



How does your campus grow? How educational institutions continue to grow in a congested setting

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New York City's educational institutions, from small independent schools to large universities, share a common challenge: how to continue to grow in this congested urban setting? And virtually all do, in fact, urgently need more space, whether because enrollments are increasing, or because high expectations and competition demand newer, better facilities for science, dining, housing, athletics, and student centers.

The difficulties are more acute for smaller institutions and those dedicated to a particular academic endeavor. While universities like Columbia, NYU, and CUNY are made up of multiple divisions and schools whose respective faculty and students do not necessarily need to interact, for others proximity and a sense of "campus" are critical to maintaining the institution's identity, fostering the students' feeling of community, and practical matters like getting from one class to another on time.

Though Butler Rogers Baskett (BRB) has worked with many of the city's schools, at all levels, to resolve such issues, one project serves as a particularly useful example of the process. Between 2003 and 2006, the Laboratory Institute of Merchandising (LIM), the College for the Business of Fashion, more than doubled its enrollment of students pursuing undergraduate degrees in fashion marketing, management, and visual merchandising. Anticipating still more growth and having already exhausted the existing facilities in their six-story townhouse on 53rd St. just off Fifth Ave., LIM needed more space.

The first step for any expanding institution is establishing the criteria for new facilities. Typically, these are, in order of priority:

Location – For LIM, proximity was a matter not just of walking distance, but of the experience of that travel. Fifth Ave. is, after all, the heart of some of the city's most fashionable retail, and the College wanted a strong connection between the students' academic training and their future professions. And since the Fashion District is to the southwest, it was important, too, to focus the search as much as possible in that direction.

Size and configuration – LIM's needs called for approximately 35-40,000 rentable s/f, ideally on one floor. It is virtually axiomatic that, once students begin to travel vertically, the sense of community is compromised. Casual, serendipitous encounters and inviting places to congregate – essential to academic life – are incompatible with small floorplates and fire stairs.

Quality – Today, abundant natural light is a high priority on every list, but for LIM it was especially crucial, given the visual nature of much of the curriculum. The College also required a floor-to-floor height of not less than twelve feet – low ceilings make for claustrophobic classrooms – and generous column spacing to enable a workable plan

Tenant mix – Commercial office buildings are generally not keen on mixing students with their other tenants. Landlords may be more amenable to an institutional tenant if the building allows

forâ€”and the school is willing to pay a premium forâ€”a dedicated elevator. A building with two or more entrances also makes a better candidate.

We considered six possibilities for LIM's new facilities, ranking each according to how well it met these priorities. The winner, occupied by the College for a year now, is a wonderful space that stretches a full city block from 44th to 45th Sts. along Fifth Ave., in three buildings the landlord had previously combined. That not only provided the required square footage, all on one floor, but also gave LIM exceptional daylight and views of the Avenue's street life. The building already housed another academic institution and, having two separate entrances, was able to allocate one to the students.

Of course, once the space is acquired, the planning and interior design must also resolve practical and institutional issues. LIM's visionary and dynamic president, Elizabeth Marcuse, who initiated and oversaw the College's overall re-branding, required a very "hip," creative environment, built on a very modest budget. The resulting plan exploits the urbanism and energy of the fashion industry by treating the main corridor as a street, with views over Fifth Ave., strategically located spots for casual meetings and displays of student work, and a student lounge at each end. The design itself acts as both a component of the educational experience and a means of expressing the students' accomplishments and the college's identity.

Our subsequent gut renovation of LIM's townhouse incorporated the same planning and design principles. Here, the main public area is the open central stair, which is much-used and thus promotes communication and interaction. To encourage that flow, we located the two student lounges at opposite poles, on the ground and top floors; both also provide easy access to the College's computer network. Key design elementsâ€”elliptical forms, cut-out openings, materials, and color paletteâ€”are common to the 53rd St. and Fifth Ave. facilities, reinforcing the sense of "campus" and branding both with LIM's strong identity.

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