

SQUEEZED-IN SCHOOLS FIND ROOM TO GROW

A COLUMBUS VILLAGE HAVEN AMID FAST-PACED REAL ESTATE MARKET

By Patty Lee

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Finding space in New York City is difficult for all renters, whether they are individual apartment hunters or commercial businesses, but the task is especially hard for community organizations, including schools.

Two private schools, however, recently leased space at Columbus Village, a new mixed-use development project on the Upper West Side. Columbus Village is being built near Park West Village, a middle-income development between Columbus and Amsterdam avenues and West 97th and 100th streets. And administrators at both organizations—The Mandell School and Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan—consider themselves lucky to have found a home.



The Mandell School and Solomon Schechter School will eventually move in to Columbus Village, seen from Amsterdam Avenue and West 100th Street. Photo Credit: Andrew Schwartz

The Mandell School is slated to move into Columbus Village in 2010, while Solomon Schechter will move in before the beginning of the 2009 school year. Both have been looking for new spaces for about a year but found the process difficult. Not only do many commercial landlords prefer renting to retail stores, but schools often do not have the funds to compete with those businesses.

“You need to be able to move lightning quick and that’s something that some developers are able to do, that some commercial establishments are able to do, but it’s difficult for most schools to have finances to move when they find the space,” said Dr. Steven Lorch, head of school at Solomon Schechter.

In addition, schools have different needs. According to Gabriella Rowe, head of school at Mandell, landlords must

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“understand you’re bringing children into a space and families into a neighborhood” before renting to schools. Unlike retail stores, “We don’t open business at nine and close at five. Teachers come in and start setting up classes at 6:30 a.m. Safety and security is paramount with us,” she said.

The new space at Columbus Village allows both schools to add new grades and increase enrollment. The Mandell School, which was founded in 1939 as a pre-school, recently opened a kindergarten-to-8th-grade division. It currently has three classes—junior kindergarten, kindergarten and 1st grade—at a facility on West 96th Street, but the space is not big enough to hold more students.

“We knew we were going to get more classroom space over the course of the next few years,” Rowe said. The school was approached by Columbus Village several times, Rowe said, and ultimately decided to lease a 50,000-square-foot space with the development because “the landlords have been really sympathetic to working with us.”

For Lorch and Solomon Schechter, “all the variables were right.” However, even with the new 13,000-square-foot campus at Columbus Village, the Solomon Schechter School will still be divided. Students from the lower elementary division (kindergarten and 1st grade) and middle school will be housed in 805 Columbus Ave., near West 100th Street, with a new preschool, but students in the upper elementary division (2nd through 5th grade) will stay at a synagogue on West 86th Street and Central Park West.

Even though the new space will not fit all the students, Lorch is happy the school will be able to have new, state-of-the-art facilities. “Technology will be built-in, instead of built on carts,” Lorch said. The Columbus Village campus will also have a library, art room and science room, but no gymnasium.

Play space will not be a problem for The Mandell School since it leased a much larger space. “We could take over the space in total and it allows us to have a full-size gymnasium, a theater, classrooms with multiple sections, a 2,000-square-foot library and an 8,000-square-foot outdoor space for play,” Rowe said.

According to Amanda Scoblick, a head agent for Columbus Village’s brokerage company, Winick Realty Group, the two schools leased space that has been dedicated for community use. While the development has more than 300,000 square feet of retail space—future commercial tenants include Whole Foods, Borders, Modell’s and two banks—Columbus Village has also dedicated 100,000 square feet to community organizations.

“Both schools were in the Upper West Side and they’re both longtime institutions,” Scoblick said. “We think it’s going to be a great addition to the project in the neighborhood.”

Currently, only one more community space is left because the Ryan Health Center is going into 805 Amsterdam Ave., taking up approximately 25,000 square feet.

The new development is not without controversy, however. Columbus Village is currently involved in a lawsuit filed by Westsiders for Public Participation, a neighborhood group that wants a greater say in the project’s development.

Scoblick would not comment on the lawsuit, but Rowe and Lorch do not think their schools will be affected.

“We have been here for as long as anyone in the community remembers,” Rowe said. “We’re not newbies coming into someone else’s territory.”