

contract

Learning Environments

in the classroom,
workplace,
and laboratory



For a private high school, Andrew Bartle weaves a modern campus within the confines of downtown Manhattan

little red elisabeth irwin school

By John Czarnecki
Photography by
Durstun Saylor



Architect Andrew Bartle created a new courtyard by removing elements of existing structures and adding a new arts pavilion. While the school is in a tight urban location, the courtyard provides an indoor-outdoor connection for students.

The Little Red Elisabeth Irwin (LREI) School has built a reputation as an exemplary, progressive private school serving students from pre-kindergarten through high school in downtown Manhattan. But a decade ago, the school faced a predicament. The high school was not attracting the students to continue on from the lower grades within LREI. High school students were in a tired, older building on Charlton Street just west of SoHo, a few blocks from a much newer building in Greenwich Village housing the lower grades. With stagnating high school enrollment due, in part, to the outdated building, the board of trustees elected to modernize and expand the high school in a process that would take seven years to complete.

New York architect Andrew Bartle and his firm ABA Studio were given the heady charge to expand the well-known school on a landlocked site in a landmark district, and reconsider the interiors. “Our design brought a sense of community by creating new public spaces, and a new visual identity, along with the needed increase in

classrooms,” says Bartle. “These public gestures were necessary to keep the school’s mission vibrant and clear.”

A new image for the school

The high school structure—originally built as an Episcopal school in 1912—had become worn after use by LREI for many years. In 2008, LREI acquired a neighboring townhouse, built in the 1840s. But the economy collapsed that same year just after the renovation and associated fundraising began. Bartle worked with the school to proceed with the renovations and additions in five phases over multiple years as the school continued to operate. The design incorporates the townhouse, renovates the interiors of both buildings, adds 22,000 square feet of additional space, and, importantly, makes the school highly attractive in the New York market with active, adaptable learning spaces. As a result, the high school’s enrollment has reached 255 students, while it had been about 150 before the renovation.

Little Red Elisabeth Irwin

Architect **ABA Studio**

Client **Little Red Elisabeth Irwin**

Where **New York**

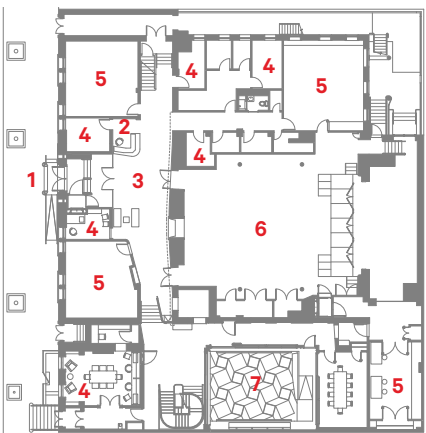
What **50,000 total square feet on six floors**

Cost/sf **\$500**

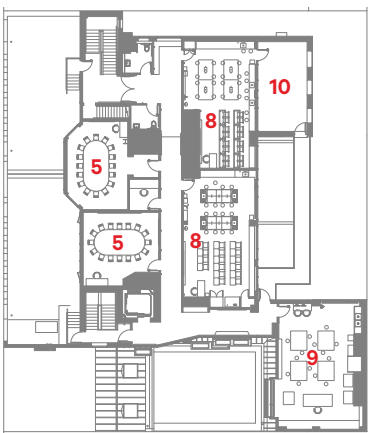
For a full project source list, see page 76 or visit contractdesign.com.



- 1 Entrance
- 2 Reception
- 3 Lobby
- 4 Office
- 5 Classroom
- 6 Auditorium
- 7 Courtyard
- 8 Lab
- 9 Art studio
- 10 Terrace



First Floor Plan



Fifth Floor Plan



Key Design Highlights

Together, a school building from 1912 and a townhouse from the 1840s were renovated into a modern, urban high school.

Two floors were added on top of the existing school, and a new volume containing an arts pavilion was added to the back.

A new outdoor courtyard, surrounded by patterned glass, is the school's focal point.

This complicated project was completed in five phases over seven years after the Great Recession put a halt to initial plans.



Establishing a new image for LREI, and allowing the school's community to become excited for things to come, the first phase included a renovated lobby. A bleached oak interior wall inflects into the lobby to subtly encourage one to proceed further into the school. Within the given constraints of the site and the existing structures, Bartle added two floors to the top of the 1912 building, as well as a new volume in the back. The additions are set back in order to not be visible from the street in the landmark district.

Bartle carved away from previous inferior additions to create a beautiful interior courtyard. Visible from multiple vantage points through patterned glass, the courtyard is the new focal point of the school, strengthening a sense of campus. "I love the courtyard, which provides an out-of-doors respite for the students and their teachers," says Phil Kassen, who has been director of the school for 12 years.

In the townhouse, which now includes a combination of classrooms, a conference room, and administrative offices, Bartle restored original plaster and stone details where possible, retaining

The school has been in a structure dating from 1912 (white building to left in photo above), and now incorporates an adjacent townhouse from the 1840s (right in photo above) with interiors that now include a conference room (opposite, top left). Large windows of a new arts pavilion overlook one of the new outdoor spaces (above, right) at the rear of the school. The renovated lobby (opposite, top right) with casual seating for students and visitors leads to a new staircase (opposite, bottom) adjacent to the courtyard.

the characteristic elements. In the remainder of the school, incorporating the additions, Bartle clearly defined pavilions for the arts, humanities, and sciences. Reconfigured circulation throughout—with new outdoor terraces on upper floors, a prominent new stairwell, and interspersed casual seating areas—allows students to freely connect as they would in a large campus setting. Savvy placement of acoustical treatments lowers the noise of teenagers within circulation areas.

Outward connectivity to the city

Taken together, the changes transform what had been an inward-facing school into one that has breathing space and outwardly connects with the city. "Classrooms on the fifth floor bring the city into the rooms, inspiring our students and giving them a sense of their place in the world," Kassen says.

In his design, Bartle thoughtfully considered the subtle nuances of high school life—including a lounge (cover of this issue)—for urban students who are actively preparing for college. "The focus on

community space, light, and fresh air was part of the collective progressive vision of building a school that shared spatial qualities with that of a college," says Bartle. "Considerable thought went into individual privacy, and observation, and the individual's experience in a community."

Kassen concurred with what Bartle's design has enabled his school to accomplish. "Learning happens in a variety of ways, in groups of all sizes and individually," Kassen says. "Conversations, arguments, moments of quiet reflection—the building creates opportunities for real interaction." **c**