Built to Last

Shaker's historic school buildings have changed with the times, and will continue to do so.

BY BETH FRIEDMAN-ROMELL PHOTOS BY KEVIN G. REEVES, CAYDIE HELLER, COLLEEN MCCREARY

Ponder this: During the 98 years that Boulevard Elementary has stood at Drexmore Road and Shaker Boulevard, the average American school has been demolished and rebuilt twice, according to the United States Department of Education. In an educational landscape dotted with obsolete open classrooms, portable classrooms, temporary buildings from the 1950s, and concrete fortresses from the '60s and '70s, Shaker's classical brick schoolhouses still serve the students and grace the community.

As the District observes its 100th birthday, its buildings and other facilities tell the story of a school system that seeks to respect the past while moving ahead.

The Teens and Twenties: Constructing a District

The design and location of Shaker's school buildings were an integral part of Otis P. and Mantis J. Van Sweringen's vision of developing a "peaceful Shaker village." From 1912 to 1914, classes for 26

The author gratefully acknowledges the research assistance of Local History Librarian Meghan Hays at the Shaker Heights Public Library, who also provided historic school photos.

children were held in the Van Sweringens' land office at Lee Road and Shaker Boulevard. Two other schools – Idlewood, at Warrensville Center and Fairmount, and Eastview, at Chagrin and Lee – also accommodated some Shaker students. But community leaders wanted a new state-of-the art school that would be large enough to accommodate an anticipated population boom. George F. Hammond, a prominent architect trained in Boston's neoclassical style, was retained to design Boulevard School, which opened in 1914 serving students of all ages.

The building program took off from there. According to the Vans' plan, each elementary school building was to anchor a neighborhood. Each would be neo-Georgian in style, with distinctive decorative elements. The architecture, the materials such as brick, slate, and hardwoods, and the carefully landscaped grounds "were designed to resemble New England campuses, architecturally complementing Shaker's neighborhoods of spacious homes on tree-lined, winding streets," according to the Shaker Schools annual report of 1990-91.

The intricate fanlight over Woodbury's front door (opposite page) dates from the building's construction in 1918. Woodbury was originally Shaker Heights High School. In 1931, it became a junior high and in 1987 an upper elementary school. Decorative plasterwork in Woodbury's auditorium (above) was restored in 2006 with support from the Shaker Schools Foundation.

In 1917, there were 218 students enrolled in the District; 10 years later there were over 2,600 students on the rolls. The Van Sweringens' development plan and Shaker's excellent academic reputation were attracting new families with children at a rapid clip.

Voters supported bond issues for new school construction at a breathtaking pace. Nine new buildings went up between 1918 and 1931, and some were even renovated or had additions made during that time. One-story elementary buildings had second floors added within just a few years of opening, and oil burners replaced dirty coal furnaces.

The building we now know as Woodbury Elementary School began in 1918 as both the Junior and Senior High School. It featured what was then considered the height of modern appointments, such as cooking and "manual training" rooms, a cafeteria, and a second gym, added in 1927.

In 1923, Malvern, Sussex, and Onaway were built, the latter as a Junior High, but by 1926, it also housed elementary students. Soon followed Moreland (1925), Ludlow (1928), Fernway (1929), and Lomond (1929), and additions were made to Woodbury, Sussex, and Malvern in 1927. The strategy was to erect each neighborhood K-6 school first, then add classroom capacity by building a second story or wing as the neighborhoods filled in.

According to the Van Sweringen's plan, each elementary school would be neo-Georgian, with distinctive elements. A hallmark of Fernway is its engraved stone door frame with lantern. **Lomond** (below), constructed in 1929, had a "pleasing and dignified modified Grecian architectural design," according to a contemporary account. Like other schools in Shaker, it has benefited from landscaping supported in part by the PTO.

As early as 1927, a second junior high was envisioned.

The layout of each elementary school followed a standard plan, based on what educators believed provided the best environment for learning. The design of the buildings itself reflects Shaker's long-standing emphasis on the well-rounded student, featuring flexible and beautiful spaces for experiential learning, special-needs classes, nutrition and health, and a strong emphasis on arts in education. An excerpt from the Shaker Schools Review of October 16, 1927, describing Lomond School, serves to illustrate:

"The exterior is pleasing and dignified in modified Grecian architectural design, obtained without superfluous decorative effects, which increase costs. Indiana limestone is used as trim for solid shale brick walls, and copper for all exposed sheet metal as flashings, gutter linings, down spouts, etc. The second floor of this two-story structure contains twelve standard elementary classrooms, clinic, rest room, and ample storage spaces. The first floor contains in addition to six standard classrooms, an art room, a library, a science room, an office suite, a kindergarten, auditorium and two gymnasiums with showers and locker rooms…..The kindergarten is a large, attractive room, a complete school unit in itself containing toilets, lavatories, coat room and an abundance of storage and cupboard space. The bay window adds much to the homelike beauty of this room as well as providing excellent lighting. In the auditorium, seating five hundred, the same delicate lines of Grecian architecture are evident as in the exterior…."

The Thirties and Forties: Quiet Years

The last pre-war building to go up was Shaker Heights High School, in 1931. The Shaker Schools Review for February 20, 1930, noted its state-of-the-art features included science labs; a planetarium; large and small auditoriums equipped with projection booths with "moving picture equipment...for talkies"; a 30- by 60-foot pool, stadium, and track; boys' and girls' gyms, showers, and locker rooms (with a "sunny rest room" provided for girls

Although built in the 1950s, **Mercer** (top), followed the traditional neo-Georgian design characteristic of the older Shaker schools. The original section of **Onaway** (above), opened in 1923, features flamboyant Baroque-style ornamentation. Painted over for many years, the detailing was restored in the early 2000s.

"not taking the regular physical work"; a modern cafeteria with sound-proofing so it could also serve as a study hall; a large library; and rooms for "sewing, cooking, drawing, woodworking, and a general shop for electrical, mechanical, and auto repair work." The entire building was "piped for future radio connections." About 1,200 students enjoyed their new digs.

The Fifties and Sixties: Building Boom

The Great Depression had brought a halt to construction of new homes and schools. But Shaker's second population surge came as postwar baby boomers reached school age and the eastern part of the community was developed.

Enrollment swelled by 1,600 between 1947 and 1953. The first completely new school building since the High School, Mercer, opened on September 14, 1953, equipped with moveable furniture, rubber tile corridors and floors, and soundproofed ceilings.

Meanwhile, residents passed a new bond issue to build a second junior high and to make structural and other improvements and expansions in several buildings.

The design for Byron Junior High (now Shaker Heights Middle School) was a radical departure from the neo-Georgian style of the other Shaker school buildings, but more in keeping with the mid-century homes that sprang up east of Warrensville Center Road in the 1950s. Designed by Michael Kane of Perkins & Will, an architectural firm that had earned a national reputation for its (then) state-of-the-art approach to school planning, Byron was laid out with three classroom wings incorporating broad glass window panes to admit more light and bring the outdoors in. Byron opened in 1957, with the auditorium completed in 1959. (Ironically, while the Middle School is significantly younger than the other buildings, it has not necessarily held up as well as the pre-war construction, and because of its design has been characterized as an "energy hog." That's one of the issues to be tackled in the coming months.)

In the early 1960s, the High School added 18 new classrooms and made improvements to the office, library, cafeteria, and gyms. In addition, new playground

A new wing on the front of Shaker Heights High School in the early 1960s (below) provided classrooms, but left an uninspiring facade and no obvious main entrance. Now a semicircular front drive and portico (below, inset) create a welcoming front entryway with accessibility for all.

Additions to the High School (top) were designed to blend with the original architecture, down to the matching brick. **The cateferia** addition in 2008 (right) meets an older section of the building. It offers an upgraded menu, and has meeting space and artwork.

equipment designed for creative play was installed at the elementary schools. Children swarmed over concrete pipes, abstract metal slides, tree-climbers and Bucky domes, named for the structures made famous by architect Buckminster Fuller.

In 1962, the administration building was opened, finally giving a permanent home to the superintendent, treasurer, and administrative staff. New technologies, such as TVs in classrooms, media centers in libraries, and computers for administrators, were also introduced during the space age.

In 1968, a new building assessment identified the need for a new science wing at the High School, a pool, elevator, tennis courts, and a new heating system at Woodbury, and more elementary classrooms in some buildings. These projects were eventually completed; however, change was coming.

The Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties: Renovating, Re-purposing, and Right-Sizing

By 1970, enrollment had been declining for several years, as the baby boom tapered off. From a peak of more than 8,000 students in 1967, district enrollment was 6,740 in 1975 and was down to 5,951 by 1982. Projections put the student population at 4,100-4,400 by 1990 (although enrollment never dipped to those numbers). Enrollment at some elementary schools was down to one class per grade.

Meanwhile, costs to run buildings that were 50-70 years old were climbing, particularly during the years of the energy crisis. Energy efficiency became crucial. The District installed insulation, new windows, lowered ceilings, and weatherstripping, lowering energy costs 22 percent between 1976 and 1979. These actions resulted in an energy conservation grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to install further upgrades.

The administration, school board, and community recognized that they needed to plan for the future of a smaller District. In June, 1984, the School Facilities Utilization Committee, after much community input, submitted a restructuring plan. After a great deal of debate and adjustment over the next three years, the downsizing ultimately resulted in shifting 9th graders from the junior highs to the High School; closing four K-6 elementary buildings and converting the remaining five to K-4 schools; creating an upper elementary school at Woodbury to serve grades 5 and 6; and housing grades 7 and 8 at Byron, renamed Shaker Middle School. This structure remains in place today.

The difficult decision to close four elementary schools was based on factors including school size, enrollment, racial and economic diversity, and the prospects for re-purposing the various buildings. Each of the closed buildings has remained in use for educational purposes: Malvern became first a Jewish day school and is now the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. Sussex, now the Shaker Family Center, houses preschools and Family Connections, an organization offering programs to support young children and their families. Ludlow is leased

to the Positive Education Program, an alternative school, and Moreland has been transformed into the Main Public Library.

Another example of re-purposing from the 1980s is the transformation of the former fallout shelter in the basement of the High School into a black box theater used every year since 1983 for the performance of original one-act plays by Shaker High School students.

Given that enrollment never dipped as low as predicted, new classroom additions were constructed at Onaway and Boulevard in 1990, designed to be almost indistinguishable from the original buildings, down to hand-selected brick for a perfect match.

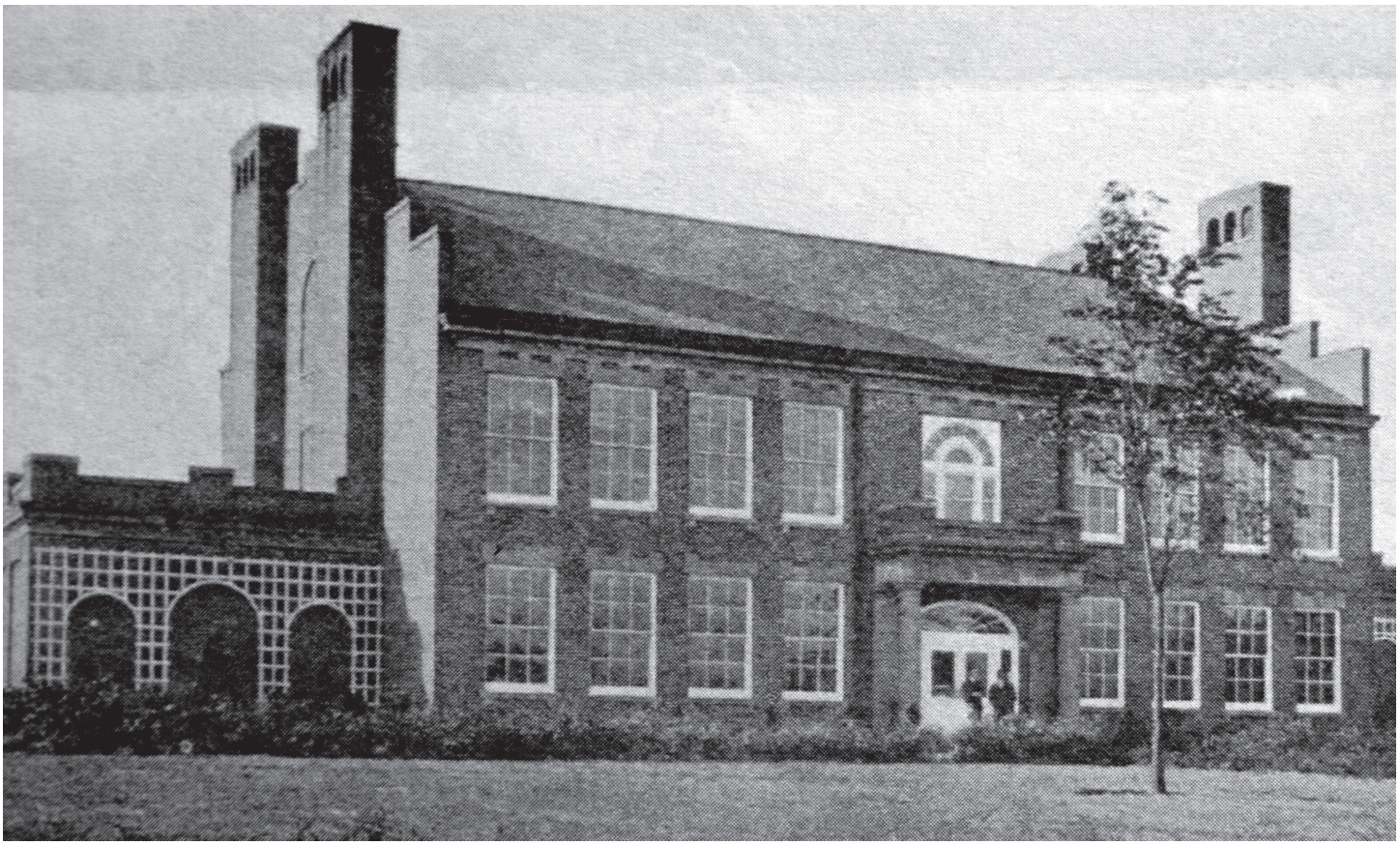
Other improvements included converting the High School pool, which was no longer regulation size, to a multipurpose room; installing a soccer field by Onaway and Woodbury; and installing new playground equipment and surfacing at several elementary schools. In the later '90s, libraries, ball fields, and computer labs were added or improved across the District, and a new gym, music wing, handicapped-accessible front entrance, and renovated library took shape at the High School in 1999. Enrollment stabilized at around 5,500 students from 1996 to today.

The 21st Century: Innovation, Engagement, and Accessibility

The District continues to maintain and upgrade its historic buildings to support a comfortable and productive learning environment, with many capital improvements recently completed or in process.

The widespread introduction of technology in classrooms necessitated the addition of electrical capacity, not to mention the challenge of running cable through foot-thick masonry walls. The High School's enlarged cafeteria provides an inviting space for socializing, meetings, and display of student art, as

When the District built a second junior high in the late 1950s (top), it departed from tradition, selecting a contemporary design with a sprawling layout and large windows, reflecting the prevailing ideas in school architecture. Shaker Heights Middle School (originally Byron Junior High) retains its spacious feel, but presents challenges with energy consumption and accessibility for people with disabilities.



Designed by George F. Hammond, who drew inspiration from Boston's neoclassical buildings, Boulevard School opened in 1914 and is the oldest Shaker school still standing. **Wings and dormers** (below) have been added to Boulevard School over time.

well as upgraded meals and healthy snacks. The High School stadium track and field are being renovated with synthetic surfaces to accommodate multiple sports. Security systems have been upgraded in all buildings. The planned installation of high-efficiency fluorescent lighting is expected to result in significant energy savings.

Private fundraising through the Shaker Schools Foundation, PTO, and other sources has also supported the creation of outdoor learning environments in recent years. In 2004, Woodbury parents raised funds to install playground equipment there for the first time in the school's history. Learning gardens at several schools provide opportunities for hands-on learning in science and the arts, as well as tranquil space for reflection and play.

Private donations have played an important role in some of the upgrades.

Boulevard is one of several schools where volunteers have pitched in to create galleries to showcase student art.

The Foundation raised over $1.5 million from donors toward the restoration and renovation of the auditoriums at the High School, transforming them into technologically sophisticated spaces for performance and teaching. Exquisite decorative plasterwork from the 1920s and '30s has been restored in the Woodbury auditorium and the High School's Large Auditorium.

As the buildings approach the century mark, the Superintendent's Advisory Committee on School Facilities is preparing to give its recommendations for the future. Chaired by John (Jack) Boyle III, the former vice president at Cleveland State University who is widely credited with transforming the CSU campus, the committee is made up primarily of Shaker residents with expertise in the fields of engineering, architecture, and finance.

After its initial meetings and site visits to several schools, the committee commended the administration and maintenance staff for their "careful stewardship of Shaker's historic school buildings."

"It is difficult to maintain older buildings, especially in the face of financial constraints and substantial staff reductions, but we found the buildings to be clean and well kept," Boyle wrote in a January 2012 memorandum to Superintendent Mark Freeman. "The major improvements that have been made over the past two decades, such as the High School cafeteria addition, the classroom addition at Boulevard, and the library renovation at Woodbury, are functional, inviting, and sensitive to the architectural character of the buildings. Nonetheless, as is to be expected, there are many unmet needs."

To date, the committee has recommended the renovation of two athletic fields with artificial turf surfaces, which afford more playing time for more students; energy-saving upgrades in lighting and heating systems; and financing mechanisms that take advantage of current low borrowing costs. One field renovation is nearing completion, the energy projects are in the pipeline for state approval, and Treasurer Bryan Christman has examined multiple financing options for these and other anticipated projects.

The big question is how to extend the life of the buildings to meet emerging needs for instruction, operational efficiency, and energy efficiency, while respecting their architectural heritage.

Resident Richard Bauschard, an architect who has been involved with historic preservation in Shaker for more than 18 years and serves on the District's facilities committee, says that preservation versus improvement is a delicate balance to achieve. For example, making vintage buildings accessible to the physically disabled has been both a challenge and a priority in recent years.

Moreover, evolving instructional practices will influence how buildings are used and equipped – from enhanced infrastructure for technology to flexible spaces for small-group collaboration and learning.

"Twenty-first-century learning involves a quantum shift in teaching space and organization, in order to adapt to the different learning styles of students," Bauschard explains. "Some of the most effective learning happens in small groups. How do you do that at a reasonable cost in a room that was designed for 30 students learning the same thing at the same time?"

While needs have changed over the decades, a few things have remained constant in the Shaker Schools: forward-thinking facilities planning, respect for the beauty of our traditional buildings, and the community's commitment to support these values.