Design Ideas for Taking Learning Outside

There is much that we do not yet know about the impacts to learning spaces as an outcome of our current moment. But what we do know is that indoor environments with poor ventilation place occupants at increased risk now and for the duration of this pandemic, and, as a result, that new modes of online instruction and e-learning are serving as a safe venue for students and faculty alike. We also know that taking socially-distanced activities outdoors may provide the benefit of a lower risk environment. At SOM, we question if there are ways to adapt insular learning environments to be more permeable to the outdoors for the benefit of students and faculty. How might we deploy new strategies at a variety of scales that result in exterior learning settings which are surrounded by nature (in lieu of 4 walls)?

A Permeable & Porous Vertical Campus

Scale: Building Massing
Urban campuses working with small footprints might consider more open and porous access to the outdoors – be it through operable windows or accessible terraces and green roofs. Pictured: Barnard College - The Milstein Center (SOM)

Open Campus Network

Scale: In-Between Buildings
Campuses that rely on partnerships might consider how a network of outdoor spaces can draw people to collaborate beyond the walls of a building – leveraging the spaces between buildings and landscape to serve as outdoor classrooms, meeting areas, and areas for wellness and recreation. Pictured: Cornell Tech Campus (SOM/JCFO)

Extending the Program Outdoors

Scale: Campus
Campuses in rural settings might consider leveraging the natural environment for learning opportunities – be it through working landscapes, experimental gardens, field research or data gathering in ecological settings. Pictured: Wellesley College Science Center (SOM)

Lifting Barriers to the Exterior

Scale: Building Facade
Campuses in warmer climates might consider operable facades to bring in the outdoors, and support natural ventilation while encouraging learning activities outside (de-densifying the indoors). This kind of flexibility on campus might be supported by operable garage doors, foldable partitioning, and open pavilions. Pictured: UC Merced Campus (SOM)