City College Retools with Research Lab Revival

SOM-designed Marshak Science Building gets facelift amid R&D building boom at Hamilton Heights campus
Robert E. Thomas

The Marshak Science Building, for decades the only laboratory facility at the City College of New York, is getting a major facelift. At the same time, it’s losing pride of place on campus. The 13-story concrete structure, designed by SOM in 1971, is currently undergoing a rehabilitation of its original concrete facade, and receiving a completely new glass curtain wall courtesy of Ahuja Partnership Architects and RSD Engineering.

Meanwhile, a clutch of new research facilities, including the CCNY Advanced Science Research Center, are in the works for the school’s expanded South Campus in Hamilton Heights.
The Marshak curtain wall is 90 percent in place, said Raj Ahuja, the firm’s principal. Ahuja Partnership was originally hired ten years ago to repair shoddy concrete panels, some of which actually fell from the building in 2005. The original concrete, though common at the time of construction, has proven unsuitable for East Coast weather, said Ajay Ghei, an associate at Ahuja Partnership and project manager for the Marshak Building. In some instances, panels were only held in place by glue.

By 2007, the repair work had evolved into a $45 million renovation, including plans for the new facade, the only way to avoid continual concrete repairs. “The new curtain wall has been designed to be the only wall,” Ghei said. This means that upon completion, the new wall, attached to the original by means of metal tubing, will insulate the entire building and protect the remaining substandard concrete, still a major liability. Thanks to this foresight, the wall, which also integrates aluminum panels on the north and south elevations, will allow for the eventual removal of the original single-pane windows, freeing space for new HVAC units.

These changes come in the midst of CUNY’s “Decade of Science,” a refocusing of university funds and attention on research and development in advanced math and science. Though the Marshak Building opened four decades ago, City College spokesman Ellis Simon said that it has remained the sole science building on campus despite a recent explosion of research activity.

In order to accommodate this new emphasis on research, CUNY has initiated a number of projects. These include construction of two graduate research laboratories, as well as a new City College Advanced Science Research Center, designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox, with Flad & Associates serving as architect of record on the project and designing the labs. These facilities should help alleviate demand on the Marshak Building, which also houses the Nat Holman Gymnasium and the Jeremiah Mahoney Pool.
The new science buildings will join the School of Architecture, Urban Design and Landscape Architecture, recently remodeled by Rafael Viñoly Architects, on CCNY’s ever-expanding South Campus.

The Marshak Building, which will also undergo a series of interior laboratory renovations, will remain open throughout the exterior construction phase scheduled for completion this fall.


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