

Embracing Healthy, Sustainable Building in the Midst of the Pandemic

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by Michael Lindstrom

Early education centers, schools, and universities across the country are embracing sustainable, healthy, design in creative ways despite, or in some cases because of, the global pandemic. Educational institutions increasingly want to make sustainability initiatives visible so that the building and landscape become part of the curriculum while interest in biophilia-based design is on the rise.

The studioMLA Architects design team understands that what is good for the planet is good for children and that green design – including natural light, fresh air, and access to the outdoors – aligns with Covid-19 guidelines.

Boston University prioritized a “healthy and green” early education facility. Renovating an historic house into a highly sustainable state-of-the-art Children’s Center required a careful rethinking of the building’s skin and the creative integration of high-performance mechanical systems into the highly constrained wall and ceiling structures. Maintaining the historical character of the existing gardens and buildings (i.e. restoring the existing single glazed windows) was key to unlocking the project’s potential.

In addition to smart integration into the surrounding transportation grid which encourages walking and biking, creative use of recycled and natural materials, and high efficiency heating and cooling systems, we created an interactive dashboard to provide children a window into the performance of the buildings systems. The dashboard also allows them to track a variety of sustainable initiatives that are a part of their curriculum such as recycling, gardening and composting, and tracking bird sightings and the weather.



The Lincoln School

The Lincoln School in Providence, R.I. was founded as a Quaker school and among its core values are environmental stewardship and strong connections to nature. Their new net zero early education center embodies these values. Students connect to these values experientially through the abundant natural light, warm natural materials and direct access to the outdoors from each classroom. They also appreciate the tangible contribution to the effort to reduce global carbon emissions reflected in its net zero energy use. The simple, elegant design includes a high-performance building envelope with high-efficiency systems to minimize energy use, generous windows to facilitate natural lighting and ventilation, and a photovoltaic array providing plenty of clean energy to power the building.

At both Boston University and the Lincoln School, prioritizing health and sustainability in the design meant that re-opening to children during the pandemic, while not easy, required essentially no physical changes. The building and site designs support safe and appropriate practices and feel warm and welcoming in spite of masks and social distancing. Educators immediately embraced these environments as important teaching resources and are thrilled to explain the connections to health, sustainability and nature that the projects demonstrate.

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