



Inside-Out: Making Connections

by Mike Lindstrom



Mike Lindstrom is currently the Principal of studioMLA Architects/Michael Lindstrom Associates Architects in Brookline, Massachusetts, which provides a full range of architectural services in the design of environments for children. As one of the leading architects in the field, Mike, along with Jim Greenman, led the annual Child Care Design Institute at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design from 2000 to 2008 and has served as an advisor to the American Academy of Pediatrics on Child Care Center Design. In his more than 20 years of designing both buildings and outdoor play and learning areas for children, Mike has extensive experience with the complex design, regulatory, and construction processes inherent in creating children's environments. Mike has practiced architecture since 1982 in Paris, New York, and Boston. 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. Mike received a Master of Architecture degree from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and a BS in Architectural Studies from the University of Illinois. In addition to co-authoring the *LISC Resource Guide for Greening Early Childhood Centers*, Mike is a LEED accredited professional and has designed multiple LEED certified children's centers.

Humans have, for millions of years, had a profound connection to nature and the out-of-doors. For almost as long, we have also sought shelter from nature's harshest elements and attempted to cultivate and shape the natural world around us. Over time, the need to create shelter has evolved into Architecture and the desire to shape nature evolved into Landscape Architecture. That Architecture and Landscape Architecture have evolved as independent disciplines in many cultures has reinforced the separation between inside and out.

Creating play and learning environments for young children presents a special opportunity to influence the way in which

they understand the relationship between inside and out and their relationship to nature. This spring's Working Forum on Designing for Children conference in Rotorua, New Zealand, focused on understanding building and landscape as a connected continuum and taking inspiration from that experience. This article will explore the nature of connections between inside and out and look closely at two projects that take very different approaches to the transition between the two.

At the simplest level, connections between inside and out fall into one of two categories: they are either openings in a building wall (doors and windows)

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or semi-enclosed outdoor spaces created by the shape of the building (porches, courtyards, roof decks, and so on). The goals of a well-designed connection/transition are to be highly functional, responsive to the particular use and site, and to provide an environment that has qualities that would be impossible to achieve in a space that is either entirely *inside* or entirely *outside*.

To understand this goal, think of a traditional North American 'front porch.' This space has multiple utilitarian and cultural functions:

- A sheltered place for visitors to wait after knocking or for the inhabitants as they come home.
- A buffer between the windows and the street allowing views out and light in while maintaining a degree of privacy.

- A space that is semi-connected to the street allowing inhabitants to sit outside and engage passersby while allowing them to control the interaction (ignore them, just say "hi," or invite them onto the porch).
- A 'safe' space from which to observe the outside world (storms, sunsets, the street, the neighbors).

In early childhood environments connections and 'in between' spaces can have many purposes and uses, not the least of which is to engender an overall connectedness of the building to the landscape and the inhabitants to the wider world outside. These spaces:

- enable children to understand the passage of time, the changing weather and seasons, seeing the sun and shadows move across the sky.

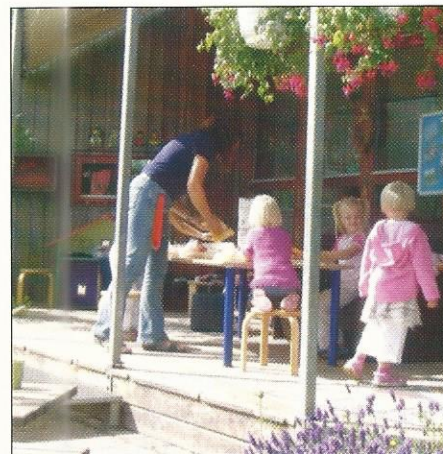


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- enrich children's experience by giving them sensory access (visual, olfactory, aural, and tactile) to the ever-changing natural world even when they are inside.
 - Frame 'special' views: the birdhouse, the dogwood tree, or something in the distance.
 - provide a sheltered space outside where sun, wind, and rain can be 'managed': to allow a wider range of activities to take place outdoors and for longer periods of time.
 - provide a space that allows children to linger at the threshold and observe before actually 'going out' or 'coming in.'
 - allow children to appreciate the special feel of transition spaces: a sunny courtyard open to the sky or a window seat with a gentle breeze blowing in.
 - provide a feeling of security and 'prospect,' a comfortable place to take in the landscape and activities of the wider world.
 - enlarge the amount of useful space available by expanding rooms (visually and physically) and by creating outdoor rooms.
 - enhance the spatial variety of an environment by creating spaces with different characteristics other than either purely 'indoor' or purely 'outdoor' spaces.
- The challenge in any setting is to understand the unique opportunities to connect inside and out and to design windows, doors, and transition spaces (between building and landscape)

to take advantage of the setting and climate and to support children's active learning. Following are two case studies, one in New Zealand, the other in the United States. Each takes a very different approach to the connection between inside and out, but both can serve as examples of strategies and techniques that can be successfully adopted to enhance the connection between interior and exterior spaces.

Case Study #1

New Shoots Children's Centre, Papamoa, New Zealand

Architecture: Collingridge and Smith Architects

Landscape Architecture and Playspace Design: Collingridge and Smith Architects

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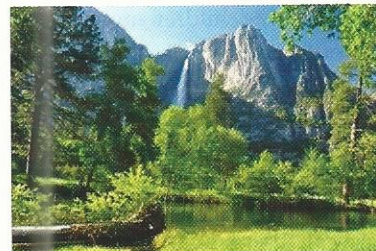
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This project is built on what was essentially an empty lot near the beach, a blank canvas for the design team. They created a very simple, elegant building with a strong relationship between indoors and out and the relaxed feel of a Kiwi beach house. The indoor-outdoor connections are based largely on three simple strategies: 1) floor to ceiling glass walls in the classrooms, 2) large sliding glass doors connecting the classrooms to the outdoor play spaces, and 3) a broad, covered deck running the length of the building.

The all-glass classroom walls provide a striking connection between indoors and out with broad views of the sky and the adjacent outdoor play space. This transparency affords children inside continual awareness of changes in light, weather, and the seasons outside.

The climate in this part of New Zealand permits the large sliding classroom

doors to be open most of the year, and local licensing allows for a free flow of children between indoors and out. This presents an incredible spatial

continuum from indoors to out, allowing for a wide range of degrees of enclosure depending on whether the sliding doors are open or closed.



Photo by Mike Lindstrom

The large, covered play deck runs the length of the classroom portion of the building. It provides a play area that is protected from sun and rain, dries quickly, and is sheltered from the wind by the building. Having the building to define one of its edges also means that it feels more protected and can serve as a comfortable transition space as children move from inside to out or vice versa.

The glass wall separation could provide for a somewhat abrupt transition to the outside, but in this center that does not happen since the wall essentially 'disappears' when the large doors are opened and the broad, covered deck creates a generous transition zone.

The design also facilitates supervision from inside to out and seems to encourage free flow, free play, and a relaxed feeling among

staff and children. The broad, open vistas and opening walls seem appropriate to a culture that relates to the expansive horizon and broad sandy beaches of the Pacific.

Case Study #2

Hort Woods Child Care Center — Penn State University, State College University

Architecture: studioMLA Architects

Landscape Architecture and Playspace Design: Robin Moore, MTR Landscape Architects, studioMLA Architects

A 90-year-old interdepartmental collaboration at Penn State University had developed a pedagogical approach to early education where environmental education and connecting children to

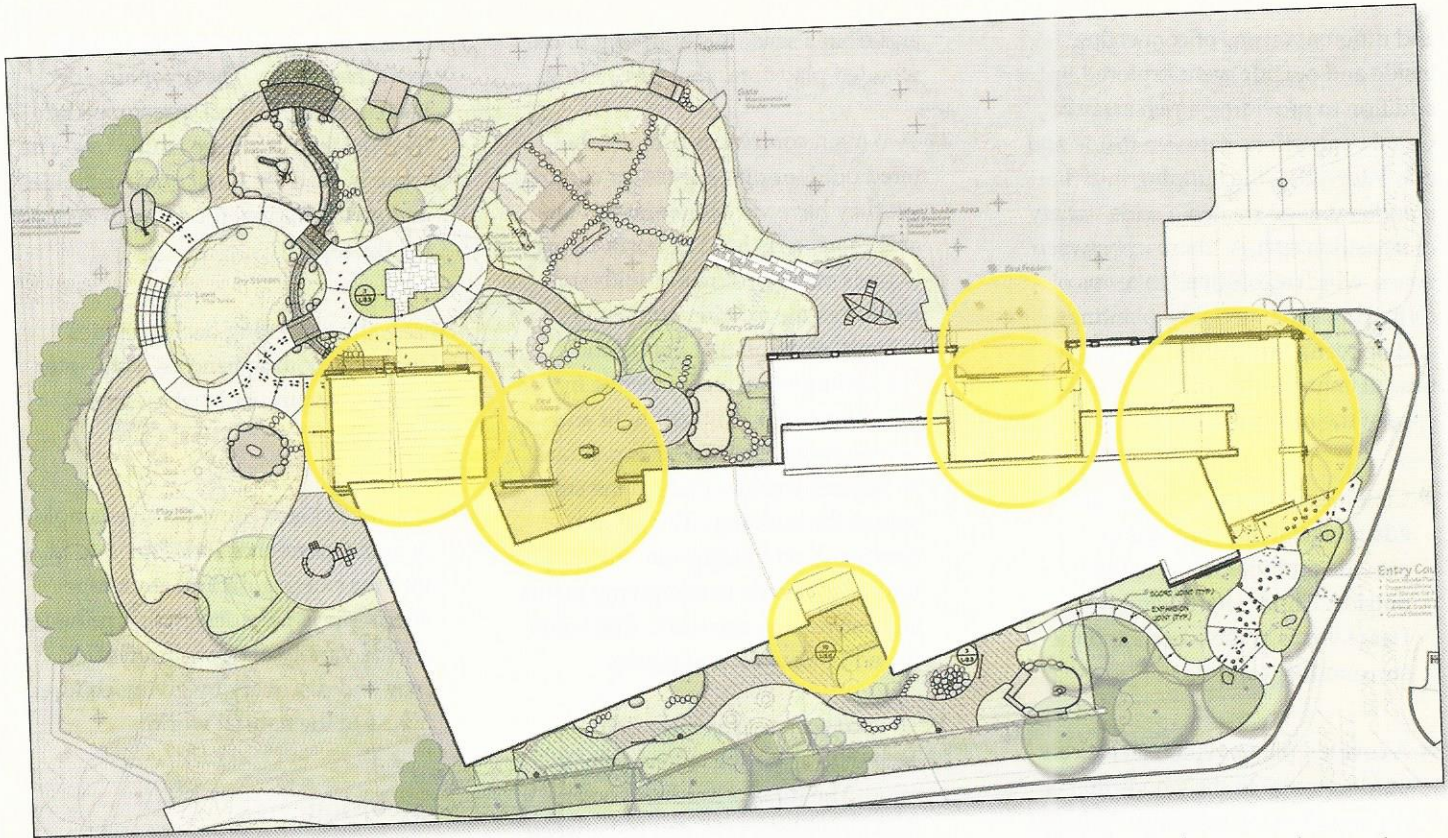
nature was a high priority. The program was severely limited by its old facility which, while it had indoor and outdoor space, had a very limited connection between the two.

One of the key goals for the project was to explore innovative approaches to integrating sustainable design, nature, and education for young children, students, and academic researchers and to reconnect children and nature by creating tangible links between sustainable design, curriculum, and children's everyday experience of nature. One of the key strategies that the design team employed was to take a multi-layered approach to connecting the indoor and outdoor learning environments.

The site, a somewhat forgotten parcel on the edge of the last intact wooded



Photo by Howard Doughty



A wide variety of decks, covered spaces, and courtyards create transitions between indoors and out.

area on campus, was initially thought to be 'too constrained' for the program, but in the end presented a remarkable setting for children to engage the natural world and an opportunity for restoring and enhancing a key entry point to the campus. The advantage was that children would have access to a very rich natural area; however, the small size of the site and density of existing trees would require that the building be built on two floors and that it have a very irregular footprint.

Working with Penn State arborists, the design team determined that in order to protect the large trees, no building elements or impervious surfaces could be introduced outside of the footprint of the small existing maintenance building and parking area. This constraint, along with the desire to maintain and restore the existing natural wooded areas and micro-climatic zones, informed the design. The team would come to see these 'constraints' as 'opportunities' as the project evolved



Photo by Mike Lindstrom

and different means of connecting inside and outside were explored. In addition to providing a rich array of visual connections between inside and out, integrating the building into the woodland edge created a wide variety of transition spaces. These in-between zones, which are defined in terms of form, climate, materiality, plantings, and opportunities for different activities, all enhance the children's experience of the natural environment:

- Classrooms are designed to take advantage of daylight and to provide multiple views to the outside. Child-height windows frame views of the woods and the surrounding campus.
- A covered play pavilion creates an outdoor room in the woods that is connected to the building, sheltered from the elements, yet is open and connected, physically, visually,

and from a sensory standpoint to the wooded play areas that surround it.

- Two main courtyards provide sheltered outdoor play spaces for children, yet they have very different designs and characteristics. The north facing 'woods courtyard' works with and reinforces the existing woodland micro-climate on that part of the site and provides a cool respite in the summer with filtered light and temperatures that can be as much as 10 degrees F cooler than on the sunny side of the building. The 'sunny courtyard' on the opposite side of the building is home to sun-loving plants and catches the sun's rays that warm its red brick walls and pavers.
- The project has three play decks, each with a specific 'connection' in mind. The Infant/Toddler woods deck provides a safe, dry, in-between space for the youngest children to play amongst the trees and experience the

woods in a space connected directly to the classroom. The 'treehouse deck' is on the second level, enveloped by the branches of a large maple tree. The space is used for small group activities and gives children the sense of being in the treetops.

Finally, the gardening deck provides raised beds, potting benches, and water adjacent to the upper level preschool classrooms.

- The project also provides an example of architecture that is designed to fit into the existing natural landscape and of play space design that provides a wide variety of opportunities for play and discovery by giving children access to the natural world.

Conclusion

It is important not to think about the building for early education and the outdoor play environment without thinking about the opportunities for amazing spaces and connections between the two. Listening and collaboration amongst the members of the design team — Landscape Architects, Architects, and Educators — is critical to the success of any design project. A project where the whole team pays attention to the connection between inside and out will be richer from a spatial and sensory standpoint and will feel like the building, and its inhabitants, are connected to the outdoors and to the site.



Photo by Howard Dougherty



Photo by Linda Deurr