

# Finding New Space in Old Places: Repurposing Auxiliary Gyms



By Kevin Havens, AIA

**S**ome parts of a school building do not age gracefully. At many elementary and middle schools—particularly those built in the 1960s or 1970s—old gyms are as useful (and attractive) as a worn-out pair of sneakers.

To save money 20 years ago, school districts often used one space as a combination gym/lunch room/auditorium. This was a time when indoor physical education was little more than jumping jacks, push-ups, running a few laps, or playing basketball and dodge ball. And cafeterias did not offer anywhere near the options available in today's school lunch rooms.

**What should you do with an old gym that has outlived its usefulness?**

Today's offerings are too sophisticated to be housed in these one-size-fits-all spaces.

As schools replace these dinosaurs with newly built, modern physical education facilities and field houses, one question frequently goes unasked: What should you do with an old gym that has outlived its usefulness?

The answer: Repurpose it. Old gymnasiums offer hidden opportunities for schools to take advantage of newfound space. Instead of abandoning them, schools should view these gyms as blank canvasses for creating new rooms or areas for specialized programs and activities.

Virtually every combination gym/lunch room or underutilized auxiliary gym is a viable candidate for re-purposing.

The key in planning for the adaptive reuse of gyms is to think outside the box and outside the classroom. For example, the newfound space could be reconfigured and divided to accommodate special needs instruction such as tutoring, speech therapy, counseling, or English as a second language. It also could be used to support fitness activities (e.g., creating a room with aerobic training equipment) or music and other arts.

When determining how to repurpose the old space, administrators should ask themselves:

- What are our current unmet needs in our programs and activities?
- Do we need more room for small groups or individual learning?
- How might we better serve the community at large?

To illustrate some of the possibilities, here are examples of effective repurposing.

### Subdivide to Conquer

In 2009, Mill Street Elementary School in Naperville, Illinois, needed to expand its size and realign its educational spaces through additions and renovations. The district built a 15,000 square foot gymnasium and cafeteria/multipurpose areas on one



end of the building, and transformed its old gym into eight dedicated instructional rooms.

The new space now includes a variety of special needs classrooms and offices and a conference room. The elevated stage was demolished and converted into a computer lab at floor level. Now, the district's itinerant psychologist is able to counsel Mill Street students in a new office rather than in a corner of a hallway.

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The repurposed gym was part of a larger renovation of the building's core, with the intent of creating a centralized learning resource center. Now that all special needs and individual classrooms are in the middle of the building, they are more accessible to students scattered throughout the school.

### From PE to Do-Re-Mi

School arts programs have been particularly hit by budget cutbacks. But two Chicago-area schools found that re-purposing old gyms can be a great way to expand and modernize their music programs.

The high ceilings of former spectator gyms are not conducive to excep-

tional acoustics, but Lemont High School turned this potential drawback into an asset by inserting a mezzanine level, which doubled its available floor space. One level offers dining and food service, while the other has practice areas for band and orchestra programs. This entire renovation did not require any exterior work.

Burr Ridge Middle School was one of the pioneers in finding latent opportunities in gym repurposing. In the late 1990s, the school converted its old gymnasium into a band room with tiered risers that took advantage of the taller volume space.

### Finding New Purposes

At a time when space for school programs and activities is tight, old gyms shouldn't sit vacant most of the day. Old gyms can be repurposed for ancillary physical education functions (e.g., health clubs), dance classes, and experimental or black box theater.

Repurposing is one of the tenets of sustainability, which is always a prime consideration on any school building project. The adaptive reuse of old gyms is a practical and economical way to transform dead space into something wonderful.

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