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A rural setting is expected to help foster education at Victory Academy, on the edge of Wilsonville. (Opsis Architecture)

An architectural victory for autistic students

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Opsis Architecture partner **James Meyer** has designed many educational spaces, but a new one for students with autism was a unique challenge. "There are lots of subtle issues that are engaged in the space," he said. "Literally nothing is accidental in the design."

Last summer, Opsis staffers started designing a new home for Wilsonville-based **Victory Academy**. With 38 students enrolled last fall, the nonprofit private school for children with autism has reached capacity in the church space it leases.

"They were in a search for a new site," Meyer said. "Really, the right thing to do was build a new school that was designed for autistic children."

Victory Academy has since purchased a 4-acre former horse farm outside Wilsonville. Officials are now raising $5.5 million to construct an 18,000-square-foot school building with nine classrooms, a teaching kitchen, a large multipurpose room, administrative space, and speech, art and music therapy rooms.



The new building will be able to accommodate up to 95 students, allowing Victory Academy to grow from a K-8 school to a K-12 one, said Tricia Hasbrook, Victory Academy director and co-founder.

School officials are aiming to break ground this summer; contractor **Lorentz Bruun Construction** has been hired. The facility is scheduled to be ready for students in fall 2015.

Throughout the design process, Opsis staffers worked closely with Victory Academy officials to ensure that the building will cater to students. An appropriate color palette was chosen, classroom windows were given effective orientation, ample space was provided for social activities, and straightforward navigability was incorporated. The team made sure that the building will not feel like an institution.

“It has been this amazing experience to sit down with the Opsis team and Lorentz Bruun to talk about what these kids need,” Hasbrook said.

The tricky part, Meyer said, was that little agreement exists among experts on what constitutes an ideal educational setting for students with autism. For instance, some research advocated for the use of bright colors, but for this project he opted to follow findings that support neutral ones.

“There really isn’t this consistency of design criteria relative to a school for these children,” he said. “There is a lot more research that you have to do … What I tried to do is cream the crop to see what made sense.”

The aim is for Victory Academy’s new home to meet **Living Building Challenge** certification requirements, including avoidance of toxic building materials, Meyer said. The building is expected to achieve net-zero energy with an orientation that supports solar panels, radiant heating and LED lighting, he said.

The design reflects the site’s rural character, Meyer said.

“We wanted it to have that timeless conveyance of a schoolhouse,” he said. “Having that sense of presence was important as opposed to something that was institutional.”

Classroom windows will offer calm, pastoral views to help students stay focused, Meyer said. With carefully managed acoustics in the classrooms and insulated walls between them, noise distractions also will be minimized, he said.



“If there is any activity (visible through the window), the kids can get off task very easily,” he said. “Your management of them being on task is really important.”

Hasbrook said Victory Academy wanted a rural site because many of the students love nature and being outdoors. Oftentimes, students are motivated to do their schoolwork by the chance to look out a window, she said.

“The natural setting serves as a both a soothing effect for our students, but also as an enforcer,” she said. “Choosing this setting was one of the triumphs.”

Each classroom will have a smaller attached space for break-out groups, individual lessons and rest, Hasbrook said.

“Children with autism by nature at some point want to be alone,” she said. “There’s a nook in every classroom.”

The building also was designed with an orderly building layout, Meyer said.

“The way finding is very clear,” he said. “You enter a small corridor. At that point, all the directionality of the school is reasonably understood.”

That will help officials keep track of students, Meyer said.

“Programmatically, it’s very specific,” he said. “Safety considerations are pretty substantial in terms of having kids in the right spot.”

This was another reason the school opted for a rural setting, Hasbrook said.

“We don’t want to be close to a busy road,” she said. “We have students who tend to wander.”

A kitchen, a laundry area and gardens will be used to teach students practical skills, Hasbrook said. Appliances in the kitchen and fixtures throughout the building will show students the diversity of the outside world, she said.

“We were looking for variety – different doorknobs, different faucets – so the kids get practice with differences,” she said.

Incorporating Victory Academy’s philosophy of teaching students to be independent was an important part of the design process, Meyer said.

“They want these kids to be a fully functioning part of the community,” he said. “That is very much part of the main goal.”