

Matter Design  
www.matterdesignstudio.com  
contact: Brandon Clifford  
brandon@matterdesignstudio.com  
617.710.6349

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## **MOVING THE CLASSROOM OUTDOORS** **A Play-Lab Designed for Adolescent Education**

RADNOR, PENNSYLVANIA—As schools prepare for the return of students, questions remain about how to balance effective education within the confines of pre-pandemic classrooms. A recent report from [Harvard's Chan School of Public Health](#) is calling for maximizing physical distancing through known procedures, as well as taking the classroom outdoors. Early childhood education already includes imaginative play in the form of recess, but middle and upper level students are rarely educated outside. This is not only a pandemic related issue, but a pervasive assumption that children age out of play in adolescence.

*We know play is an essential component for educating children of all ages. When students (and adults) engage in play, they unleash creativity and problem solving; experience wonder and joy; and develop teamwork and persistence. In this moment, it is crucial that we continue to have a dedicated focus on play and reimagine education to leverage the potentials of learning outdoors.*

— Melissa Bilash, The Grayson School

A team of collaborators are looking to disrupt the ageist play model with an experimental play-lab to encourage the next generation of creative thinkers. As leaders in innovative educational practices for gifted students, The Grayson School challenged Matter Design to provide a play space for their upper grade students and teachers that would ignite an age-appropriate version of imaginative learning. In partnership with CEMEX Global R&D, Matter Design created an otherworldly collection of curious concrete characters situated in a landscape. These colossal creatures are unlike other play-structures. The recognizable colors, textures, and materials of common play-structures have grown up, prioritizing maturity over padding for a false sense of safety. These monstrous elements are unrecognizable as interactive play objects, instead they serve as scaffolds to fuel the imagination of the project-based learning curriculum at The Grayson School.

*In considering how to cultivate play for upper level students, we felt strongly that the students should have agency over the particularities of their experience and experiments. For this reason, we followed a design principle to take every element to 90 percent completion, to stop short of providing a finite solution, in favor of a robust structure that could accommodate the student's own fabrications.*

— Johanna Lobdell, Matter Design

"It is an exciting challenge for us at CEMEX to think about how the material properties of our concrete technologies can directly contribute to play and education, but also how play can challenge us to think differently about material itself."

— Davide Zampini, CEMEX Global R&D

Since the mid-century experiments in brutalist playgrounds, concrete has been systematically hidden; coated in foam, plastic, or rubber. The play industry has understandably foregrounded safety, but this is for early childhood. In considering how to engage young adults with play, the team decided to embrace a material pallet that more appropriately reflected their age. There is a contrast between the permanence, structural integrity, and eternal aspirations of concrete with the nimble and rapid construction of rope and timber. The concrete elements are peppered with a series of anchors to tie off rope, or accept dimensional lumber. They are engineered to accept the maximum load the students can throw at them, while also flexible enough to allow the students and teachers to fabricate their own extensions — to take measurements, conduct physics experiments, anchor a game, or confirm a trigonometry equation. Matter Design sculpted the elements with cryptic details that entice curiosity. These details are practical as much as they are cryptic, with alignments to themselves as well as the cosmos. These alignments are developed in concert with the curriculum of the school. Over the course of their education, students are challenged to discover the meaning behind these design decisions, to calculate their coordinates, and understand the logics of how high-design can influence their whimsical but rigorous education.

To spark agency for the students, a family of wooden instruments, called 'glyphs', serve as a starter kit to bring the play-lab to life. Reminiscent of a type-set, each is unique, but share properties with their neighbors. These colorful tools have dimensions and forms that suggest a usefulness without overtly prescribing singular functions. This blending of utilitarian and ceremonial pressures is crafted to inspire a state of world-building. As a system, the glyphs are designed to be expanded as the students develop their own language.

*As the students fabricate their own instruments, we will be interested to learn whether they abandon, adapt, or transform the language we instantiated.*

— Johanna Lobdell, Matter Design

The concept for this play-lab is to create a space that provides a foundation to encourage the development of a world that need not rely on deterministic outcomes. The more time spent with the play-lab leads to a deeper understanding; which in turn, opens up greater discoveries for the students and teachers to unpack. The goal of this work is not only to impact the education of the students at The Grayson School, but to offer a possible re-imagination of how we integrate play into adolescent education.

*By designing this play-lab to address the under-represented category of adolescent play, we had to overcome the association that the term ‘play’ has with early childhood—one dedicated to physical activities such as swings, slides, or monkey bars. Adolescents deploy their imagination differently; through intellectual challenges, rigorous experiments, and world-building. This served as an incredibly rewarding design challenge for us, to craft an infrastructure for young adults to play.*

— Brandon Clifford, Matter Design

<http://www.matterdesignstudio.com/grayson-playlab>

### **About MATTER DESIGN**

Matter Design is a research lab and design studio that leverages alternative ways of thinking to reconsider the future of the built environment. Producing work that is uniquely playful and rigorous, the team collaborates with industrial partners, experts, and foundations to effect change at a global scale through the lens of design. The studio is recognized as an influential design practice with awards such as MoMA Young Architects Program finalists, the Architectural League Prize for Young Architects + Designers, the Design Biennial Boston award, AZ awards, AIA Small Projects Award, BSA Honor Award, a Rome Prize, a TED Fellowship, and others.

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### **About THE GRAYSON SCHOOL**

The Grayson School is an innovative, research-based learning institution that is guided by best practices in the field of gifted education, and the only “all gifted, all day” school of its kind within a 125-mile radius. Tailored for intensely curious and intellectually fearless students from Pre-K through grade 12, the school also offers summer and enrichment classes open to the community. The Grayson School provides gifted students with a setting where they can learn at a pace consistent with their abilities, collaborate with like-minded peers, and explore their

unlimited potential, all while growing and thriving socially and emotionally.

<https://thegraysonschool.org>

### **About CEMEX Global R&D**

CEMEX Global R&D is the company's hub for innovation in concrete, cement, aggregates, and admixtures technology. An underlying driver of the group's achievements is human capital, which comprises a multidisciplinary team consisting of research scientists, engineers, architects, anthropologists, business professionals, commercialization and operations experts. Based in Switzerland, the Global R&D team places a strong emphasis on applied research activities for the construction sector that are driven by the needs and dreams of customers. It is the group's conviction that innovations are borne by engaging key stakeholders in a collaborative co-creation process, in which novel perspectives, materiality, and design are contemplated. CEMEX Global R&D has the leading role for developing and managing CEMEX's Research and Development (R&D) initiatives, and to own and deploy the resulting Intellectual Property (IP) portfolio across CEMEX's business units and functions worldwide.

<http://www.cemex.com>

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