Ridgefield Agricultural School

By Design CoMission

This project is the design of a project-based learning school for about 700 students, focused on creating a more hands-on and engaging way of learning that is easily applicable. Instead of relying only on traditional classrooms, the design encourages students to interact, collaborate, and learn through real experiences. This takes place mostly in the shops and labs, exploring visual creativity through science and building. The goal is to create a school environment that supports different learning styles while also preparing students for the future. Additionally, the school connects deeply to its agricultural history to implement a heavier science program and spark students' interest in the surrounding environment.

The site is located in a rural area with a strong agricultural background and natural features, including a creek. This had a big impact on the design because the goal was not to ignore the land's unique features, but to work with them. The building and site layout respond to the existing landscape, preserving natural elements and creating a stronger connection between students and nature. This proves how architecture works in many ways to adjust to the unique set of circumstances that a project presents - working with the site, community, environment, wants, needs, and demands.

One of the main ideas of the project is flexibility. The spaces are designed to be multi-functional, meaning they can easily be used to accommodate various activities instead of serving solely one purpose. This allows for more creativity in how students learn - whether that is working in groups, studying independently, or participating in larger social activities. The design includes a variety of spaces that support focus, collaboration, and social interaction, making the school feel more dynamic and adaptable. Something that our design features is the option of where students eat, study, and socialize. This may sound like an atmospheric change, but we made sure to make that manifest in the physical layout as well. Intentionally creating the spaces with their uses in mind makes the school that much more efficient in terms of learning spaces.

A major concept in the design comes from the creek near the site and the idea of creating a built ecosystem. The main building is designed to mimic a river, curving through the site and guiding how people move through the school. Just like a river

changes width and direction, the building also expands and narrows to create different types of spaces. Larger areas are used for social and gathering spaces, while smaller areas help transition between them, usually doubling as quiet focus spaces. This creates a natural flow throughout the campus, providing variety in the volume, size, and intent of these spaces.

The educational spaces are inspired by fish, which represent how students learn and work together. These areas are grouped in a way that encourages collaboration - similar to how fish move in groups called schools. This supports the idea of project-based learning by creating spaces where students can easily interact and share ideas, passing along their different backgrounds of knowledge. By designing the spaces for collaboration, we are uniting our students as one big group, a school of fish, rather than splitting them up. Within this campus, we desire to create spaces that welcome people and spark conversation.

Other areas of the campus, like the stables and gazebo spaces, are inspired by elements such as lily pads and logs within a creek ecosystem. These spaces act as support systems, providing areas for rest, reflection, and hands-on learning. They help complete the overall ecosystem concept by acting as “fuel sources” that support both the environment and the learning experience. Another addition to the fish buildings was implementing an outdoor classroom/social space with an overhang. This space will allow students to unwind and relax a little outside, relieving bigger academic pressures and giving them a breather. This aspect of our plan aims to give students choice, flexibility, and control over their learning style. Incorporating lots of nature encourages good mental health and a work/life balance.

Natural materials, greenery, and outdoor spaces are also included throughout the design to strengthen the connection to nature. These elements help create a calming and comfortable environment for students. Overall, this project shows how architecture can be designed to reflect natural systems while also supporting flexible, interactive, and community-focused learning.

Building our school on a site originally zoned for agriculture brings another special element to this project. By making this an agriculture school focusing on the surrounding nature, environment, and human connections, we plan to give back to the community with this building. In this way, we are not taking away from the land, but rather adding more purpose to the site. The Ridgefield community would need another school

eventually, but our intentional design benefits all those involved in the project, especially everyone that will utilize the campus in the future.

Our goal is clear: the Ridgefield Agricultural School will focus on providing hands-on experiences for students, preparing them for the future, and maintaining good mental health by implementing various aspects of nature. The way our buildings reflect the surrounding environment will always point back to Ridgefield's rich history of agriculture, reminding and teaching everyone that encounters it. Opening the campus to the public and giving back to the community - as well as other surrounding communities - makes our school a place of unity and reconnection.