



The former West Pullman Elementary School in Chicago, built in 1894, has been transformed into senior housing. *Photo: Lee Bey*

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After School Closings, a Renovation Challenge

Ten years ago, Chicago enacted the largest mass closure of schools in US history. Here's how architects gave some buildings a second life.

By [Zach Mortice](#)

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Dwight Perkins isn't among the most familiar names associated with Chicago architecture. But unlike Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe, his work left a particularly vivid impression on the childhoods of generations of Chicagoans from all corners of the city, because he designed their schools.

A proto-Prairie School architect who [traded letters with fellow social reformer Jane Addams](#) and saw schools as multi-functional community hubs, Perkins had a hand in 40 school buildings and additions for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) from 1905 to 1910.

"If it wasn't for some other guys – Sullivan and Wright for example – he probably would have been more of a household name," says Kenneth DeMuth, partner at the architecture firm [Pappageorge Haymes](#), which has renovated several Chicago schools.

Architects and developers rave about Chicago's world-class collection of public schools, a body of facilities that range from the ornamented Romanesque edifices of the late 19th century to the spare Modernist campuses designed by Perkins' son Lawrence, who built the [megafirm Perkins&Will](#) on the back of early school commissions.



Overton Elementary School in March 2013, before it was closed in a wave of CPS school consolidation. *Photographer: John Gress/Corbis News via Getty Images*

“I think we have some of the best schools in the country in terms of infrastructure,” says Edward Torrez of [Bauer Latoza Studio](#). His firm has worked on more than 300 CPS schools, as either as managing architects coordinating a \$1.6 billion capital renovation campaign in the late 1990s or as architects of record for additions and renovations.

But many Chicago schools sit empty today, a consequence of the largest mass closure of schools in modern US history. Faced with a \$1 billion deficit and declining enrollment, CPS shuttered 46 school buildings in 2013, affecting 50 schools and 12,000 students – largely located on the city’s South and West Sides, the poorest and Blackest sections of the city. Then-mayor Rahm Emanuel pledged that student performance improvements would flow from this wave of consolidation, and that all the closed schools would be sold by the end of 2014.

Neither promise was kept, and as the 10th anniversary of the mass closure arrives, 13 of those buildings are still vacant and owned by CPS; 10 others have been sold but are not in use. CPS declined an interview, but in a statement, CPS spokesperson Mary Fergus said that the district is considering several options for the remaining buildings, including reclaiming them or transferring the properties to the city; the district is also ordering appraisals to prepare for a possible new public bid process. “Chicago Public Schools remains committed to selling or working with City agencies to repurpose the remaining available sites associated with the 2013 school closures,” she said.

Amid the backdrop of a national trend of tumbling enrollments, brutal pandemic-era learning losses and an ongoing flight of young families from urban centers, the dilemma of how to repurpose empty schools is that many cities face. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 2,200 public schools closed from 2019 to 2022. Chicago’s experiences offer some insights into what can happen to these spaces, and the communities around them, after the students get sent home.

Twenty of those 46 Chicago school buildings closed a decade ago have found second lives, in a wide variety of roles. They’ve become luxury and affordable housing, temporary migrant shelters, community centers offering supportive services, and public housing agency offices. Some are still being used for educational purposes, including a private Waldorf school. Their disparate fates illustrate the trade-offs in flipping once-public

infrastructure to the private sector. But they also show how new uses can ameliorate the issues that caused the schools to close in the first place, as when neighborhood organizations act as developers to secure a future for these buildings, on their own terms.

For the architects charged with bringing new life to dead schools, either path to adaptive reuse presents its own distinct design challenges.

‘Beacon of Reinvestment’

Not long after the doors were locked at Emmet Elementary in 2013, the vacant building had become an eyesore. Vandalism stripped the building’s plumbing, and its boarded-up rear facade, which faced a major thoroughfare in the West Side neighborhood of Austin, became “a visual representation of the lack of investment in the community,” says Max Kommenich of Lamar Johnson Collaborative.

Kommenich’s design firm is now leading Emmet Elementary’s transformation into the Aspire Center, a job training facility with a focus on the formerly incarcerated. To be co-managed by nonprofits Austin Coming Together (ACT) and the Westside Health Authority, the Aspire Center will offer training in manufacturing, IT, transportation and logistics.

Emmet Elementary has two wings, one of which was designed by John Christensen, CPS’s longtime in-house architect, and built in 1935. It’s a stolid red brick structure, punctuated by a thin, crisp entablature along its roof and subtle brick detailing.



The vacant wing of Emmet Elementary, built in 1935, awaits redevelopment. *Photo: Zach Mortice/Bloomberg CityLab*

The architect’s primary intervention is to add a triple-height glass-walled lobby to the rear façade, re-orienting the school with new civic presence. This transparent event space will become a “beacon of reinvestment,” says Kommenich. Inside, the building’s 30 classrooms, with their massive 8-by-11-foot windows, will become offices for nonprofits, and the gym will house light manufacturing training run by the Jane Addams Resource Corporation. The project is funded with \$12.5 million in Chicago TIF money, as well as \$10 million from the state.

With the closure, “the community was exhausted and tired of having things taken away from them,” says Darnell Shields, ACT’s executive director. “For more than 50 years there hasn’t been any type of investment like this.”



A new glass-walled lobby will mark the school's transformation into the Aspire Center. *Rendering: Lamar Johnson Collaborative*

Over the years, adaptive reuse plans for the empty school came and went without community support, but the Aspire Center gained momentum from the 2018 Austin Coming Together Quality of Life Plan, which charts a path to improve the neighborhood’s housing, economic development, public safety and education resources. “We decided that in order for this to be successful we needed to do something that we hadn’t done, which was actually get into development and become a co-developer to ensure the community vision would come across,” says Shields.

A Modernist Revival

School design changed dramatically during the 20th century: As public education became compulsory and more accessible, schools transitioned from being imposing structures meant to shepherd a rising elite into more intimate and functional child-scaled neighborhood institutions – places to join a diverse society as equals.

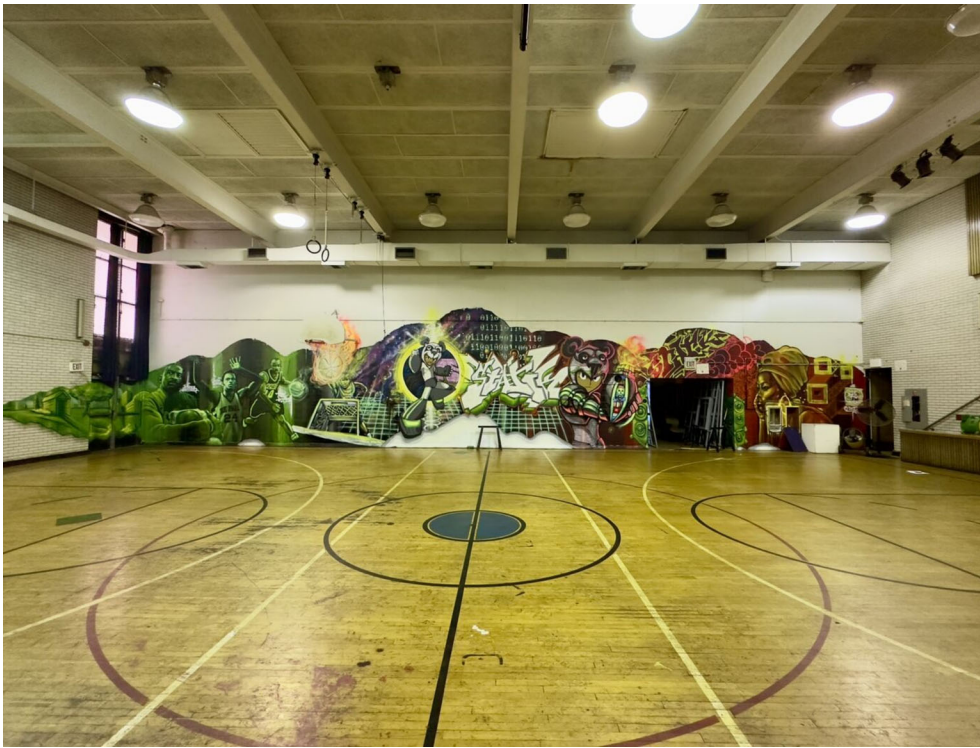
That’s the idea embodied by Overton Elementary in the Bronzeville neighborhood. Designed by Lawrence Perkins with the same progressive sensibility as his father’s best work, Overton was completed in 1963 to serve residents of the Robert Taylor Homes, then the nation’s largest public housing complex. Its airy, decentralized campus is democratically transparent, with a series of three smaller steel-and-glass pavilions punctuated by colored glazed brick and connected by glass-walled skywalks. Classrooms are placed at the corner of each of the three-story buildings, allowing light to flood in from floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides, while thick overhanging concrete sunshades block excess rays with a breezy whisper of Brutalism.



Built in 1964, Overton Elementary is among Chicago's best examples of Modernist institutional architecture. *Courtesy of Pappageorge Haymes*

With the public housing towers looming a few blocks west of Overton, Lawrence Perkins framed the school in terms of the agency and self-determination students nurtured by his thoughtfully permeable architecture might achieve. “In some cases there is not a pretty view, perhaps, but it is a live one, changing with the clouds, the mist, the sunshine, and the dusk,” he told *Architectural Forum*. “It is theirs and it is real. Theirs to like, hate, and perhaps help change.”

Two years after CPS shuttered the elementary school in 2013, it was bought by a local developer, Ghian Foreman of the Washington Park Development Group, with plans to transform it into an incubator for business, technology and arts – “things that this community has historically been famous for,” Foreman says of Bronzeville. The neighborhood was known as a self-contained Black metropolis on par with Harlem in the first half of the 20th century. His \$15 million plan includes coworking and office spaces, a fitness center, café and art studio, with rents below market rate. The lunchroom will become a teaching kitchen, and the gym will work as a multipurpose event space.



Colorful murals decorate Overton's gym and playground. Photo: Zach Mortice/Bloomberg CityLab

Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Overton became a food distribution hub at the outbreak of the pandemic and took on a starring role at several editions of the Chicago Architecture Biennial, with community gardens blooming, exhibitions in the halls and classrooms, and neighborhood mapping installations spread out across the schoolyard. “It’s brought audiences from around the city, around the country, around the world to this building, telling a different narrative about what we can do with closed schools,” says Foreman.

Today, mature trees envelope the school’s top floors in a sky-island of greenery. DeMuth of Pappageorge Haymes, whose firm is designing the new incubator plan for Overton, points

out how the school mingles indoor and outdoor space. “You’re never not aware of the two together,” he says.

Paola Aguirre, a designer that has mounted numerous exhibitions and creative programming in Overton, marvels at the building’s “playfulness, elegance and efficiency,” she says. “Walking through the hallways is kind of magical.”

Similar stories of community-powered development are bubbling up in other empty schools. On the South Side, for example, the Inner City Muslim Action Network and the Residential Association of Greater Englewood are turning Woods Elementary into the Regenerator, a housing, community and health center. But Overton’s architectural pedigree sets it apart.

Initially, Foreman intended to turn Overton into live-work lofts, but second considerations made him feel that Bronzeville would be better served if he could maximize the impact of a renovation across a wider swath of the community. “This was a facility that impacted thousands of people every year – the kids directly, but also the families,” he says.

Classrooms to Living Rooms

One indirect impact of the 2013 school closures has been accelerated population loss in Black neighborhoods, which increased threefold to 9.2% where schools were closed. Conversion to affordable housing is one strategy to address this, and that’s the path pursued by the architects at architecture firm UrbanWorks, with their senior affordable housing facility at the former West Pullman Elementary on the far South Side.

“The schools need to be an asset for the community at large, not just the few,” says Maria Pellot, of UrbanWorks. “They should be serving a bigger purpose.”



The ornate Romanesque facade of West Pullman Elementary reflects the quality of Chicago school construction in the late 19th century. *Photo: Lee Bey*

Developed by Celadon Partners, its 60 units of senior housing are inserted into a Romanesque and Classical Revival-styled school that was built in 1894 and expanded twice. The initial wing was designed by August Fiedler, with delicate brickwork and a rusticated limestone base fit for a grand mansion. The Louis Sullivan-style foliage tracery in the inscription, found in many schools of the era, is a masterwork of 19th century handcraft.

Pellot praises the building's thick and well-insulated walls, big windows and high ceilings. "The construction quality at the time was extremely high," she says.

The expansive 14-foot-wide hallways found in school conversions are often seen as a detriment to developers, who want to squeeze every bit of rentable space out of a property. But Pellot says this feature has made West Pullman a more vibrant and social space, as residents use the hallways as quasi-public lounges, setting out chairs and socializing with neighbors. The 900-square-foot classrooms work well as two-bedroom apartments or one-bedroom units with larger accessibility features like oversized bathrooms.



Repurposing West Pullman as senior housing was more affordable than building a new facility. Photo: Lee Bey

Pellot says this kind of adaptive reuse pencils in below average costs for a new affordable unit. "Repurposing the building really ends up being an economic [benefit] – the length of construction is shorter, and reusing the building maintains the embodied energy that was put into the building," she says.

It's more common to see closed schools become market-rate housing. That's what happened to three schools on Chicago's more prosperous North Side. Of this trio, the most divisive is also the most architecturally significant. In the far North Side neighborhood of Uptown, the Dwight Perkins-designed Stewart School was purchased by the developer Morningside in 2016 for \$5.1 million, which hired DeMuth to renovate it into 64 luxury rentals.

The 1907 school was one of Perkins' first jobs for the district, and displays a few Prairie-style elements. It has little applied ornament, and instead its red brick and limestone

trimmed façade offers a rhythm of carefully abstracted geometry. A hipped, gabled roof supported by copper-clad brackets was meant to create “more of a domestic experience” for pupils, DeMuth says. Harrison Ford and director William Friedkin were alums.



To address the too-wide hallways inside the Stewart School, designers inserted an additional set of interior walls that added 10 feet to each unit. *Courtesy of Pappageorge Haymes*

The gym floor is preserved and some units have retained chalkboards and other signs of the building’s previous life. For those neighbors and former students who bristled at the school’s conversion into high-end housing, such touches might look like unearned appropriation: Some units in the Stewart School Lofts rent for more than \$3,000 in a neighborhood where 22% of people live below the poverty line. “CPS was selling to the highest bidder,” says DeMuth. “It really starts there.”

In places where developers aren’t bidding, CPS takes in far less money upfront: Celadon Partners purchased the West Pullman school for \$250,000; one school that’s now a community center was sold for \$55,000. But those buildings stand a better chance of remaining public assets. In either case, the real estate value of this architecture becomes inverse to its ability to serve its community holistically.

A 10-Year Toll

Chicago Public Schools announced a five-year moratorium on further school closings in late 2012, and a state-mandated ban on closures ends in 2025. But the problems that brought the mass closures a decade ago have only deepened since. As reported by WBEZ, CPS lost 81,000 students in the past 10 years – three times larger than the run-up to 2013 – and dropped from the third-largest US school district to the fourth. Chicago’s remaining schools require \$3 billion in critical repairs; a total retrofit would take \$10 billion. According to *Block Club Chicago*, about 300 of the district’s 649 schools are considered underutilized.

But the city’s political landscape has shifted since the Emanuel administration: In Mayor Brandon Johnson, Chicago has a former teacher and teachers’ union activist in City Hall. CPS is assembling a 10-year facilities master plan to be completed this year, and in May, CPS chief executive officer Pedro Martinez told WBEZ that further closures are not planned. “I strongly believe that the cost of closing schools in terms of the lost trust, the challenges of dealing with the facilities and moving children outweigh any benefits you get from it,” said Martinez, a product of the city’s schools who was appointed CEO in 2021. “Even though I wasn’t here when that happened, we have to address that mistrust.”



The Stewart School, designed by Dwight Perkins and built in 1907, is now loft-style apartments. *Courtesy of Pappageorge Haymes*

Architects and developers blame the slow pace of redevelopment and subsequent entrenched mistrust on a lack of planning and willingness to partner with community organizations. “It was almost like they turned off the lights, locked the doors and walked away, and said, ‘OK, this will work out,’” says Torrez of Bauer Latoza Studio. “That didn’t happen. That’s not how development works.”

Designer Aguirre says the city and school system have been skeptical when community organizations suggest dramatic transformations for closed neighborhood schools. “If someone comes to you to address a project that is a result of the harm that you did, your attitude should be, ‘How can I help?’” she says.

To repair fractured community relationships, CPS should begin with an “acknowledgement of responsibility,” she says. “Then we can start pushing for reparations.

Communities deserve to be involved in designing the future of [these schools.] The city is very creative in [supporting megaprojects](#). They find a way. Can we be as creative when it comes to millions of square feet of buildings, but it happens to be spread out over 20-plus neighborhoods?”

In a statement, CPS’s Fergus said that the district’s current leadership does recognize the effects of the 2013 closures. “Few of our District leaders were at CPS during the school closures of a decade ago,” she said, “but we certainly understand the trauma and challenges of those difficult decisions.”

ACT’s Darnell Shields says that the school system has since become a better redevelopment partner. “Now they’re all very supportive,” he says. “It would have been great if that was the case from day one.”

Torrez is also optimistic that the quality of design and construction of the former CPS schools, and the care and pride demonstrated by the communities that sent their children to these places for decades, will allow them to be a resilient asset.

“It’s not too late,” he says. “These building are 100 years old. Unless they demolish them, they’re not going anywhere.”

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