

Learning Stairs

The Heart of the Student-Centered Space

By Adele Willson & Peter Winebrenner



Learning stairs are on the rise and being designed in more and more educational environments as a means of promoting social interaction and connection, as well as physical activity and wellness. The versatile nature of the learning stair provides both a formal and informal area for gathering, teaching, transporting, socializing and performing in a highly flexible, amphitheater-style environment. This is not a novel idea, as the history of stairs dates back to the first human structures, yet learning stairs are now re-surfacing as an active design concept in educational environments becoming a multipurpose, student-centered spaces.

History

Historically, grand staircases were the focal point of many buildings and served as a means of entry and connection. In many cases, they were located at the center or heart of the building and were used both actively, as a vertical bridge or pathway to a destination, and passively for sitting or gathering. During their evolution, stairways became less of a focal point in some buildings and were relegated to back corners, as new construction technologies allowed for the implementation of elevators.

Innovation

Today, we know that well-designed, visible, open stairs stimulate a variety of benefits including circulation, creativity and connection. As we have come full circle, stairs are once again being designed in schools to play both a dynamic and static role -- stimulating movement, encouraging passive seating and fostering a sense of community.

Their physical design has evolved in many cases to the size of a seat instead of a step, making them an ideal setting for congregating. Learning stairs are being designed in a variety of buildings in various shapes and sizes but are often characterized by an open feel including wide, deep stairs that can be used more like seats or bleachers situated next to the traditional circulation stairs. They may be fitted with electrical outlets for charging and use of personal devices and laptops, cove lighting and cushions or pillows to encourage comfort and convenience. Hard and soft surface may alternate helping the stairs to function for both movement and repose.



Benefits

There are a variety of holistic benefits for incorporating learning stairs in both K-12 and higher education environments.

1. **Community and Collaboration**

Because they are designed with an open layout, learning stairs provide an ideal social gathering place for students – either individuals or small groups. The staircase itself can become a communal space that encourages conversation, spurs connection and embraces collaboration. In many cases, the stairs provide a “link” to adjacent spaces, such as learning or dining commons, or as the center or heart of the school or campus. This multipurpose space can also serve as an amphitheater for hosting community events or performances.

2. **Playfulness and Creativity**

Learning stairs bring playfulness and creativity into play though the space itself and extensions of the space. The stairs offer an impromptu and informal seating area, a space for displaying artwork and a place for staging activities.

3. **Flexibility and Efficiency**

Space utilization is a critical element of a successful learning stair. Optimizing both open spaces and hard surfaces will help the stairs serve a variety of needs. The multi-purpose nature of learning stairs creates opportunity for flexibility -- transforming the space from an informal meeting area for groups to a formal teaching space or lecture hall, performance area and an active space for transporting students and faculty from one level to another.

4. **Circulation and Wellness**

Wellness is a key benefit of learning stairs as they encourage and promote physical activity and circulation, create routine travel breaks and increase opportunities for social interaction. In climates where outdoor access is not an option during various times of the year, learning stairs can provide a convenient means of active transportation and exercise. They incorporate all parts of the WELL building condition on Interior Fitness Circulation, which addresses health in the built environment and encourages wellness.

Conclusion

The concept of learning stairs has gained momentum with many of these tangible benefits at its core. By incorporating the principles of active design, these successful public spaces are shaping countless opportunities where students, faculty and the greater community can gather and thrive.



