



# Place-Making

*How the out-of-classroom experience can foster social and emotional learning*

By Sean O'Donnell, AIA, LEED AP

*"The social universe of the school is at the center of the teenagers' lives. That fact presents a danger ... but also a promise: for school also offers every teenager a living laboratory for learning how to connect positively with other people."*

—Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*

The formal process of education is often focused on classrooms and labs, but learning is not confined to the classroom alone. It occurs throughout a school or campus, throughout the day. While out-of-classroom learning may concentrate on topics discussed in class, informal out-of-classroom interaction is also an opportunity to encourage social and emotional learning—one of the keys to children's lifelong success.

Raymond Pasi, principal of Yorktown High School in Arlington, Va., and author of *Higher Expectations: Promoting Social-Emotional Learning and Academic Achievement in Your School*, sums up the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL). "In order to live an integrated, balanced life, some self understanding, self-control and interpersonal skills are needed," he writes, "Otherwise, all the academic instruction in the world may never have the opportunity to take root and flourish."

While educators have put considerable emphasis on integrating SEL across the curriculum, public nonprogram spaces in schools, where students control the discussion, are often designed solely to facilitate circulation between classes. Considering that corridors can represent 10 to 20 percent of a building, this is a lost opportunity to extend SEL beyond the classroom and throughout the campus.

## Life between classes

So how do the nonprogram spaces reflect what's happening in the classroom? Can they have a positive impact on students and help create caring learning communities?

Observing a California high school, researcher Herb Childress noted that nonprogram spaces became "a seamless, connected arcade" between classes. "A lot of living went on in the five minutes between classes: secrets shared, makeup refreshed, snacks consumed, books exchanged," he wrote in *Landscapes of Betrayal, Landscapes of Joy*. The informal interaction during this time is an opportunity to practice, model, and reinforce the behaviors associated with SEL.

The best colleges and universities have long understood that out-of-classroom interaction complements the more formal and structured interaction in class. At Pennsylvania's Swarthmore





Creating a sense of openness or transparency between program and nonprogram spaces can be achieved by designing spaces, such as hallways and stairwells, that are highly visible and where students can gather. Examples include: (facing page and below) a stairwell and hallway at the Brightwood School in Washington, D.C., and (left) a hallway in Swarthmore College's Trotter Hall in Swarthmore, Pa.



## Designing for 'Subtle Security'

**I**n public places designed to foster informal interaction, how can we be certain that interaction remains positive? The key is to provide "eyes on the street" to ensure a safe public environment.

Great public places have what a recent Virginia School Boards Association panel called "subtle security," in which adults in surrounding program spaces can unobtrusively observe activity in nonprogram spaces. This casual observation invites participation and enables proactive rather than reactive intervention when necessary.

One way to achieve subtle security is to distribute assistant principals, counselors, and other administrators across the campus. Designing a mix of uses—including classrooms and labs, administrative offices, and other common resources—throughout the building ensures that adults and children will interact casually in the same public places. This helps create a multi-age learning community where adults are readily accessible and commonly seen and where they can model appropriate social behavior as they interact with each other and with students.

Creating a sense of openness or transparency between program and nonprogram spaces is critical to the success of this strategy. Windows and doors into program spaces provide opportunity for visual and verbal engagement. At Yorktown High School in Arlington, Va., for example, administrators keep their office doors open to the adjacent public spaces, easing visual and physical access and inviting open communication with students.

Research shows that stairs, bathrooms, and other difficult-to-observe spaces are common locations for bullying and other negative activities. For security's sake, out-of-sight nooks and crannies should be eliminated. Code permitting, stairs should be open, glazed, and observable. Bathrooms should be located near offices and other actively used program space where it is easy to see who is coming and going.

The solution, in short, is to not consider these spaces less important than the program spaces and tuck them away into leftover corners of the building. As the Swarthmore College example shows, stairs can become places of great social engagement if properly designed.



College, for example, buildings are designed to promote serendipitous as well as planned meetings in the public spaces. In the renovation of Trotter Hall, a new stair became not just circulation but a place that encourages students and faculty to cross paths, to stop and chat for a minute, or to linger longer as the conversation and time allow. Likewise, the halls feature spaces that let students to step out of the path of travel, pause, and converse with a classmate or teacher.

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Can we design the "connective" spaces in secondary schools in a similar way to reflect our concern for development of the whole student? The first step might be to consider circulation systems not as corridors but as public places. Once we have elevated their status beyond circulation, our task becomes one of designing great places that foster positive interaction, not just movement.

### Heart of the school

Making such places doesn't necessarily require more space. It requires thinking about allocating space differently—having a more caring and comprehensive attitude about space and students alike.

For example, high school students have told us about the social dimensions of early morning chats by their lockers. With some schools relying less on homerooms, students often gather in small groups and sit on the floor. In a conventional double-loaded corridor, this obstructs the flow of traffic and tends to aggravate others.

If we allocated space a little differently, perhaps creating a small alcove with a comfortable place to sit, students could get together before beginning the day without affecting others. If these small places were near classrooms, students could gather comfortably before class. During class, the same areas could be used as break-out spaces by small groups collaborating on a project.

We've also seen students eating informally in various places around high school campuses—in the halls, in classrooms, and outside. Choosing these locations may give students a sense of individuality and control and allow them to engage friends and teachers more casually. If we designed places for smaller, more intimate groups to eat lunch—one of the most social of activities—schools would feel less institutional and more like campuses designed for students and for academic and social and emotional learning.

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Creating small public places throughout a campus could help organize the entire building. If they are planned in conjunction with program spaces, these informal social spaces could create conceptual neighborhoods that foster SEL and help personalize large schools.

Several of these conceptual neighborhoods could be gathered together into a "village." Where the neighborhoods come together, we could create a public place that would be considered the heart of the school—a place recognized by the entire community as the central place on campus, a place where everyone crosses paths, where larger, informal gatherings can occur to celebrate successes, and where the learning community presents its public face.

The heart of the school could take many forms and serve many more formal functions. But like a town square, it must be central to the campus and encourage informal interaction.

### 'Third places' and personalization

In his 1989 book *The Great, Good Place*, urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg wrote about cafes, bookstores, and other hangouts—semipublic places that foster informal social interaction and enhance social skills. Such "third places," as Oldenburg called them, exist in schools as well as in cities. These places are not purely instructional, but neither are they considered nonprogram areas. They include cyber cafes, student unions, and areas for student activities and community services.

Third places invite drop-in visits and informal use. Situated in

high-visibility locations surrounding important public places like the heart of the school, they could encourage active use of public places, feature the activities in those places, and enhance subtle security. (See the sidebar on page 21.)

Finally, the ability to personalize a place is empowering for students and teachers alike. Displaying work or awards or ideas on the walls or in display cases in a public place reinforces the culture of a caring learning community and can celebrate positive SEL behavior and accomplishment. Such personalization can be fleeting, such as a note to a friend or a flyer about an upcoming activity, or long lasting, such as a mural created by students.

As schools and colleges increasingly emphasize academic performance, evidence mounts that performance is enhanced and even facilitated by social and emotional competencies. In schools where SEL is integrated into the formal curriculum, the public spaces are where students practice and model what they've learned.

Accordingly, the connective spaces in educational facilities must be designed as attentively as the formal learning settings. By creating actively used public places that foster positive interaction, we can create comprehensive settings for learning. ■

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