This thesis explores the development of an interdisciplinary design incubator and business center in Richmond, Virginia through the adaptive reuse of a retired, historic school building.

The design center’s mission is to make the business and practice of design accessible to all of the Richmond community and to enhance the positive influence of design in the area. The center is open to all design disciplines, such as interior design, graphic design, industrial design, fashion design, environmental design, and so forth. As an incubator, the center nurtures and grows new design businesses in a shared, collaborative working environment; as a business center, it provides the necessary resources for design practice and advancement in the surrounding community. In the spirit of a cooperative, the center seeks to attract design resources in the Richmond area as it simultaneously and reciprocally offers its resources in design expansion efforts in the community. With VCU as a progenitor of design in Richmond and well beyond, the design center draws from the School of the Arts talent (students, faculty, and alumni) and provides resources to them in kind.

Patrick Henry Elementary School is uniquely situated in the dual context of urban neighborhood and public urban park. A historic school recently closed by the City of Richmond, this unoccupied building consists of 40,000+ square feet divided among three main floors and two smaller split levels. Given its historic significance and extraordinary site surroundings, this space offers a prime opportunity for adaptive reuse, especially for the purpose of continued education and idea generation. The site’s proximity to precious urban green space is an opportunity not only to tie the built space to its natural surroundings, but also to visually reinforce the design center's commitment to sustainable design.
The school’s extraordinary site surroundings proved fertile ground for concept development. On-site sketching and diagramming helped to uncover valuable insights into the organizational relationships of land forms and the structure of the park. These insights provided opportunity to connect the building to its site surroundings through the interior design.

The heart of Forest Hill Park is a marshy wetland at the bottom of a steeply sloping ravine. Reedy Creek enters the park from the topmost part of the ravine, meanders through its walls, pours into the wetland, and continues on to the James River.

Patrick Henry School is perched 180 feet above sea level on the crest of one side of the ravine, adjacent to the point where the creek enters the park. This building’s site defines an area of transition where relatively flat ground begins to steeply slope down to the center of the park, which rests at 80 feet above sea level.

Physical characteristics of the park landscape emanate from the central wetlands in a loosely concentric manner: a grass ring, a stone border, an asphalt path, another stone border, and continuous rings of trees expand outward and upward as they form the walls of the ravine. These elements lend a sense of preciousness and protection to their common center and reach out to establish connections with the surrounding areas.

The idea of growth from a center guides my design, serves as a metaphor for the design center program, and reinforces the connection between the Patrick Henry School building and its site surroundings.

Concept models help explore ideas related to building, site, and program. The model above best captured my thoughts on interconnected growth from a center and provided the basis for a key design element in the design center.
second floor
1. private studio
2. lounge/casual work space
3. administrative office
4. conference room
5. storage
6. ada restrooms

first floor
1. primary entry (half floor below)
2. reception
3. coffee bar
4. employee kitchen
5. event kitchen
6. ada restrooms
7. business resource area
8. informal meeting space
9. classroom
10. digital work stations
11. design sample library
12. layout space
13. design library
14. storage
Upon entering the design center, one first encounters a reception area and coffee bar which are connected by a monolithic structure constructed of dark walnut veneered plywood. Formally, this structure conveys the design idea of growth from a center and serves as a precursor to the larger, more articulated form that organizes the primary space of the design center. The planes of the structure define and condense space as they create 8’ ceilings for the spaces underneath.

A corridor with lowered 8’ ceilings connects the reception area to the primary space of the design center. Upon entering the design center, ceilings expand to 27’ in height, a significant height differentiation which emphasizes the openness of the connected first and second floors. While the first floor is designated for public use (design business center) and the second floor is designated for relatively private use (incubator businesses and design center administrators), the spaces are highly integrated both visually and spatially. This drawing illustrates the digital work stations, classroom, and informal meeting space on the first floor and the shared administrative office and balcony lounge space above (left to right).

Four individual wood structures formally connect in a manifestation of the design idea of centrivity. Originating from the same center, the forms appear to unfurl in a manner that serves to connect the public design center (first floor) to the more private incubator and administrative spaces above (second floor) and also to organize, define, and condense space on both floors. The form, although geometric, conveys an organic sensibility which reinforces the connection between the built space and the profound growth that surrounds it in Forest Hill Park. The dualism of connection and growth also supports the interdisciplinary approach of the design center program; while the design businesses grow individually, they still maintain a connection in their shared, collaborative work environment and in their design foundation.
This view from beneath the wood ceiling over the digital work stations reveals how the reception area physically connects to the design center’s business resource space. This open adjacency allows for visual monitoring from the reception area into the design center and also for the shared use of business resources between the receptionist and design center visitors.

An exploded axonometric drawing highlights the layered geometry of the combined first and second floors of the design center. The following spaces are also illustrated in this drawing: conference room (above, left), lounge/casual work balcony (above, center), shared studio (above, right), classroom (below, left), entry corridor (below, center), and design library (below, right). Behind the shelves in the library stands a wall with three built-in lighted niches—incubators for reading.

Circulation on the mezzanine takes place around the perimeter of the space alongside the exterior walls of the building so that natural light and scenic views are largely unobstructed.

The second floor mezzanine level offers 360-degree views in its collective vantage points. From this position in the second floor conference room, one can see (from left to right): a glimpse of a private incubator studio, a lounge/casual work balcony, another private studio, and another balcony. On the floor below is left to right: the design library layout space, the samples library, and a glimpse of the digital workstations.

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A steel structure frames 2' x 2' resin panels that are easily inserted or removed and held in place with magnets. This system offers incubator businesses virtually endless options for creating identity for their individual spaces through panel selection and customization. Panel options vary in color and pattern, transparency, and content if digital imagery is incorporated. The studios may flexibly create areas with varying degrees of privacy and areas of openness, depending on their needs.

Incubator group studios can accommodate up to four employees. Adjacent layout spaces, business resources, flexible space, and storage are shared along with the rest of the resources the design center offers. Wood structures come into play again in the studio and serve to simultaneously connect and separate them, as well as to formally connect the more private space to the semi-private and public spaces of the building shaped by similar structures.

The section elevations below show a range of possibilities for achieving varying levels of visual privacy and visual identity in the group studios.