

The Impact of Interior Design

By Lindsey Coulter

Los Angeles-based architecture firm Rios Clementi Hale Studios has made a significant impact on California's education landscape. Having completed a number of projects catering to early childhood learners, grade school students and those in higher education, the firm has developed a strong reputation for creating engaging and inviting structures with equally welcoming interiors.

Rios Clementi Hale Studios' Principal Julie Smith-Clementi has developed an expertise in the design of schools, child-care centers and other children's environments. She has also been integral in the development of notNeutral, the product design arm of Rios Clementi Hale Studios, which includes a number of items geared toward children, for which she is CEO. Jennifer Schab has served as project architect on some of the firm's highest-profile educational commissions, and has a particular focus on sustainability.

Together, the two have completed a number of educational projects throughout California, such as the Center for Early Education Sustainability Master Plan in West Hollywood, the Los Angeles Trade Technical College Child Development Center and The Children's Center at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena. The LEED Gold Caltech project, which serves early childhood learners, gave Smith-Clementi and Schab an opportunity to get creative, adding child-scaled furnishings, whimsical graphics, Dutch doors and lots of engaging colors and textures.

School Construction News spoke with Smith-Clementi and Schab about the Caltech project, as well as the impact furnishings and interiors can have on education spaces and how they might also support teaching and sustainability goals.

Q: Why are interior design and furnishings so important in education facilities?

Smith-Clementi: Furniture is absolutely important, but how it transforms the space is what I find most interesting. I think what is important about furnishings today is that they are moveable, transformable and can be used in different ways. For example, a chair and a desk used to be just a chair and a desk, but now people sit at tables, and tables move into different configurations for different learning groups.

Q: How do you design education spaces for young learners vs. those in high school or university?

Smith-Clementi: What you think about with both groups — regardless of age — is the scale of the space. For little children you want to size some things to their scale, as you would with an older per-

son create things that are fit to their scale. For young kids, that means little nooks and crannies and places they can get into. With older learners, that could include ways for them to break down into smaller social groups instead of just big, open, flexible spaces. Both of those groups need these kinds of break out spaces that are more related to their scale.

Schab: With younger learners you can be a little bit more literal with design, whereas with older kids you need to be a more abstract. For children, you get more opportunity to use color in a particular way to tell a story or evoke a place, and I think that's what we try to do. To engage in storytelling what you've communicated through the furnishings, paint colors and through the materials used. For example, the school we recently finished for Caltech has some elements that mimic trees kind of abstractly, which supports the natural materials we also used in developing the space.

Q: How can interior design support the particular focus of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art & Math) and STEM schools?

Schab: At Caltech we designed an outdoor STEM space that looks kind of like a shed with its structural elements exposed. That is sort of part of the STEM philosophy: that you can see how everything is built and identify the structural systems — the roof, beams, columns, even the cabinetry, as separate elements integrated into a single structure. In the interior classrooms we also have various parts of the structural system and building systems exposed so the children can see and understand how buildings come together. These spaces can still be considered quite beautiful when left open.

Smith-Clementi: The curriculum for these types of spaces is so strong and offers an opportunity to create flexible, open spaces that group science, technology and the arts together in a sort of common area with shared maker spaces. The way those spaces mix together and can be used in a multidisciplinary fashion is really interesting.

From an interior design perspective, it's important to embrace the nature of the space and how it's put together. Even though we left the ceilings exposed at Caltech, we added a paper surface to the insulation between the wood joists so that it had a very uniform coloration across the ceiling but with different textures. We have fun playing with all those different textures.

Q: What considerations need to be taken in classrooms and informal learning spaces that are used by a variety of age groups?

Schab: This was a challenge at a pre-



Photo Credit: Rios Clementi Hale Studios

The design of the center's outdoor learning space embraces STEM philosophy by exposing systems and structural elements.

School we designed for the Los Angeles Community College District. There, they had four different classrooms up through preschool age 5, but they also used the preschool classrooms for after school care for children up to age 12. So, the bathrooms in those classrooms were open to monitor young children during the day, but had to be able to be converted to close in the evening for the older kids so they'd have privacy. That was a small technical aspect, but the bathroom requirements are dramatically different for younger children and older children. That's something to think about when designing classrooms that are shared by a very large age span.

Smith-Clementi: Furnishings can also really help in situations where you have a lot of movement in a classroom. In some instances, we also create furnishings that can be moved from classroom to classroom so that the teacher can take their materials with them, instead of the idea that 'this is my classroom, all of my stuff is here and it's all geared toward second graders.' Within the furnishings you can build flexibility, so the space can either open up or close down. At one school we actually designed carts that could hold technology and be wheeled in, wheeled out and stored, each having a different purpose — one was a multimedia cart, one was a library cart — for a building that didn't have the space allotment for separate classrooms.

Q: What impact does changing classroom technology have on the interior design process?

Smith-Clementi: When thinking about the interior of the space, you really want to allow for changeability and flexibility over time. For us, it's thinking about the fact that technology is always changing and not trying to get boxed into a corner from an interior design perspective. You try to design for maximum flexibility and what you need to change

about a space to incorporate different technology. Even thinking about ceilings: if you have a hardlid (drywall) ceiling that's painted, that's different from having a flexible t-bar ceiling where panels can be removed. We use t-bar ceiling with a material called Tectum that has acoustic properties; it's natural and has a really great texture.

Schab: Technology is an important consideration because almost every school now has its own server room. Planning for technology is important not just for the classroom, but also for the building, by allotting enough space for equipment to be integrated in a way that will allow for some future expansion.

Q: What do you feel is the future of interior design for educational spaces.

Schab: The color palette in education — particularly in children's educational spaces — has changed a lot in the last few years. Actually colors have sort of been dispensed with in favor of natural materials and textures. That trend has carried through into finishes and furnishings in terms of materials and also with the use of some fabrication techniques that can mimic natural materials while making them safe and hygienic for controlled environments.

Smith-Clementi: A lot of our projects pursue LEED ratings, so looking at what the materials are, where they're coming from and how they're used is really important — particularly in educational projects where you want things to be safe, clean and durable.

I also think that every aspect of an educational building has the potential to have some pedagogical aspect to it. Talking about the ways we expose the MEP systems, how we use ventilation or collect water, how we use light — more and more those things can tie into the learning that is going on more than just creating a place to learn something specific.