



The Office of Child Development Culver City Unified School District

A4LE Southern California Chapter
2021 Award of Excellence Entry

Executive Summary

Scope of Work and Budget:

Client	Culver City Unified School District
Location	10800 Farragut Drive Culver City, CA 90230
Approved Budget	\$225,000
Approved GSF	4,200 Sq. Ft.
Category	<i>Conceptual Design</i>

Concept:

The Play Hub is a pilot project for promoting Culver City USD's district-wide master plans to future bond voters and to promote a cultural shift to more outdoor learning for equity in early childhood education. A donation from their neighbor Amazon supports this opportunity to create an outdoor space that supports equity by providing 3- to 5-year-old children with multiple means of engagement with each other in nature, meeting their sensory needs.

Goals:

The primary goal is to have students spend at least 50% of their time learning outdoors while having their sensory needs met, and to replicate this approach on the other campuses. A secondary goal is to disrupt the typical stale approaches to play yard planning beyond CCUSD, transforming predictable mundane playgrounds for just recess into spaces that provide variety for a lower cost than the traditional formulas.

Outcomes:

Post-occupancy evaluations will be conducted using a customized assessment tool measuring success based on two primary questions comparing the existing play yard with its plastic pre-fab play structure to the new nature-based Play Hub: 1) Is the Play Hub better at supporting CCUSD's Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogy and for STEM? 2) Is the Play Hub better at supporting the wide variety of needs of sensory motor learners?

Concept:

Children's cognitive development is at its most crucial stage of development from birth to age 5. Children must exercise their brains, especially their sensory motor development, during the first five years of life. It is crucial for children to be empowered to explore the world around them through sensory experiences. Educators and psychologists emphasize the importance of outdoor play and interaction for the development of children, yet most students spend more time indoors than outdoors. A child who has opportunities to play in nature with their peers, and who has their sensory needs met, will have a better chance to thrive than a child who doesn't.

What if all learning took place outdoors to support play-based learning and nature-based learning providing sensory engagement and variety for equity?







Executive Summary


The Play Hub is a pilot project to beta test one of the key planning principles promoting outdoor learning in Culver City USD's District-wide web-based Master Plan, Integrated Energy Master Plan, and Ed Specs. Their neighbor Amazon donated \$250,000 In December 2020 for a much-needed overhaul of an existing 4,200 Sq. Ft. playground to better support the Reggio Emilia-inspired program and early learning in STEM. There is an opportunity for this pilot project to be replicated on four of their other campuses. Part of the challenge was to plan the space to work in future campus development phases, when existing portable classrooms and the Administration office will be replaced by new construction.

It is a pioneering project for California public schools which typically consist of rubberized play surfaces and plastic play structures that are too prescribed, the result of leaving early childhood education experts out of the decision-making process and making low maintenance the top priority. The workshop process brought educators and Maintenance & Operations staff out of their silos to ensure the project includes their points of view for success. Another challenge for most public schools is to factor in DSA requirements that impact cost and time. This project has additional challenges of fast track schedule of four months for design to DSA submission, a hot bidding climate, and six weeks for summer construction.


CCUSD Play Hub Facts

4.4% 
of students are classified as English learners

570 
students in the 2019-2020 school year

52.8% 
of students identified as non-White in 2019-2020

80 
students are provided free or reduced-price meals by the school

2:24 
pre-K teacher-to-student ratio

350 
Culver City USD pre-K student population

48 students
4 teachers
Play Hub occupants

125 
Office of Child Development Campus (Pre-K)



History & Context

Culver City is a community within the arts- and culturally-rich creative economy of Los Angeles that is a part of CCUSD's context. CCUSD is a small district consisting of a tight-knit, inclusive, and welcoming community with a very high level of diversity of staff and students of different races, religions, languages, and cultures that are celebrated. Being a small district helps unify the vision, allowing for evolution and progressive thinking. CCUSD supports the Arts and Arts Integration with the belief that the arts bring joy and wonder to both teaching and learning because the arts are a way for students to express themselves.

History & Context

From its humble beginnings in 1971, the Office of Child Development (OCD) serves close to 1,000 students and their families, providing full day and part day Pre-K including special education Pre-K, before- and after-school care, and summer enrichment camps at six sites for school-age students. The Play Hub pilot project is being built on the Farragut Elementary School campus which houses the program's Administration Office.

The OCD program's motto is "Engaging Young Minds, Exploring Possibilities" which has led to their growth. The curriculum enables children to build basic skills in language arts, science, social studies, and mathematics using a project-based learning model inspired by the Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogy that is student-centered and experiential. The curriculum is planned to meet each child's own individuality during the process of growing physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

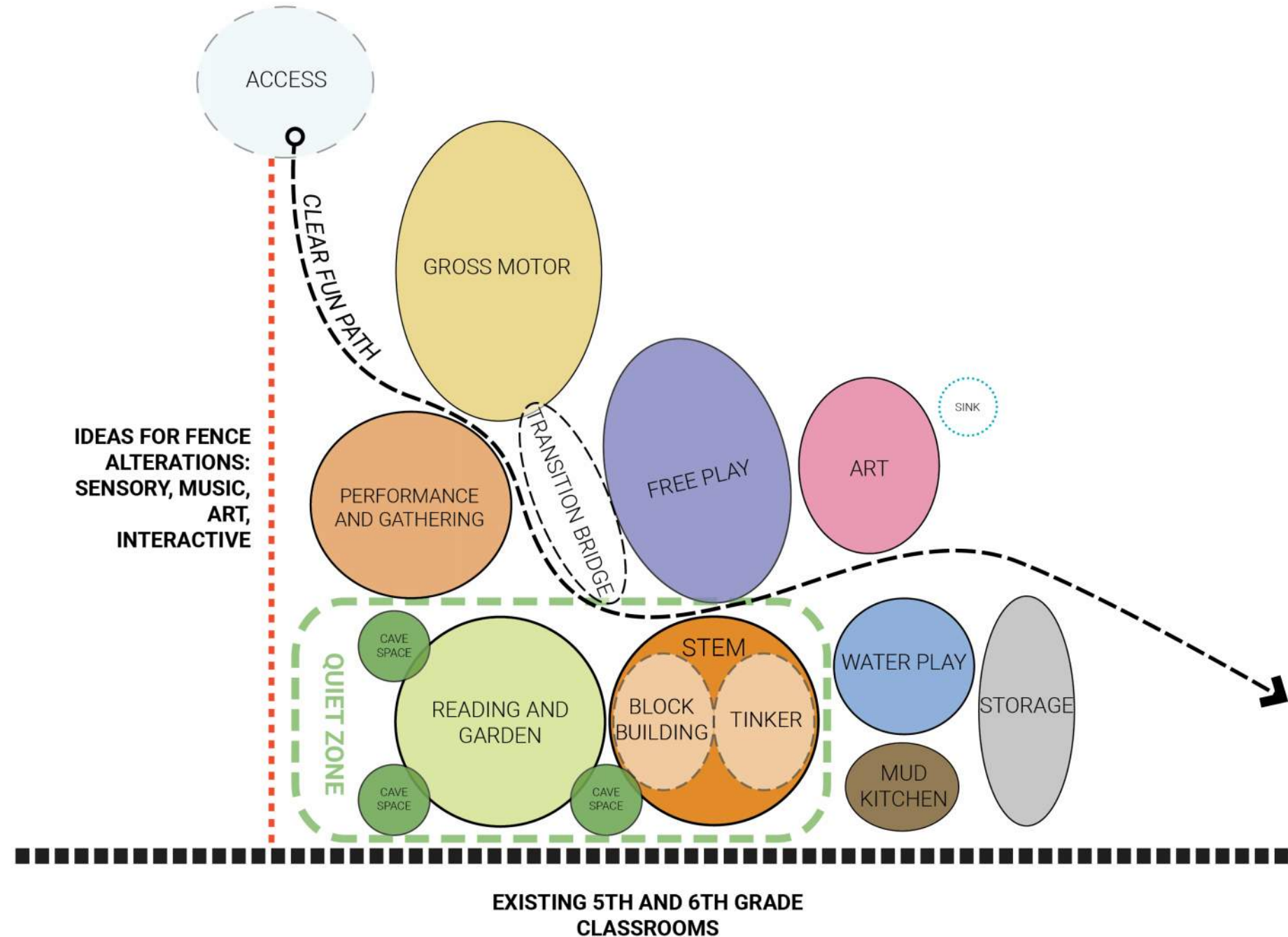


School & Community Engagement

A Play Hub Committee – consisting of a group of educators from the Pre-K program, a parent, a representative from the Culver City Education Foundation (CCEF) and a representative from Maintenance and Operations Team – met on the site to engage in a collaborative ideation process. The design firm and landscape architect began by sharing their program understanding to solicit feedback, then guided the participants to diagram their ideas on site plans. Next they shared their ideas in a gallery walk and gave each other feedback. Before leaving the workshop participants filled out exit tickets with opinions of the various options: three ideas that sounded great, two ideas that encourage behaviors for further exploration, and one idea to avoid.



Educational Environment - Program Zoning



The zoning diagram shows the translation of the zones that would support early learners in developing gross motor skills, engaging the senses, and taking risks. The organizing concept is a reference to the Ballona Creek river that flows through Culver City. The river path serves as an element to organize the various activity zones. Because of the existing condition of 5th and 6th grade classrooms south of the Play Hub, the river also gives children a behavioral cue – quiet activities on the south side of the river and louder activities on the north side.

Learning Play Hub - Planning Principles

The planning principles were established to help the Play Hub Committee and Design Team make decisions and was reviewed quickly at the start of each meeting.

Signage: Amazon donor acknowledgment in a visible area.

Approach to Gate: Child-friendly non-institutional experience as students approach the gate with their parents.

Entry: Once inside, interactive elements help students make the transition to begin their day at school.

Clear Path and Zones: Clear, fun path of travel (can be sensory) with distinct zones along the way.

Gross Motor Skills: Area for exploring and risk taking in motor and muscular development.

Transition Bridge: Between the Gross Motor Zone and the Quiet Zone to help children be mindful as they enter.

Integrate Nature: Keep existing trees and grass, add more planting and natural elements.

Materials for Nature-Based Learning: Natural materials and colors or elements inspired by nature.

Imaginative Play: Space, fixed elements, and loose components to inspire childrens' creativity.

Dramatic Play: Stage for performing and holding events such as graduation.

Sensory Experience: Materials for sensory experiences, both vertically and underfoot.

Spatial Awareness: Elements to help children understand where their bodies are in space and how they move.

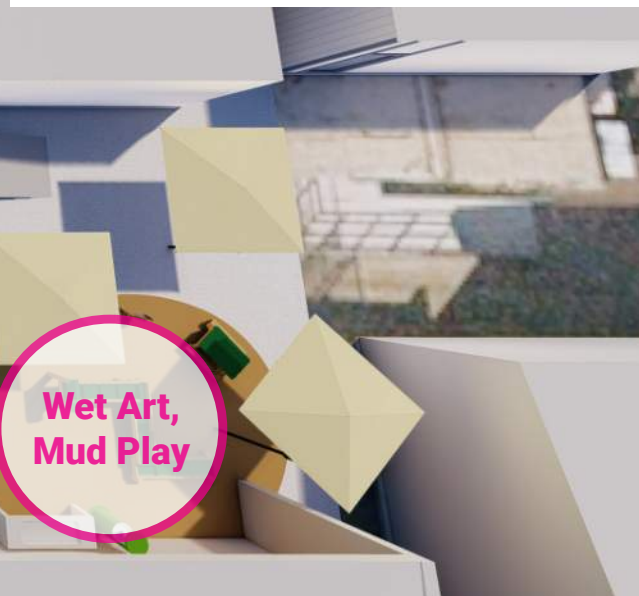
Experiential Learning: Exploratory with a loose structure.

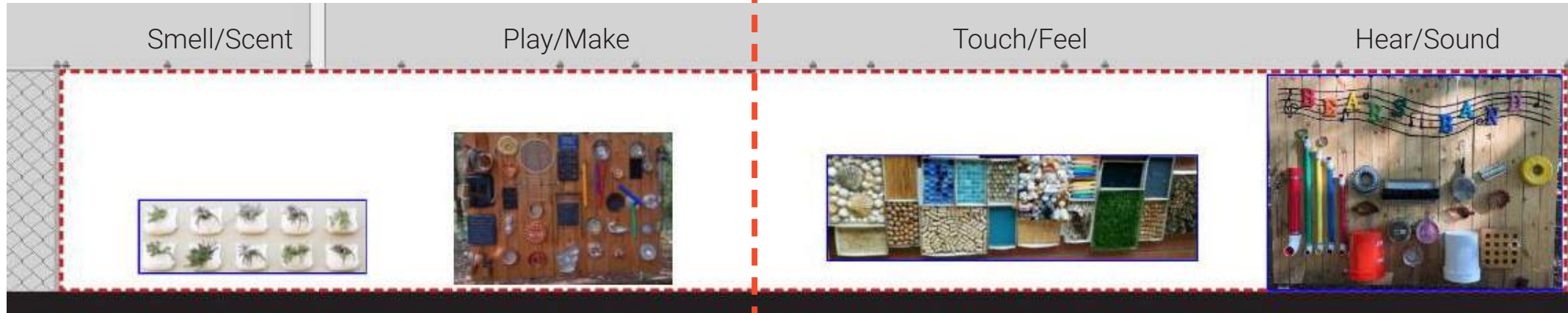
Art: Students explore different making opportunities in designated spaces.

Educational Environment

Supporting the Reggio Emilia-inspired program

Pre-K teachers were doing an amazing job of supporting the Reggio Emilia-inspired approach to pedagogy and project-based learning with facilities that were not designed to support this approach. The photo on the right shows a makeshift shade structure installed to protect all the materials and affordances needed. Much of it had to be carried out to the play yard daily. In the new Play Hub, the activity stations will be ready for learners to choose from just as they typically are inside of a classroom.





West Elevation



Plan View

Educational Environment

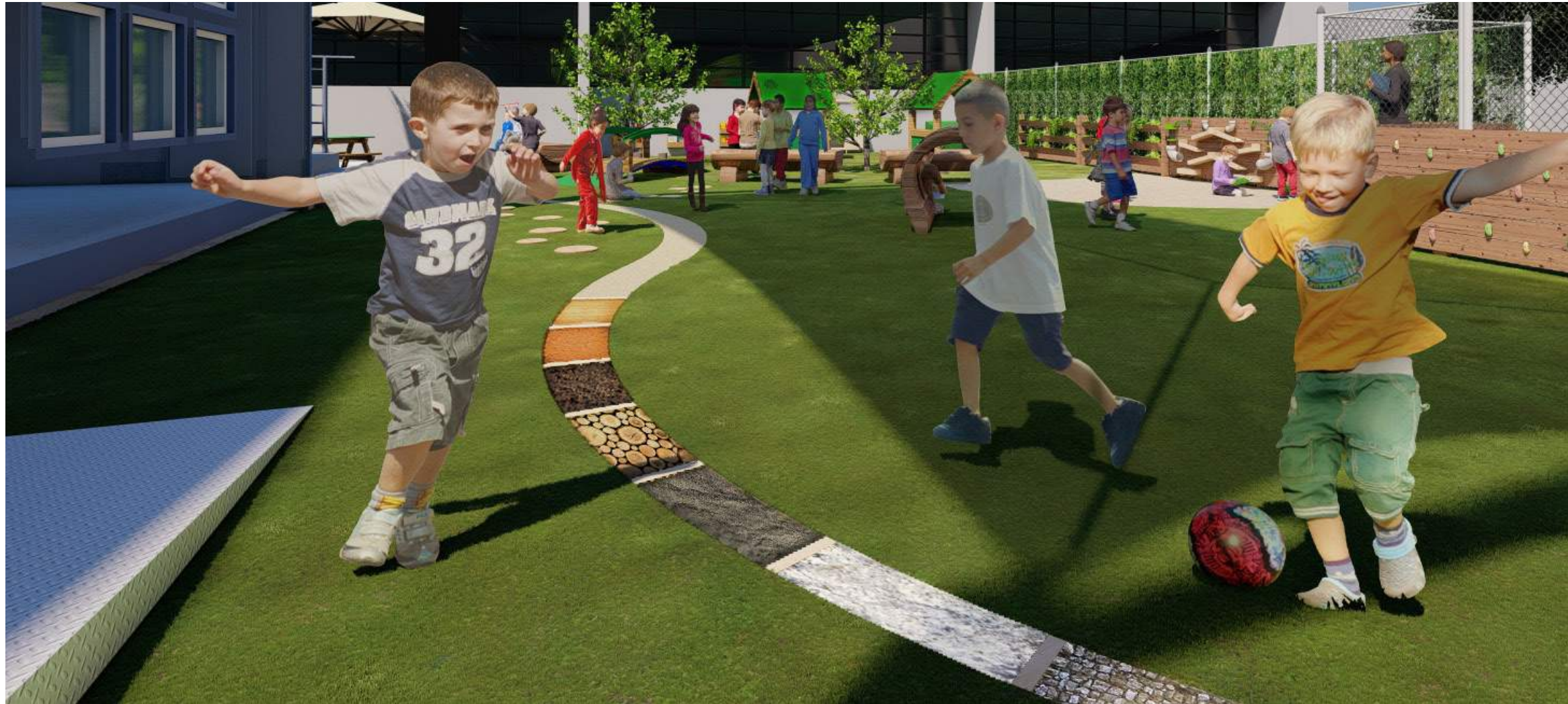
Universal Design Learning

At CCUSD, multiple entry points for broad experiences are available to all students to help them become expert learners. The Play Hub is a Universal Design Learning (UDL) environment that is part of an inclusive approach removing labels regarding students with special sensory needs. It acknowledges that each child has different sensory needs and develops at his or her own pace. When those sensory needs are met, they are better able to learn. The offering of choices to engage the senses begins at the "entry portal" after the children say their goodbyes to their caregivers for the day and begin the school day.



Educational Environment Sensory Path

The sensory path is part of the “river” path that organizes the site into a quiet and a loud side. It is a twelve-foot section with multiple textures for early learners to experience different textures from nature with bare feet. The design team learned from the educators that not only is it important for brain development to use the tactile sense with one’s hands, but also underfoot. At the entry, another section of the path frames different types of stone textures to use for nature-based art such as dry rubbings.



Physical Environment

Empowering Learners

Developing gross motor skills, engaging the senses, and taking risks are mission critical goals for the CCUSD early learning experience. Many learning activities that best serve these goals are not possible in an indoor environment. The Play Hub not only makes these activities possible, it allows indoor activities to take place in nature: in open air, under open sky,, with daylight. Neuroscience research shows that learning in these conditions keeps students engaged, adds novelty, feeds oxygen to the brain, and supports neuromuscular growth. In addition to supporting experiential learning and sensory integration, outdoor learning has the secondary benefit of improving students' indoor behavior.



Physical Environment

Solar Studies

Often playgrounds in public schools lack enough shade for today's climate which is much hotter than it was 10-20 years ago. Sometimes the reason goes back to the fact that adding large shade structures is defined by building code as a space with a number of occupants as if it were an indoor space triggering a need for more exits to meet fire code. Another reason can simply be a lack of funding. The design team did solar studies for the year-round program to come up with the best solution to make the Play Hub thermally comfortable.



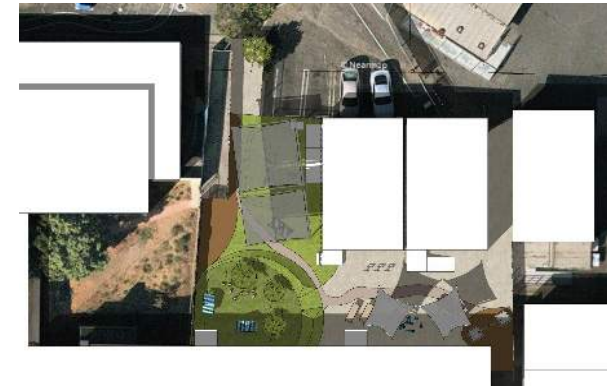
Summer Solstice

9 AM



Winter Solstice

9 AM



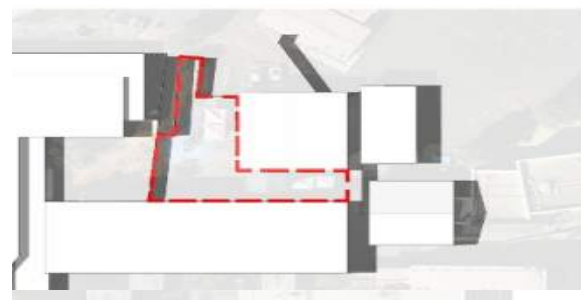
Summer Solstice

12 AM



Winter Solstice

12 AM



Summer Solstice

3 PM



Winter Solstice

3 PM





Physical Environment

Variety for Experiential Learning

By replacing the space and fall zone, a traditional plastic play structure would require with a large shaded Gross Motor Zone with minimal affordances and more loose parts, early learners are presented with a wide variety of choices for student-centered experiential learning. The Play Hub supports singing, dancing, producing art, mud play, puzzle preparing, story reading, puppet manipulating, and game playing, in addition to taking part in vigorous physical activity such as running, jumping, climbing, digging, and building.

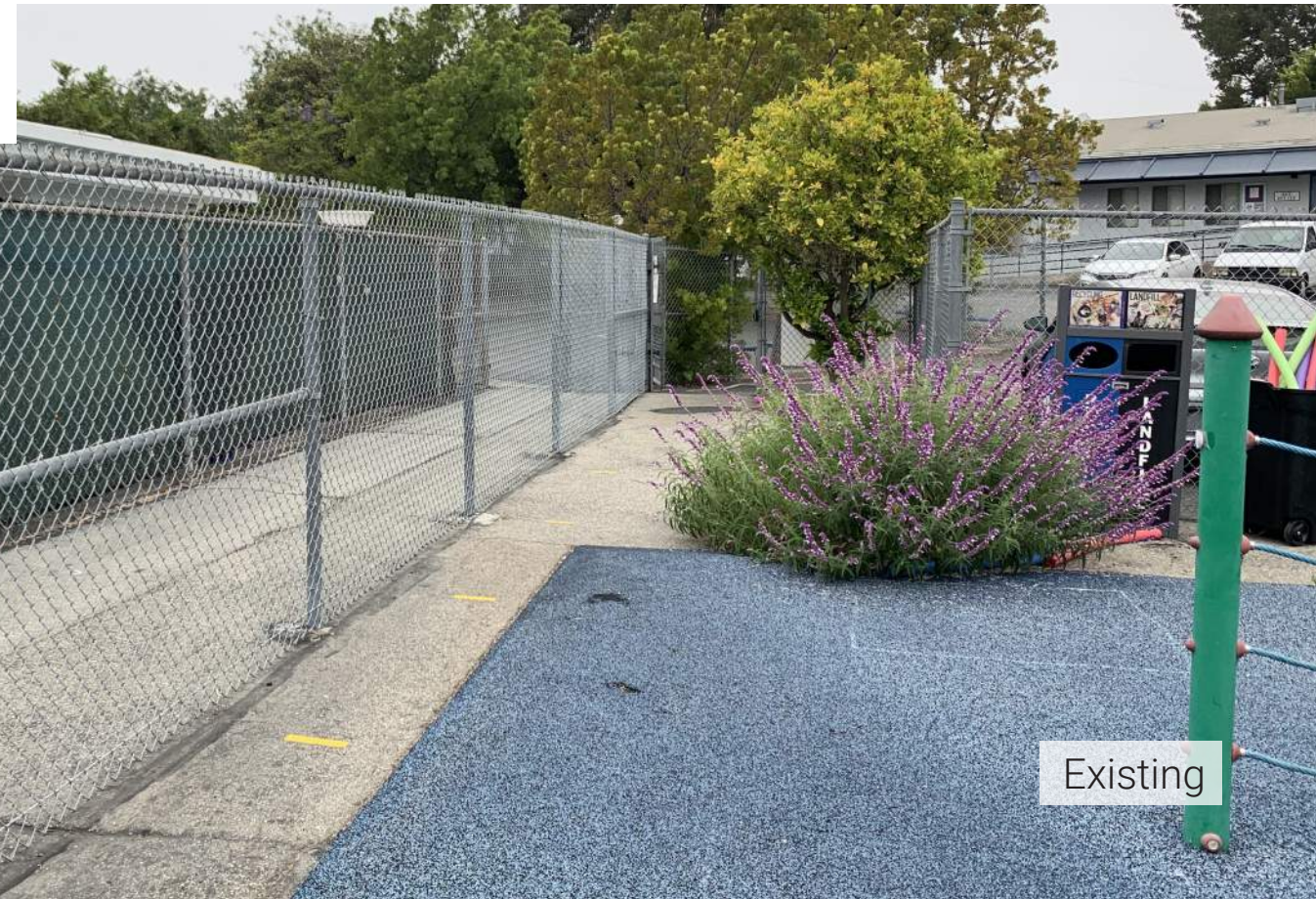


Physical Environment

Non-Institutional and Engaging the Senses

The existing chain link fence is necessary for site security, but it gives the environment an institutional feel. The engagement of the senses is invited along ten freestanding vertical wood fence panes along the west chain link fence, dividing the OCD campus from Farragut Elementary School. Each panel is 3' high x 8' long to minimize labor and material waste. Sensory experiences include:

- Tactile panels to engage by touching different materials.
- Plant pockets for the sense of smell
- Gross motor tracking
- Climbing wall
- Loom for fine gross motor



Existing



Physical Environment

Connecting to Nature and Each Other

The Play Hub supports equity by providing early learners with opportunities to connect with each other in a setting that is much more nature-based and open-ended to inspire creativity than the existing play yard.





Physical Environment

Adapting to the Seasons

The makeshift existing shade structure was a response by the teachers to have space that is thermally comfortable for learning. A permanent large shade structure would make the space too cold in winter and would trigger the need for more exits to meet fire code. The solution was posed by the educators to use retractable umbrellas to use as a teaching moment for early learners. Just as you would set up your umbrella at a beach, the teachers will open and close umbrellas with the students as needed in this zone. Umbrellas smaller than 12'x12' do not require DSA approval.



Existing

Conceptual Design

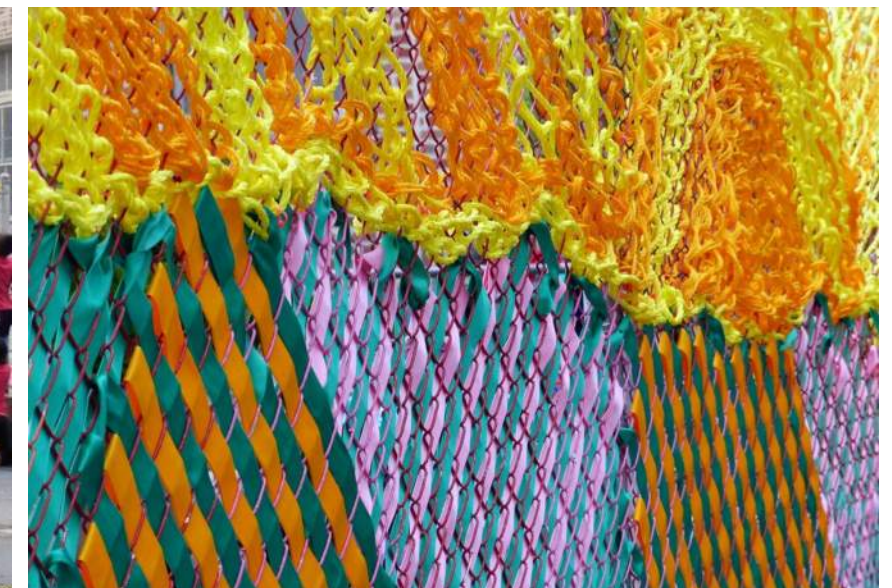


Results of the Process and Project

To finish creating a sense of place, the design team was inspired by a fence rope mural at Citizens of the World Charter School in Los Angeles lead by an architect parent Siobhan Burke of Lyric Design and Planning. The images below show a mural created by the school community to create a vibrant vertical 'welcome mat' for their school.

At CCUSD's Play Hub the first steps of engaging the community have begun with the art teacher working with students in Pre-K-5 asking them to create a work of art in response to the prompt "What do you love most about nature?" The students' work will be synthesized this summer to propose a mural the community of families and volunteers will install in the fall to celebrate the opening of the new Play Hub thanks to the \$250,000 donation by Amazon.

Not only will the Play Hub be great for outdoor learning as well as seeing equity as a topic beyond simply race, affecting students in many ways: it will create a sense of place, it will provide student agency, and will value the importance of art. The hope is this small project that does a lot with a little will inspire other public-school districts to re-think their approach to early childhood play yards and involve educators in the planning process. Post-occupancy evaluations will be conducted using a customized assessment tool measuring success comparing the existing play yard to the new nature-based Play Hub.



CWC: *From Mountains to Sea* is a chain link mural project created for the Citizens of the World Hollywood Elementary School.

An aerial architectural rendering of a school courtyard. The courtyard is divided into several distinct zones. On the left, there is a green lawn area with a wooden deck, a small tree, and a green bench. In the center, there is a paved area with a large, curved, light-colored structure that could be a play structure or a seating area. To the right, there is a paved area with several yellow umbrellas, a blue bench, and a green bench. The courtyard is surrounded by a white building with a flat roof. In the background, a street with a 'Nearmap' logo is visible. The overall scene is bright and sunny, with shadows cast by the buildings and structures.

**The Office of Child Development
Culver City Unified School District**