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## "Hector Garcia Middle School: A School's Design Aspires to Live Up to Its Name"

### "Education is Freedom and Freedom is Everybody's Business" -Hector P. Garcia

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"Hector Garcia Middle School: A school's design aspires to live up to its name."

by Peter Brown, AIA, LEED AP

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#### A Challenged Site:

Immediately upon receiving notice that Perkins+Will would be selected to design Dallas' newest middle school, I raced to the site, conveniently situated on the southern edge of the city center.



Just mentioning the corner of Jefferson and Marsalis to any old-timer will bring out stories from a bygone era, stories of tailfins and retractable hardtops. From the early 1920s through the 1960s THIS stretch of roadway was THE automotive center of the city. Without much imagination, one could feel the vitality that once breathed excitement into the now abandoned streets. Rusting panel lights—perfectly angled to sparkle new cars in the dawn of dusk—now shaded asphalt, glittered with glass. On the corner, a bus repair depot inhabited a former body shop, and lingering support businesses still kept their shingles on the door.

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Looking north, an unfortunate reality, the school would be on axis with the county jail.

A new middle school? Transforming these four blocks of urban blight into a bustling school yard? Preparing children for the 21st century? Now THAT required imagination.

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### An Asset Inventory for a Community Reborn:

An asset inventory quickly revealed that the site is perfectly located to be a hub in a network of neighborhood schools. Two elementary schools are within a three block radius. Four blocks to the west is the neighborhood high school and four blocks to the east is a leading academic magnet school, which—according to Newsweek—contains two of the top ten high schools in the United States, including the Townview Talented and Gifted program, currently ranked number 1 in the country. The site is also centrally located among the neighborhood's cultural assets. Within a five block radius, the school has access to the city zoo, the neighborhood arts district, and the planned Trinity River corridor—one of the largest urban parks under development in the country. The strength of these nearby assets informed the design team about important site relationships that could allow the new middle school to become an integral part of the neighborhood's fabric.



But late one evening, early in the design process, a message was received that would significantly influence the design vision for the new school: "At tonight's school board meeting, a name was approved for the building that you are designing: Hector Garcia Middle School". Searching to infuse meaning into the project, research ensued to learn more about the school's namesake. Incredible and heroic stories revealed one central theme: "What can one person do to inspire others to make a difference?"

### The Hector Garcia Story:

In 1917, [Hector Garcia](#) [link: Wikipedia] and his family immigrated to Texas from Mexico. Hector and his nine siblings were ESL students before ESL programs. Instilled with a strong family value for education, he graduated from the University of Texas with Bachelor and Doctorate degrees. Five of his siblings would also become physicians. A captain in the US Army, Dr. Garcia earned the Bronze Star. Upon returning from WW2, Hector Garcia worked diligently to assist minority servicemen in navigating the Veterans Administration. Through these efforts, he founded the GI Forum. From the beginning, the GI Forum worked to improve veteran benefits, enhance medical services, and provide access to public education. The GI Forum had the effect of desegregating hospitals, swimming pools and schools. In fact, through Dr. Garcia's activism, even cemeteries were desegregated.

In 1949, the body of a Mexican-American soldier was returned to his widow in South Central Texas. Felix Longoria, killed in action by a sniper in the Philippines, would not be allowed services in the

town's "all white" funeral facilities. Immediately after receiving a poignant letter written by Hector Garcia, the then-Senator Lyndon Johnson returned a telegram: "I deeply regret to learn that the prejudice of some individuals extends even beyond this life. I have no authority over the civilian funeral homes, nor does the federal government. However, I have made arrangements to have Felix Longoria buried with full military honors in the Arlington National Cemetery here at Washington, where the honored dead of our nation's wars rest...This injustice and prejudice is deplorable. I am happy to have a part in seeing that this hero is laid to rest with the honor and dignity his service deserves." This incident placed the GI Forum on the national stage.

Hector Garcia subsequently worked in every administration from John F. Kennedy to George H.W. Bush. President Kennedy called upon Dr. Garcia to negotiate a defense treaty between the US and the Federations of the West Indies. President Johnson appointed Dr. Garcia to be the first Mexican-American to serve on the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Dr. Garcia was the first Mexican-American ambassador to the United Nations and, in this role, was the first in the U.S. delegation to address the U.N. General Assembly in a language other than English. President Carter appointed him to the nominating committee for US Circuit Judge. President Reagan honored him as the first Mexican American to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award a civilian can receive. He was an advisor to President Bush. President Clinton called him "a national hero."

### **Heroic Spaces: Honoring Our Ancestors, Empowering Our Students**

Learning the stories of Dr. Garcia was important, but how could a design team relate these civic virtues to future generations of young people. How could a transformation of an unlikely school site raise the viewpoint for students and the community?

Specifically, can space and sequence be organized to communicate enduring civic values?



Driving along 8th street among vacant lots, convenience stores, burger stands and taquerías, a modern school building emerges. Perched on the hilltop, and hugging the street, a gentle bend in the façade creates a pause in the streetscape, gestures toward the skyline, and forms a plaza that greets students with trees and benches, places to see and be seen.



The colorful façade of the classrooms suggests the lively and diverse activities behind the walls. A great room, the media center, extends over the plaza, welcoming inquisitive minds into the school.

Entering the school a compact, yet dynamic lobby is the social heart of the school, an invitation to the auditorium, a place to share arts and ideas; dining hall, a place for the school community to gather, and a stair leading to the media center, a place to develop ideas.



At the crest of the stairs, a portrait of Hector Garcia greets and confronts visitors to the media center. The larger-than-life image begs questions about 'why is this person here' and 'why is he important'. The image conceals, contains, and invites the view beyond.

Turning to enter the great room of the media center, the city presents itself, through an even larger window. Stunning views of the city are presented. From the fair grounds to the east, the commerce center in the center, the medical center to west, along with all aspects of city and social life in between. The window wall, in return, evokes awe of the city, and in turn, begs questions about what mark can the individual make within their world.



Academically, the school is organized to allow nine academic teams to support classroom instruction, sciences, and technology for traditional, interdisciplinary, and project-based instruction. Clearly

organized, the school's planning responds both to the social organization of the educational program and naturally to the site's climate. North facing classrooms offer stunning views to the skyline, take advantage of north exposure for optimal daylight, and minimize cooling demand by facing classrooms away from Texas' harsh sun exposure. The south facade is planned as a buffer to the southern sun. Program spaces organized to the south require minimal natural light and are situated with the ability to control the southern exposure. Showing leadership in creating sustainable environments, the school is slated for LEED certification.

The inspiration of Hector Garcia challenged the project team to consider this investment in a school building as a greater investment to galvanize neighborhoods with community development, economic development, and inspiring young people to think broadly about their future. Working within tight technical and budgetary guidelines the school re-claims land within the city. Previously, the site was a masterful and romantic demonstration of the automobile and its importance in the factory-based industrial economy. Hector Garcia Middle School looks to reinvent a diverse community—with people at the helm of a creative society—anticipating, inviting and inspiring students to make a difference in their world.

"Education is Freedom and Freedom is Everybody's Business"

-Hector P. Garcia

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A comprehensive architectural description of the soon-to-be-opened project [can be viewed in PDF format at this link](#).

#### Floor 1, Plan View:



#### Program:

- 6-8 grade middle school for approximately 1,000 students
- Building Area: 175,000 square feet
- Site Area: 13.4 Acres

- The site accommodates high school athletic programs for neighboring schools.
- Slated for completion in spring of 2007.

**Construction Systems:**

- Structure: Classrooms – concrete frame with pan-formed decking, Longspan spaces – steel frame and decking, Music rooms – load bearing masonry for acoustic isolation.
- Exterior Wall: Brick and Ribbed metal panels on CMU or steel-stud back-up systems.
- Exterior Glazing: Aluminum architectural windows, storefront, and curtainwall systems with 1/4" single paned glazing systems.
- Interior Walls: Painted abuse-resistant drywall in classrooms and offices, Exposed ground face CMU and glazed CMU in public and service areas.
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**Bio:**

Peter Brown is a practicing architect who has built a career designing innovative schools around the country and around the world. He is a principal with [Perkins+Will](#) where he serves as the leader of the firm's K-12 practice. The firm is widely known among educators and architects for creating influential school models over the last 70 years.



Peter works collaboratively with educators, architects, and planners to create solutions that enhance teaching, learning, and community life. His leadership has resulted in acclaimed public and private schools. Passionate about improving performance of educational environments, Peter speaks and writes frequently on topics that link Architecture, Education, and Curriculum.

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