Oregon Episcopal School
Student Designed Nature Playscape

Association For Learning Environments
2022 Planning & Design Awards
Small / Special Project Category

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About a year after opening their state of the art new upper elementary school building, the Oregon Episcopal School was moving into the design process for a new playground. They wanted a unique nature based playscape that involved students at the center of the design process and tied into the natural elements and surrounding landscape.

Learning Landscapes Design led an 8 session STEAM based curriculum that walked students through the design process from base map creation, to design ideation, final concept plan development, and presentation. These students unique ideas are seen in the design detailing; reading boats, a series of towers, bridges and tunnels, sand and sensory play and an overall whimsical character. Similar to the new building layout, the school wanted variety in the playscape that met the needs of all students and a space that encouraged self-directed learning and discovery. The resulting play space weaves physical play through the main form with a series of hills with raised towers. Towers of stone, wood and plants are arranged along a central raised spine. Imaginative play is supported with a variety of materials and spaces that create different story lines and group interactions like a living willow dome, sand pit, castle and log house. Social interactions are improved as student have a large variety of activities to choose from and spaces that fit different play types and desired level of interaction.

This innovative space accommodates the needs of all students in their community. It is unique, student driven and placed based. A perfect reflection of the pedagogy inside the building. Learning Landscapes' Design team lead the project from vision to final design and the opening day celebration.

SCOPE OF WORK

- Landscape Architectural Design and lead a team of sub consultants for a 8000sf play area for upper elementary students.
- Deliver an 8 session STEAM based curriculum and lead a youth design team though the design process, classes include:
  - Creating Scaled Base Maps: including taking site measurements and making site observations
  - Play Workshop: the youth design team organized and lead a school wide free play session to gather peer input and observe how others play
  - Data Collection: creating graphs based on peer input, observations, and staff interviews
  - Spacial Relationships: creating bubble diagrams
  - Topography and Planting Design: understanding how these elements shape a space
  - Design Layout: Organizing elements on the site
  - Graphic Communication: learning how to develop site plans and perspective drawings
  - Design Celebration: Design Team presentations of final design to teachers and peers
- Develop a final concept plan based on designs from the youth design team and teacher/staff input.
- Cost Estimating
- Develop a construction document set that is biddable and buildable, including materials & layout plan, grading & drainage plan, planting plan, custom details, and specifications.
- Bidding Support
- Construction Administration
- Project Follow Up

Budget
$225,000 Construction Cost

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

The Oregon Episcopal School is a private school located in the wooded hills of Southwest Portland. The elementary school features small class size with well equipped classrooms. Student work adorns every surface and livens up bight hallways. OES delivers a liberal arts curriculum to 880 students from Pre-K to Grade 12. The tight knit community produces dedicated students with lots of student leadership.

Having just finished a new elementary building, staff were thrilled with the building, but left less then satisfied with the requested student involvement in the building design process. Site improvements around the new building were disappointingly value engineered to fencing and ADA paths. They had a blank slate of a site surrounded by their dream building.

The playground design committee comprised of most of the upper elementary school teachers, and the head of school, were looking for a deeply engaging playscape design process. Perhaps the most unique asset of the project was the time and dedication students and staff put into the process. They understood that moving the process at a student pace and truly communicating with them about what was possible for their play area would bring about a deep understanding and life long stewardship of the space. Teachers had the time to talk with students. Students took the time to listen to fellow classmates.

Together we reflected and developed a design that truly shows the best of the community and rivals the level of academic achievement happening in the building. But, outside is not achievement. It is joy and healthy development. The often forgotten side of the coin.

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

The educational value of the project hits on two levels. It stemmed from a deep understanding about the value of student directed play and playful interaction during the school day. Providing respite and joy to develop the whole child.

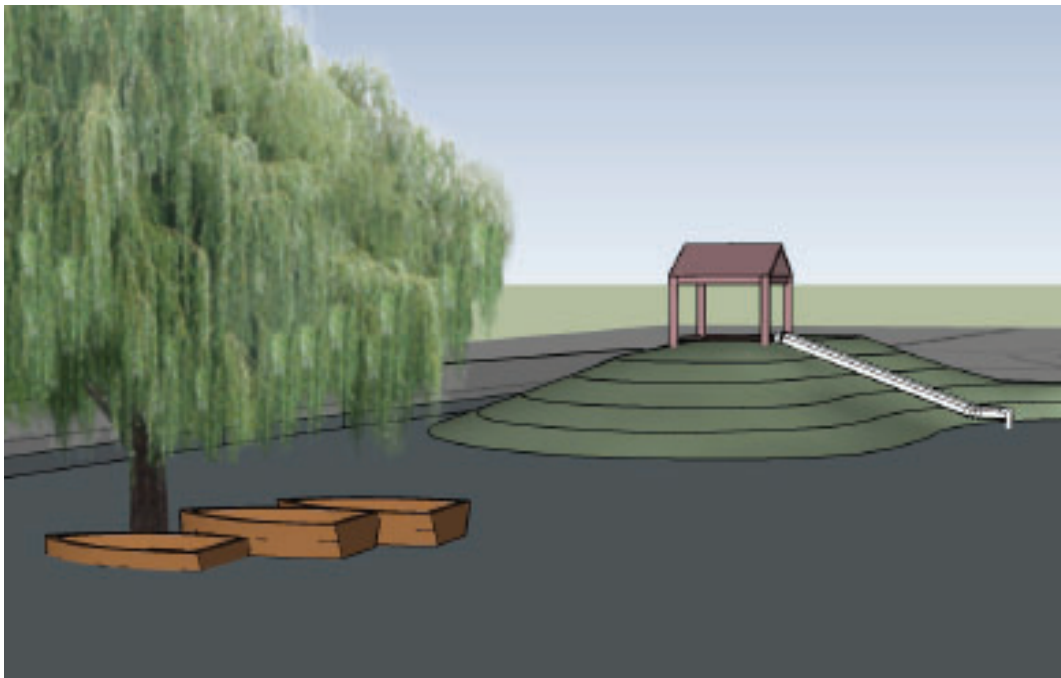
The process was developed with the youth design team as the lead designers.

Yes, the lead! (As a professional designer this can be a precarious place to operate. But, the value is immeasurable.)

After years of designing children's spaces, our team developed lots of tools to engage and elicit ideas from students. Drawings are limited to what the student knows, has seen, and can draw. Sticker voting has limited application and misses the (oh so important)...WHY do you like that? HOW would you use this? The tools we have developed help students develop a deep understanding of what should we design, why does that meet our communities needs, and how do we make sure we get the results we were looking for?

Our youth design curriculum carries a group of students through the design process on a tangible and real-world scale. They measure, create maps, evaluate precedents, negotiate a program, consider what others need from the space, work on verbal and graphic communication. The design progress was displayed on a window adjacent to the existing playground for other students to see. This is so very different then tucking the idea in a parent weekly email or back of an art room. Students looked at the youth design team progress regularly and were invited to offer their ideas and feedback.

Clip board in hand, one students asks another at the school wide play workshop, "Can you tell me what you built in your model?" "How would you play on this?" "What is the best part?" You see them frantically pulling the desires and values from their fellow student.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

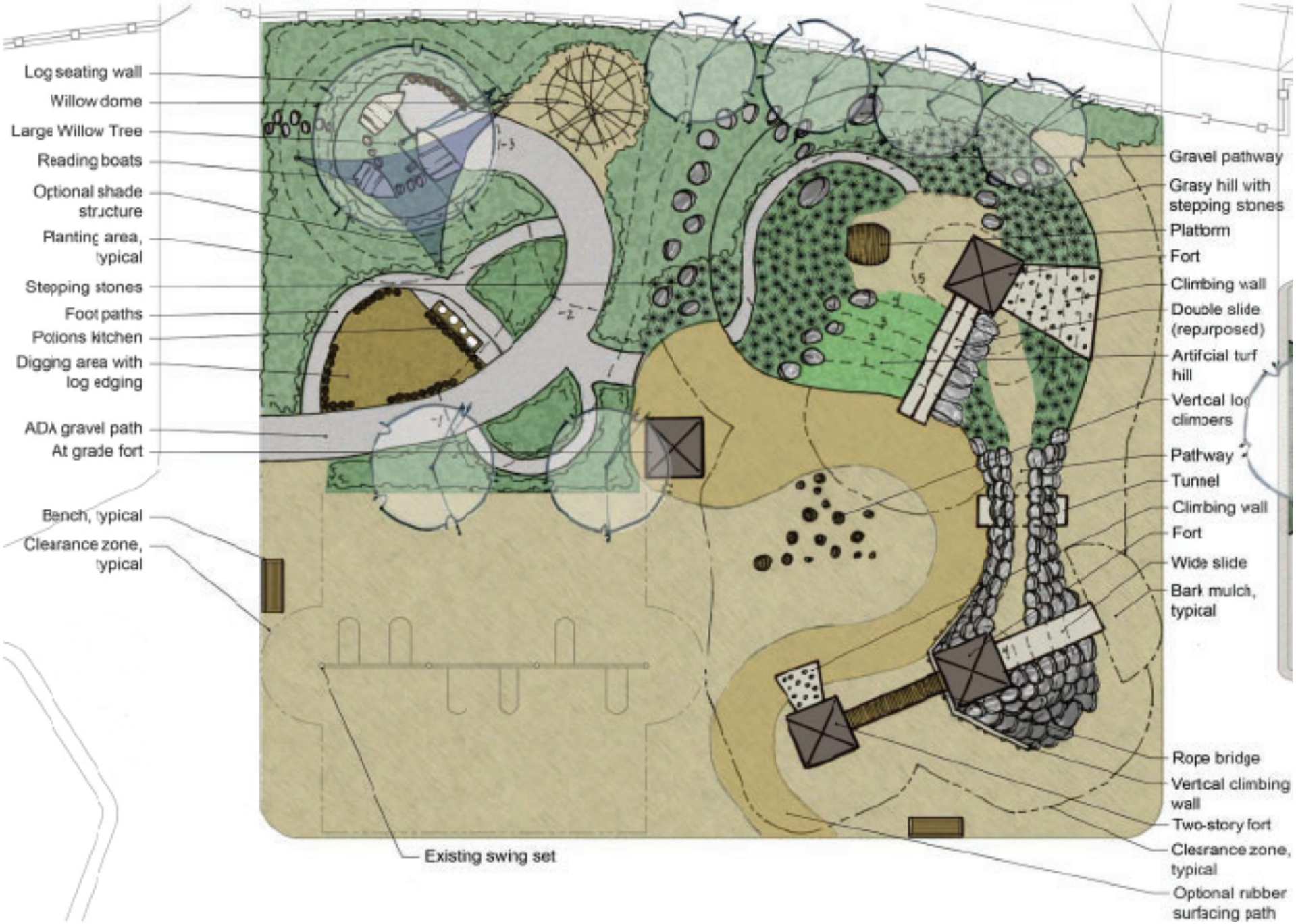
Students catch on surprisingly quickly to the idea of designing for others and designing for everyone. Inclusion and designing for a variety of interests and needs quickly became a design anchor. Students can see that not everyone likes to run, jump, and climb at recess. Some kids like to build or act out an entire world of make believe while others like to sit quietly and read or observe others at play. The playscape design incorporates all these different types of play so everyone feels welcomed and comfortable.

The design was centered around a few physical organizers. A series of towers and bridges for physical play, and a sunk-en- hidden garden for sanctuary. In the heart of the physical play space is a large boulder tower equip with a log bridge for balancing, a castle and look-out tower where make-believe and physical play meld, two slides, a secret tunnel (but not too hidden that the teachers can't see us and know we are safe), an artificial turf hill for running up or sliding down, a vine covered overhead trellis to create a sense of enclosure in the tower, and plants for exploring and picking. A climbing wall, turf hill, stepped pathway, and boulder scramble provide a variety of different graduating levels of challenges for users to access the top of the towers. Variety is the name of the game; a variety materials, spaces for flexible group sizes, and lots of ways in, out, and around.

If you wanted to read or visit with a friend your needs were met too. In a quieter corner of the playscape a sand digging area, potions kitchen, instrument, at grade fort, and willow dome provide imaginative outlets and tactile/auditory sensory expe-riences. And you MUST have the reading boats because the readers are tired of being forgotten. They want to be celebrated!

The play space is situated adjacent to the cafeteria. Large windows open to provide direct access. Two smaller spaces offer loose parts and work tables for outdoor exploration. The new playscape is situated at the heart of the Upper Elementary campus like a beacon of play.

Site Plan


Log seating wall
Willow dome
Large Willow Tree
Reading boats
Optional shade structure
Planting area, typical
Stepping stones
Foot paths
Potions kitchen
Digging area with log edging
ADA gravel path
At grade fort
Bench, typical
Clearance zone, typical
Existing swing set
Gravel pathway
Grassy hill with stepping stones
Platform
Fort
Climbing wall
Double slide (repurposed)
Artificial turf hill
Vertical log climbers
Pathway
Tunnel
Climbing wall
Fort
Wide slide
Bark mulch, typical
Rope bridge
Vertical climbing wall
Two-story fort
Clearance zone, typical
Optional rubber surfacing path

Flexibility was an important goal of the school and became one for the youth design team as they balanced and layered competing needs. There is no wrong way to use a boulder mound. It can be a purely physical element, or a seating area for your adoring fans to watch your perform, or an unreachable mountain in a game of pretend. The playscape naturally gives students room to lead their play with lots of open ended options. The boulder mound creates a natural amphitheater with the small turf mound as a “stage” for classroom size gatherings. The green tower provides seating for about a dozen in the shade.

Risk is always a how topic. A key educational goal of the school’s is to provide a playscape that taught student how to safely assess risk. By providing graduated levels of climbing and balancing, students are constantly learning how to assess their situation and safely decide: Am I ready for this next step? Am I ready to jump off this boulder today? Giving students the opportunity to make these decisions in a safe environment is key to many of their developments in other aspects of life too.

With inclusion at it’s heart, the playscape includes lots of thoughtful access details for staff and students. An artificial turf surface and transfer stations are incorporated to provide ADA access throughout most of the physical play space. Physical play was balanced with sensory and imaginative ground level components on an accessible path. A reading boat provides enough place for a wheel chair to enter and join in with friends.

The more we learn about high achievement, flow state working and brain synopsis development. The more we understand that the brain needs breaks from intense work. Students learn best when they ask and answer the questions. And that play is a very early and very pure form of learning. The playscape is a balance to the classroom. A chance for full body reset. It was designed for students, by students to provide for everyone’s needs for joy, connection, and exploration.

RESULTS AND WELLNESS

Results of the Process and Project

On opening day, when the wall of blinds was lifted and a cheer of sheer excitement ran through the students, our design team was not holding the cord. While our hearts filled with pride, it was not for ourselves, but what we had been able to give the youth design team.

In the end the hypothetical is long gone. The negotiations over scope, program, and design have been resolved. The students are left with real world STEAM skills. But, the pride, ownership, and the value of the social capital far outweighs the value of the academic knowledge. Students willingly and enthusiastically present to their peers or to a group of interested adults. They are the first to sign up on a volunteer construction day with their family. They gently remind other not to step on the plants once the playground is open. There is a wider sense of I can do big, hard, real things. The school is left with a playscape that is not only unique but a play-scape that is well loved and respected because it is a reflection of the heart of the students.

Sustainability and Wellness

Part of holistic thinking when approaching a playscape design is preserving what is working. Children find magic in spaces that we never see and might not understand. The existing play space had a swing set that was in good shape and was preserved. There is a double slide that was installed poorly, but in good shape. This was re-purposed on the green tower turf hill. These little actions of reuse add up over time.

To reduce carbon foot print many of the materials, including the boulders, logs, and new slide were locally sourced. The plants are native or adaptive to the Oregon climate and therefore minimizing maintenance and additional watering once established. We know kids are going to pick, pluck, touch, or run through the plant areas, so we make sure to carefully select plants that are non-toxic and super tough.

CONCLUSION

It can be hard to find meaningful ways for young people to make a difference in the world. They often operate in the hypothetical or learn of other people's work. Playscape design gives us a unique opportunity for tangible learning and work where students are already the subject expert and number one user. It is a place where they are deeply interested and skilled at understanding the details. If the process is slowed down a bit and intricacies explained well. Students end up with unprecedented ownership, STEAM skill sets and pride in the work they offer their school.

Over the years we have developed a curriculum with a dozen classes ranging from site investigation to construction observation. This award winning curriculum (American Society of Landscape Architects Oregon Chapter - Honor Award 2019) has been used across Oregon and in a number of other states. To help young people connect to and shape the places around them.

This work is so much more then voting with stickers. It is more then giving back to the community. It is a give and take that makes our design team more empathetic to our users. We more deeply understand their wants and needs. They help us listen and grow as designers.

The resulting space is a daily reminder of the power of young people and the power of design and inspiring spaces. We feel lucky to be part of the magic.