

Landscape design for future learning spaces in the MENA region.

Over the years, **Andy Homden** has been involved as a school principal with a number of campus landscaping projects in a variety of different environments – desert, tropical and Mediterranean. He worked with some great project managers, landscapers, playground designers and gardening experts with whom he collaborated to produce some outstanding outdoor learning spaces in schools around the world. In the first of two articles, Andy explains why landscape design is just as important as any other aspect of campus planning when creating outstanding future learning spaces.

Part 1: Designed to last

Collaborative landscape planning



Think of any great schools that you have visited, and reflect on their landscape design. It is likely to be both soothing and stimulating, practical and inspirational. Well-planned landscaping enhances the whole learning environment, while poorly designed and badly maintained landscaping (the two are often linked) lower the spirits. If, when you step through the school gates, you get an immediately good feeling about the place, one reason is likely to be the landscape and behind that landscape there will have been a great deal of thought and careful planning.

Good landscaping for great learning is always the product of collaborative teamwork in which teachers and landscapers work closely together. Few landscape designers are informed of the educational issues when starting a design. It's a bit of a specialist area. By the same token, few school leaders or project steering committee members understand the local requirements for good planting. However, if they explain their own issues patiently, and they listen to each other carefully, they have a good chance of creating a wonderful school environment while also keeping ongoing maintenance costs down.

The landscape plan must be an integrated part of new build project planning and project committee members must be as informed of the concepts behind the landscape plan as they are of any other part of the campus design. If a landscape "champion" can be found for the group on the parent or governing body, so much the better (and they do exist – many of them are just keen gardeners).

Design for simple, cost – effective maintenance

School landscapes are subject to heavy-duty use by large numbers of people – small and large. Landscape components – both planted and installed must be durable and easily maintained. Poorly planned pathways through grassed areas, will soon look scruffy and almost impossible to maintain – no amount of supervision will stop children – and adults – from cutting a corner if that corner defies the logic of a natural pathway.



Sometimes it is an idea to hold back some budget and pave the pathways that emerge with natural use. Border planting and ground cover must be easy to maintain. Over fussy areas, planted with delicate annuals are high maintenance and should be avoided. Weeds – especially scrubby couch grass – will grow almost anywhere, even in the desert: make sure your ground cover is the kind that will win the battle with weeds and that there are good access points into wider borders so that they too can be maintained. Pave rather than plant areas that are likely to be frequently walked on.



Rubbish bins / trash cans should be well positioned at frequent intervals and must be sturdy, easily serviced, accessible and in keeping with the environment. Re-cycling points should be clearly labelled, making sure that what should be placed in each bin is absolutely obvious – users will have to be trained later and you want to make this as easy as possible!

One permanent member of the maintenance staff and a member of the teaching staff should observe the planting and understand its logic. The ground staff member, if possible, should also be sent to a well-kept local golf course or beautifully landscaped hotel to learn from their maintenance team. Ideally a member of the school leadership team member should maintain responsibility for the planted environment as the school grows and be on the look-out for potential problems. For example, if leaves start turning yellow, the cause could be mineral deficiency rather than, for example, lack of water. Someone must know – or find out – what needs to be done.



Safety

It seems obvious – but the landscape must be designed to be as safe as possible. No environment will be without risk, but the extent of the risk should be understood and unnecessary risks avoided. Several commonly used landscaping trees and shrubs in the MENA region are **poisonous** – the project team needs to make sure they are eliminated from any landscape proposal. Fortunately, there are numerous hardy - and beautiful - alternatives.

Be careful where Bougainvillea are planted – their sharp prickles can give a nasty jag – so don't plant them where young children are likely to be playing nearby. Look for alternatives.

If the school is taking over a mature campus, have all the larger, older trees assessed by an expert, and then pruned, treated or removed, as appropriate. There is nothing more satisfying than saving a

mature tree, but make sure that it is not going to fall down or lose a limb in a high wind. Be especially careful in areas where high winds or storms are relatively **infrequent** – like the UAE They will happen eventually and your older trees will be subject to the kind of sudden stress that can end in disaster.



Some schools may want to take more risks than others – for example, by including irregular boulders and rocks, which, under supervision, can be safely used and explored by children. Just know the risk and how it will be effectively managed.

Shade

There should be ample, well designed shade and walkways. Plant a mix of good trees to provide natural cover at the height of about 4 – 5 metres. Be careful what trees you use. Some of the faster growing variety can invade drains and undermine walls – yet because they do grow quickly they are often planted indiscriminately and in numbers. The use of the Damas tree (*Conocarpus lancifolius*) in the Gulf States is nothing short of disastrous. Never use it!



Covered walk ways are often needed – but should blend in not only with the architecture but also with the overall design concept of the landscape. Cheap concrete and Perspex structures installed as a result of a cost cutting exercise quickly look tired, attract mould and just look out of place.

Look to traditional structures for inspiration – these have been designed to last and they will fit in with a well planted campus more easily than many other structures.

*In the next article, Andy looks at landscape design from a learning perspective, showing how well planned outdoor areas lift a school and help it to achieve its objectives. **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***