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Bright lights, big city

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. - Wollin City is a colorful place filled with blue, brown, orange - and the occasional pink and purple - homes. It has a police station, school, museum, music hall, court house and hospital. And like any other cities, it was brought to fruition by many creative minds.

But you won't find this city on any map or in a travel brochure. Instead, it's located within PS 4, a city within a city of students, who came together to create the pint-sized space made of cardboard boxes, construction paper, popsicle sticks, paint, glue and some pipe cleaners, among other elementary school necessities. The city shares its name with the school, which is named after Maurice Wollin, the borough's late superintendent of schools.

The project, aptly titled "Building Architects 4 the Future," began in 2004 through a \$65,000 2-year grant from the **Center for Arts Education** (CAE). It is facilitated and hosted by the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and a \$20,000 extension from the CAE was secured to continue the project at the Arden Heights school this year.

"I learned a lot of different things," said fifth-grader Steven Hernandez, 10. "In architecture you have to make certain size doors and windows."

"I liked it very much. I got to learn how to build a building and make a floor plan, everything about architecture mostly," noted Yana Matishynets, 11.

The first year of the program, fifth-grade students created homes, the second year, they created public spaces like the hospital and museum. This year, the fifth-grade class took on the biggest challenge yet: Skyscrapers. Like the normal progression of a city, said parent coordinator Alice Braunstein, these sky high buildings were next.

INPUT FROM ARCHITECT

Snug Harbor teamed the students up with architect David Businelli, president of Salvadeo Associates Architects in Dongan Hills, who met with them 11 times from October to April. Businelli explained to them the development of a city, concepts of structure and an overview of architecture as well as showed examples of building plans and pictures of buildings.

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"Of course it would be great if a few of them went into a career as an architect," said Businelli who has a 10-year-old daughter he often talks to about architecture.

"But I hope they look at things differently and see that good design is a part of life," he added. "If you don't have it, you're not happy with your surroundings... and a lot of effort, thought and time goes into it."

Each of the school's five fifth-grade classes were divided into two teams, helping the children learn to work together. Each student made an individual design, and they then had to combine all their ideas. They had to write a plan and create a blueprint for their skyscraper before they could begin the construction, which consisted of different-sized plain white cardboard boxes.

When finished, the colorful office buildings and hotels with names like Flagstone Inc., Merlino Suite and Blue Shell Hotel, featured walkways, landscaping, windows, doors and street lamps, among other things.

"My favorite part was working together," said student Scott Ginsberg, 10. "We learned how to cooperate with each other."

"It was a little hard with different people wanting different things," added Evanthia Siozios, 10. "But it all came out to look good."

MATH, SCIENCE, LITERACY

In addition to learning about architecture and teamwork, the program helped students in other areas as well. PS 4 Principal Marc Harris explained that creating scaled-down doors and windows hones math skills; learning about forces and balance is science, and studying famous architects and buildings helps with literacy.

"It brings all aspects of education through architecture," said Lyle Foxman, education coordinator at Snug Harbor. "It's not just building and design, it's about building relationships with each other in groups, problem solving and new ideas."

Principal Harris also explained that when he was looking into the program, he wanted something that would benefit the entire school population, not just the upper grades.

Kindergarten, first- and second-graders have taken "Architecture in Motion" lessons. Through dance, they learned about movement, balance, shapes and working in teams as it relates to architecture.

Third- and fourth-graders were taught about famous architects and places throughout the world. Art and architecture teacher Courtney Malarkey also taught lessons throughout the grades. And students took educational trips to Snug Harbor, where they viewed the architecture of the center's 19th century Greek Revival buildings.

Architecture workshops have also been held for parents, and professional development sessions were organized for the school's teachers so they could incorporate architecture into their lessons. Math coach Melissa D'Angelo made an architectural center in her classroom with reference materials for teachers.

RAISE SCHOOL SPIRIT

Architectural artwork from different grades surrounds Wollin City and can be found in hallways throughout the school.

"One of the original goals was to raise school spirit for all members of the school community," Ms. Braunstein noted.

In 2006, the program received an Award of Merit for K-12 Architectural Education from the American Architectural Foundation.

The school plans to continue the program next year, even though their grant is up. Although funding would be helpful, they say the teachers now have enough knowledge to carry forward.

Other Island schools are also incorporating architecture in their classrooms, Foxman noted, and Snug Harbor is hoping to bring similar programs to more students through an adopt-a-school program. They are currently looking for funding for the PS 4 program and to create new ones.

"They [the students] have learned a tremendous amount and developed a huge enthusiasm for learning," Principal Harris said. "They now have a greater appreciation for the art and architecture around them."

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