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St. Hilda's & St. Hugh's Rooftop Greenhouse, New York City
Architect: Murphy Burnham & Buttrick, New York City
Size: 500 square feet
Completion: December 2007

ROOFTOOP GREENHOUSE TEACHES CHILDREN ABOUT SCIENCE, AGRICULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects' design creates a "penthouse classroom"

New York, NY...St. Hilda's & St. Hugh's, a private school for 380 preschool- to eighth-grade students, claims a New York City first: a rooftop "farm" for students.

Designed by Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects, the seventh-floor greenhouse teaches the children where food comes from. It is a learning laboratory that encourages students to plant, tend, and harvest fruits, vegetables, and herbs while learning about chemistry, weather, genetics, agriculture, nutrition, and related sciences.

The glass space is part of a larger "green" vision for the school and its students. Virginia Connor, Head of School, worked closely with architect Mary Burnham of Murphy Burnham & Buttrick to incorporate sustainable design features into the phased renovations of the school's 1968 building on 114th Street. Their work began with a master plan in 2000—back when green design was still on the fringes of the design world.

Projects to date include a new library, the redesign of the school entrance, music rooms, athletic facilities, art rooms, a rooftop addition that houses the new multipurpose alumni center, science rooms, classrooms, and, the latest effort, the greenhouse.

Throughout the project, building materials were reused or recycled whenever possible. "The sustainability aspect has become an educational tool," says Ms. Burnham. "The greenhouse is the latest effort to create spaces that nurture an understanding of the environment."

Adds Ms. Connor: "We want everything we do to teach students that they are responsible for the care of this sacred planet. This building's sustainable design is an important way to send the message that every decision we make plays a role in saving the earth."

The renovation of the building emphasizes natural daylight, non-toxic materials, and finishes that require little or no maintenance. The new bathrooms have sensor-activated faucets; waterless urinals; and dual-flush toilets.

Recently, for example, the children made marmalade with lemons and oranges harvested from miniature citrus trees. In the future, using organic plantings from Greensgrow Farms in Philadelphia and seeds donated by Johnny's Selected Seeds in Winslow, Maine, the children will grow sprouts, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, strawberries, key limes, lemons, and a variety of herbs, including basil and oregano. They will also grow flowers. Some of the food items will be available in the school cafeteria.

During a typical week, the students' science classes will meet in the greenhouse once or twice to check the progress of their plants and perhaps pick a leaf or a piece of fruit to examine back in the classroom.

"Our next project is a redesign of the kitchen and cafeteria facilities," Mrs. Burnham added. "The goal will be to improve the facilities while teaching the children more about the cooking and sharing of the food that is grown on the roof."

Adds Virginia Connor: "Murphy Burnham & Buttrick has helped us to realize our vision of creating the ideal spaces for children to learn, play, and succeed."

Murphy Burnham & Buttrick brings new ideas, design talent, and experience to institutional, commercial, and residential projects. The 25-person firm provides architectural, planning, interior design, and historic preservation services.