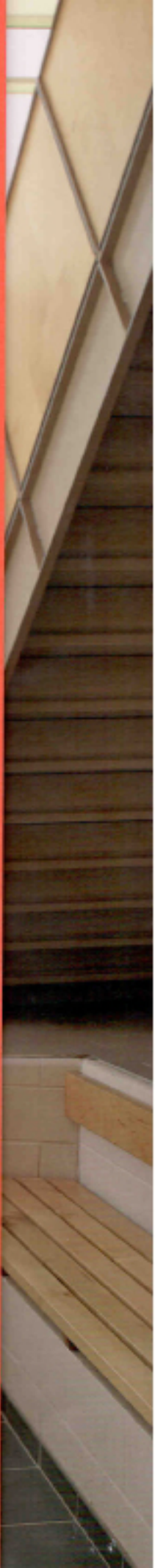


Catapult Schools

Designing Schools for Student Success

K-12





Bortolotto

Inspiring Calm and Emotional Well-Being

Bortolotto

533 College Street
Suite 401
Toronto, Ontario
M5G 1A8 Canada

K-12 Partner Contact:

Tania Bortolotto
416-324-9661 ext 21
tania@bortolotto.com

Notable K-12 Projects:

1. Northlea Public School
2. Willow Park Junior Public School
3. Oakridge Junior Public School

Learn More:

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Bortolotto understands the student experience from kindergarten to post-secondary. Founded in 1999, by Tania Bortolotto, the firm prides itself on providing design solutions that enhance happiness, health and productivity. In the last three years, the firm has implemented over 20 FDK programs for the Toronto District and Toronto Catholic District School Boards, as well as projects for the University of Toronto, York University, OCAD and Humber Institute.

THROUGH OUR EXPERIENCE working with and listening to the issues educators face, we understand that having calm, focused, and happy students and unstressed, positive teachers gives everyone the best chance at success. Students and teachers face all kinds of daily challenges. It's very difficult for an anxious, stressed-out child to focus on learning, much less achieve.

Educators prioritize academic success, but they also understand that this can only happen when they first ensure a child's emotional well-being, that kids and staff need to feel good and be calm and emotionally strong to be ready to learn. We believe that this can be achieved, in part, by shaping a school environment that reduces stress and helps people feel settled and happy to be there.

There is a term—biophilia—which means love of life or living systems. The premise is that we are instinctively drawn to and respond positively to natural elements. Our design thinking also focuses on connecting the school experience (and therefore the building) to nature. We start by considering the natural elements of the site, such as the location itself, the source of wind or direction of the sun. If you're walking through the park or hiking through the woods it creates a positive emotional state. That's the feeling we want to establish for children in schools and we do that by asking how we can connect that child to the outdoors, to the natural world.

There's a great quote by renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright, "study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you." We don't want small, windowless classrooms. We want daylight, natural ventilation, calm acoustics, a sense of space, long views to the sky, trees, or a park instead of building concrete block boxes and extensive asphalt areas. We consider this to be a key objective for schools to connect their students' experiences to the natural world while they're at school. It will instill a sense of well-being and open them to their learning.

At Northlea Public, Toronto DSB, we built an addition to a school for JK/SK classes. This was an infill project where we added three classrooms into a courtyard space on the second floor. The big challenge was how to bring natural light into the existing classrooms. We used skylights immediately above the wall so the interior classroom has unimpeded light. We also introduced natural elements and made them visually dominant. The warm wood doors pop in this white and bright room, and wood veneer is a good example of introducing warmth within a tight budget.

We tried to minimize stressful distractions by reducing clutter and by keeping things simple, light, and bright to provide a harmonious feel throughout. The use of just two colours calms the senses and calls attention to the front of the class where much activity takes place.



RIGHT: The skylight along with the window allows for an abundance of light to penetrate into the classroom; looking up students can see sky and treetops.



“The most interesting aspect about a school design project is the opportunity to put oneself in the mindset of a young person, to understand how she or he feels, plays, works, and interacts.”

— Tania Borolotto, Borolotto

Willow Park Junior Public School was all about how students and their families, teachers and even other community-members, feel when they approach the school. The school was not a very uplifting place to arrive at. It had tired, worn, dark brick and narrow windows. When we considered the addition we wanted to transform how people feel as they approach the school. The emphasis is now on showing that students and staff are respected and valued by giving them a wonderful space to work and learn.

Architectural details emphasize large recessed windows that offer a vista into the classrooms, highlighting the activities within. These windows are larger than the standard so there's tremendous opportunity to see in,



ABOVE: Window framing of composite panels allows for the special detailing and interest while maintaining the budget and constructability.

LEFT: Before the renovation, Willow Park Junior Public School.




and, of course, for those inside to see out so that there are immediate connections and context. This extra consideration was not a part of the design brief, and we certainly didn't go over budget, but being thoughtful in our design thinking we wanted to respect how people felt approaching the school and correct elements that we believed were negatively impacting kids.

From a student's perspective I think it's good for them to know what they are heading to and what they are about to do. Their approach informs them of something special. The frame of the window is almost a picture or snapshot of what they can expect, in a very beautiful way, and that brings joy, happiness, and calmness.

Despite a tight budget, a typical brick wall was bypassed to do something special. By emphasizing the windows we framed the activity in the classroom for the community. Even though this was an addition, we felt obliged to make sure that aspects of the older parts of the school balanced the new.

Parents feel like this school is an important place, that the Board cares about their children and in doing so respects parents and the community. Most schools are barricades from the community and what we're trying to do is be transparent, to be open to the community, to start a dialogue with the community. We want passersby to feel that something amazing is happening.

With my own children in school, I've learned firsthand how much thought parents give to choosing a school for their kids, and what factors they consider. Working with and listening to teachers has also given me a strong grasp of the nuances and challenges of their work. I welcome every chance to design spaces that help people feel better and therefore do better. 



Tania Bortolotto is the Founder and President of Bortolotto and is a professional architect and interior designer, registered in Ontario.