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The Class Isn't Always Greener (But It Could Be) by: Allison Arieff

School design, particularly public school design, is often lumped in with the design of other institutional structures like jails, civic centers and hospitals, to detrimental effect. My high school, for example, had the dubious distinction of having been designed by the architect responsible for San Quentin. (The convicts got the better building.) Schools fulfill a practical function, to be sure, but shouldn't they be designed to inspire?

Many preschools already are: outdoor activities are emphasized — swinging, walking, digging. But as kids get older, in this generation more than any that has preceded it, the time they spend in nature decreases significantly.

Throughout the United States, students are installed in institutional, even citadel-like environments early on: they arrive at school in cars or buses (where once they might have walked) and step directly into buildings, where they spend 8 hours in classrooms, interacting with the outdoors only in prescribed spaces and only for allotted amounts of time. (This is not just an urban problem; watch [“Radiant City: A Documentary About Suburban Sprawl”](#) for a devastating assessment of what contemporary suburban and exurban subdivisions are doing to Americans' relationships with nature — and one another.) The “teach to the test” curriculum stipulated by No Child Left Behind further restricts the sort of creativity and exploration integral to a good education.



Jennifer and

Terry, students in a scene from the film “Radiant City.” (Film still: Donna Brunsdale)

What amounts really to a sort of cubicle culture for kids is contributing to what author Richard Louv terms “nature deficit disorder” in [his book “Last Child in the Woods.”](#) In it, Louv describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them “diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses...nature deficit disorder can even change human behavior in cities, which could ultimately effect their design, since longstanding studies show a relationship between the absence, or inaccessibility, of parks and open space with high crime rates, depression, and other urban maladies.” A great quote from one of Louv’s thousands of interviews with children: “I like to play indoors better ‘cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are.”

Around the same time I finished reading Louv’s compelling book, I discovered an amazing, almost fantastical, alternative to such schools: Germany’s *Waldkindergarten*, or “forest kindergarten.” Here’s a great description from a parent, who posted to a parenting site looking for an American equivalent:

“[Kids] meet and then walk into the forest and spend the morning outside — breakfasting, playing, doing arts and crafts, running, jumping, rolling, inspecting plants and animals, learning about seasons and food, and just about anything kids usually do inside — just outside in the forest. Around noon they head inside for lunch and a nap. In the

afternoon they either stay inside and play (with trains, blocks, puzzles, paints, etc.) or they go outside and play on their playground (mainly a big sandbox). The kindergarten is open until 5 p.m. Have you ever heard of anything like this in the states? Where can I find kindergartens like this?”



Children play

at a German “Waldkindergarten,” or forest kindergarten. (Photo: Gregor Sticker)

That parent probably won’t find the American equivalent of a *Waldkindergarten*, and I’m not suggesting we swap classrooms for the woods. But what if we looked beyond the notion of schools as institutions (like jails, banks, courthouses) and thought about them more as laboratories for creativity, exploration and innovation?

This doesn’t require new construction. According to the United States Green Building Council (USGBC), one school a day is registering for a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification program for green schools — this includes both new buildings and renovations.

And before you say that design costs money, that “going green” is too expensive, consider this nice little statistic:

One-third of facility costs for the nation’s public and private schools are in heating/cooling, providing water, electricity and other energy/utility

functions. “LEED buildings have a demonstrated track record for lowering energy use by up to 40 percent and reducing water use by up to 50 percent over conventional buildings,” says Michelle Moore, senior vice president of the USGBC. Imagine the impact of that kind of use-reduction on a school’s bottom line. (For more on green schools, go [here](#).)



A classroom in the Country School. (Photo: Dave Lauridsen)

The Country School in Los Angeles, California, is just one example of many great green school projects. A collaboration between parents, teachers, students, the [Office of Mobile Design](#) and [Mark Tessier Landscape Architecture](#), the school features outdoor garden and learning spaces including a stream, a pond, edible garden planter boxes, a butterfly zone, amphitheater and sitting areas throughout. The prefab building (factory fabricated for greater building efficiency and less waste), which includes sustainable materials like cork and rubber flooring, and composite cabinets made from sunflower seeds, blends seamlessly with the outdoor learning areas.

The design team, as OMD principal Jennifer Siegal explains, focused on “developing the architecture and the landscape as one, finding a codependence so that neither could exist on this site without the other. We constantly looked to nature for sustainable solutions while remaining in the school’s modest budget and always prioritizing the welfare and safety of the children.”



Students at the Country School. (Photo: Dave Lauridsen)

“As the children move from one classroom to another and from inside to outside, so continues the learning process. While creating a campus experience that not only enriches the students’ education, we also tried to promote positive interaction between students, teachers and nature. The native plant families were selected to encourage learning through their seasonal changes. And, the introduction of an edible garden allows the children an opportunity to experience the agricultural life cycle.”

The Country School has programming to match: through its S.E.A.C.S. (Students for an Environmentally Aware Country School) project, middle school students design their own waste reduction projects, plant native gardens and, most importantly, gain a sense of stewardship not just of their school but of their world. (If you’re interested in starting a garden at your child’s school [here’s](#) a good place to begin.)

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