

Educational Interiors

The Student Factor

Sandra Kate

It is a rainy Thanksgiving day in New York and we are killing some time before arriving at my mother-in-law's house for the holiday feast. It has been some time since the kids have visited my husband's home town of Rye and we are giving them a tour of where their father spent his childhood. As we pass his high school, the kids drop their jaws with exclamations. The youngest pouts, "Wow, you got to attend a school like this and you had us attend that dinky cracker box school." His older sister, who attended a semester in Luxemburg last year chimes in "this is just as impressive as the chateau where we took classes. No wonder you loved going to high school." Both the children expressed admiration for this beautiful facility, yet Rye Middle/High school with its stone structure and sloping slate roofs is neither flashy, or contemporary. I was slightly surprised at their response because the school is so different than other sleek, new high schools they have wanted to attend, claiming that their school was "boring". This older collegiate Gothic building does, however, make the statement that education is important in this community, and it appears to have accomplished this for many generations.

At a time when kids are constantly exposed to high-tech, high energy, visual and auditory sound bites at mega speed intervals we often hear the refrain that perhaps our school environments need to be designed like places

such as malls, video arcades, restaurants, and Joe's basement to compete for our children's attention. But while hospitality and retail establishments have budgets that allow for complete remodeling every 5 years, school districts do not. These buildings, in fact, may be around for 40-50 years or more and with more emphasis on avoiding the "throw away environment" and conserving our resources there is a growing consensus to build responsible facilities that will last. The challenge then becomes how to design timeless educational facilities that engage and support students today but will continue to stimulate our children of the future.

Perhaps the key is to take a step back and investigate what are the underlying elements that children like about the environments they choose. Why do they pick one eating environment over another? Why do they like to go to the theater rather than watch TV at home? Why do they enjoy the simulation ski racer at the video arcade? More importantly, we need to take time to ask students about their physical and social needs. In designing school facilities, it is very easy to get caught up in extensive teacher and administrative work-sessions determining all the details and needs of staff and maintenance but often the real concerns of students are brushed over with a token student representative from student council or National Honor's Society thrown in with 20-25 staff and community members

on a design committee. Even though many schools throw around the slogan "We're student centered," when it comes to facilities, final decisions are too often based on concerns of the maintenance staff or needs of the administration.

As I have worked on the design of schools throughout various states I have tried to take the opportunity to do as much research with students as possible, both with observation and with interaction. While it is sometimes harder for younger children to articulate fully their needs in an environment, they usually have opinions on what they like or don't like. Young children perceive color, texture and scale in a very different way than adults do. They like brighter colors in small doses, small cozy spaces that make them feel secure, ability to see outside, and most importantly they like and need to move.

Middle and high school students on the other hand seem to have very little trouble expressing their feelings and experiences about school environments and what their needs are. Although social and physical needs vary with student age and type of demographic setting, it has been surprising in discussions with student groups to see how many of the concerns or issues were similar among middle and high school students across the country. Issues that appeared constantly in discussions include:

- Physical comfort- both in the classroom and other spaces
- Quiet space to have a personal con-

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versation — “This school does not have a single place where a person can cry” — a girl exclaimed in frustration.

- Space where you can relax.
- Personal space
- Sense of quality
- A place that creates a sense of pride
- Space that stimulates.
- Sense of order and logical layout
- Restrooms that you feel comfortable using.
- An environment that respects students as human beings.
- A place that makes ME feel special

While marketers in commercial environments have chosen to address their young consumers with certain environmental approaches, there are a variety of options which allow a school facility to address student needs and make them feel special. Many of these features can be flexible and adaptable, designed to allow for simple modification in the future as trends or social climates change. Other building elements are those which are inherent in good design and convey quality and respect for those using the building both today and in the future.

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