

ULI Chicago 7th Annual Vision Awards
June 13, 2018



Project Finalist:
CRISTO REY ST. MARTIN COLLEGE PREP (Waukegan, IL)

Project Team:

Owner: Cristo Rey St. Martin College Prep

Architect: JGMA

General Contractor: McShane Construction Company

Project Description:

Cristo Rey St. Martin College Prep (CRSM) is a member of the national network of Cristo Rey schools whose mission is to serve underprivileged communities by providing high quality education opportunities to students. Their program creates a platform for youth, whose families are typically below the poverty line, to become first generation college students. CRSM brings a state-of-the-art education to a community that is struggling to meet Illinois state standards.

As CRSM's previous facility no longer met the basic needs of its students, they looked towards their neighbor, an abandoned big box retail store, to become their new home. Combating the challenges of their deteriorated space as well as the difficult conditions of the neighborhood, they needed a building that would enhance the school's culture of high academic expectations and be as progressive as their innovative corporate work study program. The project required the comprehensive transformation of the abandoned big box store into a contemporary educational facility to serve over 400 students. The former building structure had no identity and no physical or emotional connection to the community. The design build team's challenge was to break down those barriers and develop an innovative design that would inspire the students, faculty, administration and community, while meeting the limited budget.

Looking past the stigma of a big box retail store, the tall volume, open floor plan and northern wetlands became immense opportunities in the transformation of the perceived eye-sore into a beacon for CRSM. On the building interior, the generous 20-foot tall ceilings became a means to create different types of learning environments in these high-volume spaces. The team analyzed the rigid, yet large structural bays and how they could be manipulated to create both open and closed learning environments. To make the deep floor plan suitable for a learning facility, daylight integration was critical. Slicing the building with sawtooth light monitors and skylights extends the limited building perimeter and provides a critical connection through the building, assuring all learning spaces have access to daylight. The original concrete floors were polished and stained to reflect additional light, while the vibrant colors of blue, green and yellow energize the space. The school's desire to have an open and transparent pedagogy resulted in a full wall of glazing in each classroom to permit further penetration of daylight and views.

The challenge to transform the blighted retail strip was not limited to the building itself, it needed to address the perception of the building within the community. The façade needed to reflect its new inhabitants of 400 students and 60 staff members and broadcast its new identity clearly. Given the budgetary constraints of the project, the design-build team sought a low cost, high impact solution to transform the exterior. To truly disconnect the building from its retail past, it was critical to demolish the existing Kmart signage and conceal the signature arched portico that flanked the façade. The team designed a fiber cement enclosure to conceal the arches and create a new canopy, disassociated from the Kmart store it once was. Because the existing exterior had no windows, the team designed large aluminum curtainwall sections to define entry and significant programs as well as a playful window pattern to bring daylight into each space. Finally, set back from the street, the building's placement required a bold statement to radiate change in the community that was also cost effective. The team developed a paint pattern for the existing CMU block masonry that forms a gradient of CRSM's

school colors of blue, green and yellow across the façade. This solution transformed the way that concrete masonry is perceived and provided a new identity for the school.

Although this project has already signified a huge transformation within the community, the work is not done yet. Future phases will include building out the second half of the school with a gymnasium, chapel, fine arts spaces and additional classrooms and labs to supplement school programs and nurture future growth. In addition, the surrounding site will be developed to include green spaces for outdoor learning, gardens, and athletic fields. Most importantly, the site development will eliminate the existing sea of concrete that is the current parking lot and give the community a glimpse at what the building is hiding to its north: a serene natural wetland.

The expectation of CRSM students is already elevated to that of a college student; therefore, they deserve a facility that emulates this. The new facility strives to match CRSM's innovative pedagogy, giving students the high-quality campus that they deserve.

The design build team has been committed to the Cristo Rey mission long before this project. They have sponsored the organization's work and have employed CRSM students as a part of their corporate work study program or mentored CRSM alumni interested in pursuing architecture. They have also created, fabricated, and paid for an exterior signage feature that will similarly function as an exterior gathering space. The design build team is devoted to mentoring the CRSM students; providing them with educational tools and career building opportunities beyond the classroom setting. All students deserve a high-quality education that allows them to achieve academic excellence and nurtures their educational experience.