Transparency, connectivity, community—these are the hallmarks of the Grand Prize winners in this fall’s LEARNING BY DESIGN. Though the three winning projects differ in function and context, all three embody a design approach that values collaborative learning experiences and provides a rich array of formal and informal spaces for teaching and learning.

The judges also praised these projects for their sophisticated color palettes and use of materials, their thoughtful circulation flow, and their seamless integration of public and private spaces.

These are spaces you’d want to be in, the judges agreed—spaces to curl up alone with a book, carry on small-group projects, or meet with entire classes in a commons area to listen to a presentation or watch a performance. These are spaces that say, “Learning happens here.”

By Sally Zakariya

Three Grand Prize winners shape innovative learning environments that support educational programming and foster a culture of collaboration.

LEARNING Happens Here

NEX+GEN ACADEMY
Albuquerque, NM

Above: Nex+Gen Academy’s glass-walled, studio-style classrooms overlook public gathering space, providing both natural light for the interior of the building and visual connectivity between inside and outside.

At right: Ardmore Elementary School’s design creates numerous “found spaces” for students to gather for small-group interaction.
“Fun, friendly, and flexible,” the judges said of nex+Gen Academy, an autonomous magnet school on the campus of Del Norte High School in Albuquerque, NM. The school, which focuses on project-based, cooperative, high-tech learning, was cited for what the judges called its “interesting flow of learning spaces throughout the building.”

The design features glass-walled studio-style classrooms that surround and overlook a large public gathering space. The transparent walls not only fill the spaces with natural light but also provide visual connectivity between them. What’s more, the judges noted, this transparency allows students to successfully work unsupervised.

An impressive array of collaborative spaces range in scale from small breakout areas that accommodate six to eight students to a spacious lobby with café-style seating. These spaces provide “a continuous learning environment where everyone is engaged across the space,” the judges said. “As a result, the building becomes almost 100 percent efficient” in terms of space for educational programming.

“Kids will go find the spaces,” they added. “These look like places where you would learn in the real world, places where you would get together and talk.”
A glass atrium allows passersby to be drawn into musical performances taking place at Skidmore College’s Zankel Music Center.

The judges also praised the richness of nex+Gen’s façade and noted that the school exemplifies a trend in the Grand-Prize-winning projects: a move away from stereotypical primary colors to a more mature and subdued color palette. “The colors strike the right balance,” the judges said. The interior uses plenty of colors, “but does so in a mature, adult way.”

ARDMORE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
NAC|Architecture
Nestled into a hillside in Bellevue, WA, Ardmore Elementary School takes full advantage of its siting and design to deliver intimate classroom neighborhoods, energy efficiency, sustainability, and interaction with the natural environment.

Commenting on the school’s compact footprint, the judges said, “We like that it shows that things don’t have to be overly large or spacious to be successful.” The design features six classroom pods wrapped around interior courtyards and a central, two-story library space. Doors between the classrooms encourage teachers to collaborate, and “found” spaces within the neighborhood clusters encourage small-group interaction. These small places between the learning areas also allow for individual and contemplative study, the judges pointed out.

Connectivity and transparency between the classrooms are enhanced by the courtyards, which bring the outside in and create visual flow throughout the building. “One interior courtyard is extremely intimate, yet helps stitch together the various spaces,” the judges observed, noting the airy feel of the building and the way nature pervades the learning environment.

Of special note is the energy-efficient design of this daylight-filled building. Not only does its heat-pump system save on energy costs, but a large proportion of the waste created in demolition of an older school and construction of Ardmore was recycled.

“One LEARNING BY DESIGN criterion was sustainability that supports learning,” the judges said, “and this school nails that.”

ZANKEL MUSIC CENTER—SKIDMORE COLLEGE
EwingCole
Outdoor spaces are as important as indoor spaces on college campuses, the judges observed, and the Zankel Music Center clearly demonstrates that principle. The building complements Skidmore’s Saratoga Springs, NY, campus plan by providing the fourth side of a quadrangle and creating an amphitheater in the center.

“This is a nice use of public space,” the judges said. “You can imagine bringing the program outside into the landscape on nice days so that you end up with indoor and outdoor theaters complementing one another.”

A dramatic, three-story-high glass wall at the back of the stage in the main concert hall brings the surrounding woodlands into the performing arts space—“a great integration of indoors and out,” according to the judges, “marking the most important performing space on campus.”

The theme of transparency is repeated in the practice rooms, where the challenge of combining glass walls and good acoustics is met with heavy, retractable draperies that transform the rooms both acoustically and perceptually.

A wide glass atrium at the center of the building divides the performance areas from the instructional spaces and provides a brightly lit window onto the music inside. “It’s great for passersby during a performance to see into the theater and see what’s going on there,” the judges observed.

“This project gets the big things right,” they said. “It gets the campus feel, achieving a collegiate look with a little pizzazz that complements the campus architecture.”
nex+Gen Academy
Albuquerque, NM

nex+Gen Academy is an autonomous public high school built on the existing Del Norte High School campus. Its educational program is based on the New Tech Foundation’s learning model, which combines small school principles with collaborative, project-based learning and an emphasis on technology as an essential tool for learning.

The design response to support this curriculum is an open studio environment that fosters transparency in the education process, facilitating collaborative opportunities for both teaching and learning. Educational studios seamlessly branch out from the main circulation spine without the barrier of doors. Smaller breakout spaces and a large commons area provide casual workspace for group activities, and a centrally located stage allows for large group assembly and formal presentations.

Technology is integrated throughout, with wireless connection to provide access to the web-based curriculum and support distance learning and digital media. Furnishings were selected for mobility and ease of reconfiguration, including interactive whiteboards and vertical elements that act as dividers and pin-up space.

The building’s design and material palette of masonry, stucco, and metal panel present a dynamic and contemporaneous image that reflects the forward-thinking, technology-based curriculum of the school. nex+Gen Academy is designed to achieve LEED for Schools Gold certification.