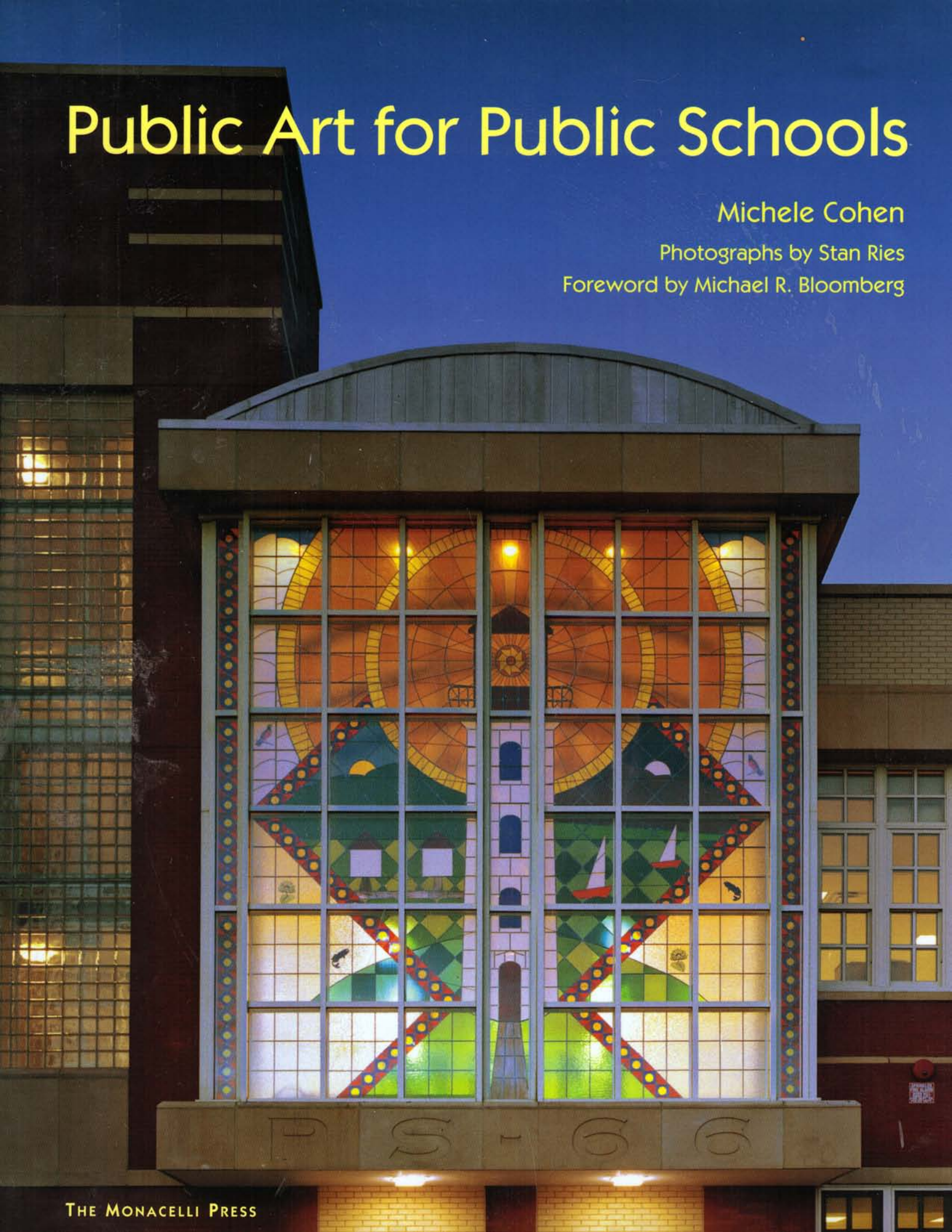


Public Art for Public Schools

Michele Cohen

Photographs by Stan Ries

Foreword by Michael R. Bloomberg



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HALFTITLE

SEONG MOY, *Timeless Spirit*, 1984

I.S. 131

100 Hester Street, Manhattan

TITLE PAGE

ROMARE BEARDEN, *Daily Activities in the Neighborhood*, 1977

P.S. 346

1400 Pennsylvania Avenue, Brooklyn

PAGES 12-13:

NED SMYTH, *Destinations*, 2002

P.S. 156/I.S. 293

104 Sutter Avenue, Brooklyn

ABOVE

LILIANA PORTER, *Situations with Them* (detail), 2007

P.S./I.S. 210

501-503 West 152nd Street, Manhattan



ABOVE
FRANCIS BEVILACQUA, *Untitled*, 1975

GRAND STREET CAMPUS
880 Grand Street, Brooklyn

OPPOSITE
HARRIET HYAMS, *The Seasons*, 1982

NEW DORP HIGH SCHOOL
465 New Dorp Lane, Staten Island

be designed by committee.”¹ The program has consistently sought the best artists to undertake work with the aim of taking the museum experience out of the museum and engaging building users and visitors and passersby in a visual dialogue with the city’s municipal buildings and public spaces.

New School Art Paradigms

In the years just prior to the establishment of the SCA, two new schools were being designed and constructed for lower Manhattan, stimulated by the creation of Battery Park City. These projects reinvigorated the conceptual approach to art in schools, offering ways public art can fit into a school building, and both became models for subsequent projects. Tribeca’s P.S. 234 (Independence School; 1988) and Stuyvesant High School (1992) in Battery Park City dramatize public art’s transformative effect on a school building. At P.S.

234, the entire fence is art, and at Stuyvesant High School, glazed block corridors are layered with artistic content.

At P.S. 234, the client was a committee consisting of the Public Development Corporation (now called the Economic Development Corporation), community representatives, and the Board of Education, engendering a dialogue that shaped architect Richard Dattner’s approach and concept of a protective environment scaled for young students, what he has described as “a pearl in an oyster.”²

Dattner suggested siting the playground on the north rather than the more conventional south side of the building, anticipating shadows that would be cast by future high-rises. He also took cues from the neighborhood of nineteenth-century brick warehouses, and the result is an elementary school that blends effortlessly with its surroundings. Dattner maximized the teaching potential of the building itself, making its architecture, mechanical systems, and site history legible in the final product. The more fortresslike tower at his earlier



ABOVE
STUYVESANT HIGH SCHOOL
 345 Chambers Street, Manhattan
 COOPER ROBERTSON & PARTNERS
 in association with GRUZEN SAMTON
 STEINGLASS, 1992

RIGHT AND OPPOSITE
 KRISTIN JONES and ANDREW GINZEL
Mnemonics, 1992





P.S. 380 (John Wayne Elementary; 1980) became a castle tower, bell tower, and lighthouse all rolled into one at P.S. 234. The lighthouse/tower marks the former edge of Manhattan at the Hudson River before landfill widened the west side of lower Manhattan. Graceful brick arches support Donna Dennis's *Dreaming of Far Away Places: The Ships Come to Washington Market* (1988), a panorama of sailing ships that evokes the historic role of the site. Together, arches and fence circumscribe the yard and front perimeter of the building, protective yet welcoming.

After eighty years, Stuyvesant High School had outgrown its Beaux-Arts building, one of Snyder's premier high schools at the time of its completion in 1907. What began as a manual trade school for boys destined for careers in engineering and other technical professions had evolved into a specialized high school for mathematics, science, and technology. With its competitive entrance exam and demanding coursework, Stuyvesant has long been a symbol of excellence in public education. Finally, after years of agitating for a better facility, a site was obtained in 1987. The design team of Cooper Robertson & Partners and Gruzen Samton Steinglass produced a new Stuyvesant for the next century.

The small site was bordered by the Hudson River on the west, Battery Park City on the south, and West Street to the east. Stuyvesant had a complex program of requirements that resulted in a ten-story building, ingeniously planned to reduce circulation time between classes. As part of the design process, the architects visited Washington Irving High School, Snyder's answer to the big city school on a small footprint. Stuyvesant's overall configuration resembles a U, but instead of an open center, the area is filled with a library, gym, and cafeteria, with classrooms on top and bottom. The courtyard makes an appearance, but on the fifth floor. Serving 3,000 students, the school building features state-of-the-art facilities, including computer and science labs, two gymnasiums, a swimming pool, and an 850-seat multiple-use auditorium.

Artist Michelle Stuart and the team of Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel submitted proposals for their projects during the early stages of the building's design, when only the basic plan had been established. For *Tabula* (1992), Stuart found inspiration in the textures and colors of various stones found in construction yards, creating delicate etchings detailing different systems of knowledge and subtly blending them with the other lobby-facing materials. After spending a good deal of time in the original school, Jones and Ginzel concluded that it was important to retain some of Stuyvesant's physical history, making art from actual pieces of the old building. The challenge for them and the architect was devising a way to mount it in a school that lacked display space for sculpture. The solution was using the school's structural glazed facing tile walls as a support system to house eight-inch-square glass blocks that were sliced, filled with objects, and then sealed and installed. The building corridors became the mechanism for dispersing and presenting the art.

Mnemonics (1992), named after a device to stimulate memory, consists of approximately four hundred glass blocks divided into three groups: eighty-eight refer to Stuyvesant's past, each sandblasted with a year from the school's history and containing memorabilia; eighty-eight were left empty, also inscribed with years up through 2080, to be filled by future Stuyvesant graduates; the rest contain a potpourri of scientific and historical specimens and artifacts collected from around the world, including a vial filled with water from the Nile, a piece of the Great Wall of China, and a leaf from the sacred Bo tree in Sri Lanka. Described by Jones as a "field of relics,"³ these blocks are imbedded throughout the corridors to be discovered over time as students move from ninth grade to graduation. *Mnemonics* is about the school, the world, time, history, creativity, the community, and the individual—in sum, education.⁴ The concept proved so successful that Jones and

Ginzel used it again for *Encyclic* (2004), installed in an addition to P.S. 102 (Joseph O. Loretan) in the Bronx.

Reinventing the Prototype

While P.S. 234 and Stuyvesant were still under construction, two changes occurred that were of major importance to New York City school facilities. The first was the decision in 1987 to address the need for new seats in a programmatic way that would expedite site acquisition and school design and possibly achieve a cost savings by reusing design and construction methods. This resulted in what has come to be known by school planners as the “prototypes,” a portfolio of design approaches that reconfigured a kit of parts to suit different sites. The second was the creation in 1988 of the SCA, devoted to school construction, repairs, and innovation.

When Snyder and his immediate successors responded to the city’s need for additional schools, they generated standardized plans—the H and U, for example—that could be reproduced throughout the city. This approach was feasible when there were open sites available that did not constrict architectural solutions. By the mid-1980s, however, the lack of potential sites made repeating the experimental sprawling layouts of the 1950s and 1960s and the early-twentieth-century plans impractical.

In response to limited real estate and the pressing need for more seats, school planners tried a new approach. First the process was revamped so that site acquisition and design development could occur simultaneously. Then, architects were asked to generate designs consisting of a small number of components that could be reconfigured for various sites, adding flexibility to standardization. The designs also needed to embrace the educational philosophy of the small school, emphasize the importance of activity-based learning by increasing the size of specialized rooms, allowing space for a

resource center and one workroom per floor, and providing customized rooms for special-education students. The initiative has had far-reaching consequences for the next generation of New York City schools.

Four nationally known firms—Perkins + Will, Gruzen Samton, Ehrenkrantz Group & Eckstut, and Dattner Architects—tackled the problem of devising the kit of parts. Like earlier schools, these buildings were also intended to be community centers so they all have self-contained public spaces. None appears massive; instead they look like a composite of parts or a cluster of smaller schools. Gruzen Samton and Ehrenkrantz Group & Eckstut adopted a townhouse model, Dattner Architects evoked the traditionalism of the Snyder era, and Perkins + Will applied a more austere interpretation of 1930s Art Deco.

Gruzen Samton’s approach to the prototype design challenge began with a reexamination of the classroom. The last big change in classroom design occurred in the 1960s and 1970s with the open classroom, a large space without walls that was shared by multiple groups of teachers and students, an innovative but unworkable concept. Gruzen Samton developed a modern version of the traditional classroom, keeping the teacher at the head, but also providing niches for computers and group work, partially expressed on the exterior as mullioned bay windows. Responding to each site and its context, the firm developed appropriate exterior details. P.S. 6 (1993) in Brooklyn with exterior sculpture by Peter Gourfain, incorporates the whimsical steel outlines of a pyramidal tower, echoing the former Flatbush Town Hall next door. P.S. 5 (The Ellen Lurie School; 1993) in Manhattan, set alone against the water, employs gabled facades and bolder accent colors and an artist-designed paving pattern.

Dattner Architects focused on the intermediate school, which generally serves 900 to 1,800 students. Dattner’s design is based on a curved classroom module and one rectangular module containing classrooms and shared facilities.

