



**“There are three teachers
of children: adults, other
children, and their physical
environment.”**

– Loris Malaguzzi

**The environment is
The Third Teacher.**

Everyone can be a designer

Look to many sources for design inspiration. Teachers and students, as well as architects and designers, have ideas about their ideal learning environment.



The Third Teacher

Do no harm

Adopt this as an oath and a fundamental approach to children's learning environments.



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Cherish children's spaces

It's a natural impulse to nurture our young – let that impulse extend to the places where young people learn.

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Put safety before study

Children are ready to learn only when they're safe and secure, so address those needs before considering any other aspect of a child's environment.



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Think small

When identifying hazards in the learning environment, remember that children are more physically vulnerable than adults.



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Assign the solution

Make health and safety a classroom project and develop lesson plans that will produce real improvements to the learning environment.

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Make janitors guardians

School custodians and caretakers play a vital role in protecting student health. Respect that role by providing cleaning staff with the best available training, technology, and supplies.

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Design for speech and hearing

Acoustics isn't just for concert halls: Using sound-absorbent materials in classrooms is a simple and effective way to ensure that teachers can focus on teaching, not repeating.

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Let the sunshine in

And the gray skies too: Increasing daylight in classrooms has been shown to cut down on absenteeism and improve test scores.

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Shuffle the deck

Change up the locations of regular activities so children can explore new surroundings with their bodies and their minds.



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Make it new

Look at your learning space with 21st-century eyes: Does it work for what we know about learning today, or just for what we knew about learning in the past?

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Support great teachers

Free teachers from the traditional desk at the front of the classroom and encourage new settings for teaching and learning.

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Build neural networks

Spark cognitive development by providing students of all ages with places to test new skills.

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Multiply intelligences

Allow students time and space to choose what they want to do—their choices will illuminate their individual strengths.

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Display learning

Posting student work, both current and past, up on the walls tracks progress in a visible way.



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Emulate museums

An environment rich in evocative objects – whether it's a classroom or a museum – triggers active learning by letting students pick what to engage with.

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Form follows function

It seems obvious but is often forgotten: Teaching and learning should shape the building, not vice versa.

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Unite the disciplines

Art and science need each other. Discoveries – great and small – happen when the two come together; so give students places for cross-disciplinary work, and who knows what creative genius will flourish.

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Bring the outside in

Transport the community, the landscape, and faraway places into the classroom with visuals and objects that call them to mind.



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Make peace with fidgeting

Think of it as brain development, which it is. Then think of how to make room for it in the classroom.



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Decide on dynamic

When classroom chairs wear out, invest in new ones that absorb rather than restrict the movements of growing bodies.

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Swivel to attention

Give students furniture that lets them twist and lean safely.
The movement will increase their ability to concentrate.



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Make classrooms agile

A learning space that can be reconfigured on a dime will engage different kinds of learners and teachers.

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Respect fitness facilities

Make them attractive and visible to reinforce the connection between physical activity and overall well-being.



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Take the “ground” out of “playground”

Who said playgrounds had to be at ground level? Locate play space anywhere and everywhere, from rooftop terraces to indoor atriums.

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Promote healthy play

Consider playgrounds a free place for children to burn calories as well as build motor skills.



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Naturalize play spaces

Kids don't need much to engage their imaginations. Allowing grass and leafy plants to flourish in play spaces will provide endless opportunities for play and discovery.

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Scale the wall

Climbing builds kids' motor skills and self-confidence, so don't be afraid to install walls and structures they can clamber up.

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Free choice

Life is full of choices. Prepare kids by giving them a say at school.



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Build close to home

All children have a right to a school in their own neighborhood.



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Let your grassroots show

To rally support for a new school, establish a visible presence for the campaign in your community.



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Build for change

School buildings can be tools for social change, and history's the proof. Take courage and inspiration from what's been done before.



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Move in together

Building a new school is an opportunity to make friends with other community services, such as libraries and recreational facilities, and perhaps even make a new home together on a single campus.

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Imagine like a child

Visualize a proposed school from a student's perspective – the poignancy of that point of view may help transform a proposal into a built project.

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Consult widely and early

Those heading up the planning process for a new school will get off on the right foot by inviting every potential user and stakeholder into the process right from the start.

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Roll up your sleeves

A new school will be realized faster if parents pitch in to make it happen.



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Blaze the way

School can start at a student's front door, if the commute is designed as well as the building. Walking paths and bicycle trails connect a school with the homes it serves.



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Make them proud

The rich cultural traditions of a school's students offer design opportunities. Embracing them is a mark of respect that tells students that where they come from matters as much as where they're going to.

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Be a good neighbor

A great school gives its neighbors a park to hang out in, a goal to aspire to, a building to be proud of, and a standard to maintain.



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Build a nest

Children need comfort just as much at school as they do at home. Give them a soft, quiet, and cozy area to play in by themselves or with a few friends.



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Leapfrog LEED

Think of today's top rating for environmental school design as tomorrow's last-place rating, and design to be better than the current best practices.

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Reveal how stuff works

Making school infrastructure literally transparent, to display the flows of water and waste, teaches kids the workings of the real world.

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Get eco-educated

Before embarking on a program to green a school, learn about what counts the most and what works the best.



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Highlight the site

Every school is located in a particular place with its own unique geological features and natural history. Call attention to a school's site with design, construction, and signage.



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Attract like minds

A sustainable school building is a billboard for a school's values and philosophy – it broadcasts the message to compatible parents, students, and staff.



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Let students lead

Hands-on experience is a powerful teacher. Encourage students who want to convert their school to sustainable practices, and let them go for it.



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Rally the results

Increasingly, the metrics are out there on the financial benefits of going green. Use the numbers to make the case for an energy efficient school.



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Do your homework

Many families are trying to shift to more sustainable habits. Aligning the school's goals with those of the families it serves creates a wide community of support for a sustainable school.

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The background of the left half of the image features two large, stylized grey silhouettes of a child and an adult. The child is on the left, and the adult is on the right, both facing right. The child's silhouette is smaller and more rounded, while the adult's is taller and more angular.

Get out of the city

Creating places where children can be immersed in the natural world for days or weeks affords learning opportunities that can't be replicated in the concrete jungle.

The right half of the image has a solid green background. Overlaid on this are several large, black, wavy, organic shapes that resemble stylized letters or abstract forms. The text 'The Third Teacher' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font across these shapes.

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Slow the pace

Alcoves and furniture in hallways discourage high-speed traffic and create places of pause.



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Make caterers caretakers

Consider the people who prepare school meals, and the places where those meals are prepared and served, critical to children's well-being – and hire and design accordingly.

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Spend now, save later

Equipping school kitchens and making wholesome lunches can be costly, but the lifelong health impacts of a poor childhood diet are even more expensive.

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Grow your own

Growing and preparing fruit and vegetables on school grounds educates children's senses of taste, touch, and smell.



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Think hands-on

Children of all ages need places where they can learn by touching, manipulating, and making things with their hands.



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Trigger the senses

Sound, smell, taste, touch, and movement power memory. An environment rich in sensory experiences helps students retain and retrieve what they learn.

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Design in multiple dimensions

Evaluate ideas, features, and materials for the learning environment on their sensitivity to color, light, and texture.



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Paint by function

Determine what each space in a school is used for, then specify a paint color that supports the mood of the space.



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Define the learning landscape

A child's world expands as he develops. Keep pace by providing environmental experiences that are developmentally appropriate.

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Slip off your shoes

Creating a learning space that's safe and comfortable to navigate in socked or slippared feet offers an opportunity to use a physical act the taking off of shoes as mental preparation for learning.

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Open the doors

Give students places to exhibit their work as if it were in a public gallery, then invite the public to come and have a look.



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Adopt a young mentor

Allow someone younger than you to become your advisor on hopes and dreams, and let those aspirations become inspirations for learning environments.

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Put the fun in fundamentals

Injecting a learning space with playfulness and humor
creates a warm and welcoming atmosphere.



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Design with words

What you say influences what you think and what you do. Use the term universal design, rather than accessible design, as a reminder of what it's all about: creating an environment for all learners.

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Recruit difference

The brightest way to arrive at inventive solutions for a pluralistic learning environment is to build diversity into the design team.



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Get accessibility aware

There's more to accessibility than meets the eye. Making a learning environment truly inclusive means designing from multiple developmental perspectives.



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Break down social barriers

The process, as well as the outcome, of building an accessible playground can bridge all sorts of community divides.

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Make it feel good

Schools that are engaging, vibrant, great places to be foster a sense of belonging that's important for all kids, especially those at risk.



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Take it to the top

Politicians can create a climate of support for new schools that are accessible to all learners. Lobby them to think about Gross Intellectual Product as well as Gross National Product.

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Domesticate classrooms

Equipping learning spaces with domestic features such as kitchens, pantries, and cupboards can help make a school feel like a home.

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Create a movement

Engage in meaningful conversations about changing the education landscape. Parents, teachers, students, principals, community members, and politicians are all important and powerful stakeholders in this movement.

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Consult with kids

Survey students about what they would like to study, then design spaces that let them learn what they want to learn.



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Put theory into practice

Give students space – studios, workshops, and laboratories
– where they can test ideas for practical applications.

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Expand virtually

Make sure a classroom has the capacity to link into learning opportunities beyond its four walls even beyond the Earth itself.

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Embrace purpose

Install technology that can simulate real-world situations – given the chance to solve authentic problems, kids will rise to the challenge.



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Plan for the unknown

New technology brings with it new teaching opportunities – design a learning environment that will allow teachers to modify their methods and expectations as technology changes.

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Unleash learning

Electronic learning aids aren't fancy window dressing: They offer teachers and students new and diverse ways to engage with subjects and ideas.



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Bridge the digital divide

One tested way to get all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, up to speed technologically is to give them laptops and a place to be unplugged yet connected.

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Dream big and be brave

The rate of technological advancement is increasing exponentially. When designing schools, don't let today's reality limit tomorrow's possibilities.

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Add to this list

The ideas in this book are ingredients, to be combined in varying quantities as suits conditions and tastes. The list is by no means finite. Add to it, adapt ideas, grow new ones, and transform the world.

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