

[Home](#) | [School Management](#) | Future schools need thoughtful design, with teacher involvement crucial



Future schools need thoughtful design, with teacher involvement crucial

By: [Kate Prendergast](#) in [School Management](#), [Top Stories](#) April 17, 2019 0

The spaces in which we live and move have profound – if often invisible – impacts on our wellbeing, our psyche, our behaviour and how we relate to each other. If you’ve ever listened to *99% Invisible*, or read Foucault, or felt crotchety at an airport or at peace in a library, this is an idea you’ll be familiar with. The decisions that go into built environments, then, are steeped with ethical and sociological implications.

Given kids spend most of their waking hours at school, one could reasonably argue more thought needs to be put into how we design school campuses – the buildings, the grounds, the play equipment, the amenities and so on. This isn’t only to create optimal experiences for young bodies and minds. It’s also to ensure that schools are responding to evolving education needs and population pressures.

NSW architect Sam Crawford certainly thinks so. In fact, he argues that schools should envision campuses as “miniature cities” and accordingly devote just as much planning time to them.

“Every space is designed, whether or not a designer thinks about them,” Crawford told *Education Review*. “They’re either designed by neglect or they’re designed with thought. If a space can be designed with thought and with care, then they’re going to be more useful and more delightful for the people who use them.”

'Delight' might be a buzzword, but it's a useful one here. Essentially, it's that sense of singular wellbeing or elevated comfort you get from a space that you wouldn't otherwise expect "that makes you think, 'Wow, someone's given some thought to this and care'," says Crawford.

Environments can evoke delight in the micro or macro level of a space, too. It could mean sitting in a classroom where sunlight falls on cold days; or having a window to gaze out of when nutting out a hard maths problem. It occurs when designers demonstrate empathy and understanding for the people whom their spaces will surround.

Listening to the end-users

In an ideal world, school design planning would involve close and ongoing collaboration with various stakeholders: teachers, parents, the community and the kids themselves. This could happen through workshops, forums or even through lesson plans. Crawford gives the example of a school in Leichhardt, Sydney, where his own child is enrolled, at which envisioning a new school design was made into a classroom project.

"They had to think of quite complex issues about the life cycle costs of the building and just even broader issues of how the building related to the streets and the waterways," he said.

While comprehensive stakeholder engagement is given a lot of air space, the actual implementation is by and large "perfunctory", says Crawford.

"A lot of care needs to be put into developing a process that people do have a say; and that they have a say not just once, but a few times through the process, so that it's not just a rubber stamp and, 'Here's what we're doing. Do you like it or not?'"

When it comes to classroom design specifically, teachers are one of the most pivotal stakeholders. But too often, says Crawford, they're left out.

"Teachers need to be brought along for the journey of changing the way they teach," he says. "It strikes me just going and visiting the



Design by Sam Crawford Architects. Image: supplied

schools of late how often the comment is, 'We're really interested in group teaching, group learning and shared spaces between classrooms,' and yet only a very small percentage of the teacher body actually teaches like that now."

This attitude isn't necessarily down to teachers' resistance to innovative design. It's just they haven't been considered. Appropriate professional training is critical if teachers are to understand, embrace, harness and actualise the potential of new spaces.

Kind to the bottom line

Good school design – that which is enduring, functional and appealing to the majority of stakeholders – is also likely to be a worthwhile

investment, which pays high dividends in the long term.

"If you deliver something to the community they don't love or need, then they're probably not going to care for it and therefore the cost will be greater in the long run," Crawford points out.

"Too often we only think about the cost of the project to what's called completion, which is when it gets

handed over by a builder or a construction team,” he says. “But really the cost of the project is for as long as it exists.” So while the initial outlay could be a little steep, buildings that last longer, require less maintenance and are adaptable according to shifting needs are bound to save money down the line.

Co-sharing opportunities

In the next fifty years, Australia’s population of 25 million is set to almost double. “As our cities are becoming more densely populated, land is becoming more scarce, and we need to use the space that we have really efficiently,” says Crawford.

He sees two areas of opportunity when it comes to public schools.

Firstly, he points out that often these buildings are mostly vacant when the bell rings for home time around 3.30 pm – not to mention those long summer holidays.

“I think there’s a push, and I hope this push continues, that public schools in particular open their gates and become available for use out of hours for other age groups. This might be for the elderly, or for younger, preschool age kids.”

This multi-use trajectory also strengthens the case for building schools that are more resilient and flexible. “Quality of the public space and its ability to withstand the pressures of use becomes more and more important,” says Crawford.

This ethics and economics of sharing could go both ways, too.

“If the school offers space to the community, the community in terms of local council might offer sports fields, bushland pathways, etc., for school use. It can be a reciprocal thing.”

Crawford identifies a second opportunity in maximising the often overlooked value of ‘leftover spaces’. A key example of this is stormwater drains, where Crawford remembers as a kid people just used to throw their trolleys, or smoke bongs, or toss cigarette butts. If a little more attention was paid to these spaces, he believes they could be transformed not only into safer and more pleasant public spaces, but places of learning.

In Iowa, for instance, this sort of disused and often unremarkable public land is currently being converted into pesticide-free havens for the region’s pollinators. Just think what an incredible science project that would be for young kids – learning about bees, flowers, sustainability, life cycles and gardening all at once.

What the school of the future looks like

How alien will be the classrooms of tomorrow? Crawford’s prediction: not very.

“The current wave of change is around group learning and open classrooms and a greater degree of independence of students in what they learn and what they investigate,” he says. “I think that is fantastic and I hope that continues.”

But he also thinks that there’ll be a second wave, which will push back against the first. “I suspect what will probably happen is a bit of a trend back towards a more traditional classroom – and that will depend on the school leavers, the principal and the parent body whether those things get taken up and embraced longterm,” he says.

“I suspect also that certain class types and subject matters are not necessarily best taught in the way that a lot of educators are moving towards. I think schools will continue to have a mix of traditional type classrooms plus much more flexible spaces.

“That’s probably appropriate, even just from the point of view that if you change things too quickly, people can’t keep up with it. And when that happens, they don’t embrace it.”