

The main title is centered on the page. The word 'Well' is written in a red, cursive font. Below it, the words 'Build It and the Children Will Come' are written in a large, bold, blue sans-serif font. The text is overlaid on a photograph of a school hallway with colorful circular cutouts in the foreground.

*Well*  
**Build It and the Children Will Come**

**Benning Charter School Renovation**



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**Build It^and the  
 Children Will Come**

By Robert Kelly

*A talented project team transformed a 1970s-era “school without walls” building into an inspirational learning environment for two fledgling charter schools in an underserved neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Chaotic open spaces are now creative, playful classrooms filled with colorful energy.*

**O**n the first day of school in 2008, tiny preschoolers in maroon shirts and khaki pants skipped through brightly colored corridors. The light-filled spaces were clean, newly-painted, and brimming with the personality that can only come from kiwi green and orange floor patterns and turquoise circles framing the library.

Just three months before, the dark 70,000-square-foot building at

100 41st Street, NE, ended its life as a District of Columbia Public School. The roof leaked. Ancient lights hung over huge spaces in the former ‘school-without-walls building,’ where classrooms were divided by furniture rather than walls.

When DC Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee announced that 23 under-enrolled DCPS buildings would close for the



**PROJECT**  
**Benning Charter School Renovation**  
 100 41st Street, NE  
 Washington, D.C.

**TEAM**  
 Project Management/Financing  
**Building Hope, Washington, D.C.**

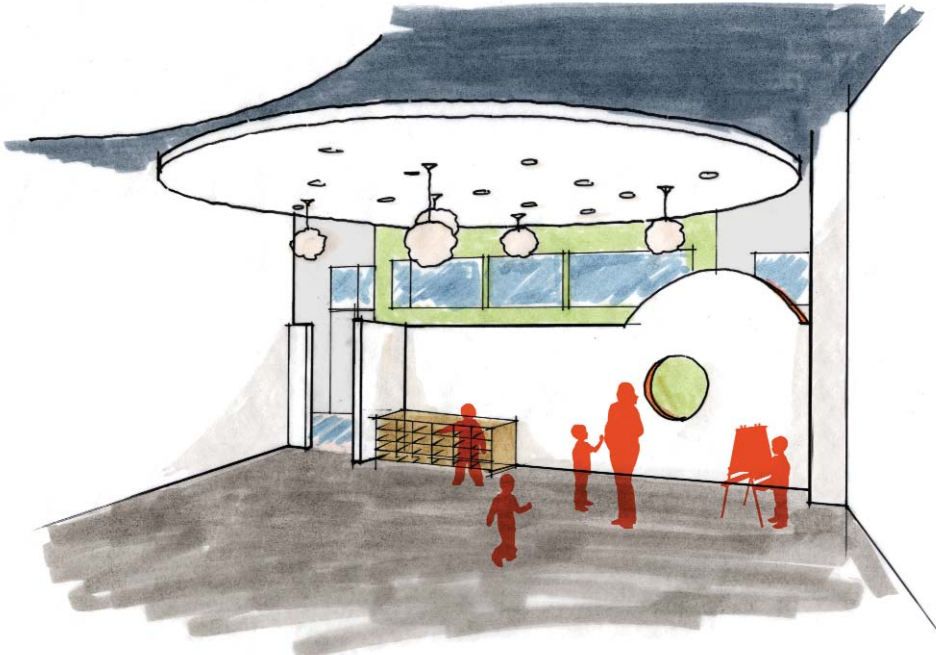
Architecture/Interior Design:  
**Cooper Cary, Inc., Alexandria, Virginia**

Contractor:  
**MCN Build, Washington, D.C.**

MEP Engineer:  
**Global Engineering Solutions  
 Rockville, Maryland**

Charter Schools:  
**Nia Community Public Charter School  
 DC Prep**

Photographer:  
**Maxwell MacKenzie Architectural  
 Photographer  
 Washington, D.C.**



The designer's conceptual sketch for the library/gathering spaces.



Inviting new second floor reception and administrative area.

2008/2009 school year, Kathy Padian, Vice President of Building Hope, began talks with the Deputy Mayor of Education in 2007. Building Hope works to close the educational achievement gap by giving students access to high-quality public charter schools. The company manages the real estate procurement process for charter schools in several cities around the country, including the District of Columbia and New Orleans.

Building Hope often manages the financing, leasing, construction or renovation and opening of a building, while acting as liaison with state, federal and private funding sources and educational systems.

Building Hope has partnered with the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education to provide facilities that can be leased to start-up charter schools on a revolving basis. The incubator program provides new

charter schools with a home during their first five years of operation, when the small number of students they serve makes it difficult to afford commercial space.

"It was always our hope that we would find DCPS properties that were no longer being used for the Incubator Initiative to take over," Padian said.

### Fast-track Synthesis

Once Building Hope chose the Benning campus, Kathy Padian walked David W. Kitchens, AIA, a Principal at Cooper Carry through the space. He recommended phasing, classrooms, and a new entrance for DC Prep so they could enter on the second floor at-grade. "It was immediate: he could see it from walking in the door," Padian said later.

Padian introduced Cooper Carry to local DC Contractor MCN Build - and the team immediately got to work. Miraculously, this entire project was designed and constructed within a 40-day window during the summer of 2008. Because of the fast-track timeline, all parties met at the beginning for a whirlwind charrette to build consensus. Even with multiple team members, two eager school administrations and various municipal agencies, the project finished on schedule and on budget - with no design-related change orders.

"Building a project that helps children study in an environment such as the one that we have been able to provide fits right into our purpose as a company," said Joseph Khoury, Project Manager for MCN Build, who spent long hours at the site throughout the summer. "This is it."

"I don't think anybody has done a project like this in 40 days," Padian laughed. "When people hear that, they'll say 'the permitting process could've taken 40 days!' I used every connection I had in the City, making sure everybody knew that it absolutely had to be done. This was a

bi-track process; everything running at the same exact time. Literally, the DCPS program closed and removed all of their stuff, and the next day the keys were transferred and we started demolition.”

**Build It and the Children Will Come**

Meanwhile, Padian was working with the two chosen charter schools, both of which were compatible with this Ward 7 location in a neglected urban neighborhood.

DC Prep was already operating two charter schools in a pair of converted warehouses in the District’s Edgewood neighborhood, said COO David Leahy; they underwent the purchase/financing/design/construction process with those two campuses. Leahy spent nearly an entire year developing the second 46,000-sf warehouse-turned-elementary school, which influenced the Benning campus’ materials and colors.

“The great part about this process [at the Benning campus] is that Building Hope, Cooper Carry and MCN Build did most of that work for us,” he said. Finding and renovating a facility can be an insurmountable barrier for charter schools, Leahy said. “This was absolutely easier. For one thing, we are leasing the space, rather than owning.” DC Prep’s Benning campus currently serves 102 students for preschool, pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten; they will fill the space in just three years.

“The incubator environment gives us the ability to grow up with our kids, adding a grade level each year,” Leahy said. “That allows us to really build a strong foundation for school culture as students have a consistent understanding of the school’s expectations.”

Just downstairs on the first floor, Nia Community Public Charter School serves an older crowd: 175 students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, mostly from the surrounding underserved neighborhoods.

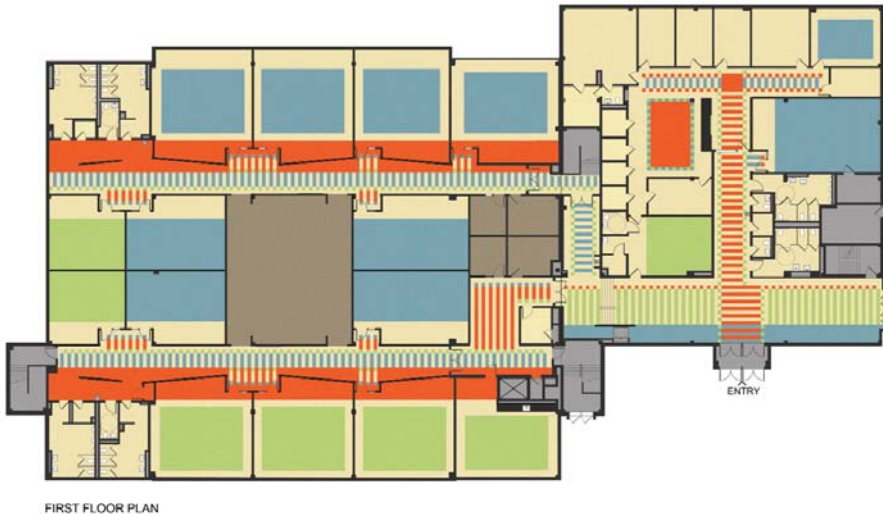


Cavernous classrooms without walls before the renovation.

“I haven’t heard anything but positive remarks when people walk in here,” said Nia’s Interim Executive Director, Wuhan Dansby. “People’s mood changes, so they have a positive mood when they come in the door. We think that can

set the right tone for our parents, students and faculty.”

Both administrations have been thoroughly pleased with the Benning results. “The space is magnificent in terms of what we do,” said DC Prep Principal Maurice



Rendered first floor plan showing colorful floor pattern. Classrooms are on the left in the larger of the two sections and administrative offices are on the right.

Porter. “We are in the business of educating kids. We can gauge the excitement by the parents’ responses. I don’t think I’ve heard so many ‘wows’ when people walk in the door, especially if they went to

Columbia Public Schools. “Parents were awestruck at one, how quickly the renovation took place, and two, how the space was transformed. It’s aesthetically immaculate in my opinion.”



New front doors and cheerful landscaping create an inviting entrance for students, family and faculty.

Benning years ago in the DC public school system,” said Porter, who used to work for the District of

At DC Prep, the colorful library with its designer lights and circular ceiling panels is being used for an

assembly area. “It’s hard for little legs to get all the way down to the shared auditorium,” said Porter, laughing. So far they’ve observed a Valentine sock hop, a fire safety day, a Christmas party and a cake celebration for the school’s 100th day in existence.

“We know that kids learn better in bright and stimulating environments,” Porter said. “We didn’t have to work as hard to provide that.”

### Creative Design on a Low Budget

From the cavernous spaces of the 70,000-square-foot school, designers gutted the space and created individual classrooms, a library, a reception area, and administrative spaces for each school. The young schools share common spaces, but each organization has its own facilities and entrances on separate floors. Even with such a short time-frame, the team included custom millwork in the reception areas and shared art room.

Led by MCN Build’s strict budget, the entire team worked closely to meet the expectations. The \$2.9 million project cost included a complete roof replacement, leaving precious funds for renovations, FF&E, code evaluation, MEP, and ADA and life safety updates. Designers used inexpensive materials such as vinyl tile to create a vibrant floor pattern that minimizes the visual length of the corridors. The corridor walls are angled to form unexpected spaces; these angled walls are a striking counterpoint to the linear floor pattern.

Preschoolers peek through whimsical cut-outs in the library walls, which echo round ceiling discs above. “We’ve had to prevent the children from jumping through,” Porter, the DC Prep Principal, laughed. Bright accent colors in turquoise, tangerine, yellow, and kiwi green highlight these circular shapes in the library/corridor walls. The colors and retro-inspired pendant fixtures hearken

to the 1960s, an optimistic era for school design. Designers used standard materials such as gypsum board in sculptural forms to reduce costs without sacrificing design.

The windowless concrete structure required a dramatic lighting solution. The Cooper Carry interior design team comprising of Robert Kelly, Karen Trimbach, and Jeanette Rihn innovatively used clerestory windows and full-height sidelights in all the classrooms to transmit light through the spaces.

High quality lighting was not initially included in the budget, but the designers opted for standard finishes elsewhere in order to provide bright CHPS (Collaborative for High Performance Schools) compliant lighting, to improve the learning environment and create high performance classrooms that mask the absence of natural daylight.

“Overall, that project could have gone either way, and I think it could have been a total disaster,” Padian laughed. “I think it’s great. We love it.” Her only regret was the inability to add windows in the short time-

frame. However, the design team prepared the building for future phases, planning to incorporate windows and other improvements such as the renovation of the cafeteria/auditorium.

The new schools have received stellar feedback from all sides, including the U.S. Department of Education, and the building’s prior owner, the District of Columbia Public School System. “I think the speed, the cost and the result are all a very interesting combination for them to see that it can be done like this,” Leahy said.

The project has already made waves in the design community with three awards: The International Interior Design Association’s Mid-Atlantic Chapter gave a Special Recognition award for this unique 40-day design/build story, and a Gold award for Interior Design Excellence. The project also won an Award of Merit for Interior Design



Top image: The old open library used only shelving to divide spaces.  
Bottom image: An interior shot of the new light-filled entrance on the first floor.

from the Virginia Society American Institute of Architects, 2009 Inform awards. In addition, work on Phase II began in April 2009; exterior windows will be added in the final phase.

“It’s amazing to think that in 40 days a bunch of people can get together and turn what was really an inhospitable building into a lively, fun and engaging place for little children to learn in,” said Karen Trimbach, IIDA, Cooper Carry’s Interior Design Project Manager. “That’s the real story.” ■

Robert Kelly, IIDA, is a Senior Interior Designer in Cooper Carry’s Alexandria, Virginia, office. He provides the brainpower and creative punch behind many of their unique projects, including an award-winning LEED-CI Gold office, which was renovated in 2006. In his time with Cooper Carry, Robert has led interior design efforts on a variety of project types, from multifamily residential buildings to a luxury resort in the Virgin Islands. He believes that the spaces he creates can have a positive effect on people’s lives.



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