

# FLEXspace:

## An Education Design Resource and Community

Go beyond the drawing board to deliver modern learning environments

As architects and designers, it's imperative to stay abreast of trends and outside-the-box thinking in designing learning environments. To address current and future needs in serving the education sector, FLEXspace.org (The Flexible Learning Environment eXchange), led by a community of experts focused on campus planning, learning technology, instructional design, teaching and research, offers a one-stop resource dedicated to improving and advancing learning spaces from K-12, higher education, and beyond.

To learn more about FLEXspace and the benefits and opportunities it provides for architects, designers and others dedicated to creating effective, innovative learning spaces, *Learning By Design* spoke with its Core Team Member Rebecca V. Frazee, EdD, Learning Design & Technology Program faculty at San Diego State University;

and Michelle E. Carpenter, director of education and government at Shaw Contract and a FLEXspace partner.

### What are the roots of the FLEXspace initiative and how has it grown into the vibrant resource it is today?

**Dr. Rebecca Frazee:** FLEXspace began as an internal resource in the State University of New York (SUNY) system to communicate and gather data on the effectiveness of its learning spaces across 64 campuses. Soon, others partnered with SUNY, including the California State University system, and founding industry partner Herman Miller, then FLEXspace grew from there. Today, it continues to be a free resource for the academic community, with nearly 4,000 members from 1,200 institutions, across 62 countries.

**Michelle Carpenter:** FLEXspace is a resource created by educators for

educators. Shaw Contract was an early industry partner because we recognized the need in the learning landscape for this comprehensive resource that invites designers, architects, and facility planners to explore the physical learning environments, space research, and data that contribute to successful learning environments.

### What areas in learning design are often overlooked when creating spaces for education?

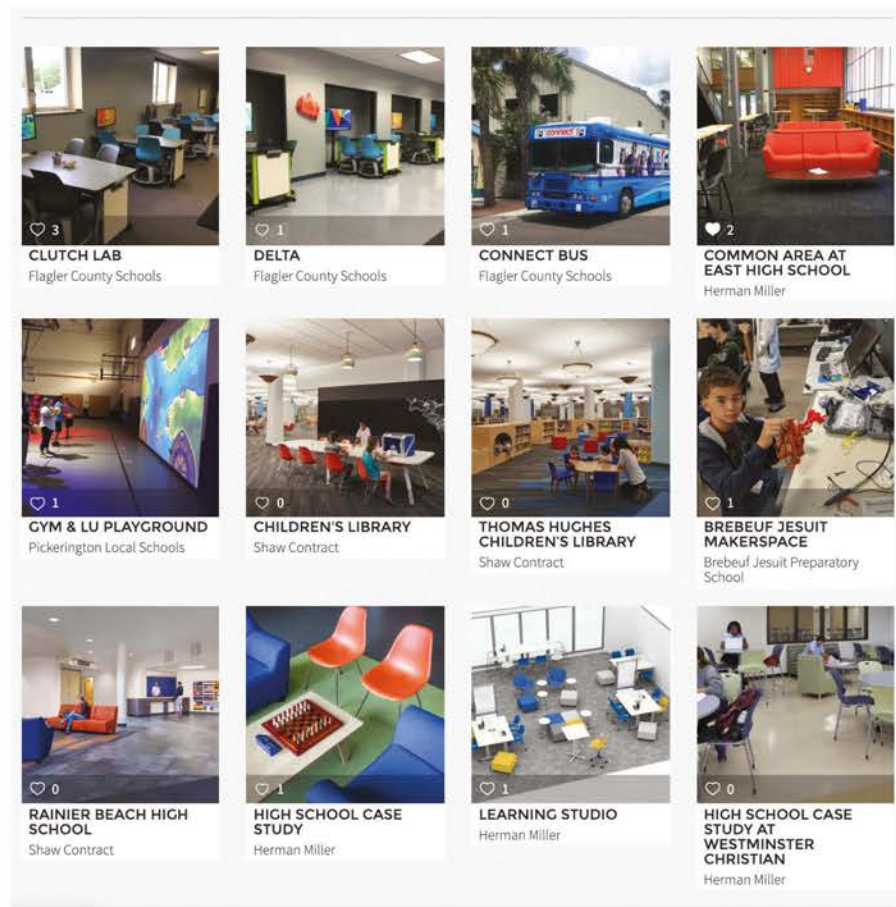
**Dr. Frazee:** Having the research, data, and rationale to support a design is crucial. Users who contribute examples to the FLEXspace collection share details and stories that provide insight into what works—and what doesn't—after spaces are in use. This information is important in deciding how to improve or re-create the space for optimal benefits.

**Carpenter:** In learning environments, we often overlook how the space impacts the users, or simply how the students and teachers use the space on a daily basis. These voices are often given cursory consideration during the design process, and also after the design has been implemented. FLEXspace helps us be more deliberate about capturing and sharing these voices to truly understand the impact a space has, or doesn't have, on its users.

### How does FLEXspace bridge the information gap?

**Dr. Frazee:** There are many ways for FLEXspace users to gain insight. First, FLEXspace allows you to search and browse hundreds of completed projects from around the world. Through this 'virtual field trip' you can create a collection of ideas, stay current with best practices, 'listen' to stories from the field, and share with stakeholders. Schools and higher ed campuses can use FLEXspace as a place to document a running history of their learning environments over time. How has the space evolved from original design? How has it changed through various iterations? Through post-occupancy data, what emergent needs were not met?

**Carpenter:** The detailed metadata in FLEXspace helps communicate these finer points so others can build upon the





successes of previous projects and stay away from the things that didn't quite work. This information sharing helps us truly move the needle for learning space design. In a landscape that is slow to change, this evolving collection of examples and lessons learned is invaluable in starting to build a design where others have left off.

### How does FLEXspace move from the holistic plan of a design beyond imagery and into storytelling?

**Dr. Frazee:** When users upload a learning environments example, in addition to photos, they also share details of the layout, facilities specifications, seating capacity, furniture, technology, and how the space is being used for learning. They also tell the story behind that project—the design rationale and different configurations of the space, for example. Comments and suggestions from other project collaborators can be added to give a complete 'project profile' beyond the photographs and specs. This is a great way to gather a variety of perspectives not only from designers and facilities planners, but also from those who use the space on a daily basis.

**Carpenter:** I agree. When working to design a physical environment, it's hard to see the invisible parts of the space you are designing, such as the technology or how the room configurations support and encourage desired behaviors. By understanding the background, as well as the intended and actual use of the space, concepts can be refined to further advance the design of learning environments.

### What is the importance of the organization's global connectivity?

**Dr. Frazee:** When this venture began, the spotlight was on American education, but as FLEXspace evolved we received a lot of global enthusiasm and began talking with people from Canada, Japan, France, the Netherlands, Australia, Ireland, and other nations. And now that we have more international representation on our advisory team and research working group, we are seeing more and more examples contributed from campuses around the world, giving designers the opportunity to see what works and doesn't work in other countries.

**Carpenter:** The global connectivity that FLEXspace supports is breaking down barriers for experiencing learning

environments beyond one's city, state, and native country. Being able to 'visit' any of the learning environments in the collection, and reach out to the campus owners of those environments, is a powerful connectivity tool that hasn't previously existed at this level of detail or scale.

### What is on the horizon for FLEXspace?

**Dr. Frazee:** We are continuing to improve the portal and grow the collection and community. And 2019 is the year we want to further tap into the architectural/design community to learn what they are interested in and how they would prefer access to FLEXspace.

While a lot of research is available to members, the FLEXspace Core Team has access to even more data. Our advisory team and research group is comprised of thought leaders and experienced practitioners in higher ed, K-12, and industry. Now we are eager to collaborate with architects and designers to share research and insights, then publish findings to the FLEXspace community and the public.

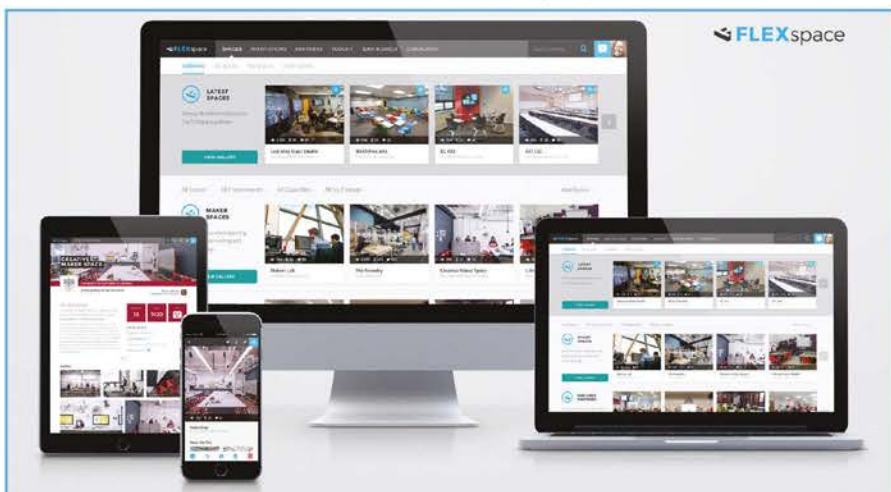
**Carpenter:** As FLEXspace grows in membership and partnerships, the collection and accessibility will

continue to become more robust, further supporting the needs of planners and designers in learning space design now, and well into the future.

### Any final thoughts?

**Dr. Frazee:** FLEXspace is a premier platform that connects you with a large community and as well as rich examples, research and data to support planning and design at a project's outset and throughout the effort. We are excited about the redesigned mobile friendly FLEXspace interface, and the new collaborative features that allow you to easily create personal project collections and share them with the FLEXspace community, clients, and others in your firm. You can use FLEXspace to collaborate with your team, investigate new opportunities, discuss options, and ask questions of users and other designers.

**Carpenter:** Funding learning space refreshes can be costly, in both time and dollars. Designers need to do their homework to make well-informed, sustainable decisions. The FLEXspace collection and community of designers and educators will be imperative to sharing projects and experiences to continue to build learning environments that support and grow with changing learning expectations.



## Join the FLEXspace Community

Anyone can visit [FLEXspace.org](http://FLEXspace.org) and request an account. A Core Team member will personally reach out to architects and designers to provide a demonstration and discuss membership benefits and options.

Whether you're a seasoned professional or just starting out, FLEXspace provides insight, research, data, and project stories that can help improve the way your designs meet educational needs and goals.

To see what FLEXspace has to offer, visit [www.flexspace.org](http://www.flexspace.org) or contact the team at [info@flexspace.org](mailto:info@flexspace.org).

*We look forward to hearing from you!*