



# POPPLETON RECREATION CENTER

## 2025 ULI WAVEMAKER AWARD SUBMISSION APPLICANT

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Once celebrated as a “Play Machine,” this iconic building served for decades as a vital social and recreational hub in Southwest Baltimore before closing in the early 2000s. Following more than two decades of vacancy, the 7,000 SF facility has been reimagined through a comprehensive renovation. The design restores an architecturally significant and long-dormant building while reestablishing a public asset that once again serves as a physical and symbolic cornerstone of the community.

## CLIENT

Southwest Partnership

## PROJECT COMPLETION DATE

Grand Opening, June 12, 2025

## COMPLETE LIST OF ALL INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

David Lopez, AIA, Twopoint Studio  
 Justin Graham, Twopoint Studio  
 Drew Suljak, AIA, Twopoint Studio  
 Darryl Richardson, Plano-Coudon Construction  
 Will Adams, Adams Engineering, LLC  
 Fidelity Mechanical Services (Design/Build by Contractor)  
 Byrnes Electric, Inc. (Design/Build by Contractor)  
 Tony Scott, Southwest Partnership  
 Elizabeth Weber, Southwest Partnership  
 Anthony Hudgins, Southwest Sports & Fitness Alliance

THE SUNDAY SUN  
 BALTIMORE, MD.  
 JUNE 20, 1976  
 SECTION D

## SPECTATOR

BOOKS  
 MOVIES  
 THEATER  
 ART  
 MUSIC

## A ‘high-performance’ public building

By PHOEBE STANTON

The news that the recreation center adjacent to school No. 161 at the corner of West Saratoga street and Arlingdon avenue will open tomorrow may seem, superficially, to be less than startling. The contrary is the case. “Rec” centers, as they are familiarly known, demonstrate that the city cares about the lives of its citizens and that it is willing to invest in their social and physical health. These centers come in three sizes. The largest, Type A, has a staff of six or

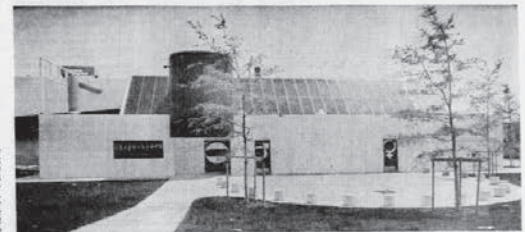
and seventy-five full-time career staff work in the centers; there are slots for 40 more. Six-hundred part-time teachers of crafts, arts and games and advisors on special work with the elderly and handicapped complete the roster. Thirty-five of the directors are women.

In the school year most centers are open from 2 P.M. to 10 P.M. In the summer the hours are 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. In a sense they are extensions of the school which offer the young educated play and guidance.

This is a valuable program. It occurs

those limitations should get the jobs. The topping off of parts when the building proves to be too costly or changes in the materials of the original design result not only in savings but in strange developments in the architectural product. The Community Mental Health Center on Fayette street near Pine is a stellar example of architecture as the art of whittling away at a design until the round peg fits the square hole.

Responsibility also demands that new buildings somehow work comfortably with this Nineteenth-Century city, a suggestion not intended to mean that



A skylight running the length of the building is the outstanding feature of the new recreation center in the Poppo area of the city. Skylight serves to light both the upper and lower levels.

Recreation photos—Katie J. Malachuk





## INFRASTRUCTURE AS EQUITY

Within a historic neighborhood suffering from decades of disinvestment and an area targeted for massive redevelopment by outside interests that would destroy the historic fabric and culture of the Poppleton neighborhood, this building held deep cultural memory despite its deteriorating condition.

Preserving the building's architectural identity, one of the few representative structures of mid-1970s late modern architecture within the region, was important to understanding the role architecture plays in the history and development of Baltimore City.

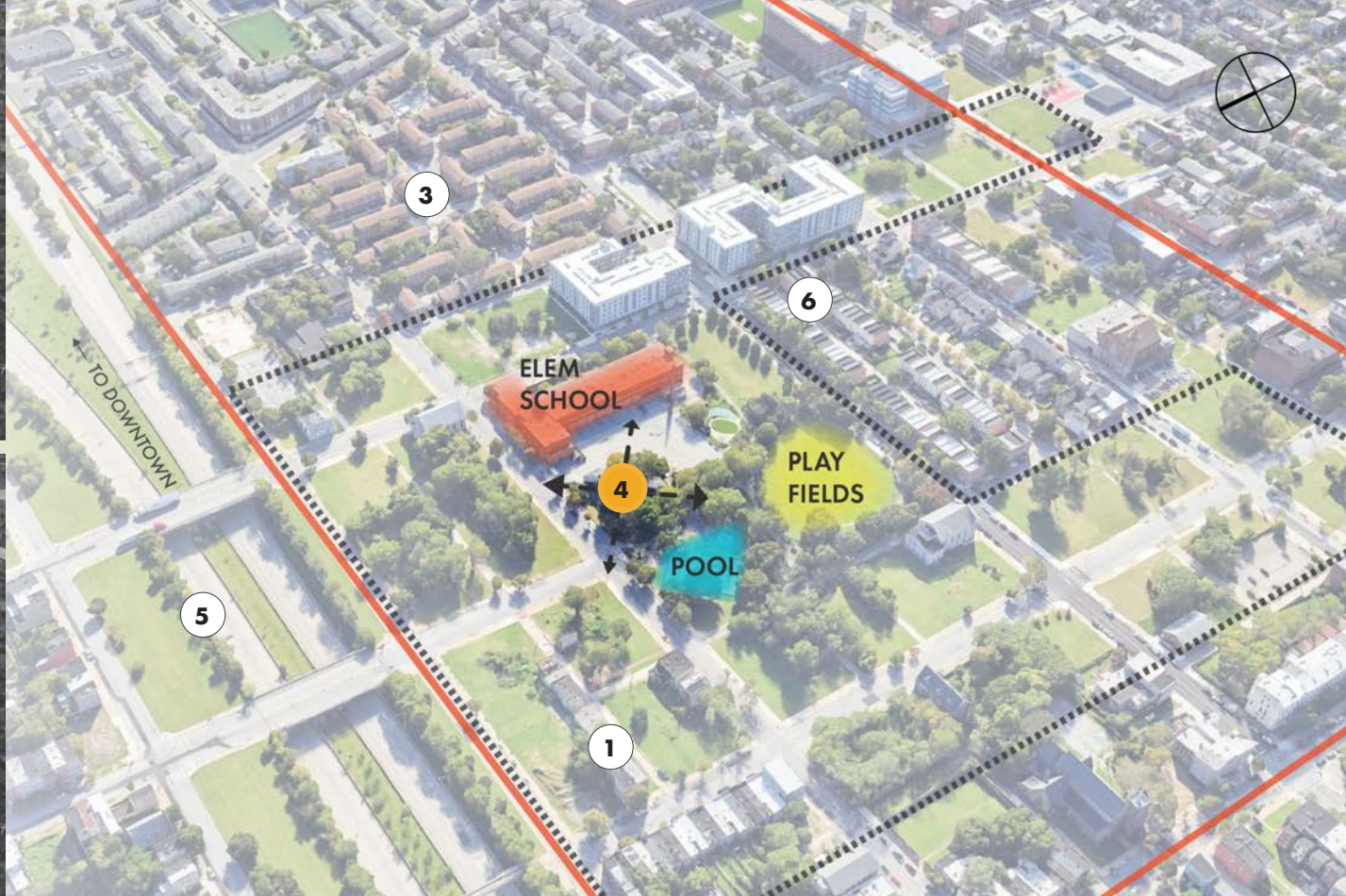
Maintaining a utilitarian aesthetic that celebrated exposed building systems and maintained access to the adjacent community pool was core to the program. Based on community input, flexibility was necessary to support both structured and informal gatherings, emphasizing adaptability and accessibility for multi-generational users. Programmatic activities varied from after-school programming with indoor games and computer labs to flex spaces for adult-centered classes, including yoga and dance. Building upgrades included replacement mechanical,

electrical, and plumbing systems in addition to providing a fully ADA-compliant facility that was previously accessible in appearance only – the exterior ramps were not designed to meet the accessibility code, which came much later than the building did – so an elevator was installed.

Architecture, as an embodiment of infrastructure for equity, was the defining legacy of the original design and its subsequent renovation. A collaboration made possible through deep partnerships between the community, non-profits, faith-based organizations, City agencies, local service organizations, and the design team included financial support, volunteerism, and community engagement.

The solution focused on maintaining the original structure's architectural identity while incorporating community needs. Technical items, including a new elevator and reconfigured entries, ensured full ADA accessibility, while interior circulation and transparency were improved to support safety and flexibility. The design emphasized durable, low-maintenance materials while incorporating warmer, more inviting finishes to enhance the everyday experience.





1870

A historic row of houses built after the Civil War, originally intended to provide affordable housing for working-class African Americans. The 1100 block of Sarah Ann Street, these two-story rowhouses are a rare example of intact, well-preserved alley houses.



1927

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, West Baltimore, Poppleton (outlined in red) and adjoining neighborhoods were densely packed with working-class rowhomes. The black and white aerial map above shows the urban density of West Baltimore circa 1927.



1940

Beginning in the 1930s, the City's "slum clearance" efforts sought to reimagine Poppleton. In 1940, Poe Homes opened as the first public housing complex in Baltimore. The public housing complex provided brick rowhouses for African American families as public housing was segregated at the time.



1976

The Greater Model Community Recreation Center opens (aka Poppleton Rec Center). "There was a division between the Lexington Terrace and the Poe homes. But once they built this rec center, we all came together as children, and got along and played together..."  
- Sonia Eaddy



1979

"Highway to Nowhere," was completed cutting Poppleton off from other neighborhoods to its north. In the 1960s and '70s, the government made room for the highway by using eminent domain to take and demolish 971 homes and 62 businesses, displacing around 1,500 people.



2000s

For about two decades, the Poppleton neighborhood has been a target for massive redevelopment efforts by outside interests, including the vast demolition of existing rowhouses and relocation of families, the construction of two apartment complexes, and further development of 33 acres.





## COMPLETENESS

The Poppleton Recreation Center is a model of reinvestment and resilience in a neighborhood long defined by systemic harm. In the 1970s, construction of the “Highway to Nowhere”, a failed expressway project that razed hundreds of homes and severed communities, devastated Southwest Baltimore, displacing thousands of primarily Black residents and leaving a legacy of disinvestment. The Poppleton neighborhood was among the hardest hit as it is situated just south of the expressway, which positioned it as a ‘dead end’ neighborhood coming from the south, and disconnected it from communities to the north.

The Center’s full renovation, decades later, marks the first significant public capital investment in the neighborhood in a generation. Through deep collaboration among public agencies, local nonprofits, and residents, the project overcame immense obstacles, fighting against outside developmental interests. It maximized the use of existing infrastructure, reducing costs while upgrading essential systems for energy efficiency, durability, and full ADA compliance. Today, the building is fully operational and serves as a vibrant community hub, hosting programs for all ages, supported by the Southwest Sports & Fitness Alliance. It stands not just as a restored civic asset, but as a visible, enduring commitment to repair and equity.





**“To be reminded of the history of that recreation center and what it meant to us, it wouldn’t have had the same effect demolishing it and making it new.”**

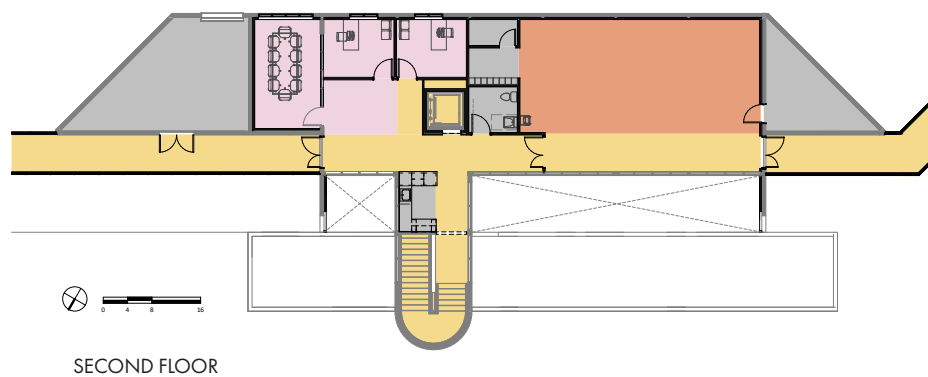
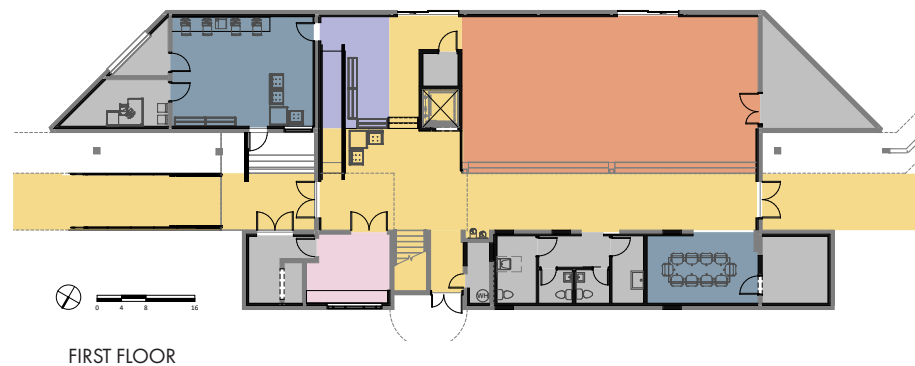
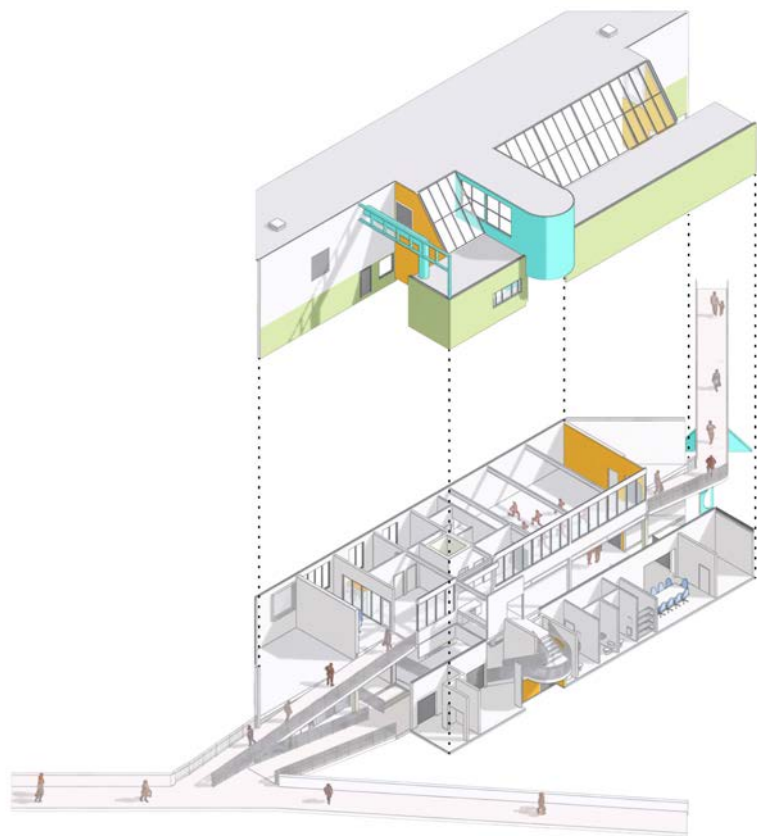
– SONIA EADDY



## **A SENSE OF PLACE AND QUALITY**

The Poppleton Recreation Center reflects the identity, history, and aspirations of its neighborhood—a place shaped by community strength in the face of disinvestment. Opened in the summer of 1976 as the Great Model Community Recreation Center, the building was an anchor for families across Southwest Baltimore. Built as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Model Cities Program, it offered free programming to children from Poppleton, Lexington Terrace, Poe Homes, and beyond, including karate, swimming, dance, and winter skating. “It was this new shiny rec center with different programs. We were all able to make claim to this,” recalls Sonia Eaddy, president of the Poppleton Now Community Association. The Center connected residents across public housing developments, creating a safe and shared space for learning and play. After its closure due to budget cuts, the loss left a deep void.

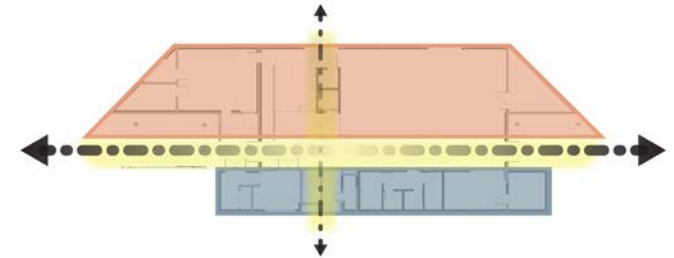
The renovation reclaims that legacy. Bright exterior colors, chosen by residents, nod to nearby Sarah Ann Street rowhomes. Local murals and restored supergraphics evoke the neighborhood’s history and achievements. The building’s distinctive “play machine” architecture remains, updated with welcoming finishes, improved systems, and safer, more visible spaces.



## FLOOR PLANS

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: yellow; border: 1px solid black;"></span> CIRCULATION | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: purple; border: 1px solid black;"></span> PLAY         |
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: blue; border: 1px solid black;"></span> EDUCATION     | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: orange; border: 1px solid black;"></span> MULTIPURPOSE |
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: pink; border: 1px solid black;"></span> OFFICE        | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: grey; border: 1px solid black;"></span> SUPPORT        |





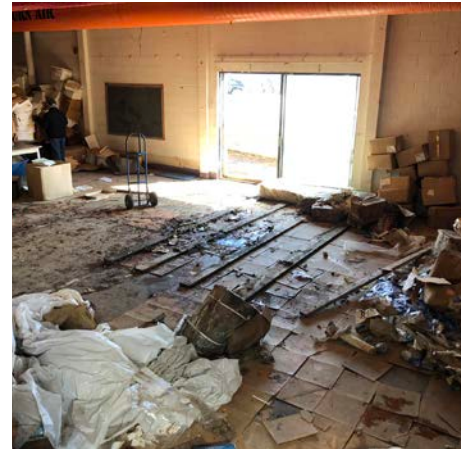
## SUSTAINABILITY

Nearly 50 years old, this building was designed to be maintenance-free, indestructible, and appealing to its users. Capitalizing on the building's original foresight for durability and its location within the neighborhood, proximity to the elementary school and playing fields, the entire building (100%) was adapted to be a new community center for the neighborhood incorporating sporting activities and recreation with computer labs, flexible spaces for varied fitness class programming, meeting space for the greater community, and locker rooms for the adjacent public pool.

The original design focused on durable, budget-friendly materials, including exposed ductwork, heavy corrugated metal paneling, and other "off-the-shelf" stock items of building supplies. The two primary elements of the design—the continuous ramp to and through the building and the large skylight over the two-story atrium—were maintained to provide low-barrier access to the building while providing ample daylight to the majority of spaces, reducing the need for supplemental lighting. The siting of the project and mature landscaping continue to provide passive energy benefits for the building while providing ample shade and encouraging the use of the existing seating areas within the landscape.

In a community long denied safe, healthy spaces, the Poppleton Recreation Center once again models design that supports dignity, joy, and everyday wellness.





A PRE-CONSTRUCTION CLEAN-UP DAY  
ORGANIZED BY THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

## VISION AND EMULATION

The Poppleton Recreation Center reframes how public architecture can serve as infrastructure for equity. Rather than demolish and replace, the team envisioned a rehabilitated space, adapting a 1976 building into a 21st-century wellness space.

What sets this project apart is its commitment to community-led visioning and grass-roots development. The renovation rejected the typical top-down approach to public development and instead embraced resident-led design and financing. Poppleton residents helped shape everything from the building's vibrant exterior colors to its internal layout and programming priorities. The broader community invested their time and dollars in the project: The Church of the Nativity adopted the cause

as a local mission project. The parish raised \$400,000 in the first weekend of its effort to support the renovation and organized a critical pre-construction cleanup day.

This project offers a replicable model for cities grappling with how to invest equitably in neglected civic infrastructure. It proves that restoring public trust and revitalizing neighborhood assets requires care, creativity, and the conviction that these resources are essential to the success of every community. The renewed Poppleton Recreation Center stands as both a symbol and a strategy that other communities can proudly emulate.





## A NEED

The rehabilitation of Poppleton Rec Center answers a long-unmet need for a safe and welcoming public space in Southwest Baltimore. After years of neglect, families were left without access to nearby recreational and educational resources. The neighborhood—once a focal point for youth gatherings, community events, and shared celebrations—had been fractured by neglect and outside redevelopment pressures. This project restored not only a building, but also the essential fabric of community life. Informed by local input, the center now offers programs that meet residents where they are: physical activity, mentorship for youth, computer labs for students, and social services for families. The building is designed for all ages and all seasons, from weekend events to everyday drop-ins. By reclaiming a critical civic asset and tailoring it to current and evolving priorities, the Poppleton Recreation Center directly responds to the urgent needs of its neighborhood.



infrastructure as equity



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