

Hort Woods child care centre & lab school

How can we design environments in ways that help children learn about, and appreciate, the earth's environment? We know that environmentalism often starts at a very young age but many children (and adults) have lost touch with nature. One answer is to re-establish the connection between children and the outdoors by simply affording them more time "in the woods". This is an important goal however the reality is that many children, for better or for worse, will spend many hours in the "built and designed" environment.

If we want children to learn to be stewards of the earth and truly believe the words of Loris Malaguzzi, that the environment is the "third teacher", then it follows that the spaces that we design and build should be a laboratory for children to understand nature and the environment.

We were lucky to have the opportunity to design a project where facilitating early environmental education was a primary goal.

Benefiting from a 'perfect storm' of project circumstances, and using a highly collaborative and integrated design approach, Penn State University in State College Pennsylvania, built a LEED platinum early learning centre which demonstrated clear, strong, unambiguous, connections between design, education, biophilia and the environment and showcased the ways in which sustainable design can truly impact education. The project would not have been possible without the motivation and clarity of purpose provided by the PSU education team but was also dependant on a highly inclusive project development process. Beginning with site selection, representatives of the early learning team, education department and campus planning were able to look beyond conventional site selection criteria to realise that keeping children on campus and

"in the woods" outweighed any inherent site challenges. The design team spent time observing the existing child development centre and design charrettes included participation by all stake holders. Since the project goals included maximising children's connections to the outdoors and ensuring that key sustainability strategies are visible and engage students, user involvement at all stages of the design was critical. Involving the larger Campus community in the design review process was invaluable in building consensus.

The project is unique in that it provides a multi-level learning experience, especially in terms of the components associated with the natural environment and the sustainable systems. On one level, children's learning is enhanced through their exploration of a sensory rich environment created with a palette of natural materials. In addition, children have access to the natural world at their doorstep and children and teachers benefit from the visible and accessible sustainable building components and systems which are integrated into the curriculum. Finally, students in the education department and the broader university community benefit from a new educational paradigm that values biophilia and a strong relationship to the environment.

The benefits to the children and the success of the new and more robust "natural curriculum" were immediately evident when the centre opened. Children and teachers have experienced a more open exploratory environment, have developed a new vocabulary and have seen family engagement around environmental issues increase considerably. More importantly, children are actively exploring the world outside and connecting the inside and outside in a more natural, healthy way that is "built-in" to their environment.



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Mike has practiced architecture since 1982 in Paris, New York and Boston and founded his current practice in 1996. In addition to teaching at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, he has served as an Instructor for the Boston Architectural Center and as an Assistant for the Parsons School of Design - Paris Program.