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# Learning Curve

## How museum design “taught” a new elementary school

By Lee H. Skolnick and Jo Ann Secor

A brick façade representing the colored strata of a famous local rock formation called Hell’s Half-Acre. Informal learning areas hosting built-in exhibits. Large window walls offering views of the natural environment—mountain-tops and frolicking antelope. Common areas with central informal seating under specially designed acoustic ceilings with audio enhancements. Movable walls and furniture on casters.

Sound like an intriguing new museum? In fact, this describes a public elementary school that opened last August in Casper, Wyo. Summit Elementary School is influenced heavily by approaches that are central to the best museum design practices: immersive environments that convey content and ideas through an array of multisensory experiences; “entry point” activities that personally engage users with various concepts and topics; and an interpretive “look-and-feel” approach that aids in conveying a specific narrative.

The school is one of a new breed of buildings that draw upon museum concepts of informal learning. Other examples popping up across the country include corporate workplaces, universities, conference centers and retreats. Can the informal learning approaches used in museums really help, for example, a K-5 school?

“Not only does the design enhance the quality of how students and teachers interact, but it fosters the potential for learning opportunities between and around classroom

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*Lee H. Skolnick, a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, is founder, principal and lead designer, and Jo Ann Secor is principal and director of museum services, Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership, New York.*





## chronicle

spaces,” says Summit Elementary’s principal, Anne LaPlante. She adds that the school is considered one of the district’s most successful, with waiting lists of families eager to have their children experience this unique learning environment and a growing reputation among educators as a model statewide and even nationally.

The Wyoming school suggests the beginnings of a larger trend for promoting lifelong learning. Museums are places of informal education: Rather than merely “uploading” information and facts to students and other visitors, today’s best museums present their offerings through a participatory experience. Over the last several decades, we’ve witnessed the emergence of museums and science centers that deliver their content through increasingly interactive visitor





participation. Recognizing this, some architects and interior designers—and their savvy clients—are using a “curated narrative” as the jumping-off point for the design process.

Our architectural firm, which designed the school in partnership with RB+B Architects, Inc., has adhered for more than 30 years to a methodology we call “design as interpretation,” using in-house, interdisciplinary design teams of architects, exhibition designers, graphic designers, interior designers and educators. The involvement of education experts—unusual for a design firm—reflects our longstanding belief that all built environments can embody and communicate content, not just museums. To this end, educators and interpretive specialists help us understand how people learn best.

Museum designers immerse themselves in content, get to know the audience, and then craft interpretive narratives in real time and space, including all aspects of the built environment as well as media and interactive experiences. It seems only natural that the same process used for museum projects can be brought to bear on any design project, client or situation, making the results more meaningful, enlightening and unique.

Wanting to create a learning environment that engaged children in active, participatory learning was the core motivation for the Wyoming school district, according to its chief public relations officer, Kelly Eastes. “Museums are places you want to go to. Why build another school with an institutional atmosphere and traditional double-loaded corridors?” he says, referring to conventional school hallways lined with classrooms on each side.

With that in mind, Eastes attended the 2008 AAM Annual Meeting in Denver with high hopes for finding an alternative to traditional school designs. “I thought, Why not make a public school a



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place that not only helps the community learn about itself, but furthermore is a welcoming, inviting place that people want to go to?" he recalls. "It seemed natural that the feelings of excitement evoked in museums could be introduced to formal learning environments, with practical, unmistakable benefits for students and for the community."

At the conference, Eastes met with designers from our firm. A few months later, a chance to realize this dream was presented to Eastes and the Natrona County School District. The Wyoming legislature, through the School Facilities Commission, decided to fund a new elementary school in Casper. Eastes was assigned a new and unusual task: involving the community in designing the school.

Working with the parents, children and education community, our first task was to formulate a vision and conceptual direction through a two-part design charette. The first, an "Awareness and Visioning Charette," comprised six separate sessions over two days. We began with a presentation on key features of motivational and inspiring learning environments: They spur creative and imaginative thinking; they are empowering; kids feel a sense of pride and ownership; they foster a sense of curiosity and play; they encourage communication and intergenerational teaching and learning; they embrace and integrate nature—light, plants, air, water—in their design. We showed how a child's world would be a nucleus for this kind of facility. We also spent time talking about the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy, especially its tenet on "the role of the environment as the 'third teacher.'" Good design, in other words, uses the physical environment to actively facilitate education.

Based on these discussions, the participants created group collages and word lists to describe the characteristics and programmatic elements for the school. These led to the final design charettes,

which expanded to include other members of the community. The result was a thematic statement—the beginnings of a narrative—based on the concept of "convergence," inspired by the fact that Casper is where the Oregon, California and Mormon trails and the Pony Express all crossed paths, and where humans have gathered or passed through for many millennia.

This metaphor also describes how curriculum subject areas overlap—and how a school becomes a community center. As proof of the efficacy of this motivation, the school now hosts events for the community including talks by visiting presenters, performances like blues concerts and such inspirational events as Stephen Covey leadership seminars. In return, the community has supported the school, with private groups and individuals investing in learning tools like a wind turbine, a map of Wyoming inlaid on the floor, and even an interactive game to help students learn how the weather impacts power production and consumption in the building.

This synthesis of space and narrative is typical of museum designs, but it is new in public schools. Yet it brings important, practical implications for any new building design. For example, there are no halls or corridors at Summit; instead, there are convergence areas called "living rooms." As in a museum, the open interiors are designed with attention to acoustics. "In just one of the school's spaces, the Village Center," says Eastes, "we can have P.E., lunch and music programs operating simultaneously, and none of them interfere with each other. The space eats the noise."

On a typical morning, many parents follow their kids into the Village Center, where staff, students and parents mingle and prepare for their day. Traditional elementary schools often lack such gathering spaces, but relationships are the backbone of learning. So at Summit, it's the key to



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student, parent and teacher connections. Elsewhere, open-space learning areas provide a refreshing change from traditional school architecture that can physically isolate people, with teachers tending to stay in their classrooms and seeing parents only at designated conferences and events. Summit works more like a museum to foster visibility, encounters and relationships.

Another difference between a traditional school and the museum-inspired Summit Elementary is the combining of disciplines. Typically, schools have separate science labs and art rooms, even though art and science have historically been partners in invention and problem-solving. Reuniting these complementary forces, Summit has a Creativity Studio that serves as a wet lab for science and art instruction. Bringing these activities together simulates what would happen in the real world and also allows for serendipitous exploration by students.

During the day, Summit's students are afforded the opportunities to work in large and small groups easily accommodated by reconfigurable walls and open spaces. The building can adapt to the needs of its occupants, and many types of experiences are allowed by the flexibility in the design. Even the curriculum has been developed to reflect this unique environment: Varied approaches to facilitating learning include "Gold Seal Lessons" designed to teach specific standards and objectives through highly motivating, real-world themes and activities. Students may be asked to research, write, compute, model, demonstrate, build, survey or report on a variety of academic, technical, work or community environments.

Advocating for users, getting them involved in the conceptualization process and helping to craft the big narrative is no different from what happens in good museum design. We hope to see more of this influence in more schools in the years to come. ●