



Featured Story

Taking Education Through the Roof at Rothenberg

By: Jonathan DeHart, 1/11/2011



Cincinnati's [Rothenberg Preparatory Academy](#) has sat in the heart of Over-the-Rhine as a prime example of the city's rich architectural heritage for over one hundred years. Now it just might be serving as a sign of the future of elementary education.

As part of a system wide upgrade of school facilities, Cincinnati Public Schools has been either rebuilding or renovating many of its schools throughout the city in order to meet state standards. Integrating innovative aspects like green roofs and energy improvements where able, some schools have been rebuilt entirely, including the district's first LEED certified building at Pleasant Ridge Montessori. But Rothenberg, like many of the older turn of the century building stock owned by CPS, was built in a different time and many of its interior features were outdated or inadequate for modern students. Replete with bas reliefs and "full of art," the school building at the intersection of Main and McMicken Streets "was built at a time when people took great pride in their schools, which served as a physical expression of their care," says Pope

Coleman, who sits on the board of the [Over-the-Rhine \(OTR\) Foundation](#).

Coleman and the Foundation had taken a special interest in Rothenberg during CPS's initial planning phases because of its historical significance, its large footprint at the northern edge of Over-the-Rhine, and its importance as one of only two public elementary schools in the neighborhood. According to Coleman, when CPS discussed demolition of the school as an alternative in order to build a less expensive, more modern structure, community advocates including the Foundation intervened, advocating for a full renovation of the existing building.

"We have been losing trees one by one, just as we have been losing buildings in Over-the-Rhine one by one," Coleman said.

By working with community input, CPS arrived at a plan to renovate the existing structure. It was then that Coleman approached CPS with his idea to create a rooftop garden.

A quirk of history had set this school apart in an unlikely way since its original construction. Due to space constraints at the time of its opening, Rothenberg's rooftop originally served as a playground at the beginning of the 20th century. As everywhere is fair game for Cincinnati's extensive greening efforts, including roof space, the Rothenberg's utilitarian rooftop practically begged for modern cultivation. This inspired the OTR Foundation to propose creating a rooftop "learning garden" in the place where the playground once stood.



Once original concerns about the roof supporting additional weight were dismissed by structural tests, CPS and Coleman began planning the new "classroom" four stories off the ground. While other buildings around town are upgrading to green roofs, Coleman explains that there is a clear distinction between green roofs of the passive kind and rooftop gardens that are meant for use, like the proposed garden atop the Rothenberg school. For those with an environmental bent, this development has arrived not a moment too soon.

"We have a population today that does everything in a cocoon, whether in a classroom, in front of a television or in an automobile," Coleman says. "There is a real lack of hands-on experience in our lives today."

In his best-selling book *Last Child in the Woods*, Audubon Medal-winning journalist and author Richard Louv makes the case that children have grown separate from nature to such a degree that their emotional development is being significantly hampered. Louv's tome links this "nature deficit disorder" with alarming trends, such as a rise in obesity, attention deficit disorder and depression among children. To buck this trend, Louv advocates that we reacquaint ourselves and our children with the Earth.



Taking this message to heart, Coleman explains that a number of private foundations have already stepped forward to fund almost one-third of the project's expected \$300,000 – 350,000 price tag, including \$33,000 to extend the school's existing elevator to the rooftop. The garden comes next.

"From the intellectual appeal to the uniqueness of the teaching garden," Coleman says the OTR Foundation has had no shortage of interested donors eager to contribute to the project.

With money matters moving along, the next piece of the puzzle was finding the green dream team to make the vision a reality. Through a string of serendipitous encounters such a team organically took shape, including environmental curriculum innovator Roberta Paola and green roof designer Rose Seeger.

Paola, a Loveland-based woman who calls herself "Granny," has cultivated a home-grown curriculum of nature-based education that doesn't teach gardening per se, but instead uses a garden as a laboratory for students to get hands-on experience with whatever is being taught in the classroom. In practice, this learning can be anything from students learning to count through planting x-number of seeds to measuring the growth of an amaryllis.



Paola recalls that when she started her garden-based curriculum in 2002, "my intent was simply to give other children the chance to pick flowers." Now one of the largest and most comprehensive school garden programs in the Midwest, Paolo prefers to mentor other programs, "not by duplicating [Granny's Garden School](#), but by serving as a guide for others to learn from our experience to create a program that fits their school's environment."

The environment at the Rothenberg school will be one of innovation. While more buildings around town are donning green roofs for the environmental benefits or to score LEED certification points, the Rothenberg school's rooftop garden "will have some permanently planted areas, but the planting beds will be planted by the students every year, so they will be a blank canvas for them to plant and learn from," Seeger says.

Alongside a common space, each teacher will have a space within the garden, in which each student will have another space.

"It is strictly voluntary," Coleman emphasizes. "Teachers will not be required to use the space. It is completely up to them."

This flexibility and the room given for creativity distinguish what is planned for the rooftop of Rothenberg.

"Children in Over-the-Rhine may have never seen a garden," Seeger says. "This will open up a whole new world for them, hopefully teaching them sustainability, ownership, math and science. I think it will be a huge success story for CPS who is on track to be one of the greenest school districts in the country. They will set a standard for others to follow."

Robin Brandon, project coordinator for CPS, agrees.

"Meeting with the community over the past few years we have learned that gardening and green space are very important to them. This is a wonderful way to create a connection between the school and the community. What



better way to bring everyone together than on a beautiful rooftop garden with a spectacular view of the Cincinnati skyline," Brandon says.

Coleman considers the work an important part of the change happening in Cincinnati's oldest neighborhood.

"Over-the-Rhine is now past the tipping point," Coleman adds. "We are on a successful curve. So many changes have occurred in the past ten years that they have added up to what I consider forward movement."

Photography provided by Green City Resources