



Steel columns became learning trees. Green carpet squares and a blue strip resembling a river invite children to explore while subtle colors guide students to classroom entrances adorned with wood acoustic baffles and tactile numbers.



PHOTOS: AJ Brown Imaging unless otherwise noted

Research, Nature and Reinvention

Interior Design Sparks Bright Futures for Early Learners

By Doug Ogurek, LEED AP BD+C

Galesburg Community Unit School District 205's preschool operated out of an elementary school built in the 1960s. The spaces were dated and designed for older students, and the district needed more classrooms. Moreover, the preschool's location near the Illinois district's western edge caused transportation challenges.

In 2021, Galesburg CUSD 205 purchased a community church building near the heart of the district and across the street from its high school. What was once nondescript gathering and storage space has been transformed into a vibrant home away from home for the district's youngest students. Bright Futures Preschool, with its vegetated walls and learning trees, offers developmentally appropriate spaces accessible to all students, including those with special needs. The facility has boosted student performance, staff morale and family

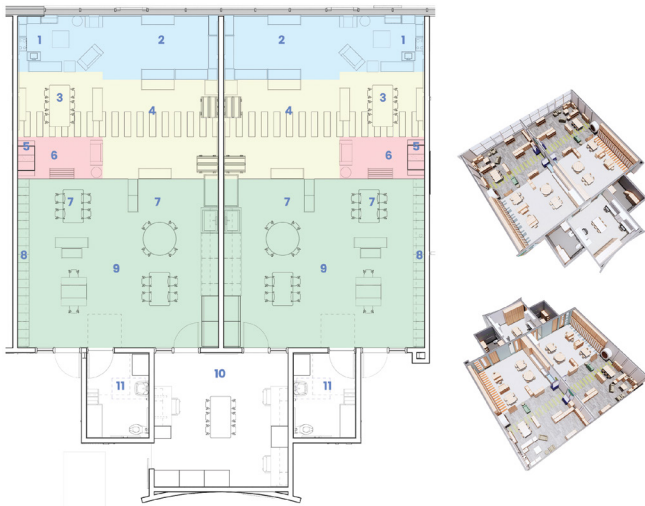


BEFORE

BEFORE PHOTO: Legat Architects



Left: The former church lobby serves as the preschool entry, where a curving wall begins and separates administrative and preschool functions. Right: The circulation area, previously church meeting space, features the curving wall.



LEGEND

LOUD ZONE	INTERMEDIATE ZONE	QUIET ZONE	MESSY ZONE
1 Housekeeping Center 2 Discovery Center 3 Math Center	4 Learning Center 5 Wall Seat 6 Library Center	7 Art/Science Center 8 Cubbies 9 Classroom	10 Integrated Therapy 11 Toilet
	Soft Surface Flooring		Hard Surface Flooring

participation. An adjacent new administrative center creates easier access for community members.

“Bright Futures is more than just a building,” says Jennifer Graves, the school principal. “It’s a promise to our community that we value early learning and are investing in the future of our youngest learners.”

A History of Reinvention

The facility that houses Bright Futures Preschool has had several incarnations during its 55-year existence. It was built in 1970 as a Belscot discount store that sold everything from clothing to housewares. A retrofit converted the store into an educational supplies warehouse, and another overhaul in 2011 ushered in Northwoods Community Church.

Ten years later, the district and Legat Architects transformed leased church space into the current Galesburg Area Vocational Center. After purchasing the facility, the district challenged Legat Architects and construction manager Russell to repurpose the remaining two-thirds of the structure into a preschool and administrative center.

During planning, the design team took Galesburg CUSD 205 representatives on tours of Chicago-area preschools. Legat Architects also created a research book that set the tone for the design of Bright Futures Preschool. The book explores everything from learning preferences and technology to height-appropriate furniture/fixtures and classroom zones. It also includes precedent-setting studies of other early learning environments.

Movable furniture and zones within classrooms allow teachers to easily reconfigure spaces for different activities or group sizes.

Learning at Every Turn

The church interior had no distinctive design elements—much of it was underused warehouse space. The retrofit conceals all evidence of the facility's former function.

“Early on, our research revealed the significant role that nature can play in early childhood development,” says Legat Architects’ Project Designer Bryan Archibald. “We wanted to integrate biophilic elements into the design and create learning opportunities wherever possible.”

The team turned its sights on the concourse, which became a lively retreat filled with references to nature and, thanks to new skylights and energy-efficient windows, natural light. Among the eco-influenced features that students encounter are learning trees, faux vegetated walls and green carpet squares resembling grass. The narrative continues at classroom entries where large numbers, tactile walls and wood canopies point students to their ultimate destination.

One important goal was separating the preschool and administrative areas while maintaining visual connectivity. A curved wall inspired by the shape of a leaf divides the functions. Window serrations along the wall mimic peekaboo for students and enable adults in the administration area to monitor preschool activity.

Color also played a vital role in the design. “We knew from our research that bolder colors can be overstimulating for



The splayed layout enables the distribution of natural light in administrative areas.

younger children and cause a distraction,” explains Monique Taylor, a Legat Architects interior designer. “Therefore, we used a calming color palette to reinforce the nature theme and help students find their way around the space.”



The indoor playground, formerly church worship space, supports year-round physical activity, a vital part of building motor and social skills. Randomly placed acoustic treatments manage noise levels.



Classrooms are one-third larger than the district's previous early-learning classrooms, giving students more places to explore and catering to different cognitive styles.

Classrooms for Every Kind of Learner

Bright Futures Preschool's classrooms were designed to reduce student anxiety and support the whole child (emotional, social, cognitive and physical development).

Research into learning preferences drove classroom layouts and color selection.

Each classroom divides into four zones that cater to

One example of the effective use of color is a blue flooring strip that meanders through the concourse like a river. Graves calls it a "natural guide that helps students navigate the building with confidence." The palette carries into the indoor play area: Pops of color surround the windows, and shades of blue and green enliven randomly arranged acoustic panels.

different student learning styles. The quiet zone, for instance, welcomes the introverted student who needs to break away from the group for reflection. The more boisterous student, however, might prefer the loud zone, where tables and a discovery center encourage group interaction. Each classroom's feature wall, casework and wallpaper colors echo the classroom entry colors.

Judge's Comment

"Well-scaled transformation—warm, bright and welcoming."

— Charles F. Bloszies, FAIA, SE, LEED AP, principal, The Office of Charles F. Bloszies



From Eyesores to Focal Points

One of the biggest hurdles that the designers faced were three unsightly steel columns that needed to stay.


"Not only were the columns unattractive, but we also were challenged in fitting classrooms to work around them," Archibald recalls.

The design dresses up the columns as learning trees, which became focal points and key organizing elements. Bent wood creates the trunk, and metal, acoustic and plywood materials form the leaves. The trees, which appear in the concourse and motor skills room, quickly became a favorite gathering place for students.

Proof in the Performance

Each morning, Bright Futures Preschool students enter their school to be greeted by music, movement and their beloved teachers. Setting the backdrop is a cheerful facility that reinforces their joy and makes learning fun. From the colors that splash across its floors to the abstracted leaves and skylights that bloom above, Bright Futures Preschool springs from an understanding of how early learners thrive.

The district's decision to repurpose a church not only made the project financially possible, but it also exemplifies sustainable practices and centralizes preschool services within the community.

"Since completion of Bright Futures Preschool, we've noticed an increase in student performance and a decrease in behavioral problems," says Galesburg CUSD 205 Superintendent Dr. John Asplund. "Wait lists have grown, and parent involvement has intensified. Beyond that, teachers have shown enthusiasm for working in the bright, open spaces. Consequently, the attractiveness of the facility has bolstered the district's recruitment efforts." 

Retrofit Team

Architect of Record: Legat Architects, www.legat.com

Construction Manager: Russell, www.russellco.com

Structural Engineer: IMEG, www.imegcorp.com

MEP/FP Engineer: RTM Engineering Consultants, www.rtmec.com

Civil Engineer: Hutchison Engineering Inc., www.hutchisoneng.com

Landscape Architect: Greenspace Associates, www.greenspaceassociates.com

Materials

Exterior Turf: Perfect Turf, perfectturf.com

Swellstop: Sika, usa.sika.com

Manufactured Stone: ProVia, www.provia.com

Profile Panels: 3form, www.3-form.com

Spray Foam: Demilec, www.huntsman.com

Roof Board: DensDeck from Georgia-Pacific Building Products, www.buildgp.com/densdeck

EPDM Roof: Elevate, www.holcimelevate.com

Storefront: C.R. Laurence Co. Inc., www.crlaurence.com, and Oldcastle BuildingEnvelope, www.obe.com

Aluminum Windows: Oldcastle BuildingEnvelope, www.obe.com

Skylights: VELUX, commercial.velux.com

Acoustic Ceiling Panels: Armstrong World Industries, www.armstrongceilings.com

Acoustic Ceiling Suspension: Rockfon, www.rockfon.com

Ceramic Tile: Daltile, www.daltile.com

Luxury Vinyl Tile: Armstrong Flooring, www.armstrongflooring.com

Paint: Sherwin-Williams, www.sherwin-williams.com

Toilet Hardware: American Specialties Inc., americanspecialties.com

Window Shades: Draper, www.draperinc.com

Plumbing: Oatey, www.oatey.com; A. O. Smith, www.hotwater.com; Zurn, www.zurn.com; Elkay, www.elkay.com; Kohler, www.kohler.com; and Chicago Faucets, www.chicagofaucets.com

Air Terminal Units, Air-handling Units, Fan Coil and Unit Heaters: Trane, www.trane.com

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