

School Play Spaces Spur Creativity and Development

By Zach Chouteau

Remember when school play areas were all about safety and structure, providing children with standard play elements that didn't vary much from school to school?

After checking in with Sarah Grant of Murphy Burnham Buttrick Architects (MBB), who has worked on several school projects recently, the big trend these days with school play spaces appears to be designing play areas that provide plenty of options — and allow children's imaginations to take flight. "There's recently been a lot of emphasis on flexibility," Grant said. "We've seen a resurgence of the 'adventure' playground that gives children more choice in their range of activities and leaves more room for them to use their imagination."

She emphasized that the optimal design process in creating an effective play space is one where the architectural team works closely with educators — resulting in modern playgrounds and outdoor areas that connect strongly with some of today's most influential learning modes.

"The current emphasis on student-led activities with play spaces is a reflection of the larger learning-based trends of STEM and STEAM," Grant remarked. "Student-led behavior is being championed in the design of play spaces."

Another trending element of play space design she highlighted is 'active design,' creating spaces that spur physical activity in a controlled environment that allows for that to happen. Grant also said that when it comes to play structures, one compelling trend she's seen there is the showcasing of actual authentic items rather than the swings, slides and monkey bars of days gone by. For example, at the MBB-designed St. Hilda's & St. Hugh's School Playdeck in New York City, authentic 'changing exhibits' as play structures have ranged from an actual tugboat section to authentic airplane fuselage.

Craig Siepka, AIA, LEED AP, a vice president, project executive and design principal with Wight & Company, said that design approaches that have previously paid off for school interiors are now being applied to outdoor spaces.

"There's a more sophisticated and intentional way to how we treat the outside of the building, which lends itself to a different way of exploring a child's educational experience. There's a fusion between the different elements including security, play and learning," he explained. "We spend a lot of time thinking about and designing interior spaces that serve multiple functions. That same kind of thinking is now being extended to how we choreograph a students' educational experiences on the other side of the walls."

Siepka added that another trend is greater consideration towards age groups and childhood development when it comes to play spaces.

"Today's architects and designers are designing spaces with the developmental needs of specific age groups in mind. With very young children, for example, dexterity and mobility are important, as is engaging the senses in ways that are conducive to early childhood development," he remarked. "We're crafting playground spaces so that they're more integral with the landscape, rather than just selecting something off the shelf. We want to create environments that feel more nature-based and more organic."

Recent Wight & Company design efforts in this area include a pair of projects in Illinois — the Sunset Ridge School in Northfield and the Jane L. Westerhold Early Learning Center in Des Plaines.



A playdeck in New York City uses real airplane fuselage for inspiration.



Modern design enhances play at an Illinois elementary school.



A mix of play areas adds fun at Sunset Ridge School.