

FINAL STUDIO PROJECT:
I.S. 131 DR. SUN YAT SEN



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I. OVERVIEW

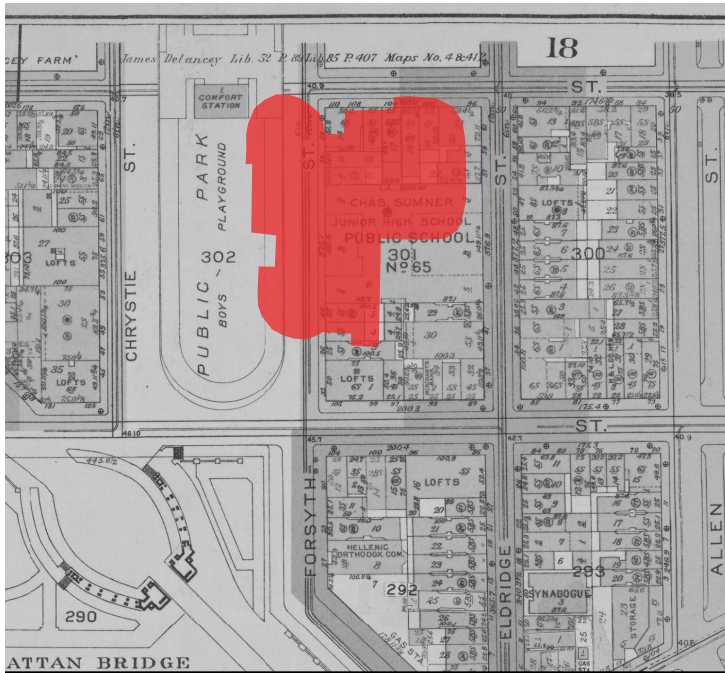


Figure 1: I.S. 131 on Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library, 1955

I.S. 131 was built in 1983 and is located on a site that lies just north of the Manhattan Bridge, and bordered to the north by Hester Street, to the east by Eldridge Street, to the south by Canal Street, and to the west by Forsyth Street (Figure 1 and 2). To the east of the school, a small track and outdoor park space are located in Sara D. Roosevelt Park, which was originally built in 1934.

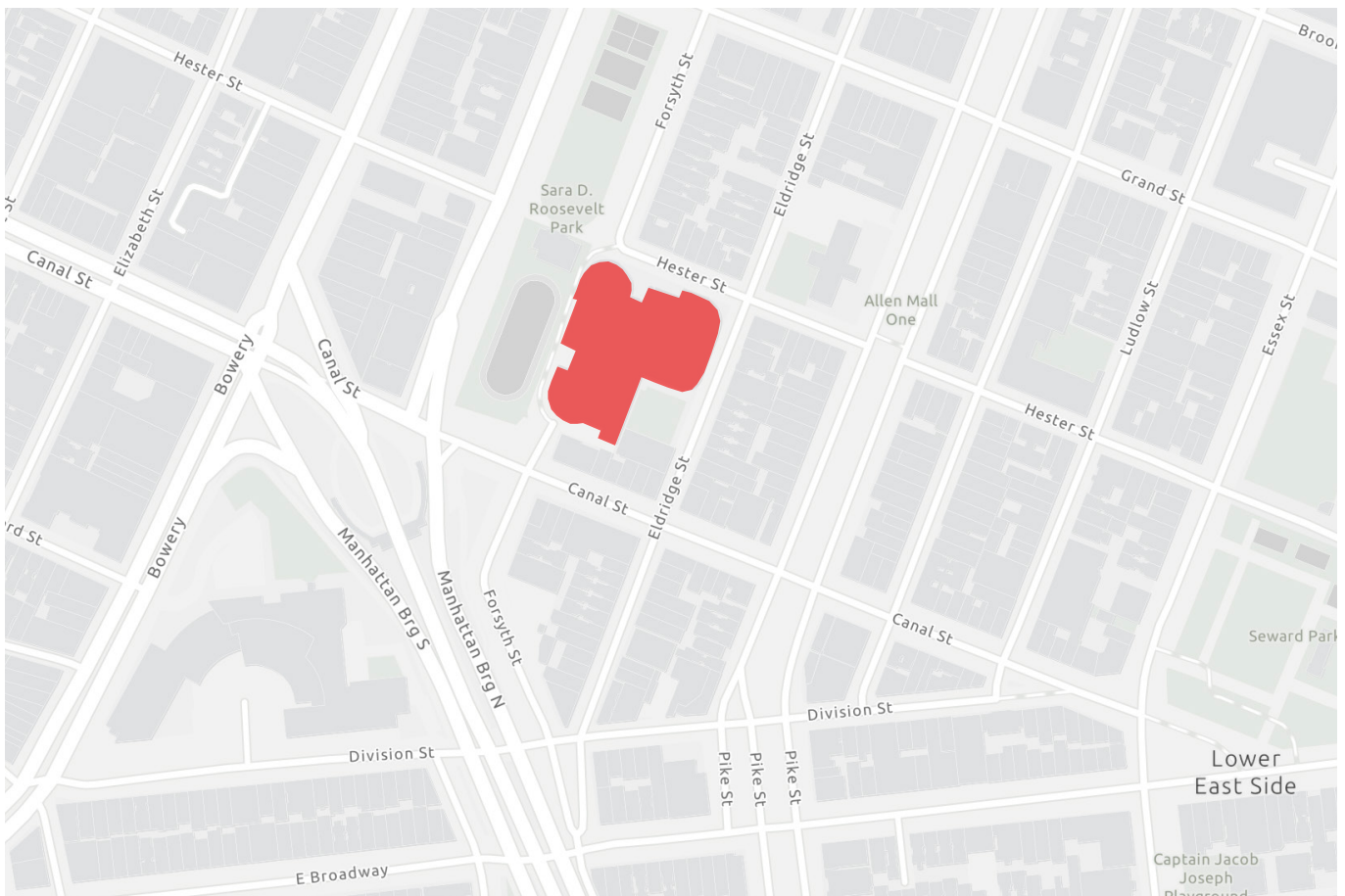


Figure 2: I.S. 131 on ArcGis Map, 2025

I. OVERVIEW



Figure 3: Danforth Toan, Source: AIA New York, In Memoriam: Danforth Toan, 2013



Figure 4: Model of Nasa Space Station (Skylab), Source: New York Times Web Archive, 2013

This building was designed by Warner, Burns, Toan, and Lunde, also referred to as WBTL. The design itself falls within the style and sphere of one of the main partners, Danforth Toan (1918-2013, Figure 3), who was also a professor at GSAPP and was known for running classes where he would lead students around campus blindfolded until they ‘saw what they could not see’. Toan’s repertoire is very diverse, with notable works including many libraries across North American campuses and the first NASA space station (Skylab) astronaut living quarters (Figure 4). His designs have found their place in many universities and college campuses, including New York University, Columbia University, LaGuardia Community College (LIC), Sarah Lawrence Col-

lege (Bronxville), Washtenaw Community College (Ann Arbor), Emory University (Atlanta), University of Toronto (Toronto), and St. Olaf College (Minnesota). Many of these libraries, such as Brown University’s Sciences Library (Figure 5) and Cornell University’s Olin Library (Figure 6), resemble rectilinear monoliths, with strong gridlike lines and a strong sense of volumetric mass.¹ However, Toan also designed structures such as Ytterboe Hall (Figure 7) in St. Olaf College and Robarts Library (Figure 8) located in the University of Toronto, where we see a specific typology of structures presenting as asymmetric volumetric buildings, with centrality and spreading out into two wings on either side.

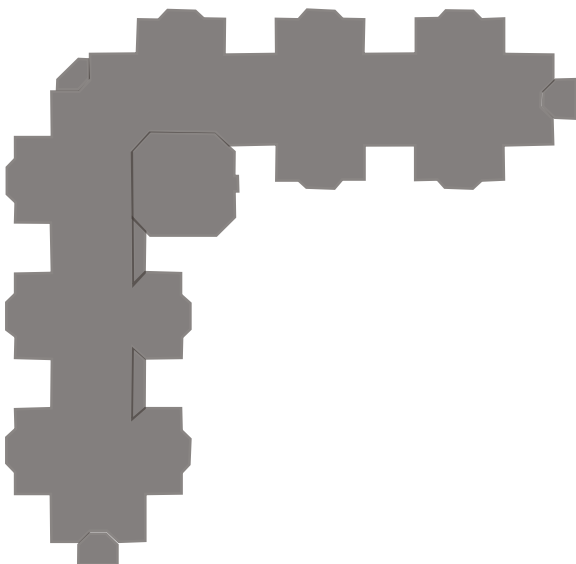
¹ Danforth W. Toan, 1919–2013,” AIANY, accessed December 16, 2025, <https://www.aiany.org/news/danforth-w-toan-1919-2013/>.



Figure 5: Brown University: Sciences Library (1971), Source: Brown University Website



Figure 6: Cornell University: Olin Library (1961) Source: Cornell University Website



7/ Ytterboe Hall: St. Olaf College (1997), Source: Vector made by Author



Figure 8: Robarts Library: University of Toronto (1973) Source: University of Toronto Website

II. DESIGN

OVERALL LAYOUT AND COMPOSITION

The design of IS 131, Dr. Sun Yat Sen, also exhibits this similar design typology of asymmetrical massing paired with a strong centrality and spreading out into two wings on either side. There are clear projections and recesses, with a larger horizontal plane pushing out on the higher floors of the building, covering part of the sidewalk, especially on the western façade. From the street, it is difficult to get a holistic view of the entire building as the sur-

rounding buildings are relatively close and the building itself is only 4 floors tall with a roof height of around 68.45 feet and a gross floor area of 196,082 square feet. The AIA guide to New York City notes key characteristics of the structure upon construction: 'Curvilinear, extroverted, expansive – it burst forth and wiped out a block of Forsyth Street's street-bed'.²

² Norval White, Elliot Willensky, and Fran Leadon, AIA Guide to New York City, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

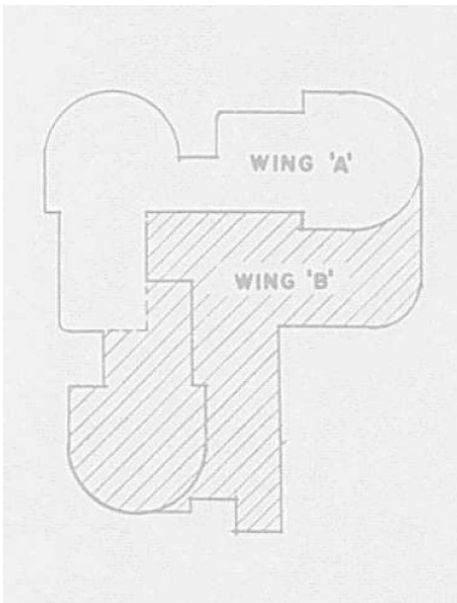


Figure 9: I.S. 131 Floor Plans, Source: Architectural Plans, NYC Municipal Archives



Figure 10: Overhead shot of I.S. 131, Source: Google Maps

II. DESIGN

INTERIOR LAYOUT

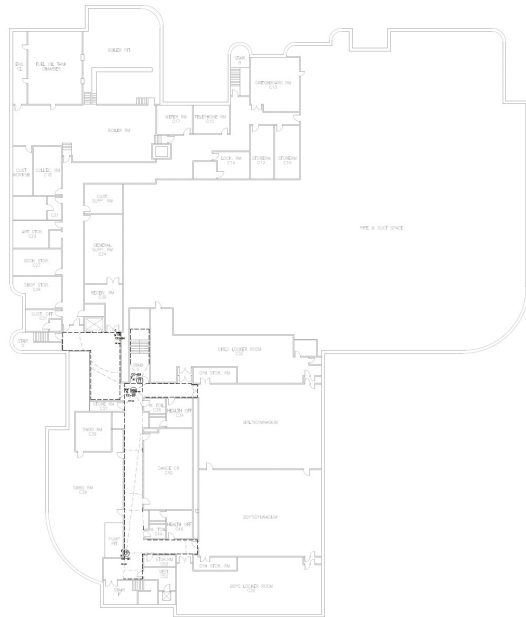


Figure 11: I.S. 131 Floor Plans - Cellar
Source: School Alteration Files

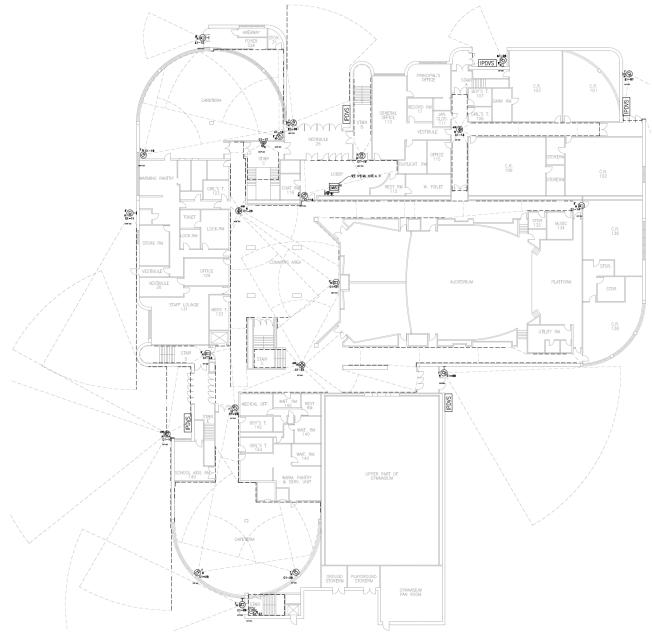


Figure 12: I.S. 131 Floor Plans - 1st Floor
Source: School Alteration Files



Figure 12: I.S. 131 Floor Plans - 2nd Floor
Source: School Alteration Files

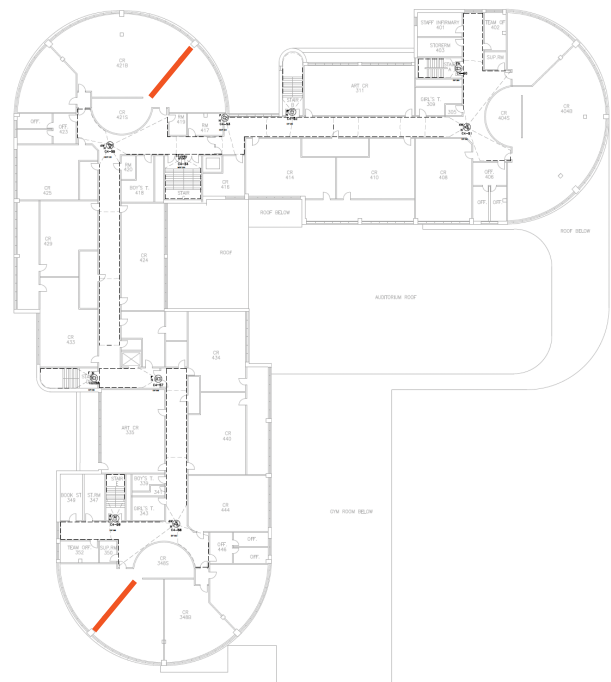


Figure 13: I.S. 131 Floor Plans - 3rd Floor, Alterations shown in orange
Source: School Alteration Files

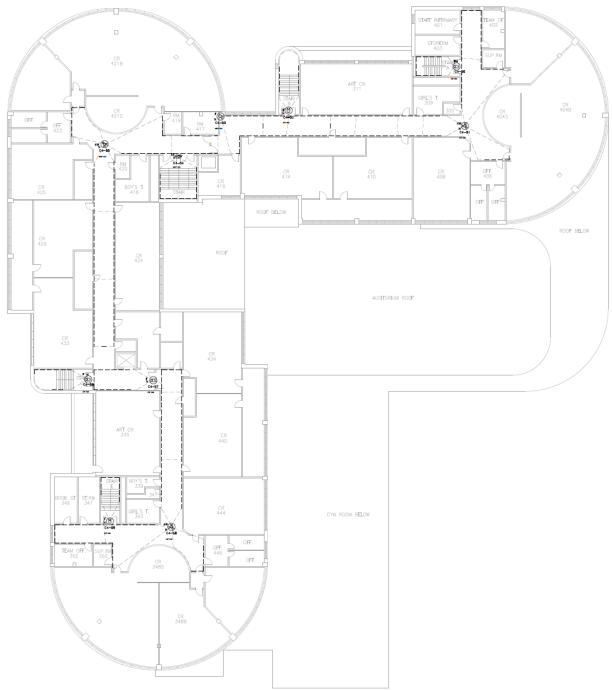


Figure 14: I.S. 131 Floor Plans - 4th Floor, Source: School Alteration Files

On the interior of the structure, there are tight transitional spaces that maximize classroom space. The layout is circular, with rooms exiting directly into other rooms, resulting in an insular layout. In the current day, temporary walls in the larger semi-circular areas have been set up, showing that the interior is relatively adaptable to changes in use. The semicircular areas were initially designed as open spaces to enable teachers to access the larger areas. However, the open layout resulted in some disorder among students. These temporary walls, however, have been noted to not have any electrical circuit connections, hindering them from some practical use for teachers. Finally, the layout includes one central elevator near the auditorium, with staircases in the central and wing points of the building.

The façade additionally gives a strong monumental impression with a fortress-like effect, being a low-level building with slim concentric windows going throughout the structure. These windows were originally constructed of plastic and used to fog up due to condensation; however, they were swapped for glass windows around 30 years after construction. There are numerous entrances that were constructed in aluminum to the building, with the main one located on the north façade; these entrances are not so obvious. Thus, the approach to the building can be somewhat confusing, with multiple discreetly placed entrances.

II. DESIGN

WINDOWS

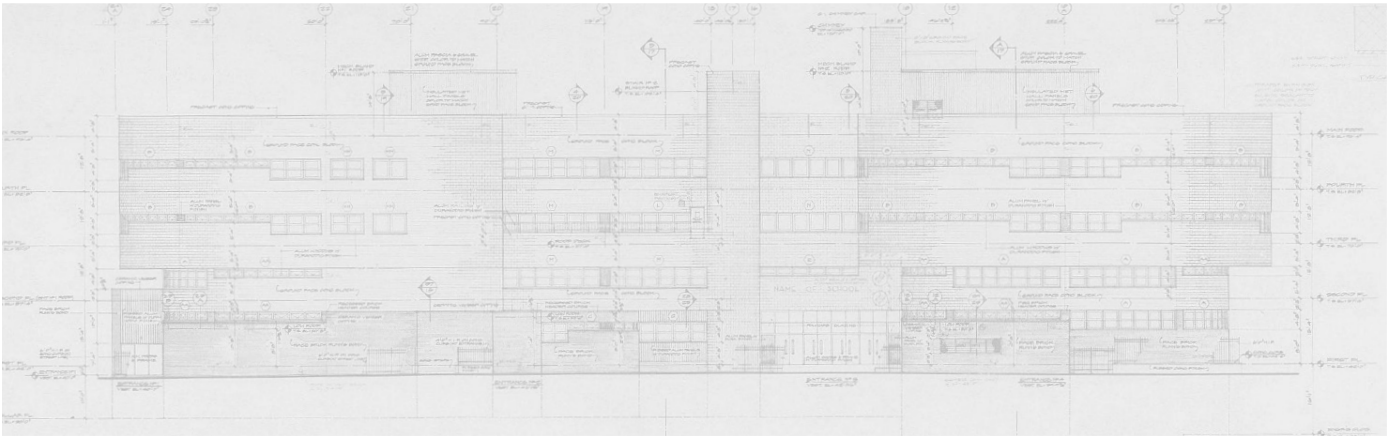


Figure 15: I.S. 131 Architectural Drawings: East Facing Elevation Source: NYC Municipal Archives

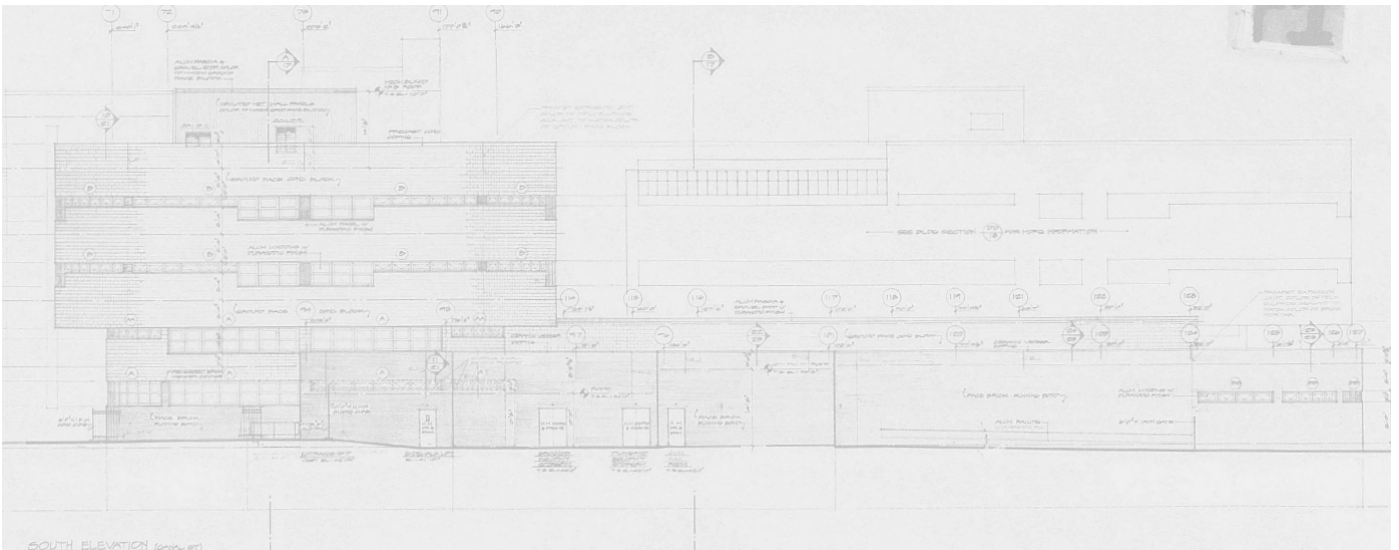


Figure 16: I.S. 131 Architectural Drawings: South Facing Elevation Source: NYC Municipal Archives

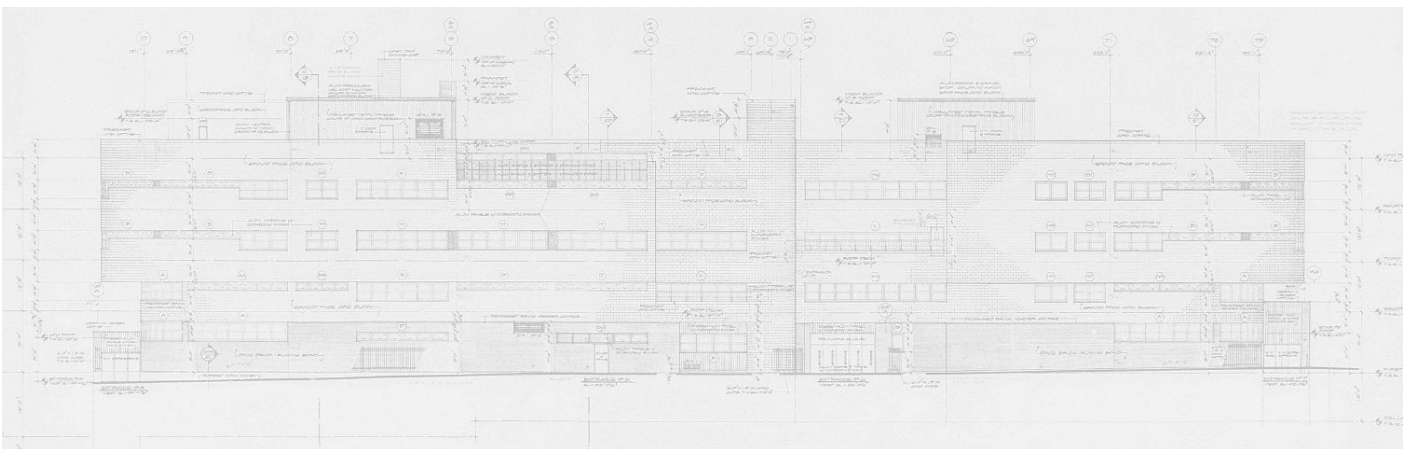


Figure 17: I.S. 131 Architectural Drawings: West Facing Elevation Source: NYC Municipal Archives

II. DESIGN

FACADE MATERIALS



Figure 18: I.S. West facing facade, usage of CMU Brick. Source: Author

The façade material is made of concrete masonry units or CMU, which is a mixture of concrete, cement, and other aggregates, creating a very economical, fire-resistant, and durable material. This building utilizes more square-shaped CMU to handle the tighter curves of the design, while flat surfaces utilize longer, elongated blocks. The walls themselves are built with 6" CMU on the outside, 1.5" air space, and 4" CMU on the inside, suggesting an economic build. Material conditions on the building fare

very well with the CMU having not undergone any maintenance in the last 8 years, but visually showing little deterioration apart from a few cracks. There have been some replacements of CMU of a slightly different coloration, as well as mortar done in different tones. The plans additionally suggest a steel frame construction, allowing for ease of alteration. Finally, surrounding the building, there is a large fence which was placed for security measures.

NEW YORK, LES IN THE 1970-80s

By Jack Egan
Washington Post Staff Writer

While a replay of the 1975 fiscal cliff-hanger may seem neither necessary nor desirable, politics and the competing interests of the multitude of parties involved in keeping New York City solvent appear to be making another showdown inevitable.

4 Keith Moore, "Board Okays School Remap It Hopes Won't Take
Shape," *Daily News (New York)*, December 12, 1974, ProQuest Historical
Newspapers

Board Okays School Remap It Hopes Won't Take Shape

By KEITH MOORE

The Board of Education gave reluctant approval yesterday to the redistricting of five Manhattan and two Brooklyn school districts. At the same time, the board was cautiously optimistic that the State Legislature would enact legislation to prevent the changes, since few seem to be in favor of them.

Three school districts this year have fallen below the minimum enrollment of 15,000 as required by state law, necessitating the re-drawing of lines.

In a resolution passed at its meeting at central headquarters, the board noted that in two hearings concerning the district lines, "the consensus was practically unanimous that no change or minimal changes be made and that efforts be made to have the law revised." The board has asked the Legislature to impose a moratorium on the redistricting for two years, after which the board would again consider population shifts in the districts.

But the board cautioned that if the Legislature did not approve its request prior to March 11, its plan will take effect at the beginning of the new school year on July 1. Board officials said March 11 was the last possible day for the Legislature to act and leave the central board enough time to set up the com-

munity school board elections scheduled for May.

The board's plan would move three Chinatown schools from School District 2 to District 1. District 1 on the lower East side would pick up Public School 23 at 70 Mulberry St.; PS 42, 71 Hester St., and Junior High School 65, 46 Forsyth St.

Besides giving up three schools to the lower East Side school district, District 2, covering portions of mid-Manhattan, would also lose PS 111 at 440 W. 53d St. to District 3, which now takes in most of the upper West Side.

District 4 in East Harlem, another of the school districts which fell below the mandatory attendance figure, would get PS 30 and PS 31 from neighboring District 5 in Central Harlem. The two schools form a complex on E. 128th St. The district would also get the PS 185/208 complex from District 3. Those schools are on W. 111th and 112th Sts.

Brooklyn's District 16, cover-

ing Ridgewood, would pick up PS 44 from neighboring District 13 for its only change. PS 44 is at 432 Monroe St.

The boroughs of Queens, Bronx and Richmond and District 6 in the Inwood-Washington Heights area of Manhattan would not be affected.

The board's plan would put most Manhattan districts just over the 15,000-student limit and keep them safe for at least two years. Then according to law, they would have to be reviewed again.

Asked about the likelihood of obtaining the moratorium from the Legislature, Board President James Regan said he already had commitments from some leaders on the matter.

Regan said he had assurances from State Sen. Roy Goodman (R-L-Manhattan) and Assemblyman Leonard Stavisky (D-Queens), who is the heir apparent to the Assembly Education Committee.

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III. CONTEXT

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE 1970-80s

During this postwar period, junior and senior high schools were additionally seen as centers to consolidate a diverse student population, with junior high schools and senior high schools seen as the best institutions for driving population diversity, as they, by nature, drew students from larger geographic areas and thus their siting was very carefully considered.⁵ In 1971, a news article is released in the *Washington Post* titled “Tentative Pact on School Plan is Reached on Lower East Side”, describing a ‘tentative

solution to the neighborhood’s long struggle to replace the aging and overcrowded Junior High School 65, at 46 Forsyth Street’, decrying the state of J.H.S 65, ‘a brick building surrounded by tenements is 55 years old. It has an enrollment of 1800 and was described by a teacher as being “roach-infested.”’⁶ The historical context depicts a school faced with population overcapacity and in need of material expansion during a time when municipal coffers are especially tight.

5 The Commission On Integration,” Board of Education Records, 1842-2002, Series 850 Box 6, Municipal Archives, New York City Department of Records.

6 “Tentative Pact on School Plan Is Reached on Lower East Side,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Tentative Pact on School Plan Is Reached on Lower East Side

The City Parks Department and the Two Bridges community of the Lower East Side have agreed on a tentative solution to the neighborhood’s long struggle to replace the aging and overcrowded Junior High School 65, at 46 Forsyth Street.

The proposed solution calls for the new school to be built over a gymnasium that is to be constructed on what is now a vacant concrete lot at the southern tip of the Sara D. Roosevelt Park, directly across Forsyth Street from J.H.S. 65.

The complex would take up about one block of the seven-block-long park. The park runs from East Houston Street to Manhattan Bridge.

Parks Commissioner August Heckscher, speaking Friday at a “teach-out” in Sara D. Roosevelt Park intended to dramatize the overcrowded conditions at J.H.S. 65, agreed to a compromise that seemed to be acceptable to community representatives.

Since February, 1970, when community representatives were given permission to pick a site for the new school, they have been trying to get clearance to have the school built on land in the park.

Heckscher’s Plan

“I am charged to safeguard parkland,” Mr. Heckscher said, “but by law I am allowed to put a recreational facility in a park.” He said, therefore, that it would be permissible to build the gymnasium in the park and that the school could then be built on top of it.

Dr. Elliot Shapiro, president of Community School Board 2, in which J.H.S. 65 is situated, said that “there has been some movement here today.” He said that he thought Mr. Heckscher “was harder to move than the

[central Board of Education] will be.”

The central Board of Education would have to approve the plan. Further discussions of the plan have been scheduled and no date has been set for submitting it to the board.

“I’ve never seen the Board of Education willing to build a high rise,” noted Mr. Heckscher. He said that even though he thought the proposal for building a school on top of a gym feasible, the board might not.

Supporting the proposal, Samuel A. Cooper, chairman of an unofficial community group working for the new school, said it would mean that students could remain in the present J.H.S. 65 structure while the new school was built.

The original proposal was to tear down the present school and build the new one on the site. Students would have had to attend classes in an annex at 78 Catherine Street during the construction period.

J.H.S. 65, a brick building surrounded by tenements, is 55 years old. It has an enrollment of 1,800 and was described by a teacher as being “roach infested.”

If the children were required to attend classes in the Catherine Street annex during the construction period they would have to be on triple sessions, according to school officials, because the annex is equipped to handle only 600 students.

Until Mr. Heckscher had indicated his willingness to permit the school to be built on top of the gymnasium there was a deadlock. Community representatives had asked Mr. Heckscher to trade land parcel in the park for the land on which the school now stands. Mr. Heckscher had said he thought that the “swap” would not work.



Figure 22: Multicultural students at J.H.S. 65 (Now I.S. 131), ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1947

Figure 21: Tentative Pact on School Plan Is Reached on Lower East Side, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1971

III. CONTEXT

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE 1970-80s

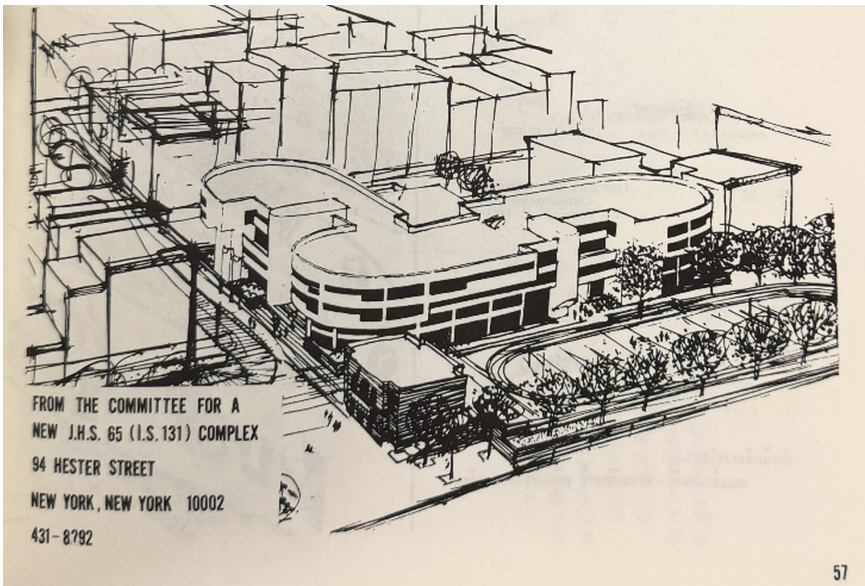


Figure 23: J.H.S. 65 Charles Sumner High School Yearbook, 1976,
Source: Photo by Author, Yearbook

This leads us to the construction of I.S. 131, which is illustrated nicely here in the last yearbook of J.H.S Charles Sumner High School in 1976. The school replaced a block of residential tenements on the northern part of the lot on Hester Street, as depicted in the figure. The Lower East Side was experiencing a decreasing population in the area, but due to school redis-

tricting was seeing an increase in students who needed to attend the school. The school desperately needed to be altered to accommodate a changing population and thus was built with an expanded capacity of 1600; however, first-year enrollment was still over capacity in 1800 in 1983.



Figure 24: See rise as school bells ring, Daily News, ProQuest Historical Newspapers 1983

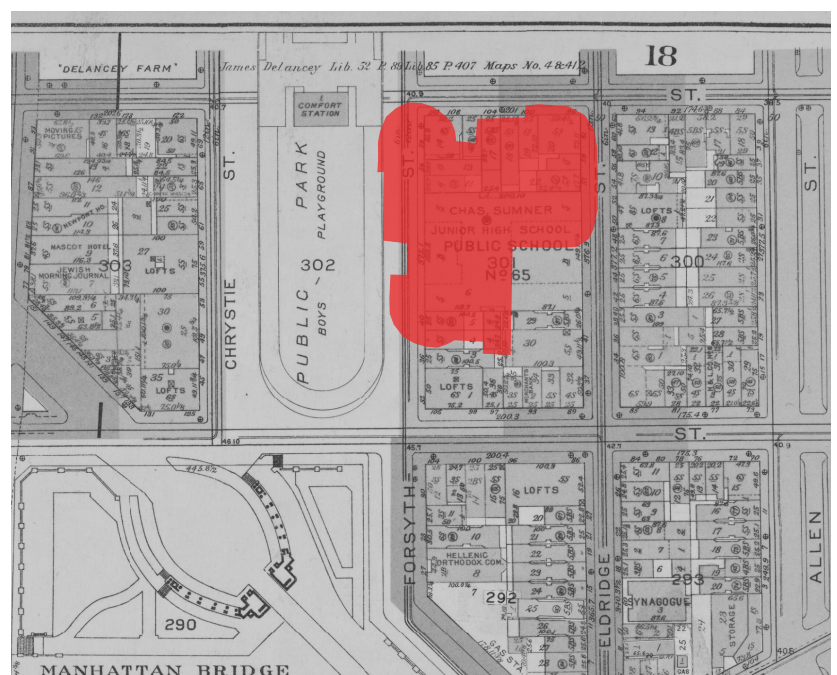


Figure 25: I.S. 131 on Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library, 1955

III. CONTEXT

PUBLIC COMMUNITIES OF I.S. 131



Figure 26: West facing Elevation facing Sara D. Roosevelt Park, Source: Author

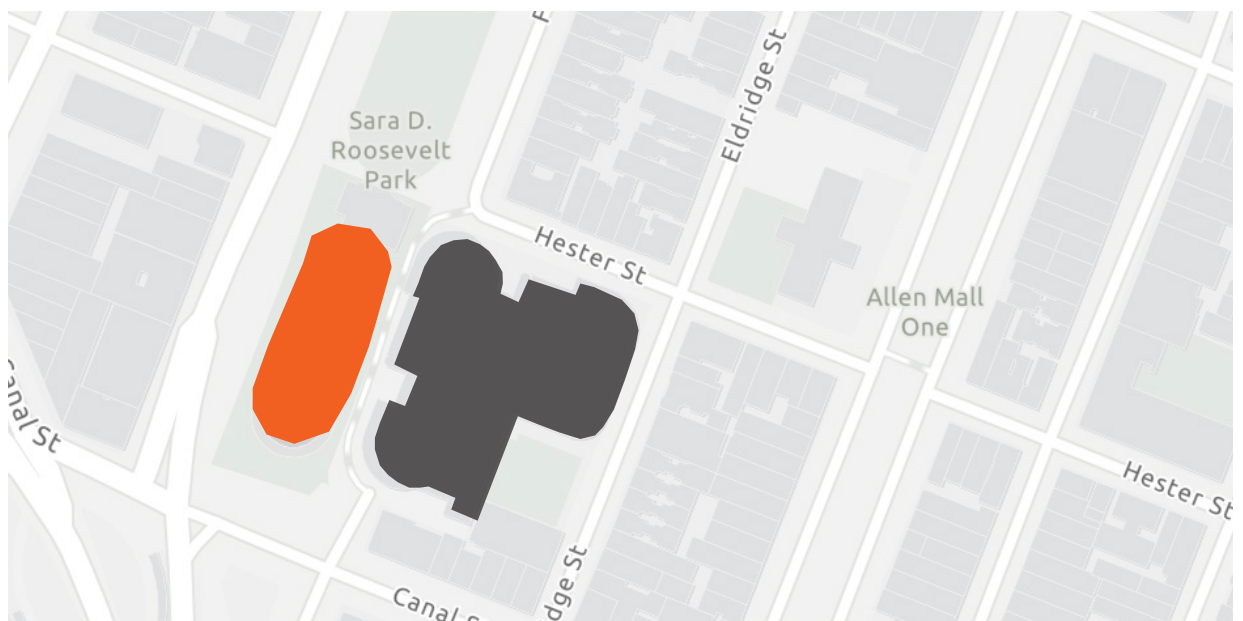


Figure 27: Track in Sara D. Roosevelt Park (Orange), Source: Arcgis, Vectors by author

III. CONTEXT

SITE OVERVIEW AND THE COMMUNITIES OF I.S. 131



Figure 28: Track in Sara D. Roosevelt Park across from I.S. 131,
Source: Mirrorless NYC Instagram Account, 2024

Currently, I.S. 131, Dr. Sun Yat Sen, functions as a busy educational hub. The adjacent public park, which includes a track designated for student use, serves a dual purpose: during school hours, it provides space for physical education, while outside these times it becomes a popular recreational amenity for the broader Chinatown community. Openness to the public brings community; however, this also leads the park to face common issues with hygiene and needles, which are often found on park grounds. In an interview run by Pace High School, a school located in I.S. 131, student journalists note, ‘Almost every morning, women gather to practice tai chi as a way to stay active and stay

connected to their fellow peers,’ referring to the community that regularly uses the park to stay connected. Making the park private to the high school is a topic of conversation, with ‘many students at pace wonder[ing] why the field isn’t fenced off and privately used by Pace.’ due to the unwanted effects of being open to the public; however, there are obvious signs that the wider community places strong value on access to the park with a local stating “I would be lost because there would be no happy place to go to. Chinese people always come here to have fun; if it’s gone, then there is no more entertainment and joy. I would be unhappy, so of course it’s always better to have this park around.”⁷

7 Alyssa Quiles and Ella Tan, “Sara D. Roosevelt Park Field: A Community Treasure or School Safety Risk?,” Pacer NYC, June 12, 2025, <https://pacernyc.com/3946/news/sara-d-roosevelt-park-field-a-community-treasure-or-school-safety-risk/>.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION AND CHARACTER DEFINING FEATURES

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION:³

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Figure 29: National Registration Criteria for Evaluation

I.S. 131, Dr. Sun Yat Sen, warrants consideration for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C for its architectural significance. The building embodies a distinctive typological expression characteristic of the work of prominent architect Danforth Toan, FAIA. Specifically, the asymmetrical, double-winged plan organization with curvilinear volumetric articulation represents a signature design typology within Toan's professional oeuvre. This typology constitutes an important aspect of his architectural legacy and reflects his innovative approach to mid-twentieth-century educational design.



Figure 30: I.S. 131, Source: Author

This building is defined by three key character-defining features. First, its material honesty: the consistent use of CMU creates a clear, monolithic presence. Second, its distinctive façade features asymmetrical massing and strong volumes articulated by slim, concentrically placed windows. Third, the outdoor park space functions as both a shared public-private amenity and a critical link integrating the school into the wider community.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

ZONING

In terms of zoning, 100 Hester Street is a C6-1G commercially zoned public-school building owned by the NYC Department of Education, intended for land use designated to public facilities and institutions. The building class is for educational structures—public elementary, junior, or senior high. It has a lot of area of 85,194 square feet and a gross floor area of 196,082 square feet. Buildings located in C6-1G districts mapped in the LES have a commercial max FAR of 6.0, and 100 Hester also has a residential FAR of 3.44, which is commensurate with the rest of the block. As per C6-1G zoning regulations, any conversion to residential units must undergo some regulatory process.

100 Hester has a high capacity for being de-commissioned, demolished, and rebuilt, as the building is underutilized and has over 60% FAR utilization left, showing strong potential upside. The property has high capacity for further lot development—approximately 1/4 of the lot is a basketball court, and the current built FAR is 2.30, leaving 315,214 square feet in available development rights.

As this district has regulations for the conversion of non-residential to residential use space, there are poor incentives to put a residential addition on the existing building. There is moderate capacity to expand through a merger with adjacent lots, as neighboring properties have medium to low FAR utilization. 100 Hester has a high capacity for TDR if adjacent developers are interested in buying and utilizing 315,214 square feet of developable air rights, and this seems to have the highest incentivization to the NYC DOE due to the dual benefit of preserving the building's unique historical value and public educational use and economic gain.

In summary, this facility is categorized as highly vulnerable due to convergent risk factors. First, student utilization stands at 75% of the designed capacity (1,200 of 1,600 students). Second, the lot retains approximately 300,000 square feet of unutilized development rights,

representing significant unrealized economic potential. Third, the disparity between the structure's economic construction cost and the underlying land valuation creates financial pressure for alternative uses. These conditions, in combination, establish a substantial decommissioning risk should municipal authorities pursue school redistricting initiatives in response to demographic or fiscal pressures.

The school itself already hosts three independent schools, being Emma Lazarus High School (founded in September 2009), a school for new immigrants in New York, Dr. Sun Yat Sen Intermediate School, and Pace High School (founded in 2004). The additions of new schools to the building also indicate high flexibility for taking in new institutions in the future. Notably, Dr. Sun Yat Sen Intermediate School mostly does enrollment through a lottery system, while Pace High School determines enrollment through a merit-based testing system. These changes in enrollment have caused a shift in the students enrolled at the school, not being determined by just geographic or neighborhood factors, something that previously defined school enrollment.

Finally, future efforts should focus on firstly maintaining and improving the understanding of what the meaningful connections are between the built materiality of the school and the different broader communities, and secondly, maintaining the design integrity of the building as per Danforth Toan's designs. In terms of an aesthetic and aesthetic argument for significance, this appears to be quite clear, as the building fits within a specific period of aesthetic significance in his portfolio and is relatively well-maintained materially. However, second-order principles of the institution's importance to the community, both using the school from the interior and the public interacting with the building on the exterior, are still unclear.

In terms of activities that could help bolster the material maintenance of the building, potential activities include a 5 to 10 year maintenance

III. SIGNIFICANCE

RANGE OF CHANGE

report or documentation of the building, and a volunteer group to help with cleaning and tidying of the nearby park. To form consensus around the building, applying for National Registration could ease some of the financial stress in performing maintenance on the building, as it opens access to federal grants, although, notably, as the school is part of the public apparatus, it would not have access to tax credit allocations. Initiating the local landmarking process would also help in forming a consensus with the community about the building. While local landmarking does not prevent our building from being demolished, it still offers a level of protection and can form a public consensus on the importance of a building. Local landmarking appears to be an attractive solution as schools typically do not have to go through the local landmarking commissions in the decision-making process of altering one of its buildings, as the School Construction Authority is a state-funded organization. However, I.S. 131 is a 41-year-old building, and for buildings approaching 45 years of age, work going forward would have to go through the State Historic Preservation Office for review.

8

Another interesting suggestion came from a studio study of post-war schools located in New York in 2013 under Professor Andrew Dolkart.⁹ In it, they propose the creation of a non-contiguous district organized by theme rather than geography, of which sixty schools would qualify under criteria A, ‘buildings associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history’, and C, ‘buildings that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction’, to be nominated to the National Register

of Historic Places.

In the case of decommissioning and privatization, a case study of 8 Spruce Street, which is a residential tower designed in a similarly formalist style, was added as an addition to a school that operates as a private educational institute. This can be a viable alternative that could help preserve some of the material or design integrity in the case of a potential privatization of the school. Additionally, since the lot of I.S. 131 is quite large, it would be relatively easy to attempt to build a taller tower, although FAR restrictions may limit the development to some extent. This could be mitigated by having a cultural entity (for example, in the performing arts or galleries) within a new development that grants additional FAR.¹⁰

Finally, as a forward-looking statement, to better understand public consensus, further studies should be conducted on how broader stakeholders come to use and value the building and its public areas, whether the structure (e.g., frame, walls, conduit installation) itself is adaptable to changing contexts, and what the demographics of the student body look like.

8 Prashant Banerjee et al., “Mid-Century Modern Schools: Preserving Post-War Schools in New York,” ed. and comp. Vincent Wilcke (Historic Preservation Studio, Columbia University School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, 2013).

9 Banerjee et al., “Mid-Century Modern Schools.”

10 Daniel A. Spitzer, Charles W. Malcomb, and Joel J. Terragnoli, “Using (and Misusing) Incentive Zoning,” New York Zoning Law and Practice Report 19, no. 4 (January/February 2019): 1, <https://www.hodgsonruss.com/assets/html/documents/Using%20and%20Misusing%20Incentive%20Zoning.pdf>.

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