

Landscape design for future learning spaces in the MENA region.

Part 2: Designed for learning, enjoyment and the community

*In the second of two articles about landscape design for new builds and refurbishment projects, **Andy Homden** looks at the way the landscape profoundly affects learning and the role it plays to develop a sense of community as the campus matures.*

Colour, scent, texture and sound

One of the first things to look for when considering an initial landscape proposal is variety in your planting – of height, shape, means of propagation, colour, texture of bark and scent. Monocultures are boring aesthetically and educationally. Insist that there is a range of trees, shrubs, grasses and ground cover planting. In the MENA region it is more than possible to ensure that something is in bloom for most of the year. This can be achieved even in the harshest of desert climates.



Our sense of smell can be stimulated through a well-planned school environment – few people will fail to notice the beautiful scent of a neem tree in full bloom in May or the spicy aroma of Millingtonia which blooms profusely in November and December in the Gulf. Good educational landscape also takes into account a variety of textures that can be introduced to the campus. For the early years in particular, whose teachers will be encouraging their children to explore their environment through their sense of touch, the opportunity to feel a wide variety of bark and leaf textures offers great learning opportunities. And as a school campus matures, there will be an increasing awareness of the sounds a school landscape will make – the birds, water, the rustling

of different leaves in the wind and the insects – particularly cicadas.

Landscape, Learning and environmental awareness

School landscapes designed for a wide range of sensory experience offer a multitude of learning opportunities and a wonderful stimulus for curiosity and creativity. Developing a sense of aesthetic and environmental awareness based on close observation and direct exposure to a great landscape is a wonderful experience for learners and teachers alike. Opportunities for close observational drawing and the development of creative writing abound just outside the classroom, and once children are taught how to see and appreciate their surroundings, the practice of environmental awareness becomes a lifelong habit.

There is, perhaps no better place in the world than the MENA region to develop an understanding of how plant life adapts to the extremes of climate. For this reason planting should always include a variety of native species – natives are the flora likely to be best suited to the environment – like the wonderfully adapted Ghaf tree in the gulf countries. The direct observation of native trees by students of science through the year offers wonderful



insight into how they collect water and propagate themselves that no book or even video, however brilliant, can quite convey.

One must always include examples of date palm in the GCC – but these tell a different story. They are oasis trees, and require a huge amount of water – 120l a day each at least. This can mean major maintenance expense where water is precious. However, consider including water features based on oasis irrigation systems which show how traditional societies have in turn cultivated these bountiful trees in order to collect a precious harvest.

A variety of flora attracts a variety of fauna, especially birds. Nectar-sipping Palestinian sunbirds are common visitors to schools if the planting is right. Well planned grass areas will attract Indian Rollers and Hoopoes – the latter often in profusion. Bulbuls quickly take up residence if there is a good variety of trees on campus. Observant and thoughtful teaching staff will take advantage of learning opportunities for science, art, maths, design and creative writing. Those members of staff who were responsible for the planting should not miss an opportunity to explain how the landscape was designed to work in regular training sessions with their colleagues.



Bee-eater



Hoopoe



Indian Roller



Bulbul

The community should become aware of the environmental measures taken to keep the landscape healthy and to keep costs down. Mulch and bark-chip help the retention of ground moisture, and shade trees can play a major role in keeping buildings cooler if carefully planted. Where possible the switch to recycled water for irrigation should be made – desalinated mains water used in large quantities makes little environmental sense and is excessively expensive.

Social use, quiet areas and terraces



A well – planned landscape is not just a great teaching resource. It is a place to sit in, escape to and be with friends. Good landscape encourages positive socialisation, enhances self-esteem and creates a feeling of well-being. Designations of space by trees and shrubs combined with carefully designed sitting areas create a sense of seclusion without isolation. The sound of carefully positioned water features enhances a calming atmosphere. One word about seating. Children seldom use benches as intended. They avoid them, or sit on bench arms with feet on the seat! If you want to create social areas where children choose to sit and use naturally, be sure to include shaded terraces and amphitheatres. Logs and rocks are great alternatives to formal seating.

Alternatives to formal seating and benches: logs and rocks.



Children will sit on the ground before sitting on a bench, and they prefer sitting on steps above all else, especially in an amphitheatre:



Community involvement with the landscape

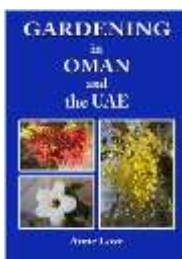


The landscape must be designed to evolve. If budgets become more restricted as a building project comes to an end, know where your next trees will be installed and plan the irrigation structure accordingly. Campaigns for tree sponsorship by families or class adoption can speed up the planting programme. Reserve an area as a tree nursery where students can raise seedlings, after collecting pods, seeds and nuts from the trees on campus or in the district. Get the facilities staff to install suitably positioned and irrigated planting boxes to grow vegetables and fruit. If possible, use organic waste broken down on site using [Bokashi bins](#) (available in the UAE) for compost. Ask teachers and parents to become involved in a

market garden project, growing items for the canteen and for sale to parents. If a community becomes involved with a landscape, its future is assured. It will be cared for, enjoyed and understood as the campus starts to mature.



Andy Homden.



Recommended reading: [Gardening in Oman and the UAE](#), by Ann Love. Simply indispensable as a guide to what should be planted and how to maintain it in a desert environment. Easy to understand and use. Great for making planting decisions and will help you keep your landscaper design team accountable.

Consilium Education offers a variety school start-up project services and can assist in the planning of effective school and landscape design. Contact ahomden@consiliumeducation.com