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 [The Great Learning Street Debate](#)

Fresh Perspectives (February 2005)

[Prakash Nair](#)

As we move into a new era of school planning and design, expect to see the phrase “Learning Street” pop up often. A cynical way of looking at the learning street is that it is a modified double-loaded corridor dressed up in today’s jargon. One can postulate that since the word “learning” seems to make almost anything in the modern school more palatable, a “learning street” is probably more acceptable to those who review school designs than a double-loaded corridor would be. But is that all there is to a learning street or does this new element of today’s school truly represent a different way to learn?



A space that contains many of the positive attributes of a successful learning street.

[Educational-Cultural Community Center P. Iglesias](#)

Alcobendas, Spain: BN ASOCIADOS SA

To answer the question, it is important to look at the multiple modalities of learning that today’s schools must nurture. I have identified the following 18, but I’m sure there are more.

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14. Naturalist learning
15. Social/emotional learning
16. Art-based learning
17. Storytelling (floor seating)
18. Team teaching



This school has all the qualities of a good social learning space.

[Peel Education and TAFE Campus](#)

Mandurah, Western Australia: Spowers Architects

Armed with the above list, we can walk around a school and see how many of these modalities any given space might accommodate. The list is also useful in planning a new school or renovating an existing school. This list goes to the heart of learning and so is unlikely to change anytime soon. This means that the learning modalities list is a more reliable way to plan a school than a system that tries to accommodate a particular curriculum.

What has all this got to do with the learning street? Well, if you consider that a good school design will accommodate as many of the above learning modalities as possible, it becomes evident that we need to start replacing some of the traditional single-purpose spaces with those that can serve multiple uses. That is why classrooms are giving way to learning studios (see [The L-Shaped Classroom](#) by Peter Lippman) and why it makes sense for corridors to give way to student commons areas and learning streets.

What is a learning street? Believe it or not, nobody has actually tried to answer this question before.

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That explains why it is becoming an increasingly misused term. I'll take a crack at it, but only because I have seen some successful learning streets and know the conditions they need to work. Several are offered in this article by way of illustration. Here are some qualities of a learning street:

Social Artery: A good learning street is primarily a social artery of the school. It is a place for informal meetings, spontaneous conversation, and unhurried movement.

Nooks & Crannies: A learning street must have stuff happening on either side to make it worth stopping along the way. A quintessential learning street is the suburban shopping mall. Though it serves to link anchor stores at either end, it does not hurry the patrons from end to the other but gives them ample opportunities and incentives to meander along the way. Nooks and crannies can be simple niches for seating or they can be actual activities along the way like a small café or compatible school activities like performance spaces, the school store, the media center, a broadcast studio, an art room, a sculpture exhibit, places for small group learning, technology corners, reading nooks with window seats and so on.



Above left: an effective Learning Street: [Millennium High School](#)

New York City

Architect: HLW International

Planner: Fielding Nair International

Photo: Richard Cadan

Above right: a traditional high school corridor.

Ample Daylight: The ambience of the learning street is critical to its success. A dark, foreboding street is not as likely to serve its learning mission as well as a bright, cheerful, daylit street. Ideally, the learning street should have outside visibility but if this is not possible, daylight should be introduced via clear-story windows or atrium-type glass roofs.

Spacious: This is one of the most important aspects of a learning street. It needs to be wide enough not to read like a corridor and tall enough not to feel closed in. But how wide is wide enough? To answer this question, let us look at a learning street at a hypothetical high school in which several themed academies open into a common learning street. Under this scenario, the learning street would probably be used to access the various areas in the school that are shared by the academies like the media center, gymnasium, the central administrative areas, and, if the food

is served from a central kitchen, the cafeterias. It is easy enough to figure out how many students will be utilizing the learning street at various times of the day. The idea is to divide the total area of the learning street, by the number of students who will be occupying it at any given time. If that number is less than the number needed for a person to be in comfortable motion (some would say this is a minimum of 10 — 15 SF/person,) then it is likely to be too crowded and cease to function like a learning street but rather as a typical high school corridor — in other words, a place with lots of pushing and shoving going on. In general, one might also say that any learning street that is less than 20' wide is likely to function more like a corridor than a social space.

It is hard to talk about learning streets and not get into a discussion of cost. How can we justify such large areas when school construction budgets are already skyrocketing out of control? To answer that question, one needs to get to the issue of value.

In the school building world, you will find the oft-repeated phrase — “net-to-gross” ratio. In fact, it is probably the school construction bureaucrat’s favorite word. After all, it is one of their few real “measures” of success. If one is able to keep the net-to-gross down, then one must have designed a really efficient school. Right? Perhaps. And by that I mean the measure is not infallible.

The problem actually is not the use of net-to-gross, but what is included in the calculation of “net” and what is included in the “gross.” For example, all circulation space is automatically included in the gross area. No wonder that architects are almost compelled to build the tiniest double loaded corridors they can get away with because that is the “bad” space — the stuff they get penalized for. To do an “efficient” building, the argument goes, one increases the “net” or “program” areas of the building and decreases the “gross” or “utilitarian” (some might say wasted) parts of the building like corridors, toilets and mechanical rooms. Utilizing these measures, a building that utilizes only about 40% of its gross building area for non-program uses is considered “efficient.” But think about that a bit differently. We are saying that a building that uses only 60% of its total gross area to advance its primary mission of learning is efficient!

Well, here is another take on the net-to-gross, and it goes to the heart of the above discussion of learning streets. What if a learning street were considered “program space?” I don’t offer this suggestion lightly. Look once again at the 18 learning modalities that the 21st century school must accommodate. Think about how many of these modalities can take place in the learning street. In other words, if learning were the true measure of a school building’s success, it is hard to argue with not attributing one of the school’s primary learning centers the position it deserves as a program space. It has been a sad commentary that any space that does not look like a “classroom” has been seen as having no educational value. But that can change. By giving learning streets, student commons areas and other such informal nooks and crannies their rightful place as important learning elements of a school building, one can actually improve the net-to-gross ratio and even reduce the overall size of the school building because students can now use areas for learning that were previously set aside only for utilitarian purposes.



South Jordan, Utah serves as the school's central learning street. Note how the street widens at locations with increased traffic and also how it is punctuated with daylight.

Architect: MHTN Architects.

Planner: [Fielding Nair International](#)

In the end, the debate on the learning street is actually a small part of a larger debate about what a 21st century school should look like. However, if a school has successfully created a learning street that works, it is a good bet that its design probably offers other clues about how to create an effective learning environment conducive to the demands of a 21st century education.

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