

Schools in a Flat World

Global Perspectives on Pedagogy and the Built Environment

By Steve Crane

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In September 2009, the American Institute of Architecture's Committee on Architecture for Education (CAE) had their annual fall conference in Helsinki, Finland. Finland was a beautiful place to gather. Cool, crisp air, a stunning natural setting, great architecture and a city that offers a blend of new and old. It was very inspiring, and that's what the conference was all about, inspiration. Finland has long been a major presence in international architecture circles. From Alvaar Alto to today's new generation of creative Finnish designers, excellence in architectural creativity has its roots in this part of the world. School design continues to be a major part of this history of unique problem solving.

We were in Helsinki because several international studies, including the OECD Program for International Student Assessment, had rated Finland among the world's best in student achievement. It is argued that Finland's exemplary performance is largely due to the country's main principles for comprehensive education: equal opportunity; regional accessibility

of education; education totally free of charge; a supportive and flexible administration; individual support for the student learning and welfare; development-oriented evaluation and student assessments – no testing or ranking lists; highly qual-

ified teachers; and quality learning environments. This stands in sharp contrast to much of the educational system in the United States where students are for the most part being educated for the 21st century in 20th century industrial-model. Further,



Courtyard learning space at the Hosmarinpuisto School and Day Care Centre in Espoo, Finland



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our schools run on a 19th century agrarian calendar schedule.

As the world becomes flatter it is imperative that we look at the best models for learning environments wherever they may be. The conference focused on two main ideas: 1) a chance to experience, first-hand, current trends in school design that have an influence worldwide and 2) what attendees could take away from the conference that would help them improve their own practice.

The annual fall conference explored, in detail, the roots of Finnish educational design. New and innovative designs influencing today's learning facilities everywhere were showcased. The conference included informative programs and great tours - in fact, the three day conference was a continuous tour, with each program taking place at a different school or learning environment.

Because learning occurs in a wide variety of spaces beyond the typical school house, the conference included higher ed facilities and

public learning facilities such as the new **Karisma Museum** by *Steven Holl*, the new campus library at the University of Helsinki and other unique learning environments. Supporting the theme "global perspectives," presentations from countries around the world complemented the projects in Helsinki.

All seven continents were represented to help illustrate the notion that learning in a flat world has always generated, and continues to generate, the same daily issues, concerns, constraints, and lifelong learning opportunities. Whether it's a one room school in Kenya, a community-built school house in Laos, a constantly evolving structure on the frozen tundra of the North Pole or a comprehensive high school for 2400 students and a community center for a city of 140,000 in America. School facilities worldwide are creating lifelong learners who become productive citizens within their communities.

The keynote speaker was *Yong Zhao, Ph.D.* He is a University

Distinguished Professor in the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education at the Michigan State University College of Education. Dr. Zhao is the Founding Director of the Center for Teaching and Technology, as well as the Director of the US-China Center for Research



Members of the AIA CAE gather for a presentation in the dining room of the Aurinkolahti Comprehensive School in Helsinki, Finland



Helsinki Lutheran Cathedral, (Tuomiokirkko), Finland

on Educational Excellence. In addition, Dr. Zhao is an Associate Director of the International Network for Educational Transformation, a U.K. based organization that promotes global exchanges of educational innovations. The first session was held in the **Karisma Museum** designed by *Steven Holl*. The presentation focused on the future of educational teaching and the ways the physical facility plays a role.

Session 2 was at the well known **Russutorppa School**. Here the group heard from *Riita Lampola* and *Kaisa Nuikkinen, arkkiteitit SAFA*. The topic of discussion at this session was "The Finnish School System" and "Visions of the Helsinki City School Bidding Program." The *Helsinki City Education Department* develops school buildings which strive to function more effectively and to anticipate the demands of the future. Their school buildings are designed to be economically viable and to provide the highest quality of architecture. As part of the "Quality School Program", the City of Helsinki has constructed over 40 new school buildings from 1994 to 2005.

Session 3 was a continuation of the Helsinki School System. This

session was at the internationally known **Hösmärinpuisto School**. Here the group heard from *Dr. Ulrike Altenmüller, Dr.-Ing (designata)*. She focused on the influence of the built environment on human well-being and performance. Various studies examined contemporary school buildings in Finland and analyzed the spatial, functional and design concepts of these build-



Uspenski Russian Orthodox Cathedral, Helsinki, Finland

ings. A variety of parameters that have significantly influenced the learning environment presented.

For session 4, the group was invited to the **British Ambassador to Finland's residence**. Here *D. Valerie Caton, Ty Goddard, and David Carter* presented "United Kingdom, Building Schools for the Future Programme". Design versus learning, actual case studies, and numerous presentations regarding prototype design were presented.

At the **Sandals School** the group heard from *Sarah Woodhead, AIA, Sr. Project Manager / CDM International, Inc., and David Young, Young Architects Ltd.*

Sarah is leading CDM's program to build 28 new schools and rehabilitate up to 100 schools throughout the Kingdom of Jordan. Sarah has had a leadership role in the design and construction of schools, serving at various times as advocate, architect, state regulator, and public program manager. She presented high quality design work and construction programs that are both visionary and responsive to community needs, including school design and construction, design standards for science facilities, sustainable design and program management. In

her role as Chief of Party in Amman, Jordan, Sarah is able to combine a dedication to exemplary school design with a long standing interest in Middle Eastern language, culture, history, and architecture.

David Young is a principal of Young Architects (Pty) Ltd in Botswana, South Africa. His career began with the Ministry of Works in South Africa and in 1979 moved to employment in Botswana. While David has worked on a variety of projects in Botswana, the focus of his practice has been educational projects. David has also developed skills in working with free and open-source web software.

A combined Tour of four different school facilities provided a break in the presentations. The **Arabia School**, **Pukinmäki School**, **Hiidenkivi School** and the **Metsola School** are four very distinctive and different examples of the Helsinki school system. The architect of each school gave a brief overview prior to the tours.

At the **Aurinkolahti School** *Rodolfo Almeida*, architect, provided a presentation on Latin American School Facilities. Project locations included Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and the Caribbean. Annalise Gehling, with Fielding/Nair International, gave us insight into new design paradigms in Australia. New and exciting concepts in collaborative learning were presented.

The **Teacher Training School** at the University of Helsinki provided the venue for *Greg Hasiuk*, Number TEN Architects, Canada, to present a case study of a new school in the Northwest Territories, just miles from the North Pole. His presentation focused on specific community cultures and how they affect design and influence learning.

Daniel Schwitter, SKAT, presented a variety of projects that improved community involvement and increased educational opportunities that including design, planning, and construction of public works projects for health, educational, and sports facilities in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Cameroon, Cuba, India, Kyrgystan, Laos, Philippines, South Africa, and Switzerland. Over the past 25 years, he has designed and managed large-scale health and school building projects, as well as housing projects in Asia and Africa. His presentation also focused on projects throughout Laos.

At the final session *Kevin King*, AIA, LEED, presented a master planned college campus for 100,000 students. Additionally, a collaborative effort with *Professor Aija Stafans*, D. Sc., Architect, *Dr. Axel Haberer*, and *Dr. Dieter Breithecker* provided insight into how furniture and ergonomics affect learning. The **InnoSchool** project was the focus of this presentation. The goal of **InnoSchool** is to develop the Future



Korona Information School Atrium

School Concept: a set of research-based good practices, processes, models and designs, as well as recommendations for the successful combination of these elements in the Future School.

This final session was held at the **Korona Information Center** library. A tour of this latest library learning center offered a first-hand look at the thought, insight, conceptual planning, and future idea's regarding tomorrow's educational facilities and how they will advance learning. ■

Steve Crane
VCBO

Steve Crane, FAIA, has provided professional architectural design and planning services on a wide variety of projects for nearly four decades. A founding partner with VCBO Architecture, Steve leads the firm's work on educational and library architecture, for which he and VCBO have earned national, regional and local honors. Nearly half of the firm's work is pre-school to higher education projects, both public and private, totaling over \$150 million per year. Steve strives to create schools that are versatile, contain multiple-use spaces, and facilitate the changing ways that subjects are taught over time. Recognized as an authority on the effects of the Built Environment on learning, he was asked by the White House to represent the AIA on CNN live and has been quoted in Newsweek magazine.



Aurinkolahti Comprehensive School