

Urban Wildwoods: Teen Area

Shambhala School (Halifax, NS)

Background

Shambhala School is a unique not-for-profit, 26-year-old independent school, with 150 students from pre-school through to grade 12. Close relationships between students and teachers enhance learning, promote a sense of belonging, and provide strong mentorship. To ensure cultural and socioeconomic diversity, the school intentionally offer bursaries to 40% of students, including full scholarships for African-Canadian and Indigenous students. With a strong emphasis on developing emotional resiliency through mindfulness, outdoor education, group conflict resolution, and the arts, the school attracts a diverse population including teens experiencing anxiety and depression who have difficulty in the public education system.



Promising Practice

The staff at Shambhala School recognize that spending time in nature during childhood and teenage years has a lifelong positive influence on various aspects of development, such as self-esteem, creativity, independence, and problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, the school's playground has been cordoned off for over a year, due to the fact that

the amount of lead found in the soil did not meet safety guidelines. The lead amounts are attributed to the [1917 Halifax Explosion](#), leaked gasoline, and paint residues from building maintenance since the 1920s.

School staff plan to reclaim the school's playground, and provide a new Urban Wildwoods that contributes to the health and well-being of the school and the greater community. This area will offer a unique place to play, rejuvenate, socialize, and learn, in an atmosphere of nature and beauty, and it will be a place of refuge and engagement in an inner-city setting for all to enjoy.

In the pre-design process, high school students asked for a quiet hang-out area within a natural environment, in addition to opportunities for active play. Students highlighted the sense of calm they feel in natural environments, the need for quiet reflection and small group conversation, and the opportunity to hold listening circles outside. Since their outdoor space has been reduced to one patch of concrete, this age group has been extremely hesitant to spending time outside. This is why the first segment of the Urban Wildwoods

project is to build a hang-out space for the high school students, featuring a round outdoor seating area for school and community talking circles in a natural environment. The project will benefit many community members. These community members include, the entire school community, the surrounding North End community (many low-income families who can use the space after school hours), and students at the public school across the street.

Impact

Interacting with nature promotes overall health and well-being, and this landscape and play area will offer informal environmental education and exposure to nature, improving overall mental health. Not only does regularly spending time outdoors help improve health, but it develops bio-affinity, an appreciation of nature, and ultimately, caring more for the environment. The school believes that providing such a space in an urban environment will positively impact each person that utilizes the space. The hope is that by engaging students in planning and designing the new space, it will inspire them to develop an affinity for helping others in their community, while also getting the opportunity to work together towards achieving a shared goal. The school plans to measure the behavioural and social changes of students as a result of their time utilizing the space, by conducting qualitative assessments of the effects of the new outdoor space on their overall sense of well-being, ability to learn, and social connectedness.

Sustainability

Regular maintenance and upkeep of the space will be completed by school staff and volunteers. All materials will be natural, sustainably produced or recycled and made of durable material. The staff will work hard to protect two 100-year-old elm trees on the property, and the students will plant trees for future generations to enjoy. By involving local architects, trades people, and artists, this project will support local businesses. By partnering with other organizations and sharing the space with the greater community, the school hopes all community members share a sense of pride for the space and support with keeping the space clean and updated.

Modifications

Here are suggestions to modify this approach for different learning environments.

- For inner-city schools that do not have access to greenspace, consider creating a space within your school that is filled with plants, small trees, and natural light, so students can use this space to feel more connected to nature
- If an outdoor learning space at the school is not possible, take students to a local nature trail or forest and have them support with finding an area for a temporary outdoor classroom
- Encourage inter-generational sharing of the space by inviting seniors and have elementary students to read to the seniors

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