

DEAR ARCHITECT... INVESTIGATING SPACE DESIGN

Nanjing International School, Nanjing,
China
2016-17

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Until now, when it comes to building a new school, architects and schools have had little more option than to base design on prior experience or untested ideas of what the future could look like.

Nanjing International School's (NIS) teachers were determined to redesign their Library and Early Years classrooms so that they reflected the community's forward-looking strategy, which they formed the year before.

Before any changes were to be made, NIS wanted to ensure that any architect knew who the school was a community, how they use their spaces, how they learn, and what their school meant to them.

In pursuit of this NIS sought to create a comprehensive overview of what it was they wanted to create in the space so that the final result would not only reflect the school and their learners, but allow them to grow, innovate and create better than ever before.

Key to the development of these spaces for the school was the input of all the NIS community in order to truly embrace and bolster their school strategy and place student voice and choice at the centre of things. The school wanted to rekindle the intensity, passion and insight born out of time they dedicated to their strategy design and focus it on creating the newly designed Library Commons and Early Years spaces.

Rather than follow the tried and tested path, limiting community expression and ongoing the aspirations of the school, NIS decided to engage with, and immerse themselves in a process of change. In order to truly embrace their principles in the design process, they asked themselves one question:

“How does space help or hinder learning?”

From that seemingly simple, yet utterly complex question, NI*S were prompted to explore what it was they understood as space, what kinds of space they needed, and what was needed within these spaces.



With support from NoTosh a dedicated design team (made up of teachers and leaders, along with regular input and reflection from a group of students) began to explore different spaces of learning. The seven spaces that emerged as the typical ways in which the NIS community enjoy learning were:

- Secret Spaces
- Group Spaces
- Publishing Spaces
- Performing Spaces
- Participation Spaces
- Data Spaces
- Watching Spaces

However when the design team were tasked with capturing images of those seven spaces of learning, in both the Library Commons and Early Years classrooms, it became clear that, despite the activities being visible, they were being shoehorned into spaces that didn't really fit the job well enough.

The way in which each activity of space took place differed from environment to environment. The way in which a teacher might engage with their students differs when they work outside their own classroom in comparison to how they work inside the library space.

Observations of this different engagement with the spaces of learning depending on environment threw into question which of the seven spaces was most influential in the school, across both the Library Commons and Early Years learning spaces.

In order to discern this, the design team saw that they needed to rate each of the seven spaces, within the context of both the Library Commons and Early Years classrooms. Out of this process the NIS team identified that the most influential spaces were Secret, Group and Data Spaces.

All three of the spaces highlighted became the catalyst for the conversation around space, what should be created and how these would help develop the kind of learning environment NIS wanted to.

The design team and NoTosh took this knowledge and worked closely with the students to begin thinking about how they might re-design their learning, in a new space.

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In their approach to assessing and considering the three types of spaces NIS asked themselves two critical questions:

- In what ways could they aspire to learn (even if we're not quite there yet)?
- How might they design a space that amplifies those practices, a space that helps rather than hinders their ongoing efforts to put students voice and choice at the centre of things?

With NoTosh on hand to facilitate the design team began to build on their initial ideas and prototype a number of different suggestions and solutions across both the Library Commons and Early Years space.

One of the developing aspects that they considered when approaching the impacts on learning, within the new Library Commons space, was the role of inclusion. The Library Commons is the physical representation of the inclusive ethos at NIS: it is the only space across the school which is open to, and has the potential to be used by, all within our learning community.

Through this observation it became clear that the new Library Commons space needed to be flexible enough to offer a space for different kind of learners. How could the Library Commons space support and nurture independent learners, and support those with additional needs, within the new space?

Consultation with a range of students identified that independent learners like 'private' spaces with reduced noise, where they can get on with work without distraction. Simultaneously, however the space must also allow for students who require extra help to achieve the best in their learning, by incorporating group spaces that ensure support staff are able to work alongside students.

For the Early Years Space, an essential element that came to the fore was the incorporation of natural lights, colour and materials. These were identified as key to how the NIS community teach and learn, and the kind of environment the school wanted to achieve. The youngest students are openly seen and recognised as future leaders and thus, ensuring that the school echoes NIS values is extremely important.

A crucial aspect of the Early Years space at NIS is that it is a community of learning, where many spaces, activities and groups are connected and working in tandem, supporting one another. Therefore it became important for the design team to ensure that spaces created allow student to both work individually and in groups, quietly, as well in loud group spaces.

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The creation of spaces that connect home and schools, as well as create a safe and comfortable space for learning was seen by the design team as a key feature that must be emulated in the re-designed Early Years spaces.

Creating spaces that allow students to both work individually and in groups, quietly, as well loud group spaces, is key. Through this, we are keen to bring a far more diverse range of flexible, soft furnishings into our Early Years learning spaces, so that both the teacher and student can create comfortable, homely work spaces.

Through the work with NoTosh, NIS were able to identify, examine and explore the different kinds of space encountered across the school, how these impacted the kind of learning taking place, and how these could be influenced to create new kinds of working environments.

The voice of the learner was paramount to the school in this process, and saw the design team identify and deliver a report on a number of changes that should and could be made, across both the Library Commons and Early Years spaces.

NIS were able to take what they **thought** they needed and instead present a range of ideas that conveyed what was **really** needed in the space through deep investigation into the school's learning culture.

The overview was presented to prospective architectural firms, which saw a number of different proposals be submitted back to NIS. The winning application came from EIW Architects in Perth, Western Australia.

Since beginning their partnership, EIW have worked closely with NIS, both on and off site, and with NoTosh, to expand on the vision and prototypes presented in the original overview. Plans drawn up by EIW have been successful in winning a shortlisted, international design competition for the redesign of the Early Years, and the last designs have us more than a little excited to see the final iteration and the physical changes to come.

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Let's start talking.
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