

Brookline's new high school design makes the honor roll

With a lot going on locally in high school construction, William Rawn Associates has crafted an exemplary education complex.

By **James McCown** Globe correspondent,
Updated September 14, 2023, 7:27 a.m.



STEM wing addition to Brookline High School, designed by William Rawn Associates. ROBERT BENSON

BROOKLINE — When Brookline High School students returned to class on Sept. 5, they did so to grounds transformed. The new buildings and renovations have been a multi-year project meant to accommodate a rapid increase in enrollment — there were 1,726 students in 2010 compared with 2,175 now.

This is the high school we all wish we had gone to — indeed many colleges would be lucky to have such a campus. The buildings are arrayed around Cypress Field, which is both an athletic space and a public park, serving students and the single-family homes that abut the school property. At Brookline High School, William Rawn Associates Architects has crafted an exemplary educational complex with architecture that is contextual, carefully thought out, and brimming with imagination.

Let's begin with the newest and most exciting building — 22 Tappan St. It is conceived primarily to serve incoming freshmen, of whom there are many, some 574 by current enrollment records. One walks eastward along newly widened sidewalks alongside Tappan Street and beholds a building with wide overhanging eaves and a gentle bend. Stairs fronting directly on the street are designed with a shallow rise over run to encourage not just ease of ascension but student gathering and socializing.



Brookline High School's 22 Tappan Building, designed by William Rawn Associates. ROBERT BENSON

“I like to compare it to an Italian hill town,” said Sam Lasky, the principal in the Rawn office in charge of the project. “When we were doing a previous project, we arrived at what we think is the perfect stair ratio of 5 to 15, rise to run. It’s more comfortable, and it’s much more receptive to sitting and hanging out.” The standard stair ratio is 7 to 11. As for the eaves, or “canopies” as Lasky likes to call them, they shield students from the elements and have an underside that appears to be wood but is actually more maintenance-friendly aluminum tongue-and-groove planks. At night the building glows like a lantern.

The interior is awash in natural light and filled with color and surprise. Clerestory windows abound, and there is a deft use of colorful glazed tile that Lasky said was installed by a master craftsman. The typical high school hallway — a double-loaded corridor with lockers on both sides, a historic design tradition that is loved and reviled in equal measure, is nowhere to be found. Instead the hallways are airy and expansive and have lockers on only one side. The choice of furniture lends a mid-century vibe — bright hues and simple design recall [Charles and Ray Eames](#) and their contemporaries.

The other notable from-the-ground-up building is the STEM Wing, located across campus from 22 Tappan. It accommodates study of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. It has a rather formal street presence, with a row of square columns and an entrance off to one side. Here, too, a great deal of thought went into designing the entry stairs. Lasky can barely contain his enthusiasm at students gathering on the stairs or, even better, consulting with a teacher.

“I find it fascinating because when you’re designing a building, you talk about a lot of things,” he said. “Will this happen? Will that happen? You’re basically creating a hypothesis about the behavior of people in the future. And when people find these places and use them as you were hoping they would, it’s quite exciting.”



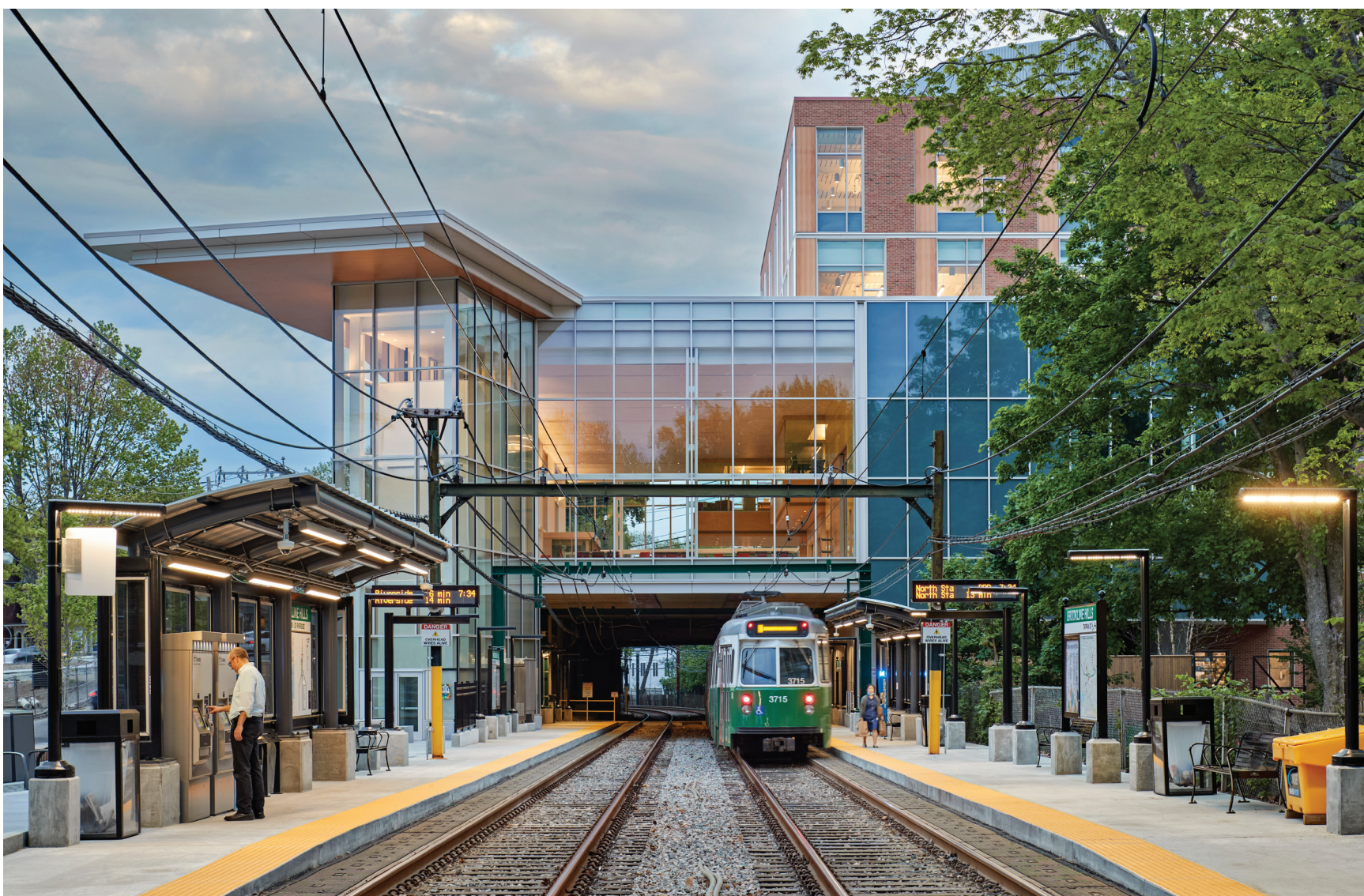
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In both the 22 Tappan and STEM buildings, students are on display. Particularly in the study of science and related disciplines, current pedagogical thinking encourages glass-enclosed spaces so the entire student body can get a sense of what their peers are working on. Enthusiasm for science is contagious — a 2017 study at Florida International University concluded that students who are initially uninterested in STEM may develop an interest in these subjects if their classmates are viewed doing them and are enthusiastic about them.

The Brookline campus is oriented toward walking, bicycling, and mass transit. One of the coups the school and designers achieved was negotiating with the MBTA that 22 Tappan would span the Green Line, and that the Brookline Hills platform would receive a major upgrade. The large international infrastructure consulting firm AECOM was responsible for the new station design.



Interior of Brookline High School's STEM building, designed by William Rawn Associates. ROBERT BENSON PHOTOGRAPHY



Brookline High School's 22 Tappan building, designed by William Rawn Associates, with the MBTA Green Line underneath. ROBERT BENSON

In addition to the new STEM and 22 Tappan buildings, the scope of the \$230 million project included the Rawn firm's renovations to the Tappan Gymnasium and parts of the school's Main Building at 115 Greenough St.

Massachusetts is investing heavily in high schools at the present time. As of last spring, according to the Massachusetts School Building Authority's website, there were 12 high school construction projects underway in Greater Boston in communities as varied as Somerville, Arlington, Belmont, and Waltham. This represents a total construction cost of almost \$2 billion.

These projects should hope to be as good as Brookline. The overall impression one gets, particularly in the two new buildings, is of expansiveness. Hallways, staircases, and mezzanines are generously proportioned. There are innumerable nooks and crannies for quiet study, student/teacher consultation, or just watching the school scene go by. The sum of the new buildings and renovation is almost 300,000 square feet, and it's all put to work for learning and socializing. Significantly, the sidewalks on Tappan Street were widened from 6 feet to 11 feet, with a 4-foot safety buffer between the sidewalk and street curb to increase pedestrian safety as students change classes. On Cypress Street they were widened from 7 to 10 feet.



Interior of STEM wing addition to Brookline High School, designed by William Rawn Associates. ROBERT BENSON

Depending on one's test-taking abilities and position in the social pecking order, high school can be heaven or hell. For those of us who had the latter experience, Brookline High School evokes longing for a teenage past that might have been. With its outstanding architecture and vibrant town/gown engagement, the students who go there are fortunate indeed.

James McCown is an architectural journalist who lives in Newton. Rizzoli New York will publish his "The Home Office Reimagined: Places to Think, Reflect, Work, Dream and Wonder" early next year.