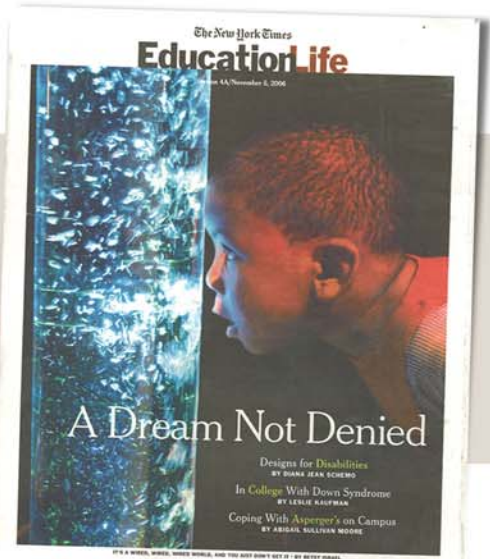


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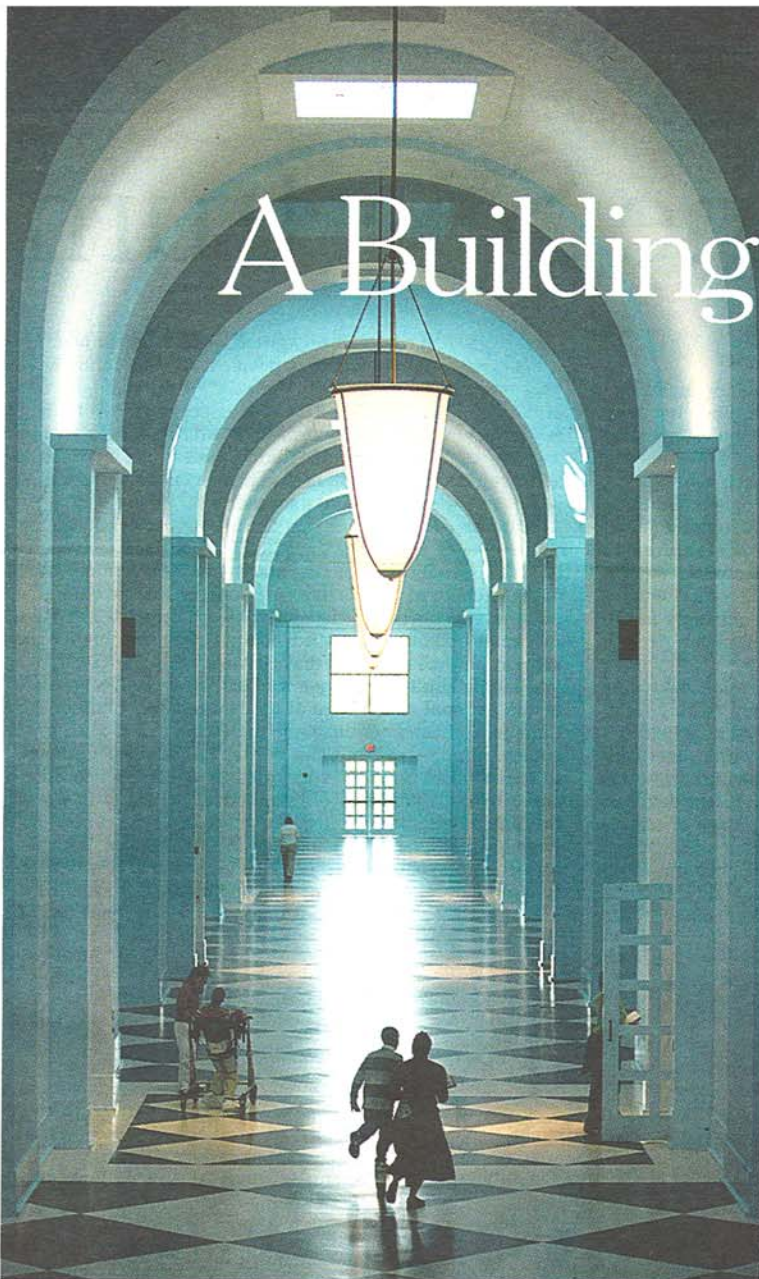
ON THE COVER: At St. Coletta, a school for the cognitively disabled, 3-year-old Sacari is taken with an interactive bubble column, which is used to teach color identification and cause and effect.

Photograph by Tyrone Turner for The New York Times

A Building With a Mission

Text by Diana Jean Schemo

Photographs by Tyrone Turner



THE ST. COLETTA SCHOOL IN WASHINGTON, D.C., LOOKS LIKE A LEGO set come to life, all bold shapes and candy colors. Unveiled in September, the building was designed by Michael Graves to reflect the school's mission: to teach life and job skills to students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, including autism and mental retardation.

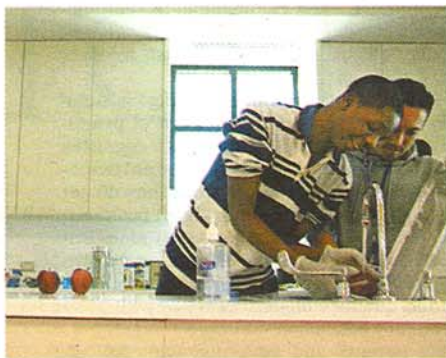
As it happens, Mr. Graves was stricken midway through the project with a mysterious sinus infection that left him in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the chest down. By then, the design was largely done, but Mr. Graves now knew to leave an even wider berth for wheelchairs, to spare doorways nicks and dents.

St. Coletta was founded in 1959 as a private school by the parents of a Down syndrome child. Over the years, it has occupied basements and churches, with limited success retrofitting with even basic ramps. With its move from the Virginia suburbs to Washington this fall, the school expanded (to 271 students, ages 3 to 22) and redefined itself as the St. Coletta Special Education Public Charter School. The \$32 million building was financed, in part, by \$12.4 million appropriated by Congress. It now occupies almost 100,000 square feet of light and colors and soft surfaces, built from the ground up for those who face the steepest hurdles to learning.

THE VILLAGE GREEN Student "houses" are grouped around an atrium that runs like a spine through the center of the building. It is free of the nooks and crannies autistic children like to hide in. The palette is Michael Graves's signature muted blue.



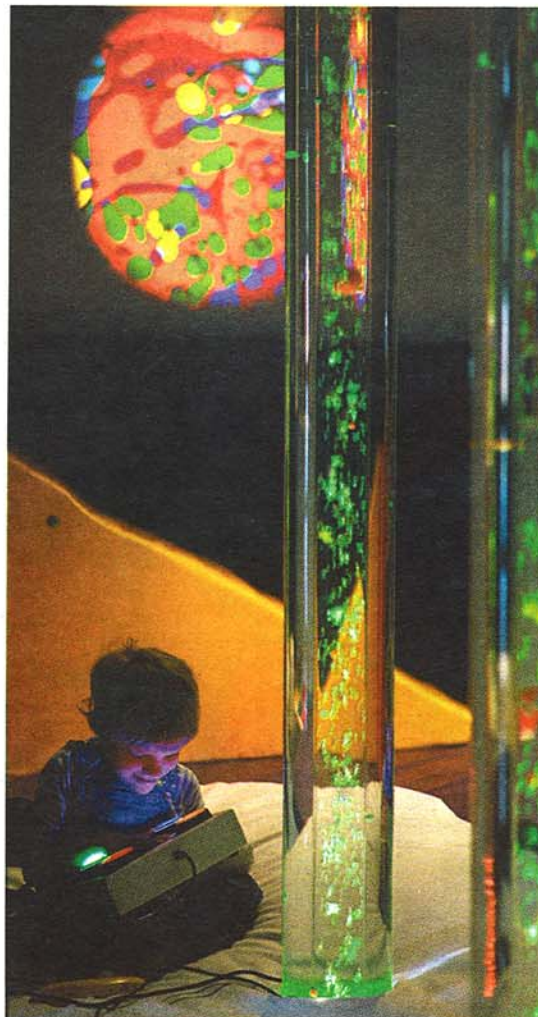
MY HOUSE An autistic child is thrown by change. Students are assigned to one of five houses, in which they will work with teachers and therapists for several years. Each house is painted a different color, with a transitional color between them. The idea, says Robert Miller, the project architect, is for students to be able to identify a defined space and feel at home in it.



IN FOR LUNCH Each "house" has a kitchen in which to practice life skills like planning a menu, preparing a meal and clearing the table. Students are also taught simple job skills (sorting laundry, stuffing envelopes). Even reading and math are tied to everyday life. Half the students are nonverbal, and learn to communicate by pointing to images in notebooks.



TRANSPARENCY Because statistics show that the mentally impaired are the most likely to be abused, all doors have porthole windows. Sharon Brady Raimo, chief executive of St. Coletta of Greater Washington, the charity that runs the school, says she wants teachers and aides to know that somebody can look in on them at any time. "The whole idea is transparency," she says. Transparency works for the children, too. Anne Strube, a teacher, likes that tall windows bring natural light into all the classrooms. "You're letting them see as much of the world as they can before we take them out or they go on a field trip," she says.



THE SENSORY ROOM The bubble column is a latter-day lava lamp activated by touch or voice. Press the green button for a swirl of green; speak loudly enough and colored shapes dance. Lessons learned: cause and effect; the correct choice has its rewards. The room is also designed for relaxation. A child can lie back in a vibrating chair as neon spaghetti tubes change color overhead. "Kids who are overstimulated can calm down here, and those who are understimulated can perk up," says Rebecca Hill, chief development officer.