

Q&A with StudioGC architecture + interiors

What factors influence your educational designs?

At the center of every design at StudioGC, we maintain a focus on the student experience. We create spaces that not only get students excited to learn, but celebrate all student abilities, cultures, and diversities. With three firm Principals that are Accredited Learning Environment Planners (ALEP), our team is constantly researching how to positively impact today's learners. As our world continues to become increasingly interconnected, it is important that schools provide spaces that can foster collaborative relationships while being accessible to all learners and educators. Spaces that limit physical and social-emotional barriers, are welcoming and adaptable, and are engaging while also maintaining areas for introspective moments, are essential in all schools.

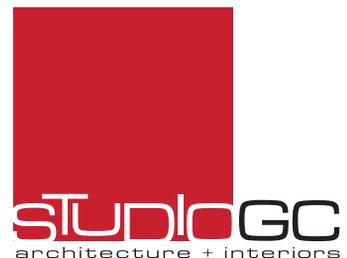
How can furniture choices support learning for students?

Furniture selections that are part of the planning and overall design process are vital to a successful learning environment. Think about an average day for a student: how much of the day are they actually moving-during class-time, at recess or during passing periods? Very little. The majority of their time at school is spent sitting, and therefore interacting with furniture. Strategic furniture selections offer opportunities to support student learning and well-being. For example, chairs on casters can promote spontaneous classroom interactions and groupwork while also allowing for subtle movements throughout the day to keep students alert and offer some kinetic release. Soft-seating lounge areas can create informal, unconstrained spaces for students that evoke feelings of hominess. Desks or tables that are height adjustable can accommodate students with wheelchairs or assistive

apparatuses equitably alongside their able-bodied peers. Furniture should also maximize the adaptability of a space for various types of instruction and uses by being easily maneuverable and adjustable, while offering variety in seating postures and visual/sound privacy.

What makes StudioGC unique?

Our team is passionate that everyone is deserving of good architecture and design. We are committed to providing schools with solutions that are attainable, are high-impact, and address the needs of each specific community. Our designs are not one-size-fits-all; we celebrate the diversity and uniqueness of each of our schools and strive to honor their cultures in every project while creating engaging and safe spaces for students to learn and grow.



223 West Jackson Boulevard
Suite 1200
Chicago, IL 60606
www.studiogc.com
312.253.3400

Q&A with Allison Mastel

AIA, NCARB, LEED® Green Associate Architect, Bray Architects

How does the interior design concept at Friendship Learning Center enhance teaching and learning opportunities?

Officially named “The Learning Lands of Friendship,” the design concept provides an immersive learning experience to encourage discovery and multi-cultural exploration for the elementary students. Each grade “pod” carries its theme through environmental branding depicting architecture, nature, animals, languages, and patterns of each corresponding continent. We incorporated symbolism in the graphics that emphasized positive human characteristics - such as hug, courage, wisdom, intuition, and harmony - to

inspire students. The wall graphic installations were designed to be incorporated into teachers’ lesson plans throughout the year.

How did you engage District’s staff in the design and planning process?

We engaged teachers from the beginning of the design process. They selected their pod’s continent based on relevance of that geographic location with the grade’s curriculum, allowing teachers to evolve their curriculum to utilize the graphics for instruction. Hours of research and dozens of graphic design concepts helped assign a distinct color palette and identifiable icons to each

“land,” which can be used as a means of wayfinding around the school. After the development of the design concept, Bray’s interior design team met with the District to educate teachers about the symbolism contained within the graphics. By engaging the teachers on the background of each, they can take ownership over the pieces and use them to educate their students.



What are some tips for schools who want to create an immersive learning experience through design?

It’s important to identify your team early and discuss their vision for the space: how they hope to teach, interact with students, collaborate with colleagues, and welcome the community. From there, you begin to see what themes are meaningful to your school and community. Environmental branding is not limited to wall graphics and two-dimensional installations. Schools should consider interactive installations and how digital displays may benefit lesson plans and the learners in that building. This project is just a taste of the future of immersive educational design, and technology can broaden the possibilities of using architectural design as part of the teaching and learning experience.



Photo Credit: Bill Fritsch | Harper Fritsch Studios



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Q&A with SHP

The Only Way to Predict the Future is to Invent It

Will school communities revert to traditional educational methods, or will they embrace what they've learned during the pandemic?

COVID-19 proved we can deliver education in a variety of new ways and accelerated a shift that began long before the pandemic. Many schools had already abandoned the teacher-at-the-front-of-the-classroom instruction for a more inclusive, student-driven approach. Future-focused schools are embracing models such as New Tech and Pathways in Education, as well as experiential, project-based, service-based and individualized learning pedagogies.

Yet the pandemic also demonstrated that we—that is, everyone invested and involved in supporting an educational community—need to think differently about education's current and future challenges. Education is in the process of

a major transformation, and transformation can be painful. (If it wasn't, it wouldn't be worth it.) Understanding the future, driving innovation and improving our approach to learning: that's the challenge in front of us right now.

How does that impact the built environment?

First and foremost, educational delivery drives design. The learning and operational environments must be in place before we can even think about how the physical environment can and should be designed.

Generally, ways schools can prepare for an exciting future include: fully integrating sustainable design and operational efficiency into every facility system and component; designing flexible buildings, classrooms and laboratory configurations; incorporating on-demand technology; using the entire campus and its environmental surroundings as a learning and teaching tool; ensuring safety and security through creative, unobtrusive design; and employing stakeholder engagement to involve and invigorate communities. Many of these strategies can be implemented without investing in additional space.



At Delaware Area Career Center, students can work individually or collaborate in small groups within the same space.



The Synnovation Lab at Sycamore High School includes flexible spaces that support a variety of learning and teaching styles. All photos: © Joe Harrison, JH Photography Inc.



A learning stair replaces traditional classroom space, while distributed dining—that is, bringing food to the students—replaces the traditional cafeteria at Winton Woods Schools.

How should or could educational spaces change to support the way curriculum will be delivered in the future?

The best way is to think about education differently. It is a life-long, life-wide and life-deep endeavor. This will require a shift in how schools plan for the future—not just community engagement or master planning, but true futurecasting.

As a research-based architecture and design firm, SHP's focus is on helping our clients think about educational delivery as far in the future as they can. When we engage in futurecasting with our clients, we consider many data points and inputs: student voices, agency and diversity; technology; economic and workforce trends; community and global demographic shifts; social and geopolitical trends; cultural, business and lifestyle trends. We ask hard questions and challenge conventional thinking. Only then can we design buildings that will adapt and change with the future.

The future is impossible to predict. And that's a good thing; at SHP, we'd rather invent it. But doing so is a daunting task. Let this be our challenge to go invent the future of education, together.



Interested in inventing your future?
Contact Shea McMahon at
smcmahon@shp.com or
614.223.2124 and visit shp.com for
more on the future of education.

Q&A with John Cronin, AIA

AG Architecture

How do you create a sense of community in your projects?

We specialize in the design of living and working environments that function as a community. Buildings are more than forms and spaces. Whether a multifamily, mixed use, student housing or senior living project, the structures we create impact people, their daily lives and their happiness. As we design, our focus is on the people who will live, work, play and learn inside these buildings. We create environments that promote interaction and enhance quality of life.



Carroll University | Waukesha, WI | Photo by: Tricia Shay Photography

What is special about designing places where students live?

Designing places where people live is our focus. No matter the age of the resident, they all have a common need for private space balanced with options for socialization. When we think about today's students, there is a unique aspect to this balance. They enjoy focusing on their personal projects while in a larger communal space. They like the buzz of a vibrant lifestyle around them as they are plugged in and multitasking. The infrastructure must be designed to support their technology needs whether they are inside or outside. Access to the outdoors is another priority. Whether views outside from a personal space, study nook or lounge or access to outdoor social spaces, they want to see and be seen. Campus housing needs to provide students with a sense of home, an environment where they feel secure as well as a place that fosters exploration, connection, learning and growth.

How is student housing evolving?

From a development perspective, we continue to see more public/private partnerships for student housing. These



developments have a true sense of community as they are mixed use environments that connect colleges to the greater surrounding area while providing access to desirable retail brands and amenities.

Individual spaces are an area of focus as we emerge from Covid. Rooms need to allow for personalization so students can make a space their own. They also need to have the infrastructure to support remote learning. Connectivity is still a priority. The college experience is about fostering connections, so amenity spaces continue to evolve—encouraging socialization within the housing development as well as exploration of the greater campus. When it comes to the communal aspect of student housing, it is first and foremost about promoting inclusivity and equity. From gender neutral bathrooms to accessibility, every resident should feel safe and secure within their home.



AG Architecture
1414 Underwood Avenue, #301
Wauwatosa, WI 53213
414.431.3131 | www.agarch.com
Contact:
Katie Miller
Director of Business Development
kmiller@agarch.com



Wisconsin Evans Scholars House | Madison, WI | Photo by: William Fritsch

Q&A with Jeffrey Hyder

Higher Education Sector Leader, Moseley Architects

How has planning higher education facilities been affected by the pandemic?

The pandemic has allowed colleges and universities to re-evaluate their space needs and prioritize face-to-face interaction times. Faculty and students have adapted to remote and online learning in ways we would have never imagined. The idea of a flipped classroom, where lectures occur online, and group interaction or hands-on learning occurs face to face has been around for years, but the pandemic forced all students and faculty to embrace the notion of online learning. Now that the content has been created to help facilitate lecture delivery during the pandemic, the focus can now be on how to best utilize in-person learning coming out of the pandemic. We continue to see universities and colleges looking at creative ways to renovate space to create active classrooms and hands-on interactive spaces to position their students for the future. Employers are looking for students that have a global

understanding of a variety of disciplines and systems as well as strong problem solving and analytical skills. These skills are often developed in hands-on learning and group thinking environments.

There is still a concern that facilities need to be resilient to better withstand a future pandemic. Mechanical systems are being designed with more air changes and increased filtration to provide healthier spaces for building occupants. Touch points are being evaluated and distance considerations are playing a part in space planning. Working remotely or working from home is reducing the requirements for office space within our programs.

What other trends are you seeing in higher education planning and design?

The social change discussions spanning the last 18 months have had a significant impact. While higher education has always been at the forefront of social change, these issues are driving our thinking in the workplace and designing facilities for clients.

I am incredibly proud of the work our firm [Moseley Architects] is doing as it relates to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Following our strategic planning efforts in 2018, we began the



James Madison University, College of Business
Photo: Maylone Photography

process of developing an EDI Plan. We formed a multi-disciplinary EDI committee that prioritized initiatives focused on developing and guiding our staff; evaluating and modifying policies; and improving our connections with the communities we serve.

In terms of higher education design, we continue to drive discussions that focus on creating spaces that are welcoming and inclusive while also supporting growth and exploration. Whether it is looking at affinity spaces for students to feel at home or planning advisory offices for students to access support services, the focus is on creating spaces, so ALL students are successful.

What do you love most about your job?

The opportunity to impact higher education facilities that focus on student growth and success. Students who seek out post-secondary educational opportunities are striving to make an impact. I cherish each opportunity we have to design a facility that enriches students' lives and allows them to flourish during a critical time in their development. From classroom and laboratory spaces, student support, athletic performance and training, wellness, housing, and dining, these facilities are all focused on helping students achieve their best self so that they can impact the future of our societies. What could be more exciting than that?



Virginia Commonwealth University, Cabell Library, Photo: Robert Benson Photography



Virginia Tech, O'Shaughnessy Hall, Photo: Maylone Photography

Q&A with Mark Beebe, AIA

Partner, LANCER+BEEBE Architects

As schools adapt to a post-COVID world, what are top design issues districts should consider with any new construction project or renovation?

As schools have responded to post-COVID realities over the past year and half, numerous efforts have been made to improve student and teacher wellness, and to reduce susceptibilities to the spreading of germs and viruses. These improvements include 'handsfree' fixtures, healthier air filtration and circulation, and accommodations for appropriate distancing. While focused improvements like these have been helpful in reducing the risk of COVID-19 and other viruses, there are other larger design opportunities that can positively impact both student and teacher wellness as well as student engagement and success. The key to unleashing these larger, multifaceted opportunities in learning spaces is leveraging 'smart flexibility'. This

means perhaps developing learning spaces that can morph in size and function, serving various size groups and functions. Learning spaces that are more flexible and visually and/or physically interconnected enable both student distancing (when necessary) but lend themselves to a greater array of programmatic opportunities.

Research surrounding Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and its impact on student success is making great strides in PreK-12 education lately; what are some ways the physical learning environment positively impact SEL?

To positively impact student SEL is to first acknowledge that any given class is comprised of a wide range of needs and placement within the SEL spectrum. This means 'one size does not fit all' when it comes to the question of what a student might need to feel comfortable and find themselves in an emotional and mental state to focus and learn. Again, flexibility is key. Classrooms with adjacent breakout collaboration spaces allow for small group instruction or individual work while maintaining visibility to the classroom. A wide variety of mobile furniture (on casters) enables learner choice and ownership of their space, while facilitating various size student groupings. Lighting should also offer flexibility to set the mood through color temperature as well as focusing on various spaces within the room. Finally, 'biophilic' natural elements and textures are vital for student social emotional



wellness, as well as controllable natural light.

'Agile Learning Environments' is a growing buzz word in education spaces today; how can a school balance the desire for visually-connected and flexible learning spaces with the need for student safety and security?

An 'agile' learning environment is a space that connects well with students on the wide spectrum of social emotional needs, and this is often achieved through creating highly-flexible spaces with exceptional visual connection from one learning space to another. However, this flexibility and visual connection would seem to run counter to 'best practices' in school design for student safety and security. Safety film on glass and wirelessly-controllable classroom door hardware are tools that can help, but the real answer is in developing strategically-located safety zones within the building that remain out of sight of the corridor but don't impede the visual connection, such as cubbie alcoves or adjacent shared workrooms. Reinforced storm shelters can be integrated throughout the building within restrooms, storage rooms, stairwells and other spaces without windows. Dispersing these safety and security spaces throughout the building will ensure they can be accessed timely, while ensuring maximum classroom 'agility.'

LANCER + BEEBE, LLC
Architecture | Planning | Interiors

Mark Beebe, AIA, RID, NCARB, LEED AP
220 N. College Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
317.750.5373
mbeebe@lancerbeebe.com
lancerbeebe.com



An 'agile learning environment' should easily morph in size and function, enabling a plethora of activities and group sizes



Creating 'break-out' collaboration spaces of various sizes adjacent to the larger classroom space enables social distancing while facilitating small group learning and individual instruction

Q&A with BDR and Ennead Architects

Anna Forgey, Partner, BDR

Tomas Rossant, AIA, Design Partner, Ennead Architects

How do you steer an educational client to test new trends in teaching and learning in a financially responsible and sustainable way?

Educational institutions that avail themselves of new technologies, novel teaching methods, and innovative types of learning environments are often advantaged with greater success in student performance and pedagogical effectiveness. But the wholesale adoption of new ideas in capital projects can be costly/risky and cultural acceptance is not guaranteed.

We recommend the approach of taking “test drives.” This can be done by 1) introductions to our other clients, 2) site visits to these clients, 3) if you have the benefit of underutilized space, consider building a “beta-test” with real lighting, technology, overall form and function, etc. and 4) if you have initiated a new capital project for which you are confident of both need and stakeholder adoption, consider expanding the budget and program to build a single “experimental” program space—see what happens.

The past few years have been years of change. What trends, in design and construction, do you see in education?

For us, there are three trends that we’ve seen.

The first is the importance of collaboration zones throughout the building; as learning outside the classroom has become equally important to learning inside the classroom. Finding these spaces without adding square footage and making them productive locations for student development, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, and faculty mentoring are proving to be significant advantages in formulating critical thinking.



Anna Forgey – BDR



Tomas Rossant – Ennead Architects

Secondly, universal classrooms are gaining traction as they allow greater utilization and flexibility of traditional spaces. They allow faculty to collaborate in separate locations and benefit each other’s approach to teaching instead of owning a classroom and never leaving it.

The third trend is about design thinking. It seems that every intellectual endeavor, or academic discipline, can benefit from teaching students the value of outcome-based design thinking. We think more maker spaces and experimental learning laboratories need to be produced to invite students to engage in experimental problem solving.

What hurdles, in design and construction, should schools prepare for when taking on new capital improvement projects?

Understanding, and helping the client understand, the school’s wants versus their needs. People always expect us to tell them what they should want in an educational environment. And we are happy to do so as someone who stays abreast of trends. But having a consultant tell you what you should do, and you knowing what you want, are very different things. Too many times the design process, project schedule, and project budget are put into chaos when a client, late in the game, finally understands their true needs and desires. Our teams work together to prioritize competing interests for program needs versus desires, so the budget doesn’t hamper the vision of the project. Establishing this awareness early and working with the design and construction teams to estimate in concept is critical to help advise and balance the priorities before time is wasted. We recommend an “R&D” phase at the beginning of the project to benchmark similar projects, visit exemplary buildings, and hold “visioning” workshops.” This costs money (we think .25% of your construction budget), and takes time, but assures a positive project outcome.

Secondly, we need to think beyond just the building. Most new projects require a level of enabling work such as infrastructure improvements, campus roadway changes, and relocation planning. It is important to identify and capture these items from the early stages of the project.



The University of Texas at Austin Cockrell School of Engineering, Engineering Education and Research Center, Photo: Jeff Goldberg / Esto Courtesy of Ennead Architects

BDR

Info@bdrpartners.com

ennead architects
press@ennead.com

212.807.7171