

# ROOM TO LEARN

## NEW EDUCATION DESIGN

The architecture of education seems to evolve slowly. Perhaps that's as it should be; we learn in much the same way as we always have – by listening to words from teachers who know more about a subject than we do, and gathered in numbers in large rooms, sometimes staring at a screen with images. But hasn't the Internet disrupted education as it has other sectors? Certainly online learning courses have been introduced, but that hardly requires new 'spaces' to conduct its essentially one-on-one experience. It is more analogous to reading a book in the old days... or doing homework, only with audio and visual aids now. We log on, follow a lecture, take notes, do associated reading, fill in online forms instead of exam papers, and so on.

Spaces for education means actual physical places where students learn something from tutors, teachers, professors. It usually involves verbal interaction, discussion, visual representations, sometimes even laboratory or studio actions. For younger pupils, pedagogic play is often involved. For this, the age-old models seem to be as relevant as ever.

What, then, is inventive about educational design right now? Architecture never needed new genres or typologies to inspire invention. Give a designer the strictest of parameters and they will still come up with something never done before in quite the same way. That is thanks to the unlimited nature of design itself. So schools, or spaces where learning occurs, don't need to 'disrupt' themselves to inspire men and women to come up with buildings and rooms we haven't seen before.

There is also the question of whether the places we learn in, need to mimic the process of learning itself. Ought schools be like art galleries – neutral containers seeking not to influence their contents at all? Simply keep the rain out, provide good lighting and quiet, and then stand back? Let teachers get on with their business, and keep the architecture out of their way? Or, rather, should they step right in with a position on how education should take place? Should – or can – architecture or interior design play an active part in how its occupants teach and learn? Most of the projects here hew to this bias, and to some extent, it is a natural position for a designer to take; it endorses the importance of their efforts. But, really, with some exceptions, most schools or learning centres can't predict exactly how individual teachers conduct their lessons, or use their spaces. As we all know from experience, teachers come in all levels of ability. Can how a room is made, truly have any effect on that? One would like to believe that a good space can help a good teacher be even better. So, does a poor space do the opposite? That is very hard to measure.

The spaces examined in the stories that follow, differ greatly from each other, but each of them was conceived and realised with a devotion to the process of education itself, regardless of whom it involves or how exactly it is experienced. Be they large or small, that unifies them in their diversity, as design put in the service of a very important endeavour indeed.



# Mighty Oaks Nursery & Kindergarten

Hong Kong SAR, China  
J Candice Interior Architects



Photography by Chris Tong, Bling Studios



The metaphor here resides right in the name: from small acorns grow mighty oaks. In other words, our children are our future, and we should nurture them accordingly, both in mind and body. This expansive facility in Hong Kong aims to do just that.

The programme is fairly conventional, including four classrooms, play areas, reading corners, bathrooms, an office, and an outdoor play area. Arranged through a long, narrow floorplate, the function spaces meander along a central axis that curves around corners like a sort of street. This works as a highly practical organisational model, so that the kids know where they are at all times. The outdoor playground is at one end of the axis.

The design style here is understated, with muted pastel colour tones, soft fabrics, wood floors, and painted-out white ceiling. Generous use of interior glazing allows views into the rooms at eye level, so that teachers and minders can see what's happening at all times, and children have a constantly lively visual environment. But what is not as evident in photographs

is Mighty Oaks' emphasis on sensory development as a teaching tool. In design terms this translates into a variety of amenities that engage the children, incorporating interactive components such as tactile walls, sensor lights, operable lighting features, swivelling mirrors, kinetic apparatus, and even an Aquaponics fish tank and mini garden. This interactive method pervades the environment, even into the bathrooms, where swivelling mirrors set into a Noah's Ark wall illustration get the kids to 'play' with animal faces and their own reflected ones. The fish tank and mini garden directly engage them in scientific learning, letting hands-on experience supplement traditional 'taught' lessons... a surefire winner. By seeing fish and plants grow each day and week, the little ones comprehend a life lesson reflected in their own slow, oak-like evolution.

Mighty Oaks may not convulse any kindergarten conventions in a literal design sense, but it embodies the idea that education goes deeper than what we see or hear. And it looks good doing it.

