BACK BAY

Evolution: movies, books, kids

Ex-Exeter Theatre is reborn as a Montessori

By Jill S. Gross
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The "Rocky Horror Picture Show" was a previous attraction. Bestsellers also had their day.

Now the Romanesque stone Exeter Street Theatre building is where kids practice addition and study parts of speech.

Kingsley Montessori School has transformed the first three floors of the building, at the corner of Newbury and Exeter streets, into a second campus, which opened last month. The school's first- through sixth-graders now learn in the old theater, while preschoolers and toddlers attend class a block away in the Fairfield Street mansion the school has occupied for 30 years.

Prior to the expansion, Kingsley had to limit its preschool enrollment due to lack of space, said Renee DuChainey-Farkes, Kingsley's head of school. This year, the number of preschool students jumped from 62 to 91, and the school plans to increase elementary enrollment from 75 to 125.

"It was frustrating because I would see the teachers and know if we could just spread the walls, the whole program would grow," she said. "I feel like we've created something that has allowed everybody to just expand."

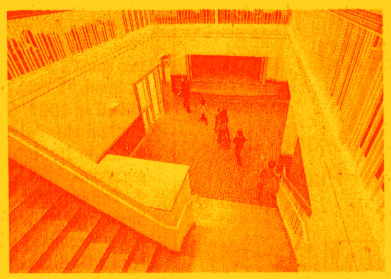
The building was constructed in 1885 as the First Spiritual Temple, and opened to the public as a theater in 1914.

Since it closed in 1984, the space the school now leases has housed Conran's furniture and Waterstone's Booksellers. It had been vacant since technology company Idealab left in 2003.

In working on the renovation of the building, Kingsley attempted to maintain historic aspects and create a homey feel similar to its other campus. The theater building's brick was left exposed, and each classroom offers Back Bay views from its original, large arched windows.

PHOTOS BY SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Zach Knopf, 6, and Christina Bulkeley, 7, enjoy a snack at the Kingsley Montessori School's new spot in the Exeter Street Theatre site, where it occupies three floors.



Kingsley is making the building available for community use, offering meeting space for neighborhood associations and mother and tot groups, as well as its stage for other local preschools, DuChainey-Farkes said. She said the school also will bring in parenting experts to give public talks.

The neighborhood has been receptive to the school's expansion, she said.

"Having a school with young people right in the heart of the Back Bay is very much a good addition," said Meg Mainzer-Cohen, president and executive director of the Back Bay Association, which represents local businesses.

The school has been a good neighbor in its Fairfield Street location, said Peter Sherin, chairman of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay.

"They provide an educational opportunity for the neighborhood that is very welcome," Sherin said.

But he said traffic from parents dropping off and picking up students is a concern as the school expands on busy Exeter Street. The school has worked with parents on the issue, and so far it hasn't received any complaints, DuChainey-Farkes said.

With the Exeter Street Theatre's transformation into a 23,000-square-foot second campus for Kingsley, each of the school's facilities now has its own science laboratory, art studio, and library, DuChainey-Farkes said. Instead of feeling crowded, students and teachers stretch out in classrooms as large as 1,100 square feet in the theater building.

One of a handful of Montessori schools in the city, Kingsley draws most of its students from the Back Bay, South End, Beacon Hill, and Charlestown. Tuition ranges from $10,000 to $16,000 a year.

Kingsley blends traditional teaching with the Montessori philosophy, which stresses individual attention for students.

Classes include students from three grade levels, and children typically stay in the same class for three years.