John S. Chase Middle School protects the wellbeing of a community physically, socially, and environmentally. The design approach for this small middle school in historically Black East Austin is centered on several distinct goals. Our first and most important goal is to create a highly transparent public space which promotes inclusivity, encourages openness and integrates nature. Second, the educational facility operates optimally during a viral pandemic and adapts seamlessly to contemporary educational environments. And third, the simple modular structure maximizes flexibility and allows expansion.

Preservation of access and views to the natural site promotes public health and equity in the densifying neighborhood. Elevated wooden walkways connect the school to the street and develop urban links to the landscape. The central strategy of the building’s design is to reduce risk of viral spread through natural ventilation. Classroom square footage is duplicated to outdoor capacity, creating hybrid learning environments. Shade, HVLS fans, operable apertures, and ideal site orientation make outdoor learning possible. When students are confined to indoor learning, distributed HVAC systems place the interior spaces under positive pressure and bring fresh air in.

Six classrooms accommodate 20 students each using traditional school scheduling. Modular, moveable desks facilitate students indoors or out. Students stay at personal stations while instructors rotate teaching spaces. Hallways and lockers are externally located. External trough sinks encourage hand-washing. The administrative program is enlarged for health services to include isolation rooms for students. An acoustical installation dampens sound and houses virucidal UV lighting. A dotted floor pattern at six foot spacing ensures occupants to maintain healthy distance and provides easy reference when arranging mobile furniture.

John S. Chase Middle School is named after a prominent black modernist architect. Chase was the first black student to attend The University of Texas School of Architecture. Many cherished public buildings were designed by Chase and define the Black East Austin community today.