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The interior shared spaces at the new Dexter Early Elementary Complex feature bold colors, geometric shapes, and dynamic learning areas that encourage students to collaborate and explore.

Dexter Early Elementary Complex:

A New Building Designed to Build Better Minds

By Lisa Briggs



When prospective parents Michael and Courtney Fitzpatrick toured the 150,000-square-foot, \$24.4-million Dexter Early Elementary Complex in June, they envisioned their first-grade son climbing into one of the cozy reading nooks built into the wall in the area known as the “Marketplace,” watching a science video in the theater area, or learning how volcanoes erupt in the “Workshop” space.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” said Courtney. “This space in the middle is so amazing, with all the light, especially in the winter when it’s so dark in our state, I imagine this space to be well-lit for the students. We are thrilled to choose this as our son’s new school. The care put into this design reveals to us how Dexter Schools is thinking outside of the box.”

The unconventional design and “space in the middle” she refers to garners great attention. It was the Marketplace and Workshop space – the center focal points between two elementary school buildings (Anchor Elementary and Beacon

Elementary) – that cinched it for the Fitzpatricks to transfer their son from a charter school to the new Dexter Early Elementary Complex.

The 10,000-square-foot area dubbed the Workspace is a visual stunner to all who enter it. It serves as a “connecting” space between two mirror-image elementary schools. There’s no end of beauty and elegance in this diverse space – glass, wood, metals, resin, laminate, rubber, cotton, vinyl, and aluminum all have a purpose. Much like the space itself, these materials were intentional and designed to be used, shared and experienced. All of that can’t happen – without people – the people who design and build the space and the people who occupy it.

“Architecture is different than art because it is not architecture until it is occupied by people,” said Dave Larson, Chief Design Officer, at TMP Architecture, Bloomfield Hills. “It’s wonderful to see the concepts we created become a reality, and it’s even more rewarding to see people using the facility.” TMP’s design blueprints and renderings created for the Early Elementary Complex came to life under the supervision of Greg Brand, Senior Project Engineer for Granger Construction, Lansing, the company who built the coveted learning center.

Brand, who incidentally is a Dexter High School graduate, is proud that one of his own two sons attends the school he built. A touch of sentimentality can be heard in his voice. His own father, Jerry Brand, Vice President at Granger Construction, built Mill Creek Middle School and Cornerstone (now Anchor) Elementary when Greg Brand himself was in seventh grade in Dexter. The Brand family legacy of constructing buildings continues in Dexter.

Visualizing the Space

Larson explains that the modern software his firm uses, Revit and Lumion, helps clients such as Dexter Community Schools Superintendent Chris Timmis visualize the results in a real way. The program allows a lifelike environment in early design stages. This live, point-of-view synchronization gets enthusiasm ramped up for clients.

“What we saw in the renderings was incredible,” said Timmis, who has served the district for six years as superintendent. Under his leadership, the district passed a \$71.7 million school bond in August 2017,

which allowed for the creation of twin K-2 school buildings linked by the Workshop and Marketplace to create the impressive Early Elementary Complex. The 17-month project was not without challenges, such as tight deadlines, the need to safely and quietly work around children and learning environments in session, developing a temporary pick-up and drop-off parking loop for parents bringing children to school, and the effects of the Prevailing Wage Act, which has to do with payment of workers. Perhaps the toughest challenge of all, however, was renovating an existing 65,000-square-foot existing elementary school while building its new twin immediately next to it.

Constructing the Space

“We created a central area where the buildings came together,” said Larson. “Trying to figure out how to connect an existing building to a new one was the challenge of this project. We didn’t know how that would work, but after meeting and collaborating with teachers, staff and administrators, we heard what they wanted so we tried to conceptualize it – we took what was in their heads and brought it to physical life; that’s what architects do.”

The Dexter faculty focused on the need for a flexible learning space to gather with multiple classrooms and children at the same time, a durable space to make educational “messes” and perform STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) experiments, a place with appealing seating options, and a space able to be reinvented, rearranged, and recreated into something new each time.

Influencing and contributing to the learning ambiance at the new facility is chalked up to Laura Casai, Director of Interior Design at TMP. “The goal with the flexible learning space was to take a large space and make it feel smaller for the kids,” she said. “We did this by creating vignettes in the four quadrants of the Marketplace, using furniture to divide space and by selecting playful colors and patterns to make the whole space feel accessible to kids.”

Timmis acknowledges how accurate the construction, blueprints and interior design authorities made everything mesh. “The drawings are identical to the product we received in real life – better, even,” Timmis said. The images are saved in his photo

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collection on his cell phone, and he proudly shows off the “before and after” pictures of the construction project, which stayed on schedule and under budget. Teachers and students moved in on January 21, 2019.

Brand’s construction skills seemed to “get an education” while on the job of building this unique education building. “We spent more time thinking about the curriculum and how these spaces would get used, which is clearly different than other traditional-style school buildings we’ve built – the kind with cookie-cutter classrooms and a lower roof line,” he said.

Creating Dynamic Learning Areas

Traditional it is not. Superintendent Chris Timmis, laughs, “We designed the Workshop to be a place to make messes – on purpose – the ‘messy space’ as we call it.” Despite this, the 80 x 125-foot angular-shaped room is bright, sleek, and naturally lit – floor-to-ceiling windows make up two-thirds of the wall space and a high, domed ceiling with a skylight system create the illusion of being outdoors. Colors, geometric shapes, lines and natural light dominate one’s senses in what seems to be the “centerpiece” of the room. Palettes of aqua, green, orange and purple pleasingly draw one’s vision upward toward the square-shaped wooden fixtures suspended from the open and exposed duct work ceiling. Circular LED light gear also hangs from the rafters – giving the room a three-dimensional feel. There is no clutter, untidiness, or chaos – unless the teacher plans it. The potential for altering, changing, shifting and rearranging furniture to accommodate any lesson or presentation is endless.

Kristin Linn, a kindergarten teacher in the new school is in awe of her new teaching surroundings. “It’s been incredible to be able to use the Workshop space and buddy-up with other classrooms to take our teaching to a new level,” she said. “We had a parent who is a real scientist come in and do some hands-on experiments, we made slime on another occasion – the cleanup is so easy, the space is durable, and it’s been such a gift to have it.”

At one gathering, she said that 120 kindergarten students met in the space. “It was a great, interactive experience. We had hands-on learning activities, snack stations and messy projects available.” Linn foresees the space being used in greater, more creative ways when school resumes in the fall. “We moved into the new school in the middle of winter at semester break. There was a planned transition time and we were learning to get settled in and acclimated to the new space. As a teacher, I can say we’re definitely making it a priority to use the space more, plan intentional STEAM-related activities and gather with other classrooms.”

This early elementary academic complex, at first seems to loom as a large, bulky space. On his tour as a prospective parent, Michael Fitzpatrick reflects and sums up the space in a meaningful manner.



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Two-tone brick was used to smoothly connect an existing elementary school with a brand new building. The two structures are connected in the center by two multi-use spaces designed to encourage innovative programming and hands-on learning.

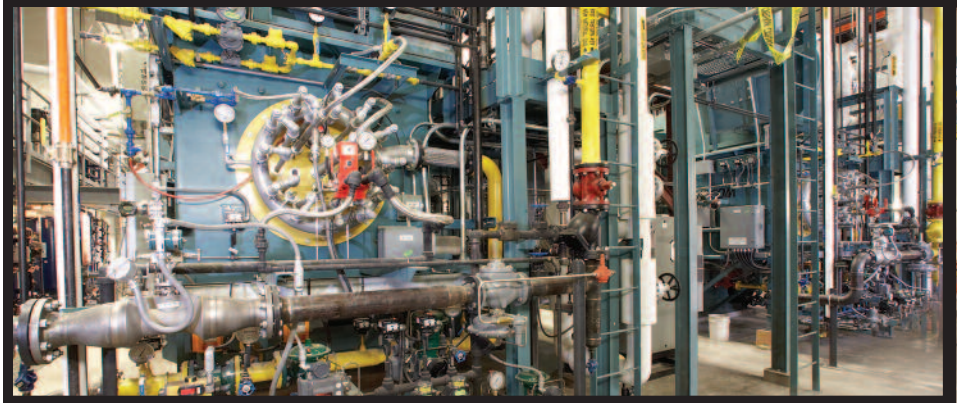
“As a student, I studied at a large university, but that university was able to make my experience ‘small.’ That’s what I see here,” he said. “This giant building with all of these different, awesome spaces – but you can envision how a 16-pupil-sized class could get more intimate with these well thought-out designed spaces. There are nooks, sectioned-off rooms, cubbies, corners, places to climb, settle and ultimately have an amazing, dynamic learning experience. It’s a really neat aspect that I see in this forward-thinking school.”

The shared space used by students, teachers and faculty at the K-2 complex is unfolding in new and unique ways. The trio of men representing the education, design and construction industries – Timmis, Larson and Brand – all concur on one major fact about the building. “It’s evolving,” they say. “We call it Tiny Town,” said Timmis. “Honestly, we purposefully designed a space to handle any kind of ‘project mess.’ We’ve had dirt hauled in, sand, water – you name it. There are so many learning opportunities available. The space can be reconfigured, rearranged and accommodate a variety of methods to present curriculum, projects, experiments – anything you can think of, it can be done



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in this space.”

Larson points out the unique spaces where learning can take place. “These are rooms where imaginations can work – there’s a forest play house, a fire play house – and the slider-style doors were designed to make sure nobody got pinched fingers in a doorway. There’s a garage door that goes up and down to let front-end loaders or backhoes in to dump off materials right onto the floor.”

The Result Is a One-of-a-Kind K-2 Complex

All of those features are certain to drive up enrollment. “The district is planning on an increase in students across the district this fall, as we’ve seen over the past few years,” said Timmis. Prospective parents visiting, touring or inquiring about the new complex find it easy to decide to enroll. “As soon as parents walk in here, it’s over,” said Timmis good-naturedly. “They’re sold. I don’t blame them. I’ve never seen anything like it myself. When we were designing it, I



The complex includes rooms where imaginations can work. There is a forest play house, a fire play house, and even a garage door that lets front-end loaders in to dump dirt or other creative materials right onto the floor.

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remember asking, ‘So, where can we look at a school similar to this?’ The TMP design team said, ‘Well, they haven’t really done anything like this in a K-2 building; this is one of a kind.’”

Light is part of the complex’s distinctiveness. Utilizing natural light, sky domes and adjustable LED lighting was advantageous to the architectural team. As an architect, Larson points out that “you don’t always get to do what you want to do architecturally.” The reasons a designer doesn’t always have free rein, of course, is connected to what the client wants, budgets, materials, and other factors. “This district really prioritized natural light,” explained Larson. “It would have been easier and cheaper for the client to cut sky lights out of the space and put a flat roof over the whole thing, but having natural light was really important to them. So, as an architect, it was a great opportunity to integrate those features into the design.”

Innovations in lighting have advanced since the existing portion of the structure was built. “In that time span, there was a revolution in lighting. This building is all LED lighting; no more fluorescents,” said Larson.

Besides the newest building code variations, the site’s most talked-about



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novelty is its gender-neutral restrooms. No more “girls” or “boys” bathroom facilities. For staff and teachers, this translates into no more misbehavior or wondering “what’s going on in there?!” The trend to offer more inclusion and avoid a male or female designation is beneficial in Dexter.

“During the design phase, the teachers challenged us by asking if there was something different we could come up with in regards to the bathroom facilities,” said Larson. “We came up with this plan to create gender-neutral stalls that give each child complete privacy. There are no ‘gang-style’ male or female signs leading to group bathrooms. The bathrooms are individualized for people, just pick one. They’re designed to give more supervision, and the layout allows teachers to offer assistance if needed.”

Kindergarten teacher Kristen Linn notices how the neutral-gender bathrooms lend a more “at-home” experience for the young kindergarten through second grade student population. “They’re used to a family-style way of using the bathroom,”

said Linn. “At home, everyone in the family uses the same bathroom – there is no male or female designation. It’s like that at school now. The bathrooms are more natural. It’s life. The bathroom design we have now is more welcoming and provides a general acceptance to everybody.”

The design of better bathrooms wasn’t the only “new” way of thinking that the construction and architectural team encountered. Maintaining unity with the appearance of the old and new building was both a goal and a challenge. It isn’t easy to identify where the old building ends and the new one begins. That is due to TMP’s innovative design and attention to the client’s desire for the modifications to blend from the old and modernization of the new. The shared space inside the academic complex isn’t the only thing the student population go Dutch on – tile schemes, paint colors and the general atmosphere of the old and new building were purposefully designed to match. “One of the things we heard during the bond surveys and pre-construction was how



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Shared spaces at the Dexter Early Elementary Complex were designed to be flexible for small or large groups. Varying seating options are offered, with elements that can be recreated and rearranged.

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there was a perceived gap between the students who attended Bates-Beacon (the older building) versus the students who went to Cornerstone," said Brand. "TMP and Dave Larson did a very good job of intentionally designing these buildings to feel the same."

The merging of the two buildings sparked the idea to share utilities. "We did a combined plan for the two buildings," said Brand. "During the heating season, we took down the chillers and replaced them with a large one to feed both, and temporary piping necessary to keep it up and operational for that building. Then we did the same with the boiler plant over the summer. We took out all the boilers and replaced them with larger, more efficient ones. There is also a combined kitchen space and other renovations allowed for a shared storage space. The storage space was filled in no time," said Brand. "If there is one theme I see on every school building project, it's that there is never enough storage space."

Keeping the curb appeal identical in the two-tone brick wasn't easy. Harmonizing the interior of two buildings might have been easier than trying to match its outer surface. "Matching the exterior brick motif proved to be a challenge," said Larson. "In

the years between the old building being built and this new one, the materials have changed completely. As designers and builders, we know it's a totally different brick, but the trick was to make it look the same."

Brand confirms the smooth blending of bricks. "If you're driving by, from the road the building looks like one building – as though it's always been here. There's no area standing out as old or new," he said.

Brand's enthusiasm for the design portion of the project was high; however, an area that lowered his excitement centered on one of the unprecedented challenges the entire construction industry faced in 2018. "Because it was a state-funded project, we were suddenly thrust into the repeal of the Michigan Prevailing Wages Act," said Brand. "Most of the contractors in this southeast Michigan area are union, so we had to deal with keeping up with the law as it changed."

The law shielded construction workers who work on state-financed projects to ensure fair wage rates and fringe benefits. "This project was on the edge of the law being removed," said Brand. "It wasn't fully flushed out, so there were a lot of questions swirling. What do we do and how do we do it were definitely some of the stressors faced on this project." Although unforeseen issues popped up on this state-funded project, the team's ability to anticipate, resolve and execute solutions made the results that much sweeter.

In a Special Kind of Community

The Fitzpatricks witnessed how Superintendent Timmis's vision for the district is allowing growth and a new standard of teaching and learning are revitalizing the school culture. Their son will be among the 750-student population in the fall. "It's evident the Dexter community is supportive of education and this new building is a testament to that."

Linn praises the Dexter School District for its commitment to students. "There is a special sense of community in this district," she said. "It's remarkable to me how they put kids first. That is something said in other places but not always the case. From the administrators, the community members, the staff and the families – everyone makes decisions for the benefit of the students. From curriculum decisions to the low class sizes to materials to

furniture to supplies, and now to the space we teach in – everything is prioritized around the students. You don't always see that in a lot of districts. The teachers here all feel fortunate to have the opportunity to teach in this new facility."

The decisions made for the sake of children included lower levels and handles on drawers, toilets, sinks, doors – everything is thought out from the perspective of a child. It's accessible to their height and vision range. In addition, the learning style of every child is considered. For example, giant, bouncing, exercise-style rubber balls are in classrooms to give jittery or fidgety children a quiet solution to work out their nervousness while learning. Laura Casai, Director of Interior Design at TMP, is an expert in the kinesthetic



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methods of improving a child's learning capacity through the use of versatile, mobile, and alternative furniture. "My role on the Dexter K-2 Project involved conceptualizing the interior design of the marketplace and workshop space," said Casai, who believes learning is about exploration and children are inimitable explorers. "The flexible learning space adjoining Dexter's two elementary schools is intended to be a place to support authentic learning experiences in a way that responds to a broad range of learning styles."

The two learning spaces – the Workshop and the Marketplace – are where Casai implements her skill. "The workshop is a large, deconstructed laboratory featuring a soft area for presentation, a wet area for exploration and an idea pergola in the center," said Casai. "As a place to explore and create, the workshop gives only a framework on which the users can build. The intent of the idea pergola is as a structure from which learners and mentors can build and suspend projects and installations – an ever-changing canvas. With expansive ceiling height, a garage door to the exterior, and vehicle access to the back of the building, the workshop is a place where learners can get their hands on even the largest of tools for exploration."

The TMP team credits Casai and how she committed herself to the project from the beginning, and the district is extraordinarily delighted with the outcomes of her interior and furnishings design work. "We know that all kids learn in different ways – learning modalities," said Casai, "We know kids learn best when their bodies are engaged as well as their minds. Meaningful learning occurs when kids can construct new ideas using existing knowledge structures. The flexible learning space at Dexter's Early Elementary Complex is a learner-centered model for what experience-based learning can look like!"

As determined earlier, the space at Dexter Early Childhood Complex is meant to be used, shared and experienced – it appears that is happening. Let's not forget to say it also shall be remembered. As Larson declared, "When you walk into something beautiful, you don't forget it."



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