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## Imani's Indomitable Home: A Meditation on Modern Architectural Design

January 21, 2021

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### Tags

## Pittsburgh's Modern Milieu Part Four

### Imani's Indomitable Home: A Meditation on Modern Architectural Design

*"A building is a box, but it can be much more. Architect Tasso Katselas, who designed the new East Hills Elementary School, believes a building can change the way people think and how they act. He thinks a school building in particular can be part of the teaching process -- changing a child's ideas of who he is and how he relates to the world around him. And that's exactly what he has tried to do with the East Hills school which opens next month as the first open-plan school in the city. A variegated structure of brick, glass and concrete, the school is a mixture of open spaces and private corners of stark geometric forms and indoor gardens)."*

-Nilsson, David, "New East Hills School Launching Open-Space Age," *Pittsburgh Press*, August 13, 1972

## **Let's take a short trip**

Drive down Penn Avenue and you will pass the former Nabisco Plant, now known as Bakery Square. A Google flag sits atop the original brick façade signifying its new occupant. If you continue down Penn and cross Fifth Avenue, you enter a residential corridor of homes that leads directly into what was once Wilkinsburg's thriving business district. Here, you find the remnants of what once was. Dilapidated storefronts, peeling paint, once stately edifices now abandoned and subject to the elements. Make a left onto Swissvale Avenue and you encounter more of the same. Vacant lots and abandoned homes whose unadorned windows seem to search for long lost residents.

Another left turn takes you up Robinson Boulevard and another quick left finds you in a public housing development. Note the pastel colored, clustered townhomes as you drive through. The next left is East Hills Drive where you will need to pay attention or you will miss our destination. As the road rises ahead of you, make a quick left into a hollow. A space easy to pass and too easily missed. But if by Google's good fortune you make the left turn, you will notice a building the likes of which you have never seen before.



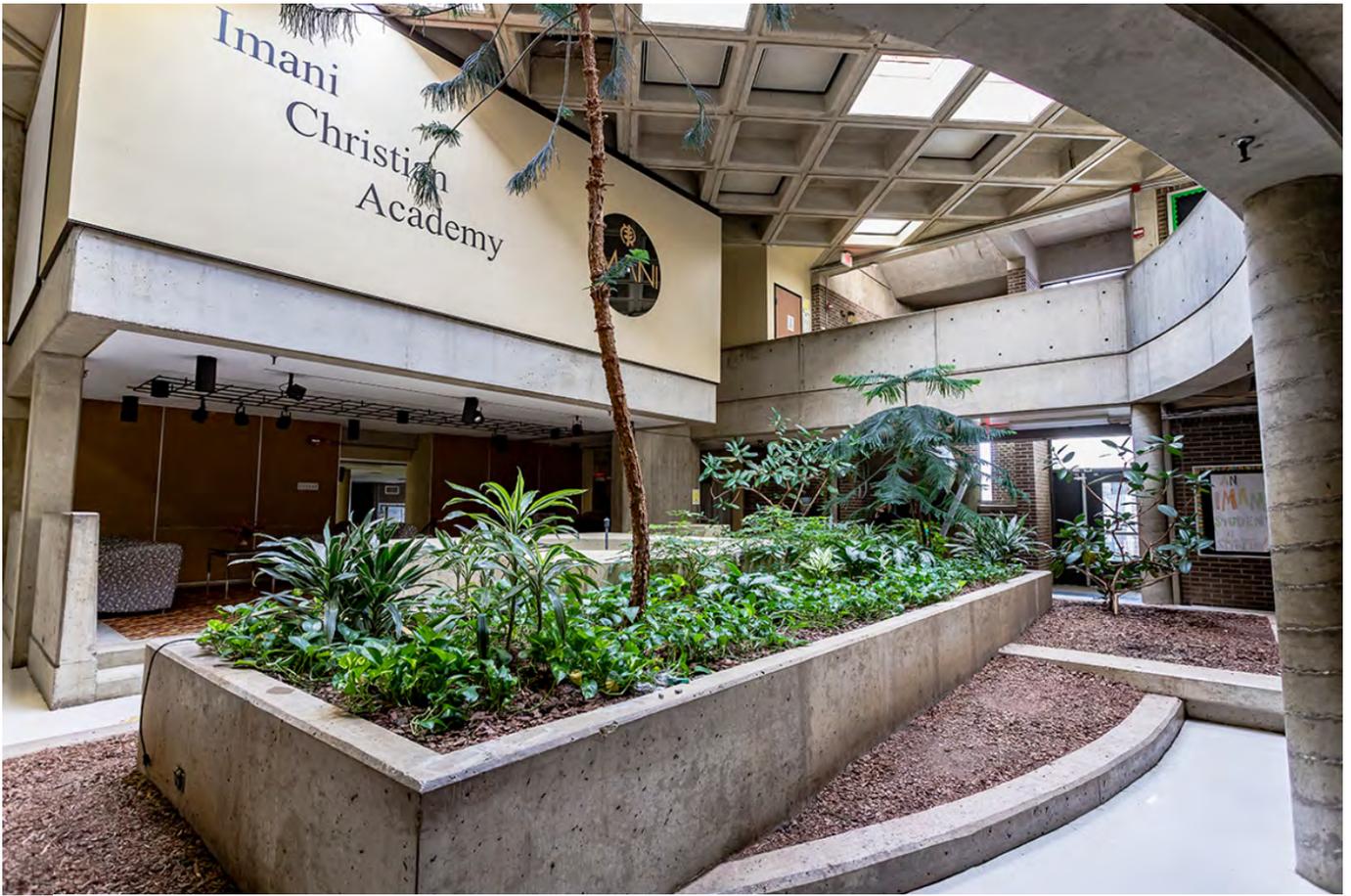
Imani Christian Academy, Pittsburgh, PA, Winter 2020

**Credit:** Amy Fisher, Pawsburgh Photography

## To see an architectural marvel

The building is a gift of modern architecture. A marvel of jointered concrete columns and spans, complemented by formidable weaves of earth-tone masonry. Historically this imposing form is referred to as Brutalism (from the French *beton brut*, meaning raw concrete), but because the English translation has a somewhat unflattering connotation, there has been an effort to rebrand this domineering and stark style as “Heroic.” Indeed, once inside you understand why.

Enter the cavernous open-concept building, and you are drawn in by the expansive entry, the beams of natural light filtering through skylights, and the atrium of living plants that extends from a lower level and is visible upon entry. And oh yes, is that the sound of water? Peer over the curved concrete half-wall and a plume of water proceeding from a fountain greets you with a giggle. Heroic, marvelous and splendid.



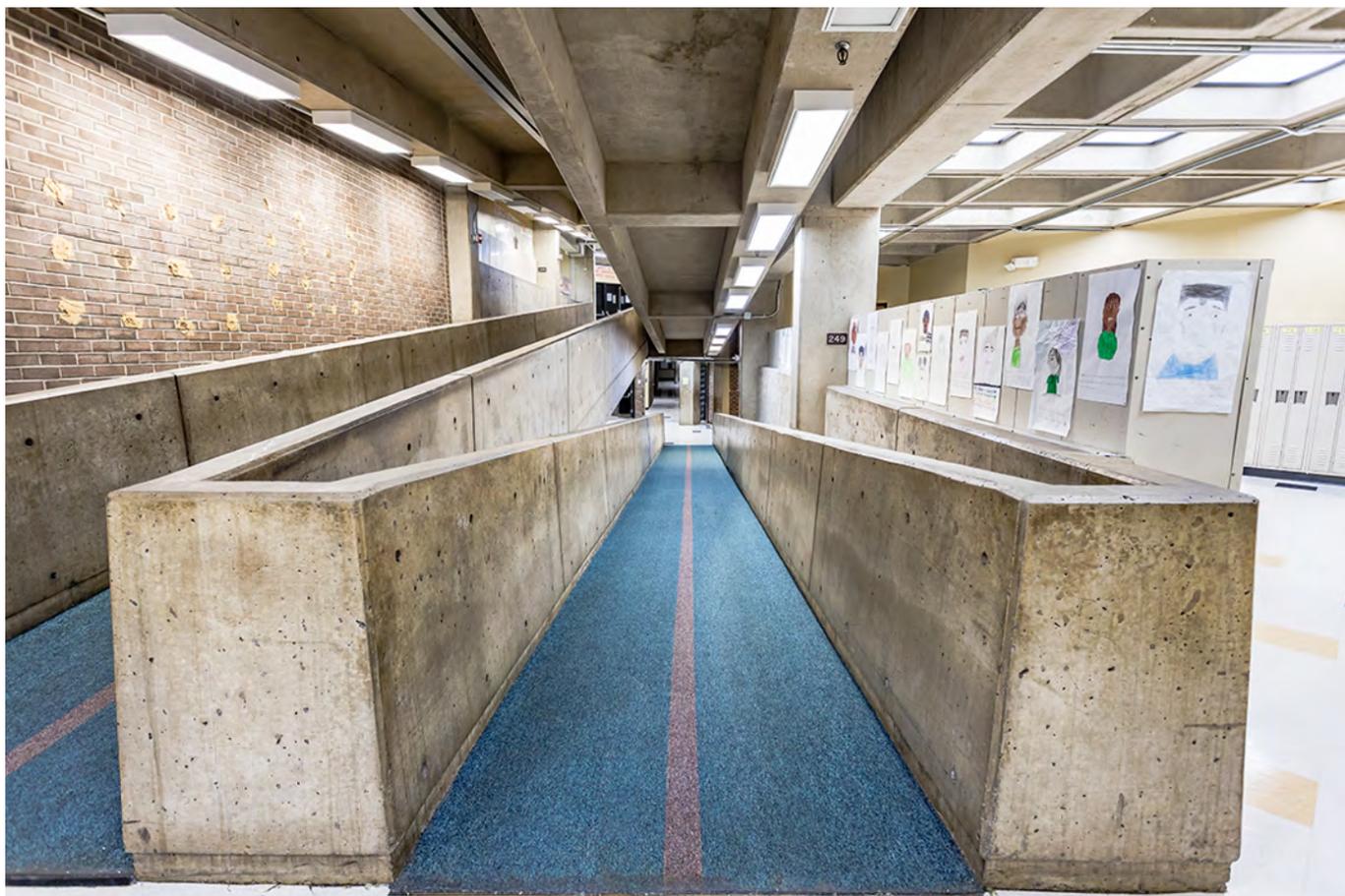
Interior atrium, winter 2020.

**Credit:** Amy Fisher, Pawsburgh Photography

## **And how is it used today**

Constructed in 1972 by famed Pittsburgh architect Tasso Katselas, the building served as the former East Hills Elementary School for 34 years before being shuttered for a period of 4 years. In 2010, Imani Christian Academy acquired the building for its school. Its concrete ramps, cheerful skylights, expansive windows and confidently-courageous form, now serve as the home for students from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade.

Imani is a faith-based school serving an average of 145 students annually. Students hail from Wilkinsburg, Penn Hills, Woodland Hills, and East Pittsburgh, some of the most economically challenged zip codes in and around the city of Pittsburgh. Imani students are 98% African American and the vast majority are raised in single parent homes. Despite the many challenges they face, they come to school every day, and for many, this building is their second home.



Interior concrete ramps and original carpet.

**Credit:** Amy Fisher, Pawsburgh Photography

## **As a second home**

The school takes pride in the quality of education it provides to its students. Part of that pride is reflected in the care and maintenance of this unique example of modern architecture. At Imani, we believe that environment shapes behavior. The ability to welcome students, families, staff and teachers to an exceptional building is an integral part of what Imani does.

The building itself teaches its own lessons. The open-concept design helps students and faculty think big about their dreams and aspirations. The natural light that courses through the skylights, sky-story and floor-to-ceiling windows, provide a unique sense of well-being and joy. The fountain, an element usually associated with privilege and luxury, reminds students that they too are worthy of the best.

The building is solid. Its concrete and masonry speak of safety and protection in a world that seems increasingly threatening. The building looks and feels like it could withstand anything. And so, the building's indomitable nature manifests the indomitable spirit of the African American experience. Like the building itself, the students, their families, and their ancestors have endured a great deal, but remain unwilling to surrender to forces of inequality and discrimination.

As a second home for students and as a place where the mission of education is pursued with vigor, the building itself serves as an inspirational reminder that serving those less fortunate requires an unrelenting commitment and indeed an indomitable spirit.

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Open library from upper level

**Credit:** Amy Fisher, Pawsburgh Photography

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## **As a community asset**

It is extraordinary that Imani owns this exceptional building. Its architectural value, suitability as a home for a school, and inspiring beauty are unparalleled. This is why it is imperative that the property is well maintained. Like other important works of art, this structure requires committed attention guided by a recognition of its unique characteristics.

Its particular style demands that skylights are repaired or replaced to preserve the majesty of natural light as it cascades through the roof. The large window openings should likewise be preserved. This may require re-glazing, glass replacement and sometimes the replacement of frame and glass together. All to allow the outside and inside to seamlessly merge. Over time, the earth-toned brick requires repointing to prevent water infiltration and retain the fortified appearance of the edifice. Respectfully, all of these efforts are preferred to the cost-saving, but design-thwarting alternatives of covering up the skylights, bricking up windows and stuccoing exterior facades. These examples give voice to a clear intent: to preserve the unique qualities of this building, to honor the architectural style, and to respect the vision of this venerated architect.

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Interior looking down the ramp, with partially enclosed Chapel beneath unique clerestory windows.

**Credit:** Amy Fisher, Pawsburgh Photography

## **As a treasure**

What comes next might be viewed as controversial but requires voicing. For the words to be penned here have often been considered, but too frequently robbed of expression. The power of art is that it allows us to address controversy with beauty. I trust that my final thoughts on this fabulous structure will achieve this end - for the lines below express my genuine concern, for a stately building, I now consider my friend.

Were this treasure found downtown,  
or beside a gleaming tower,  
Were it adjacent to a statue,

or a cathedral's gilded spire,  
No penny would be reserved,  
to see this building preserved,  
For the value of its existence,  
would already be conferred.

But place it in the urban core,  
beside a housing project,  
Near undervalued tenements,  
with struggling inhabitants,  
Then despite its majestic presence,  
And the uniqueness of its existence,  
Its slow and sad deterioration,  
**Could** proceed without resistance.

And so I pen these words  
and pray that this not be so.  
For at Imani Christian Academy,  
this treasure is our home.

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Key Leadership of Imani Christian Academy, Winter 2020. Left to Right: Maria Anderson, Executive Administrator; Kevin Miller, Chaplain and Dean of Students; Tru Dixon, Dean of Students; William Baker, Theology Instructor and Chapel Pastor; Paulo Nzambi, CEO and Head of School

**Credit:** Amy Fisher, Pawsburgh Photography

## **As a way of building community**

By engaging local and relevant historians, preservationists and project managers along with the Imani's community, staff and leadership, an exchange has been kindled regarding viable steps to sustain this structure. This process begins with sharing content and educating our network, but it does not end there. Rather, the process continues, as this phenomenal structure brings us closer together as people and continues to bless the

community it was created to serve. To join this effort, please contact Paulo Nzambi at [pnzambi@imanichristianacademy.org](mailto:pnzambi@imanichristianacademy.org).

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## **About the Author**

Paulo Nzambi is a former trial lawyer, real estate entrepreneur, poet and playwright. He is currently the CEO & Head of School at Imani Christian Academy. Mr. Nzambi lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with his beautiful wife and three children.