

# Wheeler Kearns Architects

## **Award-Winning Marwen Arts Campus Creates New Opportunities for Chicago Youth:** Expansion of non-profit art center wins coveted 2016 SEED Award for Public Interest Design

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**Chicago, IL** - Marwen, a leading nonprofit arts center in Chicago, has completed a \$7.5 million, 30,000-square-foot renovation and expansion, doubling the organization's previous square footage and creating new spaces for expanded programming, including an increased focus on college and career counseling for Chicago's under-served youth, grades 6-12.

The new arts campus, which recently received a coveted **2016 SEED Award for Public Interest Design**, allows Marwen to serve 200-300 more students each year. Designed by nationally recognized Wheeler Kearns Architects, the building project provides a new public face for the organization, which previously occupied two floors and the basement of the former manufacturing building at 833 Orleans Street in Chicago's River North Neighborhood.

Founded in 1987 in a one-room art studio, Marwen now serves nearly 900 students annually, 95% of whom come from low-income families. Offering free classes in photography, graphic design, film, animation, textiles, and ceramics, the arts center continues to fill an ever-widening gap in Chicago public schools, where at least 24,000 students have limited access to arts education. Nearly half of Marwen's students attend schools that do not offer arts instruction.

*"Making art is important. Growing up, some kids only go to school because of the rocket club or the chess club or football. Those were the things that got them involved in school. For other kids, it's art. Unfortunately, a lot of schools no longer have art classes. This is one reason why Marwen exists,"* says Joy Meek, AIA, a principal at Wheeler Kearns Architects.

Cynthia Weiss, an artist and Marwen's director of education, says arts-based learning also provides transferrable skills that can help students succeed in any career. *"We need beauty and good design in our world, but making art gives young people so many different skillsets: being able to think critically—to brainstorm, research, try things out, pilot them, get feedback—plus, all the social and emotional learning that goes along with making creative work alongside your peers—things like negotiation, collaboration. These are essential skills."*

The renovation of the four-story industrial loft building and adjacent parking lot, which Marwen purchased in 2012, includes a new main gallery for student work, an alumni gallery, a library, new administrative offices, nine state-of-the-art instructional studios, as well as a new roof, HVAC system, and all new windows. Wheeler Kearns Architects, which has designed some of Chicago's premier cultural institutions, including the Old Town School of Folk Music and the Beverly Art Center, also designed Marwen's previous space, which was completed in 1999.

The most substantial alteration made during the recent renovation was the creation of a new vehicular entry courtyard, allowing for the relocation of the main entrance and the addition of a 950 square-foot, steel-and-glass loggia on the north side of the building. The loggia, which employs an innovative structure and under-floor radiant heating and cooling system, provides a safe and visible gathering place for students, as well as a new public gallery space that creates increased opportunities for showcasing student work.

*“Marwen students come from all over the city, sometimes through dangerous areas via multiple means of transport,”* says Dan Wheeler, FAIA, a founding principal at Wheeler Kearns Architects. *“So to arrive at a place where you feel welcome and where you feel safe, was important.”*

The loggia was an idea more than 15 years in the making. *“We have watercolor sketches of this facade from 1999,”* Wheeler says of the loggia, whose form and materiality were inspired by industrial docking bays. At the time, the addition wasn't possible because the parking lot was owned by another entity. *“The thing that unlocked the potential of the site was gaining access to the north lot,”* he says.

The interior architecture continues the palette established during the award winning 1999 renovation, which is quietly restrained, creating a backdrop for the student artwork. Exposed brick and Douglas fir beams are juxtaposed with sound-deadening tooled concrete floors—spare, simple finishes often reserved for world-class museums and private galleries.

The architects believe this type of setting can play a powerful role in shaping students' lives and creating possibilities for their futures, Wheeler says. *“In many minds, the arts are seen as an avocation; for a parent to come into a designed place and see that there are serious teachers and artists working with and instructing the students, and that their child's work is considered and presented in a professional way, that gives them the confidence that this activity might actually be something to support and sustain their child.”*

## Project Facts

Project:	A nationally recognized art education organization, providing free visual arts classes to under-served students in Chicago in grades 6-12.
Gross sf	29,875 sf total building area
Client:	Marwen
Architect:	Wheeler Kearns Architects
Completion Date:	09/24/15
Project Photos:	<a href="http://wkarch.com/project/marwenexpansion/">http://wkarch.com/project/marwenexpansion/</a>

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