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# The Shape of School

## De-stressing education and re-infusing joy through WELL design.

— By Christine Bruckner

Learning is fun, and young people who get to learn by using all of their senses, do it effortlessly with joy. By nature, they are inquisitive, stimulated, curious and self-motivated.

In our best intentions to ensure our young people learn everything that they can, the global educational environment has created opportunities for children to exercise their native brilliance, while simultaneously threatening them with the kinds of hurdles that initiate anxiety and nervous-system disorders. Social interaction, academic performance and parental expectations are just some of the factors that impact educational pressure.

With an increasing number of students suffering from stress disorders and suicide rates rising, how can we keep our children both mentally and physically healthy at school?

### Path to wellness

The importance of de-stressing is clear, but beyond policies and medications, what are our options?

M Moser's goal is to provide an overarching solution to children's education and wellness by enhancing their built environment in a way that mitigates stress, stewards curiosity, nurtures health, promotes learning and results in unequivocal holistic success. We do by integrating educational engagement, architectural design best practices, and WELL metrics (air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort and mind) as established by the International WELL Building Standard (IWBI).

Critical to improving a child's environment is the notion of the "mind concept". This concept encourages, "a physical environment that optimises cognitive and emotional health", the primary focus of which is to reduce stress, freeing students to enjoy the process of learning as a part of engaged curiosity.

WELL metrics are based on the understanding that daily exposure to natural environments increases students' ability to focus and enhances cognitive ability. In designing Shanghai's Concordia School pilot classrooms for science, arts and robotics, wood furnishings and earth tones provide a calming atmosphere to support dynamic exploration.

Another critical way to de-stress through design is to incorporate daylight and views to nature. In Shenzhen's Green Oasis School, the library is designed to incorporate expansive windows and orients colourful, flexible study areas towards garden views, promoting a positive learning environment.

Colour, texture, scent and tactility, complemented by greenery, bring warmth to a space, create a sense



Concordia School, Shanghai



Yale Centre, Beijing

of tranquillity, and provide a strong connection to nature, minimising stress. These aspects are critical to creating optimal places for learning at all scales. In the Western Academy of Beijing's middle-school campus, a vibrant blend of green design components provide an energising space that inspires curiosity, re-infusing joy in learning through interaction with nature. The project also incorporates multiple sustainable design elements to create a living, breathing, healthy environment for study.

### Natural environment for receptive minds

Exposure to natural light both improves health and enhances the ability of students to learn. As a direct influence on the body's circadian rhythm, optimum lighting levels keep students alert, boost attention span and improve concentration. Spaces that feature indirect, diffused lighting also provide maximum comfort and prevent nervous system distraction.

At the Yale Center Beijing, natural light and views to the outside combine to create both tranquil transparency and a sense of warmth and openness. The natural materials and daylight continue into the lecture amphitheatre integrating seamlessly with acoustic criterion and advanced technology to ensure stress-free, global connectivity and sound clarity.

Beyond daylight and natural integration, there is great peace of mind that comes with flexibility and possibility. Having control over our environment

reinvigorates joy in learning, reinforces freedom and enhances development.

Not only can we adapt our environment, we can expand it to break out of the confines. Just as moving the flexible furniture gives freedom, understanding that every aspect of a school can provide a learning environment opens possibilities to both students and teachers to embrace spaces beyond the classroom.

Encouraging people to brainstorm and re-imagine their own environment is another way in which engagement can enhance sense of ownership and value, and help solidify the joy in learning.

### Building the environment we need

As we have seen, the built environment has a direct impact on learning. There are many additional metrics M Moser works with to further reduce stress by addressing human intangible needs, such as acoustics, ventilation rates, air quality, daylight penetration, access to water, nutrition, ergonomics, movement and more. The synergy of all of these human-centric metrics offers an opportunity to transcend traditional, enclosed environments and support the wonder and intellectual curiosity for students. When our needs are met, creativity and innovation can be unleashed.

As life-long learners, there is a broad opportunity to innovate the built environment and define healthy learning facilities that shape our young citizens and provide a nurturing foundation for the future. ■



Christine Bruckner  
Director,  
M Moser  
Associates

M Moser is a global firm with almost 900 staff in 15 offices on three continents. The company provides a holistic approach to physical and digital workplace environments of all scales, integrating expertise in workplace strategy, architecture, engineering, interior design, and digital infrastructure, together with sustainability and wellness. For more information, please go to [www.mmoser.com](http://www.mmoser.com).

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