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For youth who've given up on schooling and taken to the streets, Edmonton's Inner City High School offers hope for a future with purpose.

The school meets marginalized youth where they're at, reeling in 300 a year with music, sports, art, food and wrap-around support – and enticing many to delve deeper into learning. Most who come are Indigenous and many have no real home, or have bounced from home to home, school to school. "They see this school as the last chance to change their lives," says Joe Cloutier, cofounder and member of the administration team.

But given personal and family traumas (including residential schooling), the very word "school" can stop a troubled youth at the door. Especially if what's inside looks conventional. So it was a godsend, in 2010, when the Edmonton Oilers Community Foundation raised money to purchase and renovate a truly unconventional building just north of downtown to serve as the high school's homebase. As a bonus, some students had good memories of visiting

this space during years when it served as a Native Friendship Centre.

Designed in 1976 by the late great architect Peter Hemingway as Peoples Church, the building's boxlike Brutalist facade opens to an airy gymnasium set at a 45-degree angle to the exterior. This offset "box within a box" creates intriguing triangular spaces on the first and second floors. Despite appearing largely windowless, the building is flooded with natural light thanks to banks of skylights, both up top and angled into the basement.

"The building is not a church in the conventional sense – a departure from existing concepts, it presents a series of multi-purpose spaces which affords an extension of the congregation's religious and social philosophies."

– THE CANADIAN ARCHITECT, OCTOBER 1977

The building's purchase came at a critical time for the school. Begun in the late 1980s as outreach through drama, it morphed into an accredited school at the request of its young actors. For 17 years the school enjoyed free space in exchange for operating and maintaining the downtown Boyle Street Community League. Then the league building was demolished to make way for Boyle Renaissance, whose mix of new tenants includes a childcare centre. To ensure everyone's safety while working with sometimes volatile street kids, the school needed a home of its own.

After extensive renovations (including a time when Cloutier taped an umbrella to his chair to avoid being rained on), the building was ready to facilitate wrap-around learning. Ground-floor offices hold the mix of counsellors who shepherd students through life traumas, court appearances, home evictions and more. The second story invites creativity with multiple recording studios, open spaces for physical and digital arts and classrooms for introductory courses. In the basement, rooms for more advanced classes surround a much-used kitchen and cafeteria.

Two years ago, the Oilers Foundation gifted the building to the Inner City Youth Development Association, the non-profit organization managing the school. The gift brought a welcome sense of permanence. But with it came energy bills, putting heavy strain on an already lean budget.

RETROFIT ROADMAP

Recognizing the need for extensive energy retrofits, the school teamed up with Reimagine Architects to secure more than \$2.9 million in funding, via the infrastructure Canada's Green and Inclusive Community Buildings program, along with further funding from Indigenous Services Canada's Urban Programme for Indigenous People. As a crucial first step, Reimagine engaged staff and students in workshops and walk-throughs that bubbled up insightful suggestions for reducing utility costs and improving overall liveability. Those insights are imbedded in the workplan, which includes the following key elements:

Energy savings. Photovoltaic panels covering the entire roof will generate an anticipated 48kW of electricity a year, reducing energy consumption despite upgrades such as EV chargers. "The photovoltaics will also shade the roof, extending its life by reducing the amount it expands and contracts," predicts Vivian Manasc, Reimagine founding principal. All light fixtures will be changed to LED, reducing energy used for lighting by about 17 kW a year, or 60 per cent.

"Vacuum" glazing in high-performance frames. Vacuum-insulated glazing replaces existing double glazing in all skylights, to achieve the equivalent of triple pane glass, but with the thickness of just two. The same strategy, along with new high-performance fibre-glass frames, will moderate temperatures in an office with large expanses of curtain wall – an office created when the high school moved in by closing the building's original entrance.

Ceremonial room. For the first time, the school's elders will have dedicated space to lead classes and ceremonies. Located near the cafeteria, the area will set a welcoming tone with a medicine wheel and a fireplace.

Baby box. A new two-story structure, "a baby box beside the big box," as Manasc puts it, will house a music room, performance space, storage and a garage to protect the school's van from vandalism. A second-floor walkway will connect the two buildings.

Sound absorption. Acoustic treatment will absorb unwanted sound from the gymnasium, classrooms and music rooms. "The space has been fantastic, but sound bleed from the gym to the second floor has been a real challenge," observes Executive Director Nikolai Linden, who attended this school and returned to give back, as others have.

Motorized blinds. Remote controlled blinds over the upper skylights will reduce glare during the heat of the day and allow the space to be used for events that call for darkness.

Expanded kitchen. A new commercial grade kitchen will include space for food classes so students no longer bump elbows with cooks preparing the meals and snacks that fuel their learning.

Maximizing space. Basement rooms are being reconfigured to hide pillars that interrupted sightlines, resulting in more but smaller classrooms – exactly what the school needs.

Inclusive signage. Rooms are being renamed to reflect Indigenous teachings. Student input in that process fostered a sense of ownership and pride in the Indigenous heritage many share. Signage will point the way in three languages: Cree, English and Braille.

Comfort and safety. Redesigned front and back vestibules will reduce the cold air coming in and improve sightlines. The building will also gain sprinklers to meet current code.

Accessibility. Enhanced accessibility features include a new elevator, barrier-free washrooms, ramped entrances with powered doors and designated loading and parking areas.

Exterior enhancements. Lighting, native plants and gathering spaces will soften the building's face, making it look warmer, livelier, more inviting. There'll be space designed for outdoor performances, including the ability to project images onto the baby box.



re The school supports 300 youth each year, with music, sports, art, food and wrap-around support.

New lease on life

The team has had its share of surprises since construction began in mid-2023. For example, crews found two hidden rooms behind basement drywall, flooded with water due to cracks in the foundation. “Those cracks are likely the cause of cold air people complained about in the basement,” says Miguel Queponds, lead architect on the project.

The surprises are due in part to the fact that this is the building’s fifth renovation. Hemingway’s original drawings were found in architectural archives at the University of Calgary, Manasc says, but documentation of work done since has been pieced together “like Frankenstein.”

These latest renovations, due for completion in summer 2024, will equip the school to serve 20 per cent more youth while saving more than \$60,000 a year, Cloutier says. But what truly excites him is the fact that kids on the margins will study in a building that showcases state-of-the-art sustainability. “A building like this will be a shining spot for the community and a living lesson for the youth.”

Manasc agrees. “This will give a whole new lease on life to a distinctive, elegantly proportioned brutalist building, one of the few remaining in Edmonton. When we’re finished, this will be one of the most energy efficient buildings in town. There’s a lot of pride in that.” **re**

“It’s important for these students to see they’re not getting a poor man’s building.”

— VIVIAN MANASC

re The building’s most impressive feature is its generous skylights. Vacuum-insulated glazing will replace the existing double glazing in all skylights, to achieve the equivalent of triple pane glass, but with the thickness of just two.





PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH THE RATTLES OR DRUMS WITHOUT THE ELDER'S PERMISSION
HAHAI

INNER CITY HIGH SCHOOL
Hahai
Hahai

PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE YOUR GARBAGE OR