Key Points:

• Design is a key contributor to a sense of place and community vitality and should also be implemented to educational environments..

• Features of teaching/learning environments include: flexibility, acoustics, technology, lighting, and comfort.

Timothy A. Casai, FAIA is President of TMP Architecture, Inc. of Bloomfield Hills with a branch office in Portage. He has over 40 years of professional architectural experience. In 2011, Tim was honored with the AIA Michigan Chapter Gold Medal Award, and in 1999 he was recognized as a Fellow in the AIA.

Why Design Matters...to Education!

Tim Casai, FAIA, President, TMP Architecture, Inc.

As Dennis King, FAIA articulated in the January issue, design is a key contributor to a sense of place and community vitality. The strength of design excellence is evident in building spaces, places, and experiences that not only enrich the community, but also help to build the community. When we stop and analyze the factors that make our communities successful and desirable, the impact of design is at the top of that list. The effect of design excellence on education is similarly meaningful.

As information access and knowledge creation have accelerated and become more sophisticated in the 21st century, so too has the need to provide new learning environments that facilitate knowledge gathering and inquiry in ways not previously possible. Classrooms have remained relatively static for more than 100 years, but are now evolving into learning studios and collaborative laboratories that rely on design and critical elements that provide new learning experiences. Just as the stage is a platform for creative presentation in the arts, the classroom/studio has become a platform for creative sharing and access to information and ideas.

Through the creative design process, space is shaped and invigorated in order to facilitate multiple learning styles and teaching platforms. Project-based learning is facilitated through the creation of maker space with hands-on opportunities, and active learning grows along with group problem solving through the creation of collaborative space. Presentation space has evolved through technology to become a center for shared content and group interaction. Informal space is designed to foster socialization, interaction, and social learning while providing an atmosphere of welcome and comfort.

While learning studios sound very different from the classrooms of the 20th century and seem difficult to create, there are five key elements that all creatively-designed teaching/learning environments share. These necessary ingredients give students access to learning in multiple styles and methods. Some have walls, some do not. Some are more traditional, some are not. All, however, share these features:

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1. Flexibility. Furniture and fixtures that are easily moveable, comfortable, and provide a variety of individual and grouping options are essential to learning studio design.

2. Acoustics. Space that allows learners to hear each other clearly and to cleanly process presented content, whether from an instructor or through technology, is an essential key to understanding that content.

3. Technology. The importance of seamless access to – and sharing content of – information and ideas through digital tools cannot be understated. Multiple output opportunities allow for critical thought, analysis, and collaboration.

4. Lighting. Creative design solutions should allow access to and control of natural light with generous use of windows, sun shades and other devices. Natural sunlight combined with a thoroughly developed artificial lighting system should allow learners to see both analog and digital material clearly.

5. Comfort. A heating and cooling solution that not only provides personal comfort, but does not affect hearing and flexibility is a cornerstone of today's learning environment. "Too hot" or "too cold" compromises the ability to focus and to process information. In addition, finishes and furniture that support acoustic and visual acuity contribute to learning comfort.

The challenges of creating new learning environments and the renovation of last century's classrooms depend on design to facilitate critical thinking and creative solutions. Our learning communities are as critical to our shared future as our living communities are, and therefore design matters… to education!