SALEM WOODS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
MONROE , WA

A4LE Polished Apple Award

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What would it look like if we treated educational environments like ecosystems?

Interconnections could presuppose functionality, and the building itself would support the surrounding landscape and community as an active member in a larger ecosystem. This foundation was the focus of Salem Woods Elementary School. Once a “California style” campus with open circulation, the District sought intentionality and connection to place as the basis for providing a safer campus that better supported learning.

From the very start, it was clear that integration with the site was critical to the solution. Tucked back in a wetland forest area, with access to a salmon creek, it was the perfect setting for outdoor learning. The teaching staff didn’t have shared group space, but they were also clear that they didn’t want to lose interaction with the outdoors. Additionally, the school lacked communal space, but didn’t anticipate its inclusion since they were limited by a tight budget.

A clear goal of creating connections between people, and connections to landscape emerged.

The new two-story Salem Woods Elementary School replaces a former classroom block while the original gym, cafeteria, kitchen, and music room remained in an adjacent building. Site work provides a new storm water detention system, vehicular circulation, hard surface play, entry plaza, two outdoor learning areas, and an extended trail and a bridge over Richardson Creek.

The new classroom wing is housed beneath two gabled roof forms connected on both floors by an enclosed and thermally-controlled corridor. It houses 24 classrooms grouped into six learning suites with shared activity areas for collaborative learning. The new building includes a library, three collaboration rooms, gender neutral bathrooms, and administrative spaces. Adjacent to the entry area is a feature community area, the Waterfall Steps, which can hold an entire grade level for group presentations. This area also connects directly to the front entry plaza with a glazed garage door and creates a gathering place for students, teachers, staff, family, and community members.

SCOPE OF WORK

550 Students
41,900 SF New Construction
$19.6 million Construction Cost

The community cherishes the outdoors, the farm land, and forest that make up the landscape of this area.

COMMUNITY

Salem Woods Elementary School is surrounded by a community spanning a semi-suburban, yet semi-rural way of life. Single-family homes on larger lots occupy much of the land surrounding the project site. Many students and families that come to the school live on land that is used for animal husbandry and agrarian purposes. The community cherishes the outdoors, the farm land, and forest that make up the landscape of this area

STAKEHOLDERS

This district sought to elevate the teaching and learning environment for its students and staff with a new facility that would also improve school safety.

The school staff expressed a strong desire to maintain seamless connection to the surrounding landscape. This desired connection to nature echoed the surrounding community's values rooted in the land. The connection to the outdoors was carefully considered during design as improving school safety without inhibiting student movement throughout the building was a primary goal.

The project team held eight workshops with a Design Committee made up of key stakeholders. Workshops included analysis of the "Day in the Life" of a student, "Hopes and Fears," visual likes and dislikes, program studies, and an eco-charrette to establish design goals, guiding principles, and philosophies that best fit the staff and student of the new Salem Woods Elementary School.

The project team and members of the Design Committee toured three recent elementary schools to form a conversation regarding materiality, daily routine needs, and preferences for spacial layout. The group shared preferences for large classroom windows, tackable and tactile wall surfaces, light maple wood tones at interiors, limited and orderly open ceilings, and outdoor spaces for students and staff.

PROVIDE COMFORT
Provide comfortable spaces with ample natural light, fresh colors, and welcoming materials.

TACTILE LEARNING
Create spaces for sensory and hands on learning with easy access to materials.

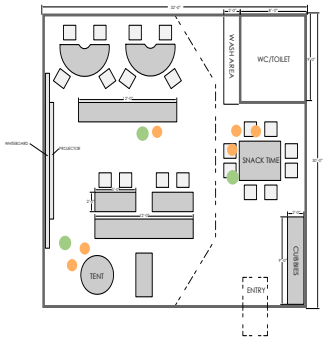
FOCUS ON LEARNING
Support technology that is accessible and available to all students and staff, creating an environment that allows technology to be embedded in learning and creating.

CREATING CONNECTIONS
Value and manage site assets including sunlight, vegetation, and water.

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS
Promote lifelong learning and community support by utilizing the school facility as a shared community resource.

SAFETY
Provide safety and security for students without interfering with students' development and learning.

PRESCHOOL
10:00 AM



OBSERVATION
- 10 AM END OF DAY - FREE CHOICE TIME
- MANY ACTIVITY AREAS

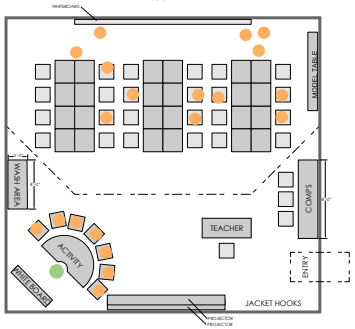
KINDERGARTEN
1:38 PM

OBSERVATION
- FREE CHOICE IN SMALL GROUPS
- 5 STATIONS OF CHOICE

FIRST GRADE
10:56 AM

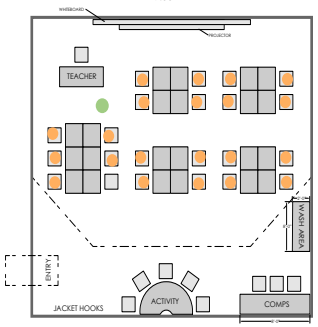
OBSERVATION
- KIDS GATHERED IN READING CORNER ON FLOOR
- TEACHER LEADS CREATIVE WRITING/READING EXERCISE

SECOND GRADE
9:30 AM



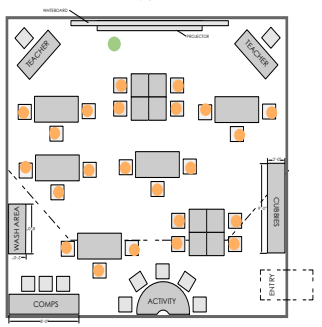
OBSERVATION
- FREE CHOICE TIME IN SMALL GROUPS
- ONE GROUP WITH TEACHER

THIRD GRADE
9:56 AM



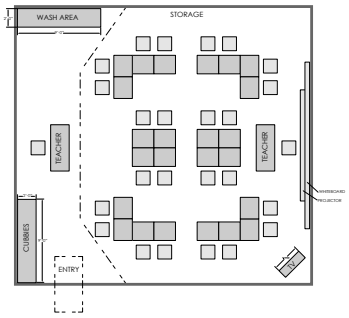
OBSERVATION
- LEGO MATH EXERCISE
- TEACHER LEAD VIA PROJECTOR

FOURTH GRADE
9:20 AM



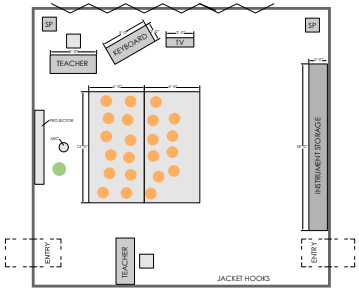
OBSERVATION
- TEACHER LEADS SPELLING LESSON
- KIDS IN DESKS, 3 TO 4 PER AREA

FIFTH GRADE
3:00 PM



OBSERVATION
- NO KIDS - GRADE LEVEL TESTING
- FIFTH GRADE SCIENCE ROOM?

MUSIC
11:15 AM



OBSERVATION
- KIDS ON FLOOR IN ROWS ON RUGS
- NO CHAIRS

Day-long site observations showed the design team the innovative teaching techniques being utilized in a very traditional setting and showed how valuable space that truly supported them would be.

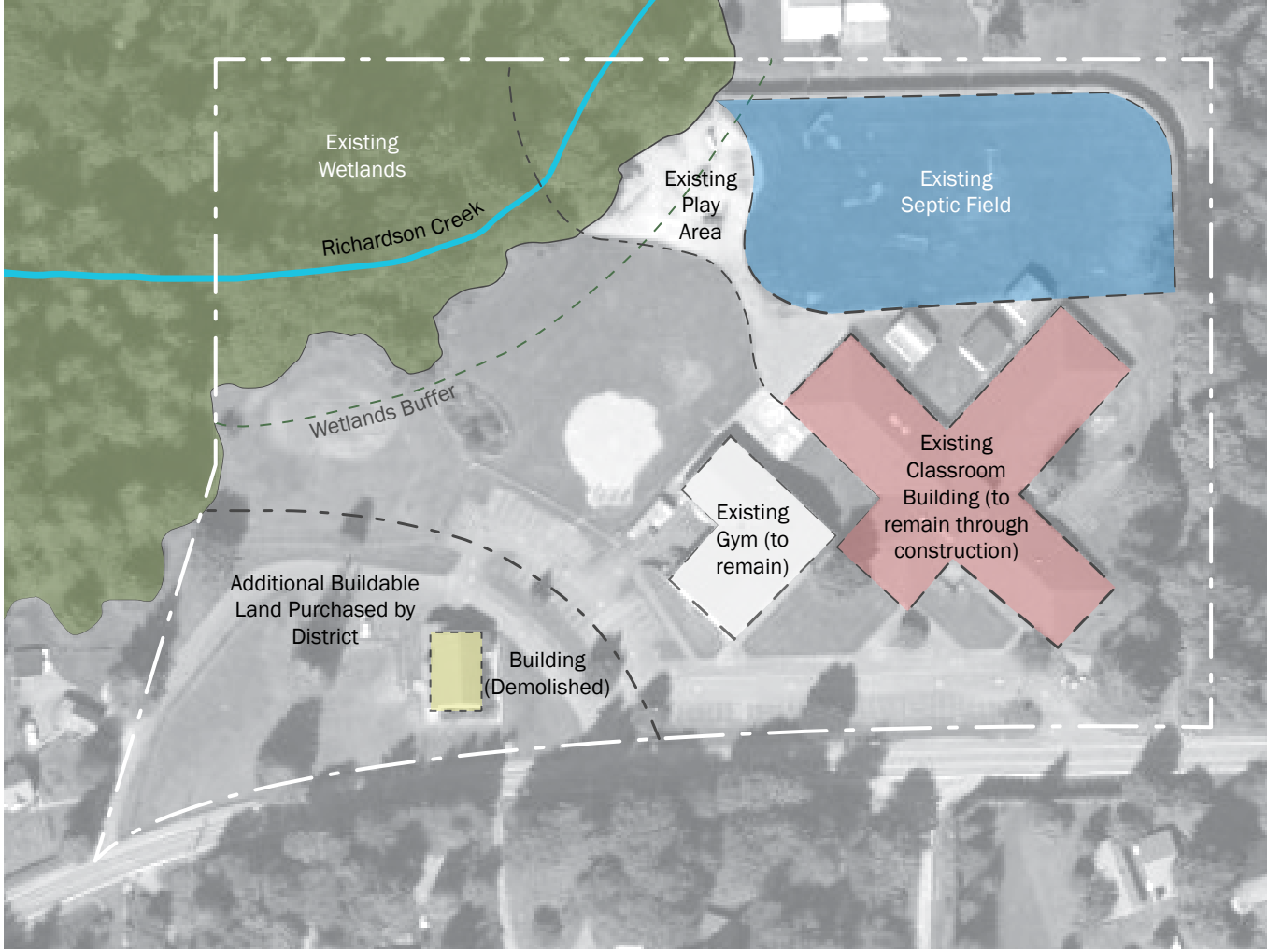
CHALLENGES

While the users wanted to maintain the connection to nature and the outdoors, the natural elements and features of the site provided challenging restrictions to overcome. A portion of the site is a wetlands area, while other built elements such as the existing gym, covered play area, service yard, and septic field further decreased buildable area on the site.

The desire to celebrate connections to nature was challenged by a shift from exterior circulation and classroom access to a fully enclosed building. Staff and students were used to having regular encounters with nature throughout the day due to the existing school's "California style" model. To maintain this connection, a variety of outdoor learning spaces, high levels of interior and exterior transparency, and targeted views of nature were considered during design. Large, operable windows in classrooms and shared learning areas would further enhance a connection to the landscape.

In order to respect the surrounding environment and community, a smaller building form was desired to mitigate scale and reduce the new school's impact on the its surroundings. With restriction on the site's buildable area, the project team studied how to maintain a low, two-story building profile on site with a style befitting of the adjacent homes and barns of the surrounding context.

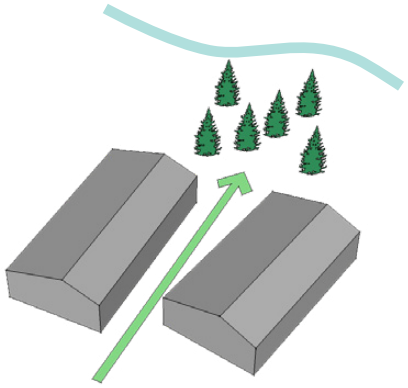
Lastly, budget constraints of the project necessitated the implementation of building efficiencies through organization and design choices.



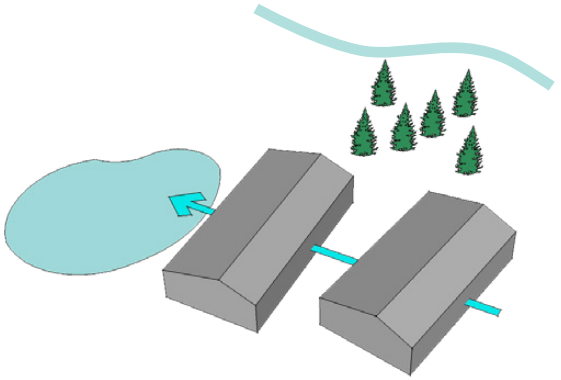
How do you move outdoor circulation indoors while maintaining a connection to nature?

RESPONDING TO SITE OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

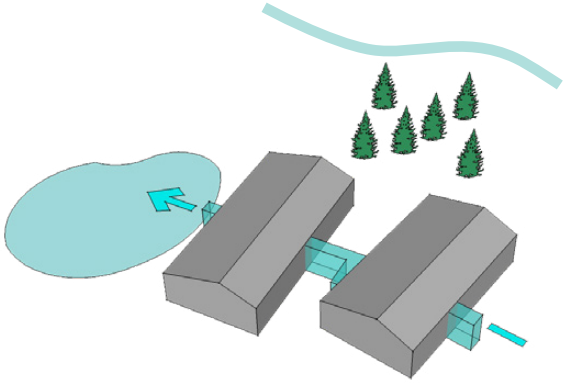
Connect to existing site forest and stream



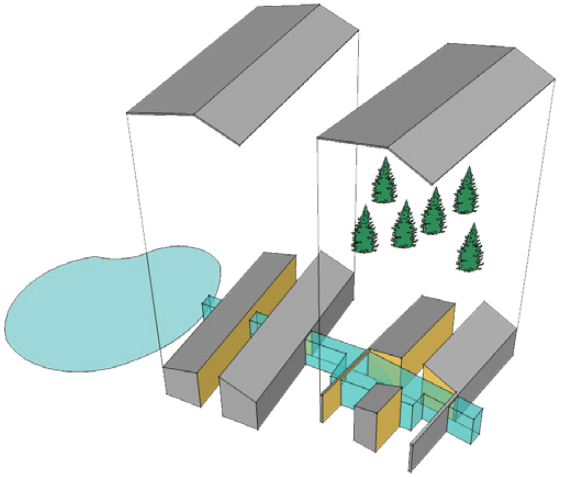
Building frames view to trees



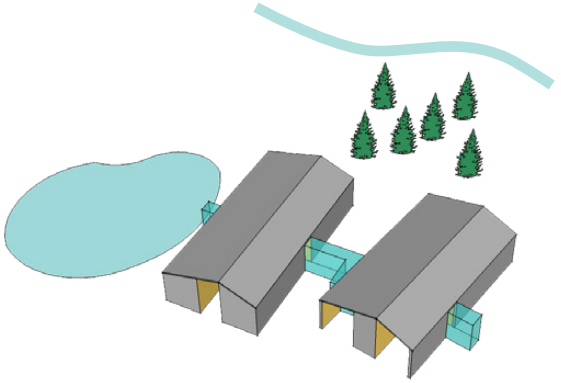
Connect to new site bioretention pond



Building circulation becomes building bridge to water and enhances views of the trees

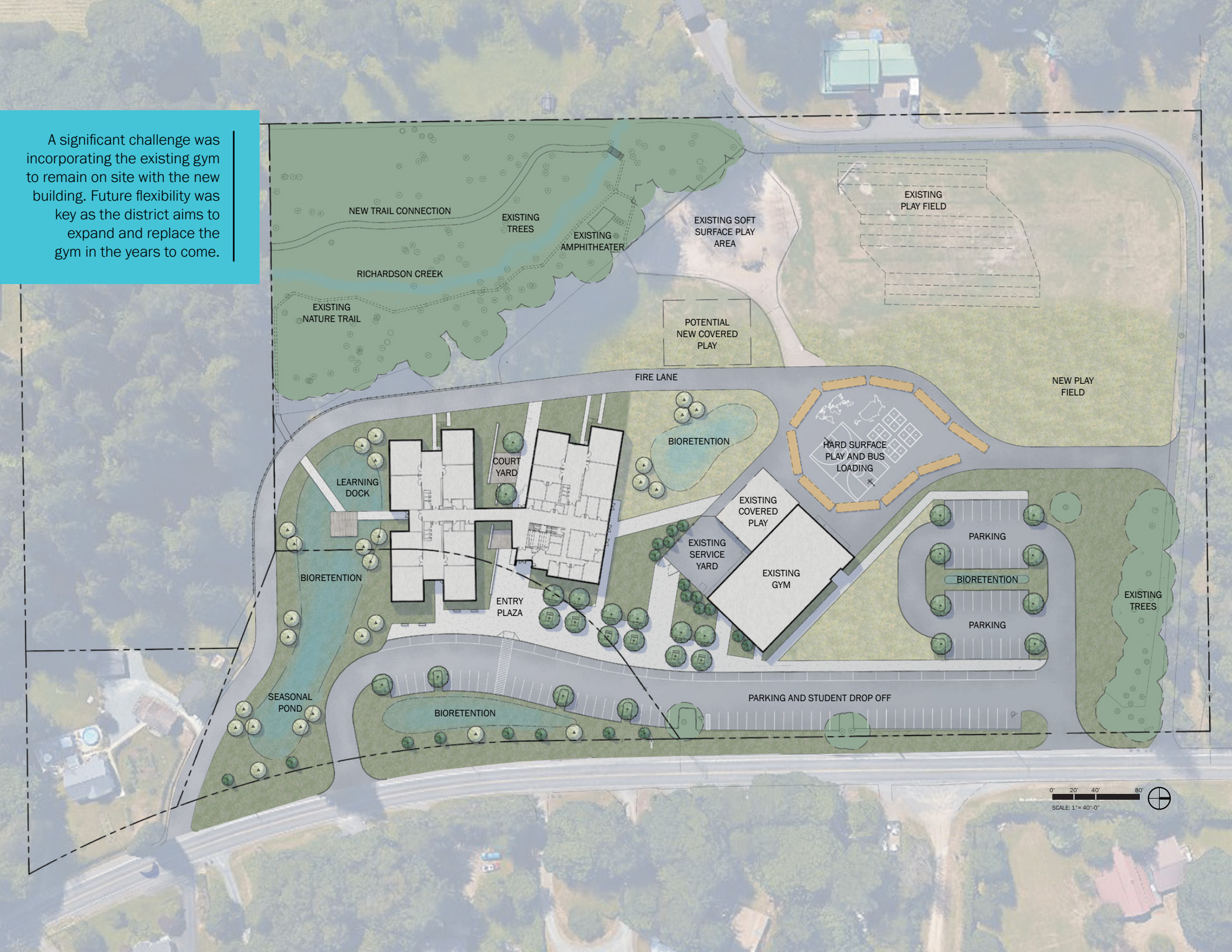


Community spaces carved from the building form

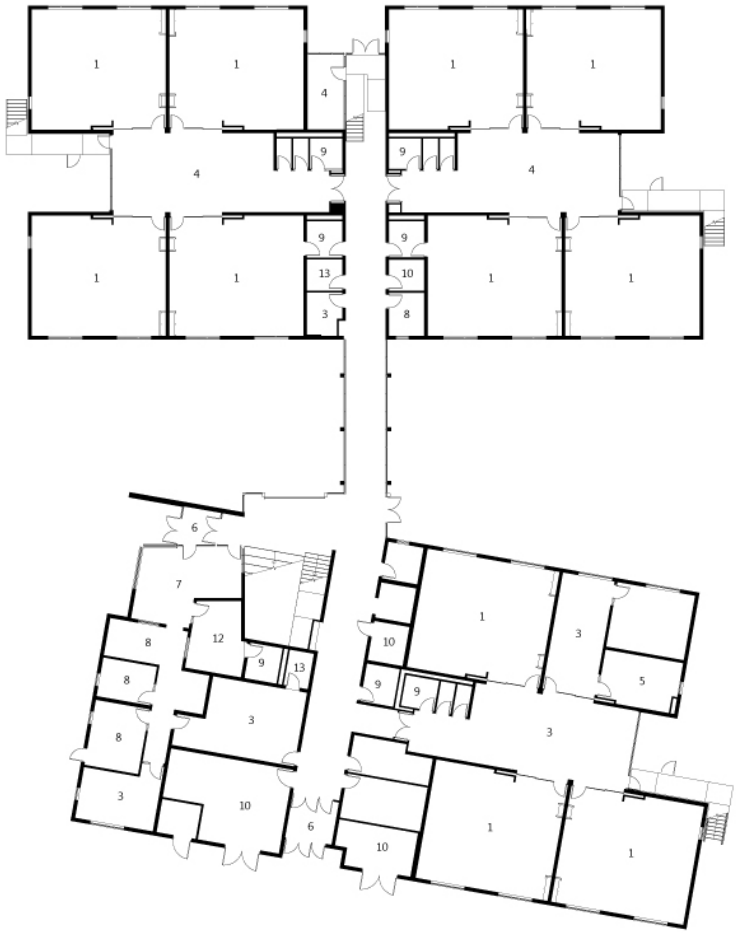


Final building form with site features

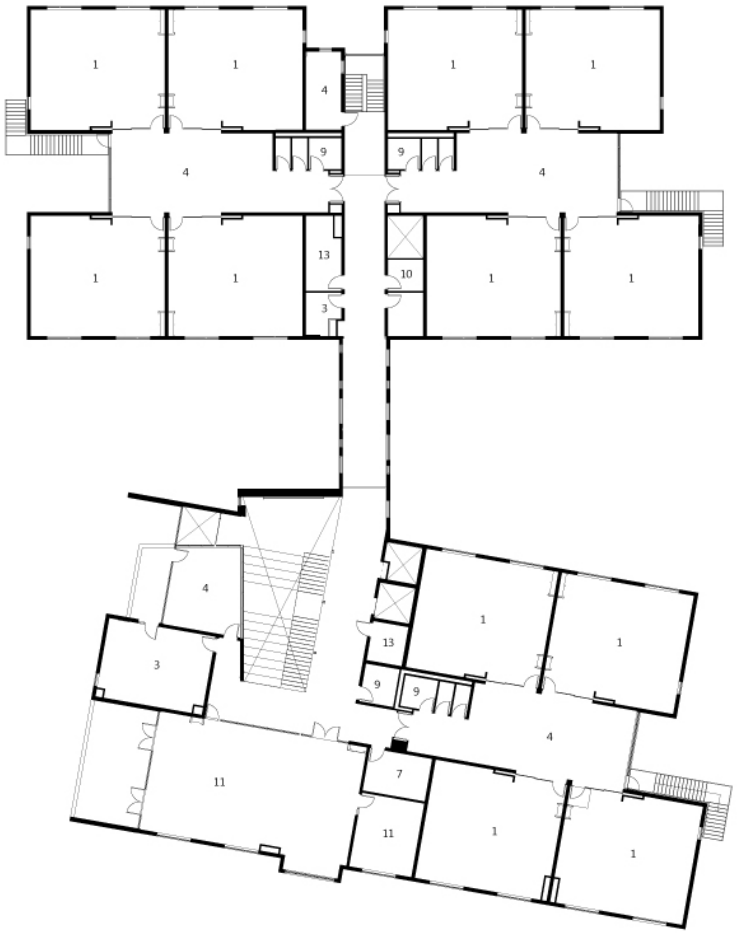
A significant challenge was incorporating the existing gym to remain on site with the new building. Future flexibility was key as the district aims to expand and replace the gym in the years to come.



First Floor



Second Floor

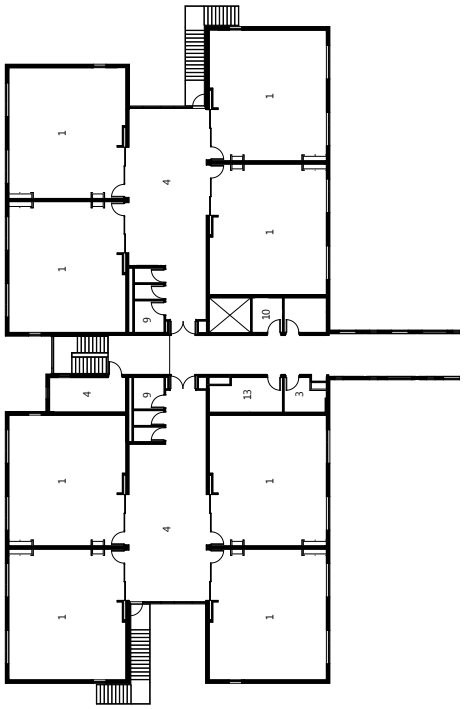


1	CLASSROOM	8	OFFICE
2	COMPUTER LAB	9	RESTROOM
3	STAFF RESOURCE	10	MECH
4	SHARED SPACE	11	LIBRARY
5	OT/PT THERAPY	12	HEALTH
6	VESTIBULE	13	STORAGE
7	RECEPTION		

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Previously, with all exterior circulation, informal group gathering spaces for staff and students outside of classrooms was not available. Through a full day of observation, the design team recognized that the existing building did not support the growing community of learning and sharing that the teachers already fostered. To support the beautiful school culture, the new building provides flexible sliding doors from all classrooms to communal shared areas, allowing grade cohorts to learn separately or together. On a typical school day, students make it a priority to open these sliding doors to encourage the sharing of learning between classrooms and peers.

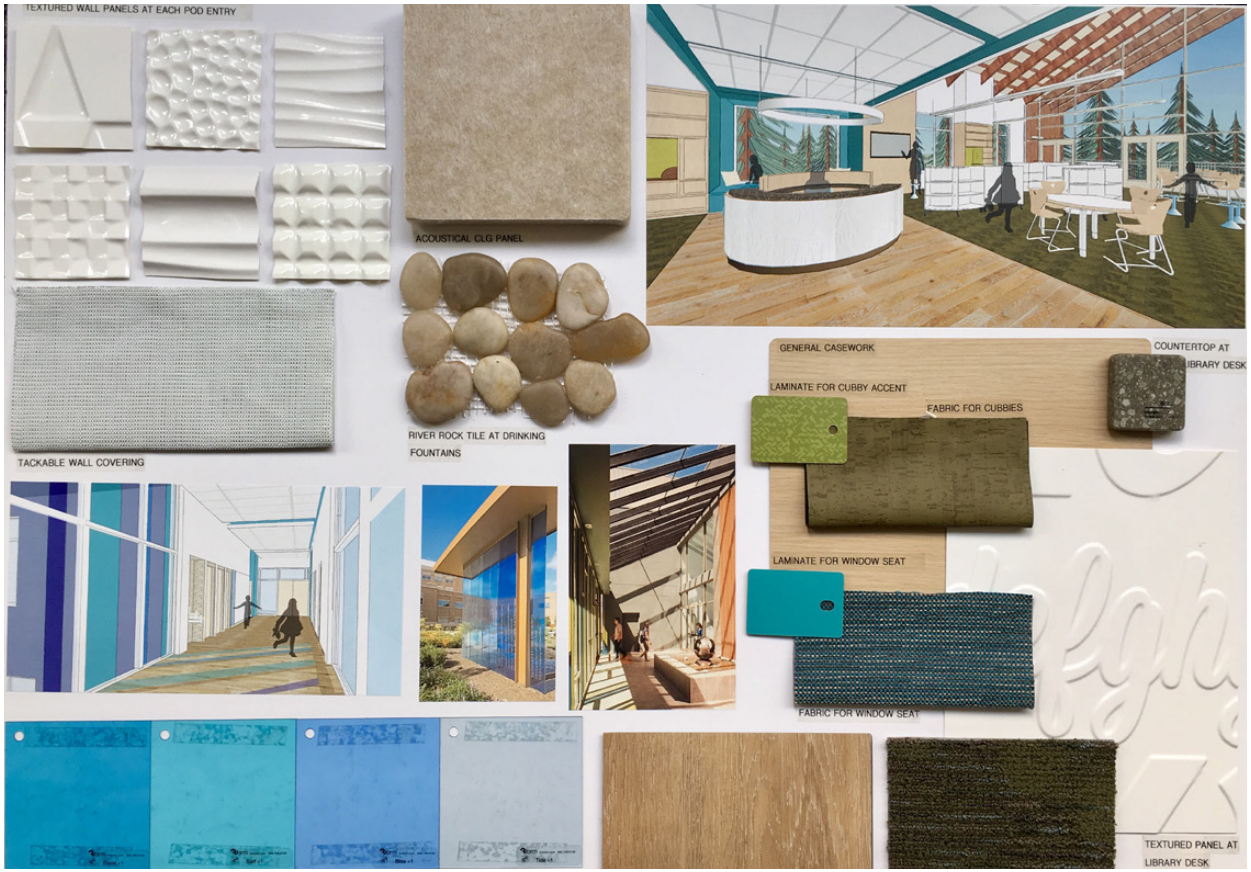
The new communal classroom pod layouts, allows the closely knit staff to foster and grow their collaborate education style as a group.



Tactile learning and textured spaces became important as the school caters to students with vision impairments from around the school district. Textured wainscoting is placed near the entry of the communal learning pods as a method of wayfinding. Each learning pod has a different physical feel. Visually, tactile textures continue to the exterior of the building as the metal panels that make up the exterior façade provide visual interest.

A playful blue pop of color helps to identify areas where light, air and circulation enter the building. These visual highlights also assist in the circulation wayfinding throughout the facility. This color contrasts with the natural pallet of the building that takes cues from the natural environment. At the windows, a sunshade element was integrated with the blue surround feature in order to provide better daylighting within the interior spaces.

How do you center tactile learning with material choices?



In conjunction with the open nature of the building's organization, the main circulation played with materiality, light, and color by blending indoor and outdoor space with various levels of transparency.

Blue glazing in the upper bridge circulation provides a visual texture that evolves throughout the day and with the yearly seasons. This heavily used circulation path further connects students to nature as they experience the change of light and color play throughout their day.

The bridge at the ground level circulation maximized its transparency to the outdoors with landscaping butting up to the exterior wall. The wide open views and nearby natural elements helped to reinforce the connection to the outdoor environment for the building occupants.

How do you make indoor circulation an experiential opportunity for education and connection?

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The connection to the natural site assets is maintained through a variety of methods. The main circulation is situated parallel to the nearby salmon stream on site — Richardson Creek. Continual views from classrooms and circulation spaces out to the adjacent forest and wetland areas reinforce a visual connection while operable windows allow for fresh air, breezes and sounds of the birds from the forest to further bring the outdoors into the learning spaces and encourage the health and wellbeing of the building occupants.

A connection in presence is provided through secure outdoor courtyard between the two forms of the building, allowing for students to have safe outdoor learning spaces. Further outdoor learning space was provided by way of a new learning dock is placed in the middle of the new bioretention pond specifically designed to be shallow and plant-filled to support STEM instruction. This unique learning platform gives an up close, hands on learning experience for students to study how the water affects the plant life of the surrounding site.

With limited area how do you maximize educational opportunities by making site requirements function as learning opportunities?

Arranging classrooms around the communal learning areas also provided the building with space efficiencies and allowed for the implementation of bonus areas such as the Waterfall Stair - an open communal learning space rising from the main entry to the second floor that can be used by students and community members alike.

The wooden makeup of the stairs hearkens back to the past as gluelam beams from the previous classroom building are utilized.

Additionally, the theme of streams and water connections begins at this entry as a through-line to Richardson Creek behind the school. This can be seen throughout the school at each entry connecting to the outdoors.

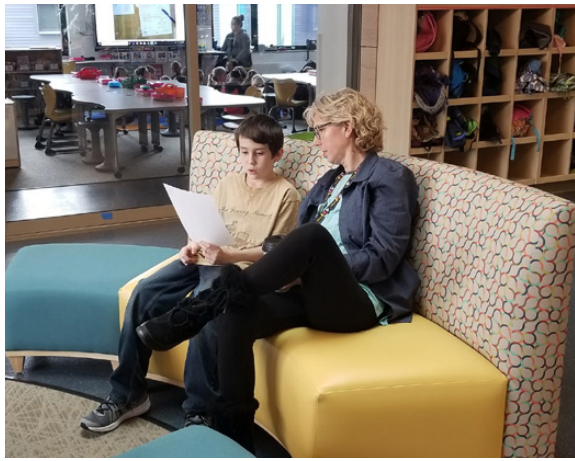
RESULTS OF THE PROCESS & PROJECT

Providing indoor and outdoor spaces dedicated to shared teaching and learning allows the community to embody their values of connecting to the land and each other. Classroom neighborhoods and shared learning environments supported the collaborative and connected community of teachers and learners that already existed at the school. Through tactile learning and continual views to nature, occupants' senses are fully stimulated as they move through the building.

Today students can be seen reading in the blue tones of the "bridge," gathering on the waterfall stairs and sprawling out upon the outdoor learning platform. Students own the building connections and flexibility between classroom and shared areas by using sliding walls more often then swing doors to enter classrooms. The community has fully inhabited every inch of the building making each piece their own and finding new uses for spaces on a daily basis.

"Wow! This school is so cool... It's nice and it's surrounded by beautiful trees."

– Salem Woods Student

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