

ARCHITECTURE

EMPATHIC SCHOOL DESIGN IS CREATING HEALTHIER, MORE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

BY DESIGNING SCHOOLS THAT CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO, HKS IS CREATING A SAFER, TRULY INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE BENEFIT OF LEARNING FOR ALL.

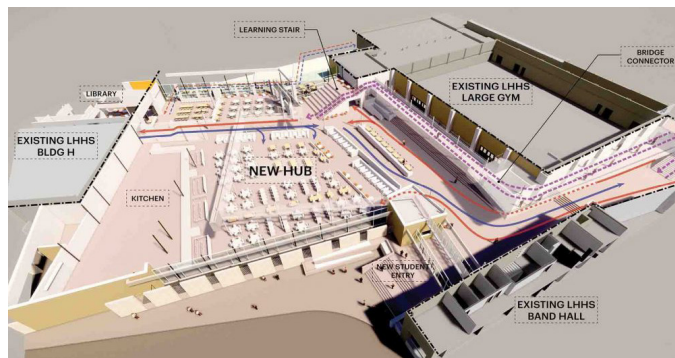
Through much of 2020, the bells didn't ring. School was out, virtual learning was in. As districts tiptoe toward a new normal, architects are using bigger-picture thinking to build schools that can create transformational change. Designing the future of education, says Leonardo González Sangri of HKS, is all about equity, community, adaptability, health—and keeping an open mind.

WHAT'S AHEAD FOR EDUCATIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN 2021?

First and foremost, I see a chance to deliver equity in access to opportunity. How can school architecture influence equitable access to prosperity? What messages are being sent to students by virtue of the space we build for them? What message is sent by virtue of how we engage them in the design process? For us, it means addressing design problems with an open mind, without a pre-conceived idea. To listen intently, and let the conversation uncover the solution. Architecture that responds to the true needs of the community in support of the institutional goals can deliver transformational space.

The challenges ahead in education are, as in most industries and realms, great ones, and go well beyond architecture. However, the primary challenge in educational architecture today centers around resilience. The current emergency has highlighted a need for additional considerations in the design of educational facilities that revolve around adaptability, flexibility, and most importantly, health and health safety. It's also shined a light on the importance of lifecycle analysis to understand building systems and the impact on health to focus on long-term benefits and balance initial capital costs.

The challenge is to design



The renovation of Lake Highlands High School in Richardson ISD is an example of HKS' user-centered approach where the firm used the district's inclusive design process to uncover value for LHHS students and faculty.

buildings that can perform to high, measurable standards of performance. Healthy material choice, more efficient/higher-rated building systems, and strategies to improve indoor conditions should be evaluated—along with desired outcomes of health and well-being—and become part of the stated objectives of building performance. Architecture needs to evolve to take advantage of available technology in service of the users.

WHAT ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES?

The current pandemic can be viewed and ultimately leveraged as a tremendous opportunity to improve upon everything—including education and the way we design buildings for education. As the pillars of our communities, educational institutions are in the unique position to be agents of transformational change.

Additionally, I see an opportunity to design for emotional health and



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well-being. In the last decade we've learned of the alarming prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress reported among students of all ages. We know from research that there are ways to use design to create spaces that help reduce these conditions and increase happiness in users.

Finally, I see a chance to engage our clients in a deeper, more meaningful way, to help them uncover solutions that might be possible with bigger-picture thinking. As architects and designers, we're trained to problem solve.

WHAT FEATURES WILL BE KEY IN SCHOOLS OF THE FUTURE?

Resilience, sustainability, health and technology.

Designing for resilience is of paramount importance today and into the future. As we move into a future riddled with great challenges, our built environment can play a big role in building resilience in support of our communities. Schools of the future can play a bigger role in the success of communities, leveraging interdependent programs or functions that consider intergenerational and inclusive environments. By designing for flexibility and adaptability, with relevance to place and in consideration of human needs, our buildings can help us manage crisis and build community. This adaptability will manifest itself through rapid repurposing of spaces, flexible design and more agile infrastructures.—QP