Program Summary:
Historic restoration of a circa 1850 double gallery townhouse for classroom use with new student chapel addition; new main entrance to school for special children.

Program Statement:
This school for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities had been operating from its disjointed campus of several disparate buildings in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans since 1965. The school was desperately in need of additional classroom space, a dignified worship space, a more cohesive sense of place, and a better connection to the surrounding community. The project brief required the following:

- The restoration of the only truly historic building on campus, a former Greek Revival residence called the “Convent.” The interior of the Convent would be renovated and adapted to create unique teaching spaces, including a music classroom, a technology laboratory, and a transition academy for young adults.
- The addition of a dedicated student chapel for the weekly celebration of mass and other school gatherings.
- The renovation of the front of the 1960’s era school administration building to provide a more inviting and clearly defined entrance to the campus.
The restored Greek Revival Convent building with reconstructed double front gallery. The new student chapel is visible behind the building on the left.

To the right of the Convent sits the new main entrance to the school. Originally built in the 1960’s this classroom and administration building has been given new prominence with the addition of an entrance canopy, lighting, landscaping, and signage.

The restored and renovated buildings are now an anchor for the school campus and help reconnect the school to its Lower Garden District neighborhood.
In the 1880’s, the current site of the school was home to several architecturally significant structures, including a handsome brick school building, a masonry gothic revival church, and a parsonage. The building on the far left of the c. 1890 etching is all that remains. Built as double residential townhouse, it was purchased by the church and converted to a convent in the 1880’s. It was modified greatly over the years, losing most of its gallery, a service wing, and several window openings. This etching, along with a partial photograph from 1919, were used to reconstruct the Greek Revival double gallery, with its unique, full height box columns on either end.

The single-story administration building to the right of the Convent was constructed on the foundations of the original church school, but with a much less decorative, more bunker-like style, in stark contrast with its surrounding neighborhood.

The front of the building was opened up and a glassy new lobby created. A new aluminum canopy provides a better sense of scale to the building, bringing it out to the sidewalk, and presenting a more inviting and accessible presence to students and the community. The custom laser cut panels are a modern reference to the intricate cast iron railings on the Convent, and are based on a Rose motif, the unofficial symbol of this school for special children.
By 2013, the historic Convent building was in extremely poor condition and had suffered years of neglect. No longer safe for occupancy by students, the structure was relegated to storage of school supplies, and was a prominent neighborhood eyesore.

Restoration of the building required careful deconstruction of insensitive additions and extensive structural reinforcement. The masonry foundation had failed, requiring that the entire building be temporarily jacked up on wooden supports while a new foundation was constructed. Water and termite damaged joists and studs were replaced, and the entire structure was reinforced with plywood sheathing.

All original windows, doors, and trim were carefully salvaged, then restored to original condition. Where original components were missing, replacements were fabricated using the historic fabric as a model.
The historic Convent building was originally built as a double townhouse residence but had been heavily modified over the years as it was adapted for other uses. The original residential layout was mostly restored, with the double parlors on the ground floor adapted for use as classrooms.

On the second floor, the bedroom in the southwest corner was occupied by Sr. Lillian McCormack, the founder of the school. In 1976, St. Theresa of Calcutta stayed in this room during the New Orleans stop on her US tour. The room has been restored and furnished to reflect its appearance during this visit.

Toilet rooms and a new code compliant stair were added to the rear, in the footprint of the original service wing.

The new student chapel is located behind the service wing, its size and dimensions defined by the original residential structure. For years, a makeshift student chapel had been located in the Convent building, so it was important that the new chapel have a direct physical connection to its origins.
The interior of the Convent had suffered numerous unfortunate renovations over the years, and much of the historic fabric was lost. One of the two matching entrance halls remained and was restored to its original elegance. The heart pine floors were repaired and refinished. Massive Greek Key door casings and baseboard were uncovered and repaired. A section of elaborate plaster crown molding was discovered behind a dropped acoustical ceiling and was replicated in all of the public spaces on the ground floor.

Originally hanging in the St. Michael church down the street, the antique brass lighting fixture was moved to the Convent in 1965 when the church was demolished. The fixture was cleaned, rewired, and reinstalled in the entrance hall.

The remaining interior spaces have been adapted for use as modern classrooms but retain their gracious proportions and historic detailing.
The original Greek Key entrances were restored, with new four-panel wood entrance doors and glass transoms. The remaining slip head sash windows were restored to original condition and used as a template to replace long-removed, closed-up openings. New window trim matches the remaining historic trim and casings. New operable shutters and hardware were installed at all window openings.

The original iron railings had been removed from the building during earlier renovations. Fortunately, small sections of the railing had been installed as a security measure in the second-floor windows when the gallery was demolished some time in the 50’s. Those small sections were used to replicate new cast iron railings on the front gallery.
The new chapel addition could easily have overwhelmed the original Convent building. Instead, great efforts were made to limit its size and dimensions to respect the historic building. The gable roof of the chapel matches the height and angles of the Convent but is covered with metal panels to distinguish the new construction. Large windows allow daylight to fill the interior of the chapel, but the lighting is controlled by horizontal aluminum louvers that reference the horizontal siding and wood shutters on the Convent building.

The chapel is offset from the historic building with a lower, glass-enclosed entrance vestibule. Large, historic stained-glass windows, originally from the destroyed 1867 church on the adjacent parcel, were fully restored and set in lighted recesses above each entrance. These beautiful stained-glass panels are a subtle exterior indicator that this is a religious building and connect this modern building to its historic origins.

Smaller rectangular windows in the side aisles of the chapel are filled with custom art glass panel, designed and fabricated by the students of the school. The art glass panels depict the stations of the cross, providing a unique connection between the current educational use of the site and its historic origins.
At the heart of the contemporary addition is the school chapel. The chapel is a large double height space with exposed steel columns and scissor trusses. The space is flanked by large louvered clearstory windows that provide filtered light into the space. The focal point of the space is the sanctuary with custom designed wood furnishings and a large wooden cross beyond. The cross is backdropped by a vertical wood slat wall and custom fritted glass curtainwall that delicately diffuses light and pulls the eye skyward. Restrained in materials and details, the chapel space provides a contemplative environment that is a reflective space for individual prayer and the celebration of mass.
The Sanctuary is outfitted with custom designed furnishings made with clear sealed rift sawn white oak. Like the surrounding architecture of the space, the furnishings are simple in form and detail.

The fronts of the Altar and the Ambo are adorned with custom cut wood panels in a rose pattern, a motif that reflects “Blue Roses,” as the school’s students are sometimes called. This sobriquet is based on a statement by the school’s founder, Sister Lillian:

"If there were such a thing as a Special Blue Rose, with what care it would be nurtured. Our children are that special." -Sr. Lillian McCormack, SSND
Flanking the chapel are two side aisles that have small punched window openings running down their length. The windows are fitted with cast glass artwork representing the fourteen stations of the cross. These glass art pieces were designed and produced by the students of the school’s art department. The glass artwork has a handmade, playful aesthetic that helps make this chapel “special.”
At the rear of the chapel is a large vertical slat wood wall with acoustical backing. Light throughout the day is filtered through the louvered clerestory windows, creating an everchanging play of light in the space. The wood slat wall in addition to perforated metal ceiling panels and fabric wrapped panels flanking the space help provide comfortable acoustics in an otherwise hard surfaced space.
The new chapel, the restoration of the Convent building, and the redesigned school entrance have provided a new prominence for the school. Previously fenced off and protected from its once-sketchy neighborhood, the school is now visually and physically connected to its community, proudly proclaiming its presence as an anchor of this now vibrant neighborhood.
Project Name: St. Michael Special School Restoration and Addition

Project Location: New Orleans, Louisiana

Owner/Client: The Archdiocese of New Orleans

Architect of Record:
Holly and Smith Architects, APAC
208 North Cate Street
Hammond, LA 70401

Project Team:
Holly & Smith Architects, APAC

Landscape Architect: N/A

Consultants:
Civil/Structural: Heaslip Engineering
MEP: ADG Engineering

General Contractor:
Voelkel McWilliams Construction, LLC

Photographer:
Neil Alexander (Slides 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, & 13)
Holly & Smith Architects, APAC (Slide 3 – Before Photos, Slide 3 – Before Photos, Slide 6 – Before Photo)