

# HIDDEN TREASURE

## A Traditional Courtyard at Tenacre School, Wellesley, Mass

The Tenacre School, a private and highly personal "country day" school for children in kindergarten through 8th grade, embraces traditional values and education in a pastoral setting in Wellesley, Massachusetts. The grounds consist of rolling green playing fields and sprawling meadows, framed by scenic woodlands and historic fieldstone walls. The surrounding community personifies typical New England architecture with white clapboard homes set gracefully in a village-like setting.

The school grounds include a cluster of buildings, some older, converted clapboard houses, some newer buildings, a glassed-in corridor which leads to a combination gymnasium and dining hall, and a collection of playing fields. The parking areas are carefully nestled into the remaining open spaces between the buildings and fields.

Our challenge was to develop a landscaped courtyard that would bridge the distinctly different design of the old and new buildings that abutted all sides of the open space. We needed to manage access to the courtyard through major doorways at opposite ends of the yard. And, complicated architectural shapes needed to be integrated into the view from large windows lining two interior corridors that adjoined the courtyard.



The final design would also need to support heavy foot traffic from one side of the school to the other and allow sufficient space to serve the needs of numerous school activities in an area that was only 75' long by 35' wide.

The development process began with a series of meetings with the school's design committee to develop preliminary concepts for the courtyard. Early on, members of the committee agreed with our approach that called for the new space to combine the whimsy of childhood with the comforting feeling of a traditional New England country day school.



An "S" curved ramp is bordered by a black iron railing. The pathway joins the upper courtyard to the reading circle.

Given this design theme, the next step was to brainstorm how to accommodate a place for intimate, outdoor classrooms, while creating a lovely porch for the headmaster to conduct various fundraising events. We conceived of partially hidden areas for seasonal sculpture shows, a space to host holiday gatherings, and a reading circle where teachers and children could interact.

The reading circle is paved in bluestone and defined by a fieldstone seatwall.



River Birches underplanted with myrtle provide a softening green edge behind the seat walls.



To address a significant grade differential from door areas at opposite ends of the courtyard, we decided to create a curving, yet gracious pathway that would allow for a large number of children to scurry from one class to another. We also wanted to make sure there were good views into the garden from all of the surrounding windows and corridors.

To further enhance the space, we decided to install specialty lighting for evening access and brighten long winter days with a bit of sparkle, while adding shadow patterns throughout the year. And finally, we all agreed that adding wooden benches to the courtyard would invite visitors to sit and read or simply relax in the late afternoon sun.

In developing a school courtyard, we were especially considerate of the materials used given that safety and durability are tantamount where children are concerned. We focused on using strong, native New England materials: cedar benches, bluestone walks and steps, and random fieldstone walls. The plantings we selected were chosen from species that grow easily in the immediate area to enhance their prospect for survival, while minimizing the required maintenance, a key factor in the summer when fewer people would be available to care for them.

Our plant materials included: clusters of Whitespire Birch, Paperbark Maple and evergreens set along the pathway and accented with a Japanese Maple as a focal point opposite the main porch. We used pink Azaleas to surround the courtyard that

will bloom at the same time as a carpet of myrtle and spring bulbs. Our plans include working with the school children to plant annuals and perennials to add early summer color.

A key factor in the success of this project was the design committee assembled by the school. It consisted of teachers, parents, administrative personnel, architects and landscape architects. Every member made a solid contribution to the process and eventual success of the project. This kind of involvement went a long way towards making this project a success.

What's more, by allowing each committee person to have direct input, where their thoughts and ideas could be heard and in many cases applied, it created a real sense of "ownership" among everyone involved. It also fostered a true sense of pride and accomplishment that over the long-term will benefit the children and their learning experience.

TO NEW  
MAIN  
ENTRY

HEADMASTER'S  
PORCH

CURVED  
PATHWAY

UPPER  
PATIO

CLASS-  
ROOMS

READING  
CIRCLE

LOWER  
LANDING

GLASS  
CORRIDOR  
TO GYM

CENTRAL COURTYARD • TENACRE SCHOOL • WELLESLEY, MASSACHUSETTS

