

# Visual Literacy — It's Elementary!

A Center for Architecture Foundation workshop boosts Harlem kids' understanding of their neighborhood and city  
By Jane Cowan



The class of 2019: P.S. 161 sixth graders pose in front of Low Library and the statue of Alma Mater during their trip to Columbia University

literacy begins with the basics: Letters are combined to form words, words are combined to form sentences, and then paragraphs, and then books. Visual literacy, too, begins with the foundations: Shape, color, texture, pattern, and line are combined to give form to buildings, streetscapes, and cities. For most professionals, the introduction to visual literacy began in architecture or design school. Yet visual literacy has value and importance for all students of all ages, whether or not they are studying architecture and design. (See "Growing Patrons" in the *Oculus* Winter 2007/08 for a related article.)

Why? Visual literacy increases one's powers of observation. It improves one's vocabulary. It develops better speaking and writing skills. It provides students with the ability to make sense of the world around them, and connect seemingly disparate parts. It enhances and encourages spatial thinking. It sparks curiosity about one's envi-

ronment. It elevates one's daily experience (say, walking to school) as a valuable source of knowledge and learning. Any pedagogue would agree these are important goals, yet, one need not be an educator to understand how lessons in visual literacy can enhance the standard curriculum. To this end, the Center for Architecture Foundation's Learning by Design:NY (LBD:NY) program has – in its 19 years of existence – sent architecture and design professionals into hundreds of New York City public-school classrooms to teach multi-week "residency" workshops where students learn the rudiments of architecture and design. While the goals of these residencies vary wildly depending upon the class and age of the students, they all have at their core a strong foundation in visual literacy.

Since spring 2007, with support from the New York State Council on the Arts, the NYC Department of Education, and the generosity of



M(Group) and OMNI Architects through Center for Architecture Foundation's Adopt-A-School initiative, LBD:NY has conducted a special multi-year residency that exposed one group of 125 youngsters to architecture. The students at P.S. 161 Don Pedro Albizu Campos School in Harlem began their introduction to architecture when they were in the fourth grade. Today, as graduating sixth-graders, they have developed into sophisticated observers of the urban environment, savvy problem-solvers, and urbane critics of the architectural scene in their neighborhood and the city in general.

Throughout the five semesters of the residency, visual literacy formed the backbone of the children's studies. During the first semester, they took a macro view of architecture and learned to identify different building types, such as residential, commercial, or industrial. They were introduced to – and learned to identify – architectural vocabulary, such as cornice, arch, column, lintel, keystone, stoop, quoin, etc. The students also explored the variety of building materials found in their immediate neighborhood and within the school building itself, such as brick, brownstone, glass, metal, limestone, and terra cotta. They learned the components of a neighborhood, including residential buildings, schools, libraries, hospitals, places of worship, open spaces, commercial sites, police and fire stations, etc.

During the second semester, as fifth graders, the students zoomed in on Harlem. While the youngsters knew the name of their storied neighborhood and were aware that tour buses ply its streets daily, many were unfamiliar with the reasons for Harlem's worldwide fame. Through neighborhood walking



**Interviewing the local coffee-cart proprietor about Columbia University's expansion plans**

tours, visits to important Harlem sites, and the study of historic photographs and maps, the students learned Harlem's vibrant history. They conducted in-depth research of 25 Harlem landmarks and constructed models of these buildings. Later, they turned their research about these buildings into original short plays, writing scripts, creating backdrops, scenery, and costumes, and performing. Legendary Harlem sites like the Apollo Theater, the Hotel Theresa, the Schomburg Center for Black Research, and the Abyssinian Baptist Church shared the stage with less familiar (but no less important) Harlem buildings like photographer James Van Der Zee's studio, the Old Broadway Synagogue, the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque, 409 Edgecombe Avenue, and the Old Croton Aqueduct Gatehouse.

With a solid understanding of Harlem's history and architecture, the students returned to school in fall 2008 as sixth graders ready to tackle a more complicated task. The architectural lens narrowed further to the area immediately surrounding the school, known historically as Manhattanville and today the site of Columbia University's campus expansion. (See "It's Priceless," *Oculus* Winter 2007/08.) Manhattanville, the students learned, was a small village (not part of New York City) that developed in the early 19th century. Originally

rural with its own religious, medical, and child-welfare institutions, it evolved into a manufacturing and industrial center by the latter 19th century. Paint factories, commercial dairies, bottling plants, and beer breweries were common, and by the first decades of the 20th century

Manhattanville came to be known as "Automobile Row." Concrete automotive buildings to house showrooms for Chevrolet, Nash, and Studebaker characterized the streetscape. By the end of the 20th century, Manhattanville had become a low-scale and low-trafficked area studded with mom-and-pop car repair shops and warehouses.

Now, the neighborhood is slated to change permanently. The students undertook an extensive photo-documentation project, in which they recorded every building and lot in the Columbia project area. Columbia University officials gave students a special presentation that explained the need for their expansion and showed images of what the neighborhood would look like 25 years hence. Many students were concerned about the impact this project would have on current residents (like themselves and their families) and workers. They peppered Columbia officials with questions and conducted on-the-street interviews with residents, workers, business owners, and passersby. Then they designed and curated an exhibition that featured their photographs and written observations about the neighborhood, on the eve of its alteration.

This exercise presented the students with a real-life scenario. The ideas they had learned about architecture were tangible. "LBD:NY brings the real world into the classroom," notes P.S. 161 Assistant Principal Pamela Price. Students learned that architecture is not only something from the past; it is happening now, in their own backyard, and will directly affect them. LBD:NY provided a foundation of visual literacy that gave students a sophisticated understanding of the Columbia project. "The awareness of their community has grown," says Desiree Howard, one of the participating teachers. "Having them consider the effect of Columbia's expansion in their neighborhood has raised the level of the discussion."

And what has visual literacy accomplished for the students? They unanimously agree they have enjoyed the architecture program. Participating in the play, building the models, taking trips throughout the neighborhood, and photographing it have been highlights of their elementary years. More importantly – and more lasting – they have learned to appreciate and look at their city and neighborhood in a new way. Eleven-year-old Christopher Thomas observes that the LBD:NY residency "really helps kids understand how places are. We also learned about and explored different places we never knew about before." To those who care about architecture and urbanism, could a more crucial goal have been accomplished?

The Adopt-A-School initiative provides firms and individuals a unique opportunity to support customized design curriculums for students in underserved schools. Sponsors help expand awareness of the value of design and the built environment. For information, visit [www.cfafoundation.org](http://www.cfafoundation.org).

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**Students decide which of their photographs to include in the exhibit**

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