

# Why Some Schools Just Feel... Different

HOW SPACE SHAPES LEARNING AND BELONGING

by Kate Chandler

Before a teacher speaks, the classroom has already made an impression. The light through the windows, the way desks are arranged (if there are desks at all), whether there is room to move or gather.

All of these details quietly shape how students experience learning. In recent years, research in neuroscience, psychology, architecture, and education has begun to show just how much these physical conditions matter, influencing everything from attention and stress to collaboration and wellbeing.

For much of the last century, schools were designed with a different assumption in mind: if you put students in a room with a teacher and a curriculum, learning would take care of itself. Buildings were meant to be efficient, orderly, and easy to manage. Rows of desks, long corridors, and closed doors reflected a model of education built around control and standardization.

What that model missed was how profoundly the environment affects the brain. Students do not arrive

in a classroom as blank slates. They arrive with nervous systems that respond to noise, light, crowding, and movement. They arrive with social instincts shaped by whether spaces invite interaction or discourage it. They arrive with different ways of focusing, processing, and participating, all of which are either enhanced or constrained by the spaces they spend their days in.

This has led educators, architects, researchers, and designers to rethink what school buildings are actually for and how they are used. Instead of treating them as neutral containers, many now see them as part of the learning itself, or, taken from the Reggio Emilia approach, a kind of third teacher that is an active participant in education and reinforces, or undermines, what schools say they value.



### **WHEN A BUILDING BECOMES PART OF THE LESSON**

In early learning environments, this idea is almost taken for granted. Young children learn through exploration, play, and physical engagement with the world. They gather on the floor, work at low tables, drift toward windows, and turn staircases and corners into places of discovery. The space itself shapes what they notice and how they make meaning. However, as students age, school environments have historically narrowed into rows, schedules, and systems that assume learning happens primarily at a desk.

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*Above: Then Grade 6 students working on their personal inquiry Park Project in the Innovation Lab asking, “What do mathematicians do in our community?” and “How are parks built?”*

For York House Head of School Deryn Lavell, this is precisely the assumption worth questioning. Design, she believes, is never just design. Influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach, she has spent years observing how architecture and design shape children's attention and mood, and how even small details can change the way a day begins.

She recalls one school in Singapore that made a deliberate choice about how students entered the building. Each morning, children walked through a bamboo grove before reaching their classrooms. The walk created a pause between home and school. By the time students arrived, they were calmer, more grounded, and more ready to learn.

That kind of intentionality shows up in quieter ways as well. A staircase positioned to catch winter light. A window seat that invites a child to sit and think. A curved wall that softens a corridor and slows people down. A learning hub visible from the corridor becomes an invitation rather than a barrier. These are not architectural flourishes. They are signals that this is a place where attention, curiosity, and presence matter.

Up to this point, the argument can sound almost utopian: light, movement, invitation, visibility. But none of it works unless it is grounded in something practical. Students still need to focus. They still need boundaries. They still need places where they can hear one another think.

That tension between openness and structure requires a commitment to architecture and design that responds thoughtfully to context.

For Alex Percy, a principal at Acton Ostry Architects who designed York House's Senior School and the Junior School Transformation Project, this is where school design has undergone its most important shift. For much of the twentieth century, school buildings were designed for teaching. The goal was transmission:



a teacher, a room, a class moving in unison. Today, schools are being designed for learning, and that is a much more complicated task. Students do not all learn in the same way, and schools themselves have different priorities, cultures, and rhythms. That opens the design field to far more nuance.

Some schools, he notes, have experimented with eliminating classrooms altogether, opening everything up into large, flexible spaces. The idea is attractive, but it often runs into a simple problem. Without acoustic separation and clear boundaries, attention collapses. Students struggle to focus. What looks freeing on paper may become exhausting in practice.

Percy's approach has been to keep the classroom but loosen its traditional edges, allowing learning to flow into the spaces within and around it. Natural light, which benefits everyone, becomes a starting point.

So does the ability to move. Learning today is far more collaborative than it once was. Students work in groups, explain ideas to one another, and pick up information from one another informally as well as through direct instruction. Classrooms need to support that shift, and so do the spaces outside them.

kind of self-awareness and anxiety about making mistakes. The classroom, with its assigned desks and individual workspaces, seemed to reinforce that pressure.

So they started with the room.

“We reflected on how we wanted our students to feel in these spaces. Previous years had rooms that were “traditional”—teacher-led, with assigned seating and individual materials. We envisioned something more akin to our early years classrooms: communal materials, group tables, carpets, pillows, and a generally comfortable and safe space for our Grade 6 students. This renovation propelled us to challenge traditional, “factory-style” models of education<sup>1</sup> and reconsider how the learning space reflects the evolving identities of middle school students.”

Over the course of the year, they gradually removed fixed seating and introduced shared supplies and flexible work areas. Students were

invited into the process, sketching possible layouts and reflecting on how different arrangements made them feel. Some days they worked at grouped tables, other days on the floor, in window seats, at small individual stations, or even at the teacher’s table.

As the space changed, so did the students. Girls who had been quiet began to speak more. Others learned to recognize when they needed a quieter corner or a more social setting. The classroom became less about occupying a desk and more about choosing an environment that supported how they were thinking and feeling.

At a stage of life when confidence often wavers, this shift mattered. The room gave students a way to practice agency and to take responsibility for how they learned.



Instead of corridors that exist only for circulation, more intentional schools are carving out places to stop. Soft seating. Small tables. Breakout areas. Nooks where a student can talk through a problem or sit quietly with a friend. These spaces give students a way to find their own path through the school day and make movement part of learning.

### REMAKING THE CLASSROOM

At York House School, these ideas took shape last year inside a pair of Grade 6 classrooms.

Two teachers, Emily Stoyles and Elisa Hall, both trained in early childhood and inquiry-based education, noticed a growing tension among their new Grade 6 students. By the time they reached middle school, many students were already carrying a new

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Brent, et al. *Engaging Minds: Cultures of Education and Practices of Teaching (2nd Edition)*. Routledge, 2015.



### SEEING WHO YOU CAN BECOME

In schools that serve Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12, the ability to see what older students are doing plays a quiet but powerful role. When younger girls turn a corner and glimpse older students training, rehearsing together, or working side by side on a project, they are not just observing activity. They are catching sight of their own futures in the school and of their path to graduation.

Lavell has long argued that these moments of visibility matter. Learning, she suggests, happens in the spaces between formal spaces, in shared studios, along staircases, and in the places where students gather without being told to. These are the environments where ideas surface, where collaboration takes shape, and where students and teachers connect, reflect, and ideate.

For Percy, this kind of visibility is especially important during the middle and senior school years, when students are beginning to imagine themselves in new roles. At York House, he and his team worked to introduce transparency between spaces so that younger students could see what older students were doing, whether that meant watching seniors collaborate on projects or come together in shared spaces.

For girls especially, those moments matter. Seeing older students take up physical and intellectual space makes confidence and growth visible. The building itself starts to suggest what is possible.

### WHAT BUILDINGS TEACH

For Prakash Nair, a futurist, entrepreneur, and architect whose work spans the globe, these patterns point to a deeper truth. Schools often talk about creativity, individuality, and collaboration, but their buildings tell a different story.

When learning happens in rows of desks behind closed doors, the message is conformity. When students must ask permission to move or work together, the message is control. Over time, these physical signals become part of what students internalize about themselves and their place in the system.

Nair describes this as the hidden curriculum. The building is the hardware that makes certain kinds of learning easy and others difficult. Schools may aspire to personalized, student-centered education, but if the physical environment does not support it, those aspirations remain largely symbolic.

What makes this approach to school design significant is that it reveals how much is possible when the space itself aligns with the school's values, an alignment that York House has made visible in practice.



### WHEN THE PROGRAM OUTGROWS THE BUILDING

One of the clearest signals that a school is evolving is when its programs begin to strain against the physical spaces meant to hold them.

At York House, that pressure is increasingly visible. Over time, expectations around athletics, leadership, collaboration, and student life have grown, but one specific area of the campus has not expanded at the same pace. One gym serves students from the earliest grades through graduation. Teams train from early morning into the evening, often waiting for space. The ambition is there. The infrastructure is not.

Students who compete at high levels, students who want to train for fun and fitness, and students who simply want to be part of a team are all drawing from the same limited space. Elsewhere on campus, shared areas are being asked to do more than they were ever designed to do, hosting learning, gathering, and movement all at once.

What this reveals is not a flaw in the program, but its success. The life of the school has expanded beyond what the gym building was designed to support.

Looking ahead, Lavell imagines spaces that better reflect how the school now operates. Gyms that are filled with light and visible from across campus. Training and fitness areas that support both competitive athletes and everyday movement. A dining hall and commons that

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can host students at lunch, families in the evening, and alums returning to campus. Learning hubs for younger students that reflect the same openness and care.

These changes are necessary to show a student walking across campus what is possible. To show a younger girl watching older students workout or collaborate that this is a place where effort and excellence belong. To tell the wider community that the school is building for the future it is already living.

### WHAT THE SPACES SAY

School buildings are not just backdrops for education. They are another teacher with the potential to transform learning and connection.

They teach students that different kinds of learning are valued. They teach them about collaboration, movement, and new perspectives. They teach them about belonging.

As schools like York House look toward tomorrow, the spaces are not just shaping what students learn, but who they become. 🌀