

# Ambient Learning

An investigation of integrating graphic design into school environments to enrich educational opportunities.



# Graphic Learners

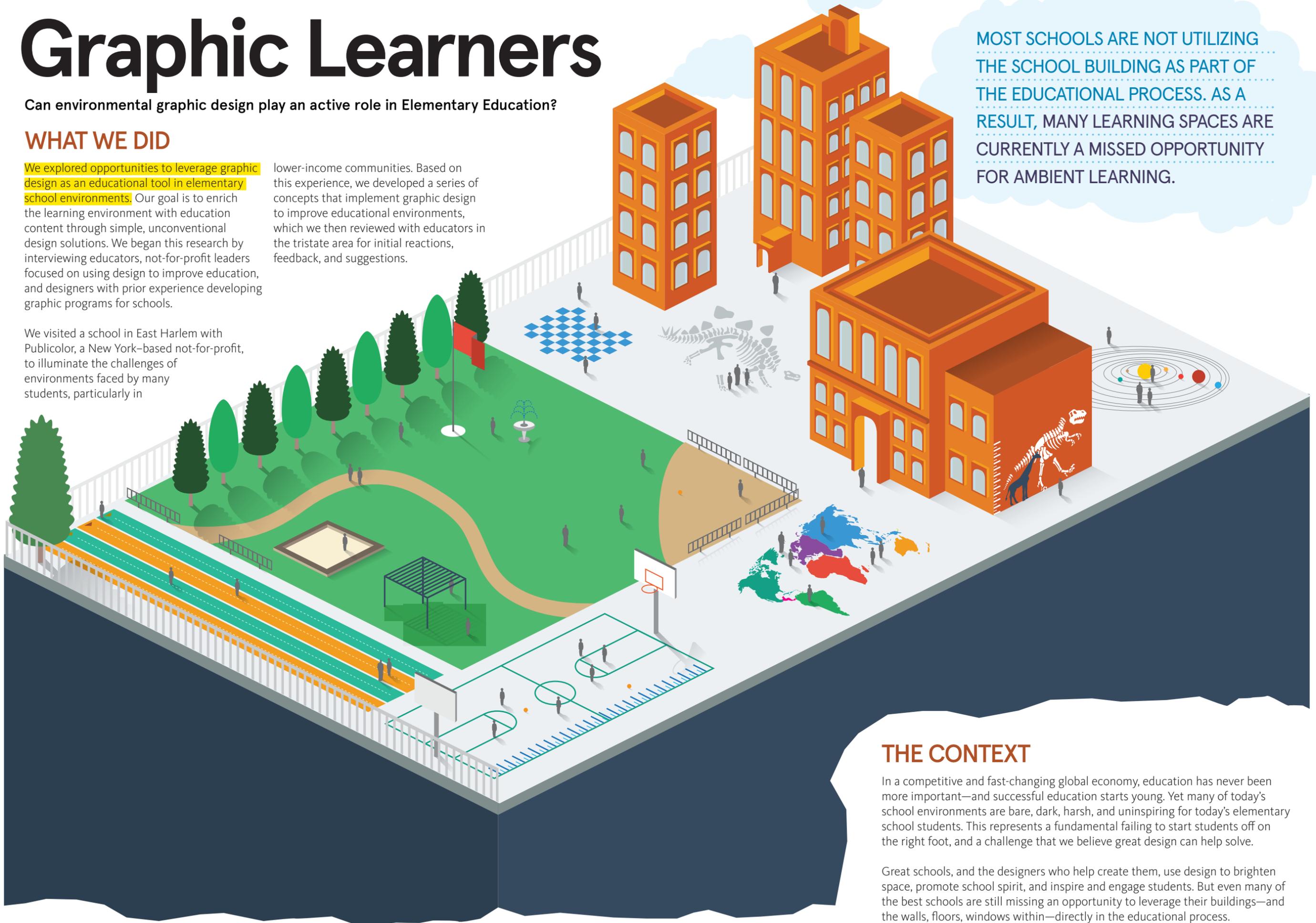
Can environmental graphic design play an active role in Elementary Education?

## WHAT WE DID

We explored opportunities to leverage graphic design as an educational tool in elementary school environments. Our goal is to enrich the learning environment with education content through simple, unconventional design solutions. We began this research by interviewing educators, not-for-profit leaders focused on using design to improve education, and designers with prior experience developing graphic programs for schools.

We visited a school in East Harlem with Publicolor, a New York-based not-for-profit, to illuminate the challenges of environments faced by many students, particularly in

lower-income communities. Based on this experience, we developed a series of concepts that implement graphic design to improve educational environments, which we then reviewed with educators in the tristate area for initial reactions, feedback, and suggestions.



MOST SCHOOLS ARE NOT UTILIZING THE SCHOOL BUILDING AS PART OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS. AS A RESULT, MANY LEARNING SPACES ARE CURRENTLY A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR AMBIENT LEARNING.

## THE CONTEXT

In a competitive and fast-changing global economy, education has never been more important—and successful education starts young. Yet many of today's school environments are bare, dark, harsh, and uninspiring for today's elementary school students. This represents a fundamental failing to start students off on the right foot, and a challenge that we believe great design can help solve.

Great schools, and the designers who help create them, use design to brighten space, promote school spirit, and inspire and engage students. But even many of the best schools are still missing an opportunity to leverage their buildings—and the walls, floors, windows within—directly in the educational process.

# Only 55% of K-12 students are engaged in the learning process, according to a 2013 Gallup State of America's Schools report.

## PERSPECTIVES

Publicolor, a New York-based not-for-profit, is one of many organizations leading the charge to improve education outcomes through the possibilities of design.

By involving students in the process of improving their own learning environments, Publicolor has seen significant success in improving students outcomes and engagement.

## THE RESULTS

The design of education environments can serve not only aesthetic, inspirational needs but also practical ones. The integration of architecture and environmental graphic design communicates and reinforces core concepts and ideas related to the students' ongoing studies. Importantly, this opportunity applies to all learning environments—low cost can yield high-impact results.

We believe creative, unexpected design intervention can assist current schools that are struggling to keep students engaged, and also act as a catalyst for a new type of school environment that sets a precedent for high-performance learning facilities. The success of not-for-profits such as Publicolor in using design to improve student outcomes serves as inspiration for our ideas.

## WHAT THIS MEANS

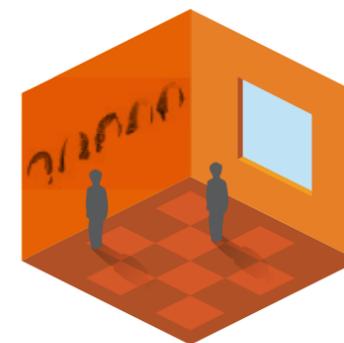
We identified a set of core educational areas or concepts with the greatest opportunity, then developed a series of design solutions to demonstrate the possibilities for each.



**Show Measurement at the Student Scale.** Use the physical environment to communicate measurement relative to other subjects or students' own experience.



**Connect Language to Physical Objects.** Install words onto objects themselves, using multiple languages to provide short lessons in translation.



**Make History Personal.** Display historical individuals or items in a way that invites interaction and students placing themselves into the tableau.



**Let Structure Communicate Structure.** Use school buildings to highlight architectural, engineering, and sustainability concepts, processes, and ideas.



**Integrate Learning and Playing.** Involve students in the creation and application of graphics, and make them interactive or changeable to keep the process going. Outdoor surfaces and playgrounds are an opportunity too.

# WHAT'S NEXT

Based on outreach to educators, we believe there is significant opportunity to implement these solutions in education environments.

We hope to develop a series of design solutions that can be implemented easily in existing and new facilities in partnership with our educational designers. We are also exploring opportunities to create solutions that could be implemented directly by students and/or teachers.



## TEAM

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*Designers*

John Bricker  
*Creative Director*

Fabiano Vincenzi  
*Graphic Design*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## IMAGE CREDITS

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As architects, designers, planners, and consultants, we partner with our clients on some 3,000 projects every year. These projects can be as small as a wine label or as large as a new urban district. With more than 5,000 professionals networked across 46 locations, we serve our clients as trusted advisors, combining localized expertise with global perspective wherever new opportunities arise. Our work reflects an enduring commitment to sustainability and the belief that design is one of the most powerful strategic tools for securing lasting competitive advantage.

Gensler's Research Program supports research investigations important to our firm, our clients, and to the ongoing learning and development of Gensler professionals. Research projects are practitioner-led with involvement across the globe. Our teams bring thought leadership to the table as we seek to solve our clients' and the world's most pressing challenges by creating high-performance solutions that embrace the business and world context in which we work, enhance the human experience, and deliver game-changing innovation.

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