

SQUARE FEET

BLUEPRINTS

At a Public Policy School, Design by a Big Committee

By TERI KARUSH ROGERS

ELLEN SCHALL, dean of the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, was determined to use the design of her school's new space as an exercise in public policy.

"People who live in cities need to be consulted about their own neighborhoods and what the programs should be," she explained. "What we try to do is prepare students to develop policies and programs that are the result of wide processes of consultation."

In mid-2003, Ms. Schall, who is a professor of health policy and management, instructed the school's design firm, Suben/Dougherty Partnership in Manhattan, to involve at least 70 students, teachers, staff members and alumni in planning the new facility. "Typically, we have a committee of five," said Susan Dougherty, a principal at the firm. But for this project, she gathered 60 or so constituents for a marathon meeting in the raw space that would house the new center. "We had to get them all in a room and engage them. Our whole process was analogous to developing public policy."

The wish list emerging from the design session reflected the school's hodgepodge heritage. Until the school was offered 46,000 square feet on two floors in the Puck Building, a property with landmark status at East Houston and Lafayette Streets, its 850 students and 30 faculty members had been scattered among five or six buildings on N.Y.U.'s campus in Greenwich Village.

With a stepchild's legacy of feeling overlooked, students and faculty members had a "shared sense of wanting to have a big impact," Professor Schall said. The school had lacked a student lounge or large meeting room, so a community-oriented space was high on the list. On the other hand, she said, because the faculty members conduct research, "there was a need for very quiet

private space."

All of these needs had to be served in a way "that let the beautiful existing architecture shine," said Ms. Dougherty of the raw space, which looked "as though it hadn't been touched since the 1880's." Nonetheless, she added, "we had extreme reverence for what was there."

The compromise that emerged is a serene, sleek juxtaposition of old and new. With neutral tones and ample helpings of glass, light and modern materials, the new space resembles a loft-like headquarters of a magazine more than a traditional academic setting.

That is a good thing, those involved say, for a public-service school that is trying to elevate its visibility and promote its mission at the same time. "As a school of public service with an urban planning program in it, we understand that the built environment is also important,"

Professor Schall said. "It's not just policies that shape a city."

She says the new quarters, which began to be occupied in May 2004, have energized students and faculty members by encouraging better collaboration. Recruitment has also been affected.

Bethany Godsoe, assistant dean for enrollment and student services, said that "the

shape of the space speaks to our mission and our spirit as a school and to our culture." She said prospective students, most of whom apply for master's programs in public administration or urban planning, tell her that the new quarters are more contemporary and urban than those of such schools elsewhere.

The school has worked hard to weave an urban motif through the project. This is most evident on the lower level, on the second floor of the Puck Building. Gigantic arched windows that start at knee level bring the city into reach and not just for a lucky few. Most offices were pulled off the wall, creating a walkway along the window, and given sliding glass fronts — frosted on the bottom, clear on top — for a more democratic



Scenes at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, in the Puck Building: a seminar in session on the building's second floor, above; the computer kiosk, left; and the seating area for the café, below.



distribution of light.

Black-and-white signs, looking like street signs, point to the student lounge, career services area and other destinations. They hang off the original 18-foot Doric columns that rise everywhere like whitewashed lampposts. Brick walls around the perimeter were left exposed and painted white.

This floor also contains a small café managed by a student in

collaboration with Housing Works, an advocacy organization for homeless people afflicted with AIDS. Nearby, students congregate in a free-form lounge: 16 taupe-and-red upholstered chairs, each with a movable tray-like arm, can be rolled or glided to accommodate collaborative work. The area can be joined to a conference room that can hold 150 seats. Together, the rooms can accommodate more than 200 people.

"The year before we moved in, we held 97 events," Professor Schall said. "The year after, we held 300." They range from student oriented events to fund-raisers to programs by local civic groups. The school now has a more varied profile. "We show up in different ways now," the dean said. "It's busy all the time."

That is especially important when it comes to fund-raising, she said. "One of the challenges of a school of public service is that by definition alumni are in public service and not necessarily able to contribute hugely financially to the school," she said. "So we need to recruit people to the school who don't necessarily have the loyalty. Donors want to come see the space. They are excited about the space."

(In addition to its usual fund raising, the school still needs to raise \$2 million to \$4 million to pay off the \$10 million renovation; the new center is seeking people who will pay for the chance to name the four new conference rooms, the student lounge and other areas.)

Worried that elevator travel between floors would impede interaction, the school punched through the ceiling and built a concrete, glass and stainless steel staircase from the main reception area to the upper level, occupied mainly by professors and administrative staff members. On that upper level, the ceilings drop to 12 feet, the windows recede to more normal proportions and the emphasis is on quiet and privacy.

Offices were standardized — down-sized, in many cases — from idiosyncratic proportions in the school's former spaces to 9 by 12 feet, and Professor Schall expected the distribution process to be contentious: faculty members had indicated in the planning phase that they expected title and seniority to play big roles.

But turning again to community-based public policy, Professor Schall invited each professor to submit his or her top three choices for an office — and made a startling discovery: "It turned out that what we meant by a better office was not necessarily the same thing as what they meant. Some had a preference for light different from another's preference for quiet, or someone wanted to be adjacent to someone else and didn't care about where."

As a result, she said: "We were able to give everyone their first or second choice. And if people were unhappy with their office, it was their choice, not mine." □

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