

MORE ABOUT BEAUTY IN THE CLASSROOM

by John Heaton

One of the central claims of classical education is its insistence upon beauty in the curriculum, on the campus and in the classroom. This claim, however, runs counter to our culture. Our consultants at Independent School Management (ISM) have conducted research on parents, who, when searching for a school for their children ranked the things that were most important to them. Topping the list, not surprisingly, was safety. A close second was caring and competent teachers, and third, a proven curriculum. These top three were far and away on the minds of more than 80% of the respondents.

The research dug deeper and went further. When queried about the appearance of the campus, only 16% of respondents indicated that it mattered – less than one in five! We don't want to be too critical. It's entirely possible that a survey of this sort naturally "harvests" top of mind issues that should characterize good schools. A safe, loving environment buoyed by a serious curriculum must rank pretty high. I think the survey suggests that this what most parent think of when they look for a "good school." Few are thinking that beauty matters; in fact, most have not thought about it all. Most school campuses and even churches in our experience have value-engineered beauty right out of the picture, leaving us with functional boxes that we quickly ignore.

We actually don't ignore them. Once we build something, it works on us; it continues to shape us. If we conduct our business in an environment we cannot control, such as rented space, a church basement, etc., we suppress it, ignore it, and tell ourselves it doesn't matter. If we are blessed to create spaces with intentionality, however, we design them in harmony with nature, with color, and light, so as to promote a pleasing classroom aesthetic. Here are few things we have pursued in the development of our campus:

Consistency – From the parking lot to the playground, from the Principal's office to the classroom, we have tried to develop a continuous look and feel. We actively suppress clutter in the administrative wing, and we seriously discourage it in our classrooms.

Less is more – Speaking of clutter, contrary to what many teachers do, we believe that some empty wall space is good. It's okay for students to see the paint. We don't cover every available square inch with visual stimulation. Rather, the look and feel of the classroom, while age appropriate, should have a natural flow that facilitates its purpose. That means that we absolutely prohibit kitsch. Children like bright colors, yes, but classrooms at New Covenant are not dominated by cartoonish "art," scalloped borders and garish posters.

Outside-Inside – Using lots of glass has allowed us to enjoy natural light in places where we want students to feel relaxed. The library and the hallways were specifically designed to flood common spaces with light, suggesting

that illumination of the mind is congruent with the illumination of a room.

Gardens and Commons – Another feature of our campus is the incorporation of courtyards and patios. The central courtyard is completely enclosed and landscaped. While it is outside, the enclosure ensures that ambient noise of the city is eliminated, make the space useable for quiet conversation, outdoor classes and social gatherings such as the poetry recital. The faculty also have a enclosed garden and patio suitable for lunch or breaks. With the Epic Hallways and classrooms coming online, we will soon be landscaping the area behind the bell tower to create yet another spacious student commons.

Dedicated spaces – It's not always possible, but to the extent that we can, we have created dedicated spaces that are used for specific purposes. The library and the chapel are good examples of designs calculated to have particular effects on those who enter. The space dictates the activity that takes place. When we enter the field house we can yell and cheer. When we enter the chapel, we make a different "joyful noise."

Real art – Finally, we are attempting to help students interact with real art. We are slowly collecting original artwork from local artists and friends of the school (see What's New?) to display appropriately. Several pieces already hang in our hallways, along with student works from time to time. All of these things work together to elevate beauty in education, and to raise our awareness of its critical value in the education of children.