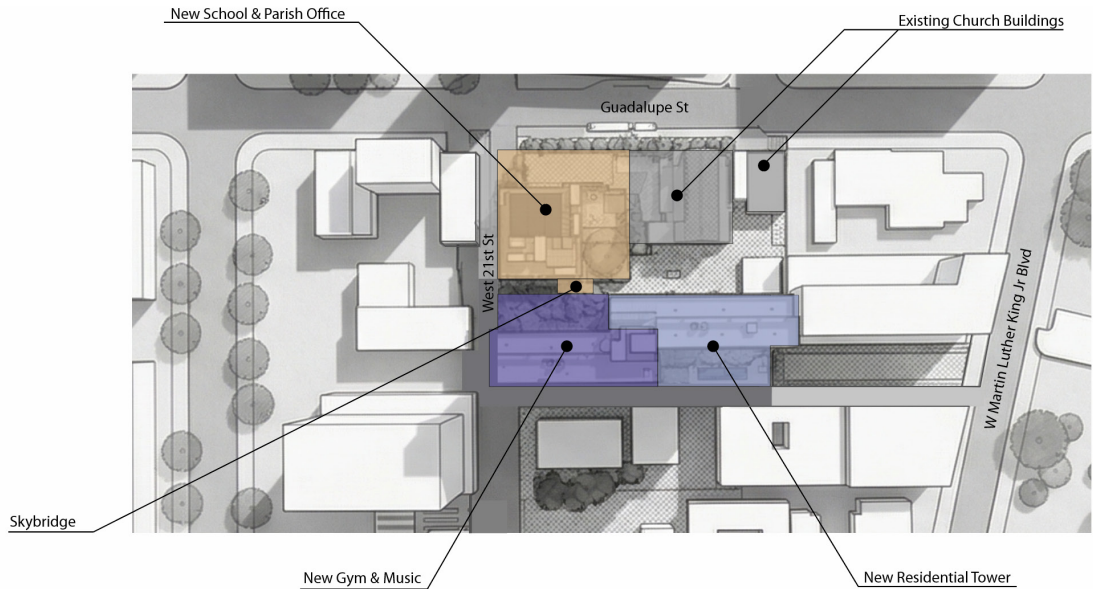
Dining Commons/Parish Hall with divisible wall that can safely separate the space into two distinct areas so that a 3-year-old can be eating lunch on one side and community outreach programs can occur on the other.

FOSTERING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

- Many aspects of the physical environment specifically foster diversity, equity and inclusion. In addition to an environment designed to be welcoming to all, the school supports students with reading challenges through creative wayfinding to designate neighborhoods and spaces. Quotes and sayings throughout emphasize the school's mission and focus on inclusion.
- The Dining Commons / Parish Hall serves as a powerful example, even recognized by the children as evidenced by the quote above. The larger space and tables supports inclusion, and a mobile wall can safely separate the space into two areas so that the church can hold outreach programs on one side of the wall while children are enjoying lunch on the other. It is a powerful example of DEI in action.

FOSTERING SUSTAINABILITY AND WELLNESS

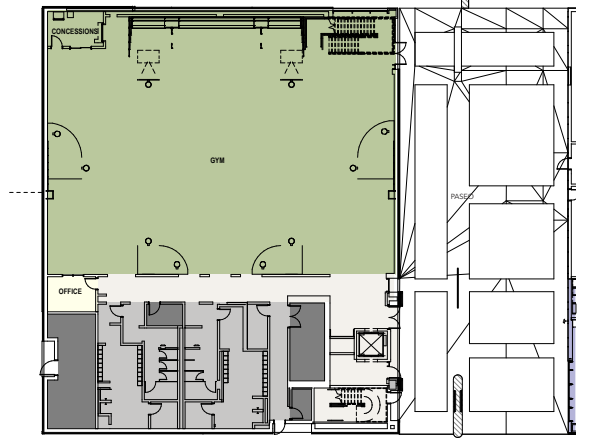
- Designed to serve this community for at least 100 years, this development embodies sustainability. Designers considered life cycle and maintenance costs in the materials selected so that the future burden on the church would not be too great.
- Sustainable elements include use of daylight, energy efficient lighting, low flow fixtures, low VOC paints and furnishings, durable flooring, and the use of responsibly sourced furnishings where possible.
- Wellness and ensuring outdoor play was a huge consideration for this project, which creatively incorporated three levels of unique outdoor play spaces in the design. A vegetable garden in one of the outdoor spaces teaches children the joy of eating healthy vegetables they have grown themselves.



Level 1



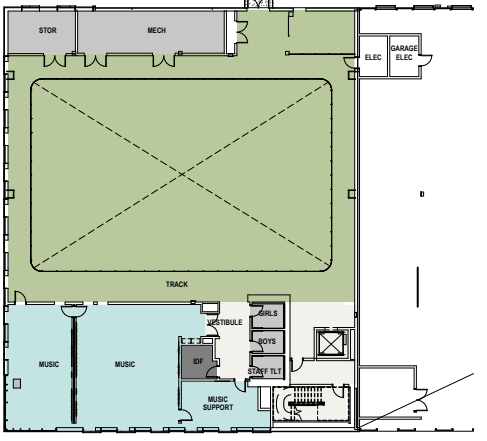
Level 1 Gym/Music



Level 2



Level 2 Gym/Music



Level 3



Level 6 Rooftop Play



05 Educational Environment

EDUCATIONAL VISION AND GOALS OF THE SCHOOL

The school's established vision is "non-scholae, sed vitae" meaning "we learn not for school, but for life." The school's core values are Respect, Dignity, Integrity, and Community.

HOW THE ENVIRONMENT SUPPORTS CURRICULUM

- St. Austin's approach to curriculum is knowledge-based, challenging students to develop their critical thinking. Research has revealed the important role active learning methods provide in learning, and the St. Austin design is rich with active learning opportunities. Generously-sized classrooms are supported by break-out collaborative spaces in the halls. Labs for Art, Music, and Science encourage movement and exploration.
- A Maker Space with a Lego wall provides opportunities for experimenting and building. Physical education and health programs provide the needed balance between mind and body. An elevated walking track circling the gym is accessible without going through the gym, allowing student use outside of physical education class. Exploration and activity is further enhanced by a multitude of different outdoor activity spaces on three different levels.
- Outdoor access was extremely important to the client, and activity areas on the ground level, level 3 and level 6 ensure students are never more than one floor away from an outdoor space. The school's design deliberately promotes St. Austin's project-based learning framework.

STUDENT COMMENTS

What is the best thing about our new school?

"the Lego wall"

"the cool skywalk"

"smartboards and elevators"





Science Classroom with Downtown Views and Flexible Furnishings

HOW THE ENVIRONMENT SUPPORTS A VARIETY OF LEARNING & TEACHING STYLES

A variety of spaces to support the way students learn and educators teach was a foundational goal for the project. In addition to flexible classrooms, the design features neighborhood open collaboration spaces of multiple sizes and small group rooms. Spaces for both group and individual instruction and learning abound.

HOW THE ENVIRONMENT IS ADAPTABLE/FLEXIBLE

- Transparency is provided between all classrooms and neighborhood collaboration spaces for visual contact between students and educators.
- Operable walls are provided between select classrooms to create larger educational spaces.
- Classroom furnishings feature wheels for mobility and reconfiguration as needed.
- The fourth floor was deliberately designed as open shell space to allow for future expansion and adaptability as needs arise. This building will support the community's educational needs for generations.

STUDENT COMMENTS

What is the best thing about our new school?

"the school has 6 floors"

"the classrooms are really big"

"the podcast room because it makes me able to express my thoughts and feelings"



Library

"Makerspace with Ms. Kennedy"



Maker Space

INNOVATIVE ASPECTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

- St. Austin School is designed in a neighborhood format, with small and large commons gathering spaces for students to connect and break out from classroom instruction when needed.
- There are intentional labs for art, music and science and operable walls throughout many spaces to create flexibility in their use and allow for small, medium and large group gatherings. A maker space lab with 3D printer and large Lego wall has become a huge hit with kids and encourages creativity and fine motor skills.
- A podcast room is a forward-thinking space that additionally supports creative expression.
- The noisier activities of gym and music were relegated to a separate building so classroom spaces could remain quieter.
- The dining commons is like the living room of the school, supporting meals, shared church activities and serving as a large format space that connects to the outdoors and hosts events.



Level 3 Outdoor Play and Gardens

06 Results

HOW THE PROJECT ACHIEVES EDUCATIONAL GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- St. Austin Catholic School believes in personalized instruction that meets the diverse needs and learning styles of every student.
- Architects translated that belief into a building designed for individualized learning. Design discussions centered around about the importance of having a variety of learning spaces to adapt to each student's needs.
- There were discussions about Thornburg's metaphors of primary learning spaces (campfire, watering hole, cave, sandpit, and mountaintop) and how they translate into creating spaces for storytellers, exchanging ideas, reflection, exploration, and sharing.
- The final design includes opportunities for all of these student experiences spaces via classrooms, large and small collaborative areas, labs and presentation spaces.

HOW THE PROJECT ACHIEVES SCHOOL DISTRICT GOALS

St. Austin is a thriving and diverse Catholic community served by the Paulist Fathers since its founding in 1908. The school's mission is to nurture the whole child – mind, heart, and spirit.

The project design respects "**mind**" by providing an innovative learning environment featuring dynamic settings to enhance student engagement, collaboration, and personalized learning.

The project design respects "**heart**" by connecting the students and educators with nature through the integration of natural elements in the design and by providing opportunities for the students to experience outdoors at multiple levels – ground level, mid-level, and rooftop-level of their 6-story school.

The project design respects "**spirit**" through imagery and its physical connections to the church.

St. Austin Catholic School successfully fulfills the Paulist mission of being a welcoming presence for all.



Enclosed, Secure Level 1 Courtyard

HOW THE PROJECT ACHIEVES COMMUNITY GOALS

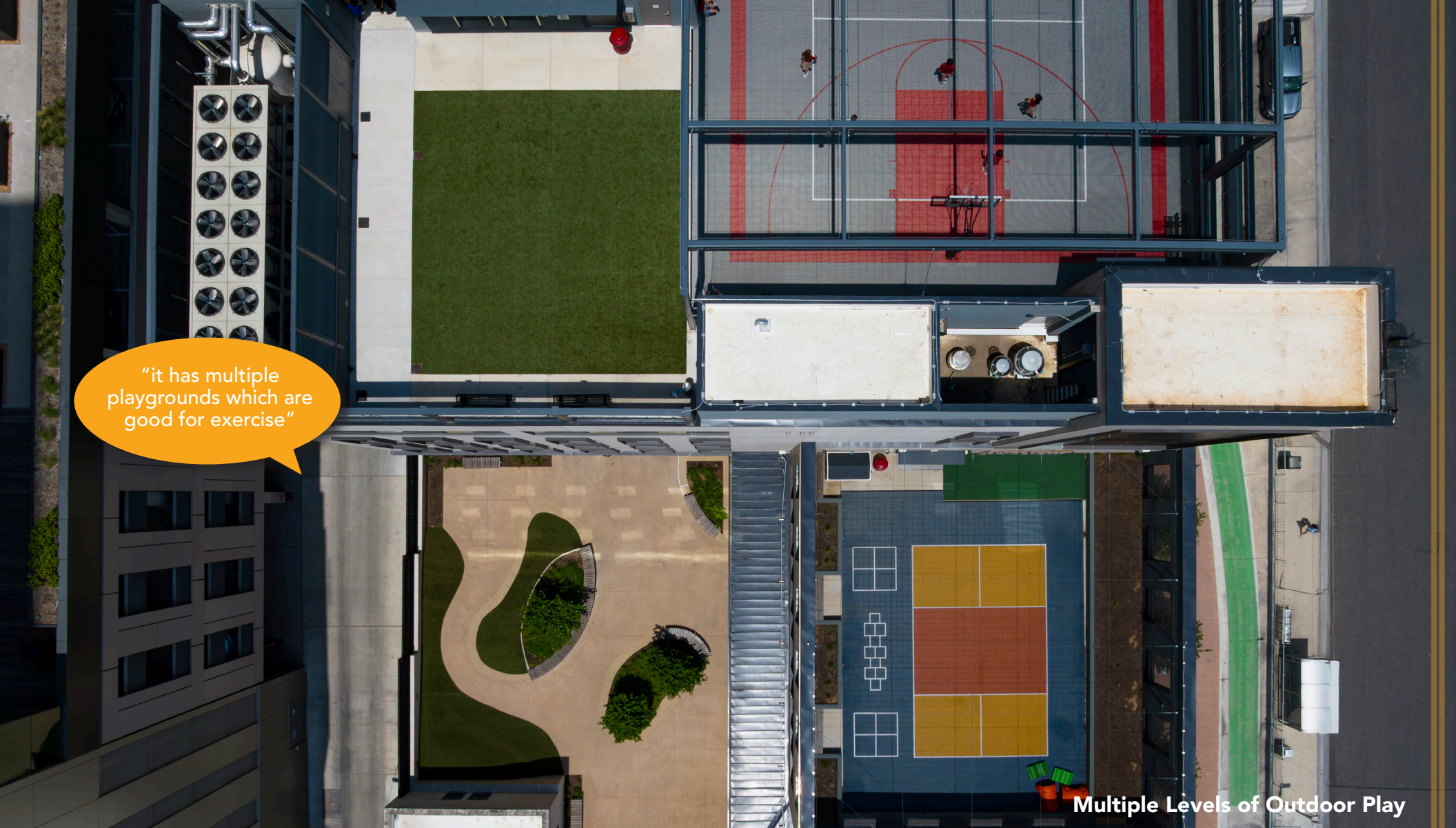
Fully integrated into the fabric of the Austin community, this project successfully enhances the area with a new school, needed housing and updated parish facilities serving the community. The innovative P3 partnership and land lease provides sustainable financing for an historic parish and school deeply embedded in the community. It provides much-needed housing for UT Austin students as well as affordable housing for the underserved in the area. It further sustains the church's outreach to the homeless population, which has increased almost 40% in recent years along with a 40% increase in Austin rents. **More than simply a school project, this development serves many community needs.**

UNINTENDED RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PROCESS & PROJECT

Some of the project's most difficult challenges ultimately became opportunities for innovation. Due to site constraints such as metered parking, bike lanes and a city bus stop in addition to site size, parent drop-off was a design challenge. The solution: create a vehicular paseo by carving a path through the 29-story residential tower and turning onto the existing alley which dissects the urban site into two pieces. As you exit the alley onto 21st Street, you are greeted with one of Austin's most beloved murals, Daniel Johnson's "Hi How Are You" mural. The before-mentioned alley also dissects the school into two buildings. The solution: build a skybridge to connect the school buildings. The project itself is an inspiration in creative thinking.



Skybridge and Paseo (entry to the left) for Student Pick Up



"it has multiple playgrounds which are good for exercise"

Multiple Levels of Outdoor Play

VALUE AND STEWARDSHIP OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The value of this project is enormous, for many constituents: from the school to church to UT Austin and the overall community. The unique 99-year ground lease with a developer was an ingenious solution that created long-term revenue streams for the parish and diocese. Not only did it provide the funding stream for the new school and ministry facilities, but it will ensure viability for generations to come.

SUSTAINABILITY AND WELLNESS OUTCOMES

Sustainability outcomes from this project include facilities designed to last for at least 100 years, reduced life cycle and maintenance costs and reduced impact on the environment through the use of efficient materials.

Wellness is encouraged through abundant outdoor play spaces as well as gardens that teach about nature and nutrition. An intentional biophilic design approach throughout the school reflects nature and presents a calming and welcoming environment.



UNION of San Antonio

St. Austin
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Guadalupe

ONLY ONE WAY