

EducationARCHITECT

Addressing the Design Needs of Today's Independent Schools

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Windward School's Leichtman-Levine Family Foundation Bridge. View looking north toward the new Academic Building. Both projects by Pica & Sullivan Architects. Photograph by Randall Michelson.

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Designing Schools Building the Learning Environment

by Elise Kalfayan

The true challenge in designing a school, believes Pica & Sullivan Architects, Ltd., is incorporating meaningful spaces surrounding the classrooms. "The spaces that aren't the classrooms are the hardest part," says Maureen Sullivan, principal of the Los Angeles-based firm, which has 12 years experience in education design. "That is what separates us from those who are not as experienced in education architecture. Classrooms are easy. Making a place where teenagers will want to be is difficult."

Co-principal Joe Pica adds, "Learning, particularly in the middle and high school level, doesn't occur just in the classrooms but oftentimes in the places between the classrooms. We try to create what's 'in between' as well as the program itself."

Pica and Sullivan, husband and wife architects, established their firm in 1990 after working separately for several years with other firms. "We had worked on large-scale projects, in positions of responsibility, so we had a better understanding of what was involved than those who start a firm fresh out of school," says Sullivan.

They quickly got several prestigious projects – including the restoration of Los Angeles' historic Grand Central Market – and their first school client, Crossroads School in Santa Monica, CA.

Since then, they've developed master plans for several independent schools, renovated other historic buildings and designed entertainment and retail facilities. Their

recent work for Pasadena, CA's Westridge School for Girls combines master planning with historic renovation and theater design.

Creating Master Plans

The Crossroads School project set Pica & Sullivan on its path of creating campus master plans. Since 1990, the architects have either built or significantly renovated a variety of Crossroads' facilities, including the school's new entryway and façade, the middle school, administrative and college placement offices, classrooms and sports facilities.

"Crossroads' main campus is located on a block of industrial buildings which the school has purchased or leased over 25 years," say Pica. "Because of the location, we stayed with the industrial idiom." Pica & Sullivan designed an elementary school for Crossroads on a parcel of land 3 blocks away from the main campus. The 40,000 sq. ft. Crossroads Elementary School is a renovation/retrofit of two 1959 two-story office buildings. In addition to joining the two buildings with a *bridge*, the architects adapted two almost square plans into a configuration appropriate for a multiple classroom layout. They designed the main corridor as a distinctive wide street with large intersection or nodes serving as classroom entrance vestibules and created an inlaid cobblestone *River of Knowledge* that leads students into the school.

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Making A Campus Connection At Windward School

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Connecting the Campus

While Pica & Sullivan has completed many projects



at Windward School in West Los Angeles, its landscaped bridge has truly connected the campus. The new 55-ft wide Leichtman-Levine Family Foundation Bridge sits over a 12-ft deep storm runoff channel that had divided the 10-acre campus.

Working with Carter, Romanek Landscape Architects, Pica & Sullivan replaced a small pedestrian bridge with a new landscaped plaza that offers a wide walking path, meeting place and activity area. The space allows

the two sides of the campus to flow together.

“The administration was nervous about the bridge. We were not, but we did realize how big a challenge it was to design,” says Sullivan. The architects decided to look at the bridge as an opportunity to create an “in between” space on campus that students could use for casual interaction and informal gatherings.

The result has exceeded expectations, as the bridge has become a very popular hangout. “Windward’s students have actually changed the name of their newspaper to *The Bridge*,” says Sullivan.

The new academic building serves as a focal point for the school’s eastern end and is the cornerstone beside the new bridge. A contemporary two-story structure with dramatic angles and corner glass windows, it has sloped pillars and whimsical metal flags sculpted to reflect a “windward” metaphor. Pica & Sullivan adapted design elements from other campus buildings to unify stylistic expressions, including metalwork detailing from the bridge and colors from other campus buildings.

The exterior balcony allows a constant interaction between the activity in the building and campus life on the concourse. Pica notes, “The students are very respectful of the building. They treat it with kid gloves.”

Crossing the Street

Pica & Sullivan’s master plan for the expansion of Pasadena’s Westridge School for Girls involves uniting the original campus site with surrounding properties the school has acquired over time, including several to the north across a small side street.

The first phase of the expansion included a new 22,000 sq. ft. classroom building for Upper School Humanities, located across the side street and behind the remodeled administration and classrooms. The architects incorporated dining hall requirements into the new humanities building and fashioned a walkway across the side street, creating a new axis that terminates at the new Herrick Commons.

The result is that the Commons has become both a major campus destination and a new center of the school, another successful “in between space.”

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Crossroads Elementary School at the Norton Family Campus by Pica & Sullivan Architects, Ltd. Photograph by Randall Michelson.

Littlefield Plaza at the new Art Complex and Pavilion at Windward School by Pica & Sullivan Architects. Photograph by Randall Michelson.



Restoration of Greene and Greene House at Westridge

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Along the east side of the Commons, in the second phase of the north campus development, construction is about to begin on a 19,000 sq. ft. 500-seat theatre. Additional landscaping and parking are part of this phase, which Pica & Sullivan is currently working on with the school and the City of Pasadena.

The Greene and Greene designed Pitcairn House at Westridge glows anew in its stunning reuse as alumnae reception center and development offices. The school added the house to its campus in 1965 and remodeled it to house art classrooms in 1973. The home's interior suffered much wear and tear over 27 years of use. Westridge decided to restore the home after Pica & Sullivan completed new art classrooms in 2000.

At the Pitcairn House, the architects rebuilt walls to return the rooms to their original sizes. They restored the interior finishes, including Greene and Greene's signature furniture-quality wood paneling and trim. And they sensitively installed new fluorescent lighting, a mechanical system and a fire/life safety system.

"One of the big decisions we had to make was what to do with the wood," says Sullivan. Together with their contractor, they realized they weren't going to get the results they wanted unless they stripped the wood completely. General contractor, West Cal Construction, employed specialty subcontractors using the living room as a guide to obtain the final result.

"The original living room wasn't used every day and was never used as a classroom, so the furniture-style wood paneling and trim was in fairly good condition," says Sullivan. "We applied layer after layer until the color matched the living room, ending with an extremely matte finish to match the original wood. In the end, the living room looked drab by comparison. We touched it up so it would have the same fresh glow to it."

The restored house provides much needed office space as well as an elegant meeting area that adds to the aura of the campus.

Ongoing Projects

Pica & Sullivan currently has 25 projects underway, with multiple contracts for many of their clients. Along with a contract they just won for a completely

new K-12 private school in Temecula, Calif., which will ultimately house 2,000 students, projects continuing at Crossroads, Windward, Westridge and two other schools are in various stages.

The Linfield Christian School in Temecula has asked for an accelerated schedule for its high school which it plans to open as soon as possible, so Pica & Sullivan is simultaneously completing the master plan and designing the high school. "Tovey/Shultz Construction, Inc. added us to the team because the school wanted them to be stronger in the areas of campus planning and education design," says Sullivan. "A mutual consultant, Carter, Romanek Landscape Architects – who worked with us

at Windward – recommended us. A lot of firms have done individual school buildings, but we've had a significant impact on a number of campuses."

Design-Build Team

On the Linfield project, Pica & Sullivan won the contract as part of a traditional design-build team. "It's a different way of working with your contractor, evaluating construction techniques, looking at life-cycle and installation costs," comments Sullivan. "This is the most traditional setup we've been involved in...the school is very comfortable with the team, and we will continue as a team through all design phases. During the process Tovey/Shultz Construction will provide on-going budget updates to assist us in maintaining cost control and to keep the school informed of the financial consequences of various decisions."

The organization of the Pica & Sullivan Architects is built around project teams that execute the work from inception to realization. Architects at the firm both lead and are members of different project teams of up to four people. The teams work on the same project from early programming through construction, to ensure continuity of philosophy, goals and solutions. Pica & Sullivan currently has nine staff members.

"It is very difficult to hire senior staff people," says Sullivan. "We found that it is much more desirable to



The Herrick Commons at Westridge School's Rothenberg Humanities Center by Pica & Sullivan Architects, Ltd. Photograph by Randall Michelson.

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Proactive Approach to Master Planning and Design

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hire recent graduates and train them within the Pica & Sullivan design philosophy. It takes them about three years to reach a project architect level. The next time we increase our staff, we will again look to hire new graduates.”

The project teams at Pica & Sullivan also manage jurisdictional approvals for clients’ master development plans. This involves working with local governments to obtain conditional use permits, which are usually based on school population, traffic and parking parameters. The firm’s approach is very proactive, meeting with neighbors and city planning commissions ahead of public hearings to determine what the site issues will be and to mitigate adverse impacts if possible.

Variety and Challenge

“As we’ve grown, we’ve expanded our expertise in the field of education architecture,” says Pica. “It is its own specialty, and

as our knowledge and experience has increased we bring more to the table.”

“An education client is different from any other client,” he notes. “Projects take a long time from planning to completion, as they are dependent on fundraising. Cost constraints are different than those you’d experience in the public sector. We have multiple projects because clients can’t afford to build it all at once. Instead, they do it in phases.”

Sullivan notes that the field of education actually provides a lot of variety as far as design challenges. “We have designed theaters, art studios, dining facilities, classrooms, offices and sports facilities,” she says. “Our business development approach is not to look for projects, but to look for people and clients that we can relate to and can work with, together, towards a common vision.”

Looking to the future, the firm has a goal of translating their K-12 education expertise into designing college and university campuses. Building its practice on collaboration and a strong sense of its clients’ communities, the firm has built schools where students learn and grow, both in and out of the classroom. ■



Office at Westridge School for Girls' Pitcairn House in Pasadena. Renovation and historic rehabilitation by Pica & Sullivan Architects. Photograph by Randall Michelson.

Pica & Sullivan Architects, Ltd. Firm Profile

Pica & Sullivan Architects, Ltd. was founded in May 1990. Since then, our firm has been involved in over 300 projects of varying size and scope, including master planning and architectural design for private and public schools and universities, renovation of historic structures, and architecture and interior design of entertainment and retail structures. We have built our practice based on client service and collaboration, resulting in multiple projects with nearly every client.

To meet the special design needs of educational institutions, Pica & Sullivan has established management systems and technical resources for large new construction projects, as well as small remodeling jobs. Pica & Sullivan is organized around project teams that execute the work from inception through realization. Architecture, as design and as a service, is exercised by the same people from early programming through construction. This approach ensures continuity of philosophy, goals, concepts and solutions.

At the center of our practice is an openness that results in both better ideas and a higher degree of efficiency. It is our belief that architectural services are founded on responsiveness to client needs and goals, access to expert input by

consultants, and the practice of appropriate project management. The strength of our office lies in the innovative translation of these services into architectural projects of the highest quality. ■

Pica & Sullivan Architects Client List

- Chadwick School*
- Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences*
- First African Methodist Episcopal Church*
- Girls and Boys Town*
- Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion*
- Le Lycee Francais de Los Angeles*
- Linfield Christian School*
- Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Sparks*
- Saint Lawrence of Brindisi Catholic Church*
- Saint Matthias High School*
- Saint Monica Catholic Church and Schools*
- Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills*
- Westridge School for Girls*
- Windward School*