IN GURUGRAM, STUDENTS LEAD THEIR OWN LEARNING AT THIS ONE-OF-A-KIND EXPERIENTIAL SCHOOL

The Heritage International Xperiential School in Gurugram experiments with architectural space as a tool for learning.

HERITAGE INTERNATIONAL XPERIENTIAL SCHOOL

The Heritage International Xperiential School in Gurugram is changing the way society thinks about education. The freshly opened primary school campus—which will be supplemented with a secondary campus for grades 4 through 12 in July 2023—exemplifies the principles of experiential education and autonomous learning. The structure of the school was conceptualized around the idea that architectural spaces have a significant impact on cognitive development, and the design borrows from tenets of anthropology. Inspired by Scandinavian design, the school forgoes bright colours and stark forms in favour of clean, straight lines, muted tones, and warm materiality.

The Heritage Group of Schools was founded 20 years ago, on the premise that students should be the leaders of their own learning. "A lot of our curriculum is centered around real-life work," explains Heritage director and Xperiential Learning Systems CEO Vishnu Karthik. "There is a hierarchy-less system—of course there are protocols and procedures and rules, but that is to serve a certain learning need, not serving a certain power structure–and everybody is a learner, including the educators."

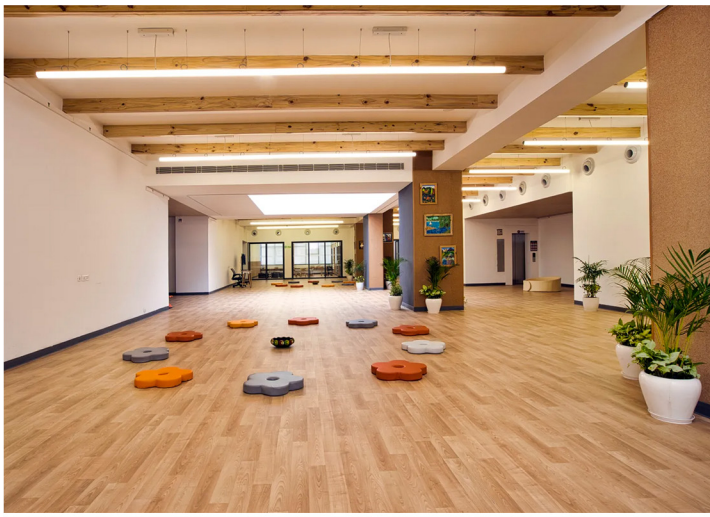
The range of seating arrangements encourages flexibility, and allows students to learn at their own pace.

Seating arrangements range from "campfire"-style hierarchy-free arrangements to nooks, in which children can sit solo.

When Karthik, who is a Harvard alum with 15 years of experience in leadership development, school leadership and school administration, had the opportunity to design the Heritage International Xperiential School, he took it as an opportunity to build a campus that purposefully served the needs of their curriculum. "One of the principles we borrowed from Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf school was the idea of space being the third teacher," Karthik says. "The old adage, 'I can teach under a tree', is a powerful statement only if you want to treat that tree as a teacher. But if you're using that statement to imply you can teach anywhere, and that the space doesn't make a difference, then that's dangerous, because you're not allowing the child to immerse into their environment."

Every learning space is broadly divided into four zones: the first is the “campfire”, which allows for non-hierarchical seating around a single expert or group leader; the “watering hole”, which is slightly more informal and open, and allows for collaboration and peer-learning; the “cave”, which offers students a space to sit by themselves; and finally, “life”, or a common courtyard that leads into and out of each zone.

The school breaks the students up into micro-groups, suited to a specific pace of learning. “One of the reasons not all kids in our generation are good at math, for example, is because they’re all forced to go at a certain pace,” Karthik says. “But unlike most other subjects, math is a spiral, and if you miss out on something in grade three, you really can't understand grade four, grade five, and the gap of misunderstanding just continues to widen. But if you allow kids to pace their own learning, and move onto the next concept only if they have mastered the previous one, they will do well in math throughout their life.”



The furniture is lightweight and easily movable to encourage the students to maintain autonomy over their own spaces and learning groups.

Every classroom receives ample natural light, which is scientifically proven to enhance cognition, decrease stress, and encourage learning.

To give the students autonomy over their own groups, the furniture has been designed to be easily movable, so that the kids can rearrange the rooms themselves. Rather than sticking to the traditional “chalk and talk” or “sage on a stage” construct, in which a teacher addresses a classroom of passive listeners sitting in their fixed places, the movable furniture allows kids to create their own learning groups based on their independent interests, while the educators can remain as passively or actively involved as needed. “You have no regimented structures of sitting,” explains Karthik. “The learning dictates how the children sit.”

The interior was designed based on cognitive neuroscience research around how the developing brain responds to space. “The first principle was to be minimalistic, and decluttered,” Karthik says. “We also wanted a lot of natural light, because it does wonders to the way we think.” The colour palette is limited to wood, grey and white, while most of the colour comes from the student’s work. “We also wanted to bring a lot of greenery inside, and there are spaces for the students to nurture some of this greenery themselves,” says Karthik. The ceiling height also varies from space to space, allowing for a range of ambiences. “An open sky for a child who is feeling very vulnerable is not a good thing,” Karthik says, “If a child wants to be solo, we have small tents that can do wonders to soothe a child who is overstimulated.”

Karthik was particularly inspired by the model in countries like Finland, Sweden and Japan, where open and flexible learning contexts, such as these, have been working well for many years. “What we learnt through the process was to create multiple learning options for the educators to design their plans,” he says, adding that “every child is a special needs child, at that age. Some might need overstimulation, some might need understimulation, some might need more friends, some might need less friends—the only difference is, some have those needs met quickly, while others do not.”

The Scandinavian influence calls for a muted colour palette of wood, grey and white, while the colour emerges from student artwork.

Karthik recalls how his own daughter, who is a student of the school and has Down’s Syndrome, struggled to socialize after coming out of lockdown. The solution, he realized, was to offer variations within the classroom structure that allowed students to socialize or retreat at their own pace. Some students didn’t come out of the tent for three or four days; but when they eventually sensed that it was safe to do so, they happily came out to join their peers on their own, without needing to be coerced. “We often underestimate the child's need to be alone,” says Karthik, “We think the child has to be busy, but a lot of research tells you that feeling bored is a necessary condition for being creative.” The school has now also added a few swings that encourage kids to sit and read, while allowing them to gently rock back and forth to soothe their hyperactive tendencies. While the secondary campus is under construction, Karthik continues to happily add little improvements to the primary schools as educators and students alike experiment with the space. He beams as he recalls how students have established their own little rituals around the trees on campus, as a result of the freedom they have to interact with the outdoors. “The best of the space is yet to come,” he admits. “It’s only going to get better with time.”

The contents of this e-book were originally published in
www.architecturaldigest.in

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