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ENC campus architects earn national award for sustainable design excellence

The American Institute of Architect's Committee on the Environment (COTE) honored the Environmental Nature Center's architectural firm, LPA, with a national COTE Top Ten award, the industry's best-known sustainable design award, for the design of the Environmental Nature Center and ENC Nature Pre-School.

The American Institute of Architects also awarded the two projects with the COTE Top Ten Plus designation, which recognizes projects that have already demonstrated "exemplary performance and generated post-occupancy lessons." The Environmental Nature Center (ENC) was the only one of the 10 projects honored to receive the Plus designation.

The annual COTE awards program, established in 1997, recognizes 10 innovative projects from around the world each year for "integration of design excellence with environmental performance." Projects are evaluated on 10 distinct parameters, ranging from energy strategies and water conservation to resiliency and wellness.

"Working with LPA gave us a unique opportunity to design facilities that mirror our sensibilities on sustainability and energy efficiency," said ENC Executive Director Bo Glover. "The LPA designed buildings on the ENC campus are model green buildings, and we are enthusiastic about sharing our model with administrators from a multitude of educational institutions – from preschools to universities. We are passionate about empowering people to make sustainable choices: to strengthen their communities, and literally save the world."



Click on photo for a larger image

Courtesy of ENC

ENC Nature Pre-School is a model green building

The Environmental Nature Center and ENC Nature Pre-School, which opened last fall, have also both been awarded Platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. The ENC's learning facility that opened in 2008 was the first LEED Platinum building in Orange County. The award is the highest designation available to buildings that demonstrate energy efficiency and sustainability.

The pre-school is also pursuing the Living Building Challenge's Petal Certification, one of the first projects in the region to target both a high-level of sustainability and the healthv environment standard. Both buildings operate at net-zero energy, meaning the total amount of energy used on an annual basis is equal to the amount of renewable energy created on site.

Energy efficiency and water conservation are incorporated into every element of the facility. The butterfly-shaped roof opens the classrooms to natural light and supports a 32KW array of photovoltaic panels, which are designed to provide 105 percent of the net energy for the preschool's electrical needs. Natural ventilation, low-energy ceiling fans and a radiant floor heating system eliminate the need for traditional HVAC systems. Rainwater is treated as an educational tool, with water channeled through rock basins and bioswales, and naturally treated by plant materials.

"LPA was able to work with educators, the community and ENC leaders to develop the idea of learning through nature in a facility that reflects the organization's mission," said LPA Design Director Rick D'Amato. "The preschool seamlessly blends indoor and outdoor learning environments to connect children to nature. The nature play and education areas expand on the sustainability focus of the original nature center."

The ENC Nature Preschool's philosophy is embedded within its design. Curriculum is play-based. The design of the school encourages and nurtures the children's inquiries and discoveries. Children's ideas and investigations are easily implemented because their classrooms are open and flexible to allow indoor spaces to blend with the outdoors. Classrooms open to a central courtyard, which connects to the Nature Playscape. Daily hands-on experiences with nature instill a deep intuitive understanding of nature and the natural world.

"Engagement with nature and with others is where real learning occurs," said ENC Nature Preschool Director Sue Bierlich. "Our teachers are really there to guide the learning that the children initiate themselves based on what they discover in the environment. The blending of the school's indoor and outdoor spaces has been essential to the success of our educational philosophy, and the school's green features are a huge draw to parents who want their children to learn in an environment with good indoor air quality, surrounded by non-toxic materials."

For more information or to donate to the ENC Nature Preschool scholarship fund, visit encnaturepreschool.org or contact ENC Executive Director Bo Glover at 949.645.8489, ext. 101 or bo@encenter.org.

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