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Creative Spaces: Schools That Don't Suck!

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I hated school! There, I said it. My husband is a professor and several of my family members are elementary and high school teachers. Teaching is a profession that I highly admire; our educators' endless dedication, passion and motivation are amazing and inspiring. But our schools themselves are a different story altogether.

Whenever my nephews complain about their schools, it all comes back to me. I remember sitting at my desk in the fourth grade, thinking how uncomfortable my chair was and how boring it was to be lectured to when I had already raced through my homework for the day. It felt like torture and I got through it by consoling myself with the thought that I only had eight more years left.

I went to an elementary and a middle school, which by academic standards ranked pretty high for public schools in the U.S. I grew up in a picture perfect family in a bucolic suburb. My parents couldn't have been more supportive. Even so, for most of my years in school I was a perfect mess, scared and quiet, frustrated and bored, crying in the bathroom all the time.

So why is school so traumatic for so many kids, even when the basics like safety are covered? Not too long ago [Sir Ken Robinson](#), an internationally renowned expert on creativity, gave a [TED Talk](#) about how [Schools Kill Creativity](#). The video went viral with more than 10 million views. So apparently I'm not the only one who's been thinking about this subject.

In his articles and [bestselling books](#), my husband and professor [Richard Florida](#) has said that our education system is fundamentally broken, that it's a relic of our industrial era. He has compared schools to prisons, huge bureaucratic structures that we're locked into for a good part of our lives.

I decided to ask my nephews what would make school a better experience. Their responses included: bean bag chairs and sofas instead of desks and chairs, being able to use technology in the classroom, pets, plants, and even holding the class outside on warm weather days. They wished school would be less regimented -- that they could sit where they want and have the freedom to

come and go as they please and to pick the kinds of projects they want to do and who to do them with.

Developing a school that not only makes students feel welcome and safe but encourages students to unleash their creative potential is a huge and important challenge. There is no silver bullet for transforming school buildings into an environment that inspires and ignites the creative flame, but an imaginative design can go a long way.

In a recent Huffington Post column, [Peter Smirniotopoulos](#) wrote that the right approach to education reform "is not to assume that we already have the answer; that the current system is fine but just needs to be tweaked. The right approach is to start over."

With my colleague [Steven Pedigo](#) at the Creative Class Group, I scoured the world to find schools that truly celebrate and inculcate creativity -- whether through their design and architecture, art or music programs, or new ways of thinking. We decided to stick to public schools since most private schools charge high enough tuitions to create complete utopias if they wish.

Cross Roads in Santa Monica, for example, teaches conflict resolution so children can learn to settle their issues intelligently and without escalation. Though many public schools would like to emulate that sort of program, they don't have the resources to undertake one on that kind of scale.

Even so, there are public schools that are doing things to enhance the learning experience that put even the most privileged private schools to shame. The following slide show features some of the most impressive.

Ørestad High School, Copenhagen



Five stories tall, but with just a few glass walls separating its vast interior spaces, Ørestad High School is the school of my nephews' dreams. Not only are its study zones incredibly flexible; its students use no books, just computers.

Photo credit: www.contemporist.com
Designed by 3xn Architects

Australian Technical College, Sunshine, Victoria, Australia



Along with conventional classrooms, this vocational school has common areas that can accommodate 75 students at a time—and there are fireplaces, skateboard ramps, and café-like areas perfect for laptop users. The building is built to the greenest specifications as well—skylights provide natural light and rainwater is captured and utilized for toilets.

Photo credit: Dianna Snape, Australian Design Review

METI School in Rudrapur, Bangladesh



Handmade from mud, straw, and bamboo by local craftsmen under the direction of the Austrian architect Anna Heringer, the METI (Modern Education and Training Institute) School provides a beautiful, spacious, and innovative setting for 168 primary school students.

Photo credit: Flickr user thanhhung84mt

Tuormarila Kindergarten, Espoo, Finland



All Finnish children have access to free, full-day daycare and kindergarten from the age of eight months on—and the results have been nothing short of spectacular. Finland’s students score at or near the top of nearly every international index of educational achievement. The Tuormarila Kindergarten in Espoo, Finland suggests some of the reasons its students perform so well—because it is so fun looking: like a giant toy.

Photo credit: Jussi Tiainen

American Canyon High School, American Canyon, California



Built to the most exactingly green and sustainable guidelines, American Canyon's 69 acre campus also supports the most progressive, 21st century education practices. Divided into four "Small Learning Communities," its teaching is project-based, computer-intensive, and collaborative.

Photo credit: wiki user Cullen328

The Fuji kindergarten, Tachikawa, Japan



The Montessori philosophy that guides the teaching at this kindergarten is evident in its design—the building itself is like a gigantic piece of play equipment. The roof of the oval-shaped building is a play deck; play spaces and learning spaces are merged in the wall-less interior. Hardwood timber boxes are used as desks, seats, and storage containers; they are also stacked to create impromptu dividers.

Photo credit: Flickr user naoyafujii

Dandenong Senior High School, Dandenong, Australia



Victoria's oldest high school is also one of Australia's largest, with more than 2000 students and 281 staff. Innovative design and organization give the school a much more intimate feeling. Divided into seven smaller schools of 300 students, the buildings, each of them architecturally unique and striking, accommodate both traditional teaching spaces and open-plan common areas where students can break into groups.

Photo credit: Hayball Pty Ltd

Rafael Arozarena High School, La Orotava, Spain



Built along a hillside, atop the original stone terraces that farmers built centuries ago, this magnificent building blends perfectly into both the built and the natural landscape of La Orotava. The gymnasium is sunk into the hillside to minimize its visual impact; the windows look out into the countryside and the high sky, which can't be inspire the students.

Photo credit: mimoa.eu

Birmingham Covington School, Bloomfield Township, Michigan



This unique school is not featured for its architectural beauty but for its innovative teaching. Grades 3 through 8 are admitted on a lottery basis, and only 108 third graders are enrolled at a time. Interdisciplinary with a focus on science and technology, students learn to apply an array of 21st century skills, among them: Digital-Age Literacy, Inventive Thinking, Effective Communication, and High Productivity.

Photo credit: Four square user Elizabeth R