

Summer 2004

## The Landscape: Education Architecture

Jones R. Estes  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/metroscope>



Part of the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Estes, Jones R., "The Landscape: Education Architecture" (2004). *Metroscope*. 85.  
<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/metroscope/85>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Metroscope by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible:  
[pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

# The Landscape

## EDUCATION ARCHITECTURE



BY JONES R. ESTES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATHAN MESZARNOS

Public education is rooted in the belief that education is necessary for the self-government democracy requires, but schools today serve as more than a place to learn the “Three R’s.” They become the social center of students’ lives. For neighborhoods, schools function as a nucleus of communal activities and provide greenspace. For society, schools influence young people’s development as citizens and workers. This Landscape feature examines the ways in which architecture reflects these ideological roles.

Stately, neoclassical school designs of the early 20th century embody the ideal of democratic self-government and the progressive potential of public education, while schools built in the economic and baby booms of post-World War II America embody the country’s faith in Taylorism and industrialization. These schools embody principles of a nineteenth-century factory model: a teacher at the front of the class, students sitting in orderly rows and moving from room to room, activity to activity, at the sound of a bell. The factory model reflects both what students were expected to learn, and how they were expected to learn it. At the time this model worked well because a central directive of education was to transform a primarily agrarian population into a manufacturing population; moreover, a high school diploma was not a prerequisite for economic success. By the 1980s, however, school architects, educators, and communities realized that technology and increased urbanization were rapidly transforming the goals of education.

This realization led to a national systemic reform or restructuring movement, and current school building designs illustrate the movement’s rejection of the factory model of education. For instance, research illustrates a strong correlation between smaller school

size and higher levels of student achievement. While building several small high schools accommodating 500 or fewer students is an unsustainable luxury that communities and school boards feel is out of reach, new schools are being designed to provide smaller learning communities within larger, more energy-efficient buildings.

Technology also has dramatically changed the characteristics of learning environments. Technology requires specialized training, yet since technology is ever advancing, teaching with technology also requires flexibility. Consequently, designers of a new school must contend with reconciling many competing interests and ideologies that they did not have to contend with 50 years ago. Computer skills, multiculturalism, and group learning processes are just a few examples of the values and skills we expect education to cultivate in today’s students. However, while we expect our schools to be places where students learn these skills for the 21st century, relatively few new schools are built to help fulfill that mandate. Because new school construction competes with many social policy priorities for limited funding sources, those that do get built are located on the metroscape’s edge where suburban expansion has led to large increases in the student population.

As the metroscape grows, we must be aware that changes in technology, policy, and educational expectations also impact the buildings within which education occurs. How we address such impacts in turn affects the character and quality of the education provided to students.

*The author wishes to thank Gregg Sanders, Project Manager, and Kurt Zenner, AIA, Associate, of Mahlum Architects for their expertise and insight.*





From the top:  
Southridge High  
School, Franklin  
High School, and  
Washington High  
School.

Opposite: Liberty  
High School.

