

PURPOSEFUL ARCHITECTURE

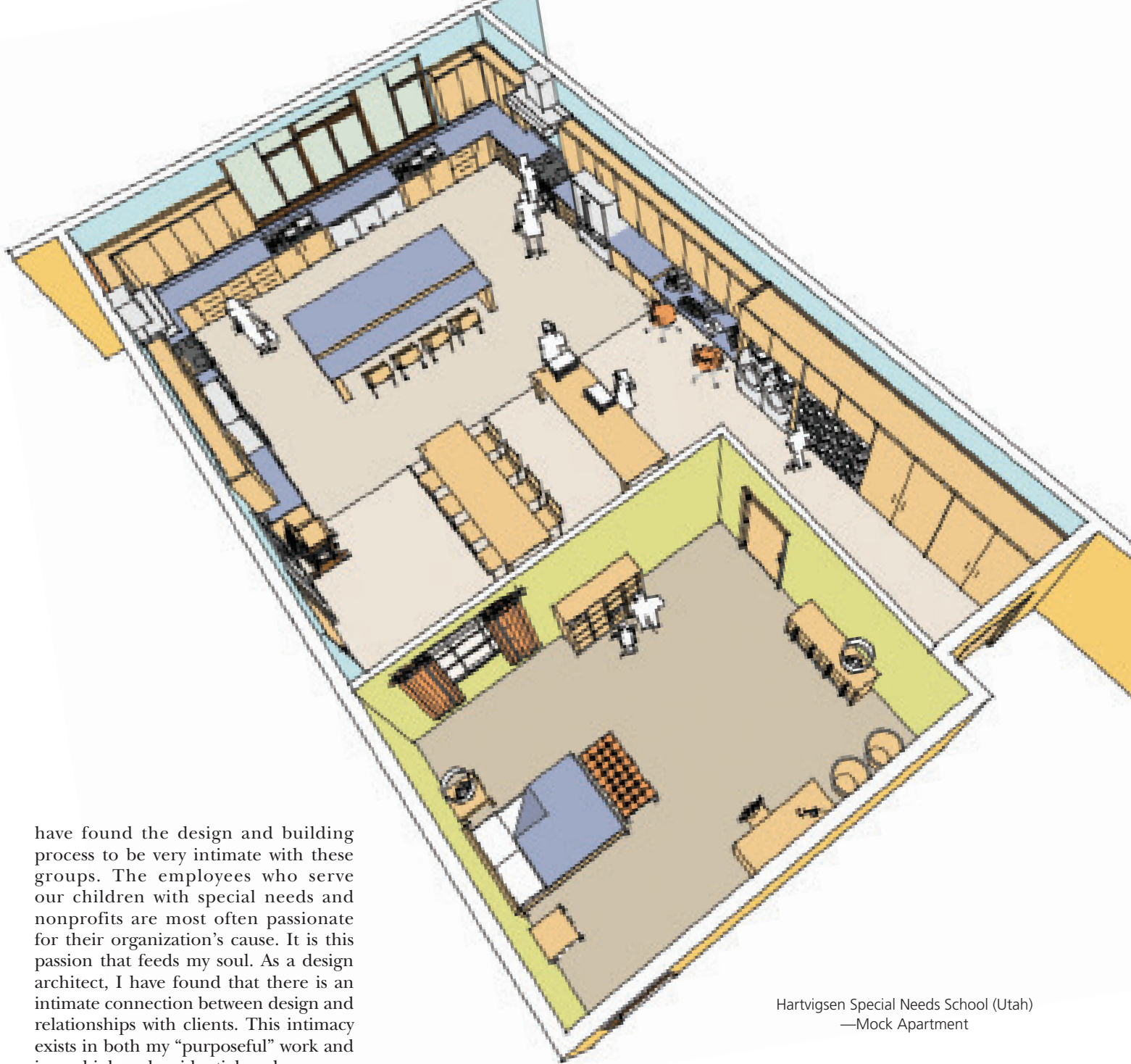
Designing living and learning environments
for adults and children with disabilities



Benedictine School
(Maryland)—Floor Plan

By Cathy Purple Cherry, AIA, LEED AP,
Purple Cherry Architects

The name “Purposeful Architecture” was selected for the specific body of work within my architecture firm, Purple Cherry Architects, dedicated to positively impact living and learning environments for adults and children with disabilities. In this work, I serve as a special needs architect consulting with teams across the country to positively influence the built environment that supports individuals with special needs and the staff that serve them. For me, this work has a very specific purpose. Thus, the name. My “Purposeful” heart extends to my other non-profit work as well. I am dedicated to helping nonprofits and



Hartvigsen Special Needs School (Utah)
—Mock Apartment

have found the design and building process to be very intimate with these groups. The employees who serve our children with special needs and nonprofits are most often passionate for their organization's cause. It is this passion that feeds my soul. As a design architect, I have found that there is an intimate connection between design and relationships with clients. This intimacy exists in both my "purposeful" work and in my high-end residential work.

In my role as a special needs architect, I initially evaluate the needs of the end users. Each special needs program and population served is different. It is important for me to understand the specific goals of the organization. My ability to have detailed conversations with the staff and users comes from the very fact that I was raised in a home with an intellectually-disabled brother. Further, twenty-two years ago, my husband and I adopted a complex child from Russia. This ultimately led to me living the journey of raising, teaching and advocating for individuals with special needs. The education and service language for these programs is, at times, like speaking

a foreign language, and I consider myself fluent in this language. Further, through extensive observation and interaction over the last 50 plus years, I understand what triggers can influence this special group of people.

In being able to properly support the special needs population for design, you must be able to understand all of the various medical diagnoses, the impact of the diagnoses on an individual, and how these diagnoses may co-habitate with other challenges. Further, you need to know what triggers create stress which basically can prevent growth and lead to failure within the environment. My goal, as a special needs architect,

is to motivate, encourage, elevate and promote success for the users. What I have learned in this journey is that success for an individual with special needs is further influenced by a properly-built environment.

When approaching the design work for a new or existing facility, my first design strategy is proper placement. What this means is I need to determine the best adjacencies for the programs defined, the best location for specific groups to challenge and support the individuals, the best circulation and wayfinding paths, and the best area allocations. I consider this the most important part of the design process



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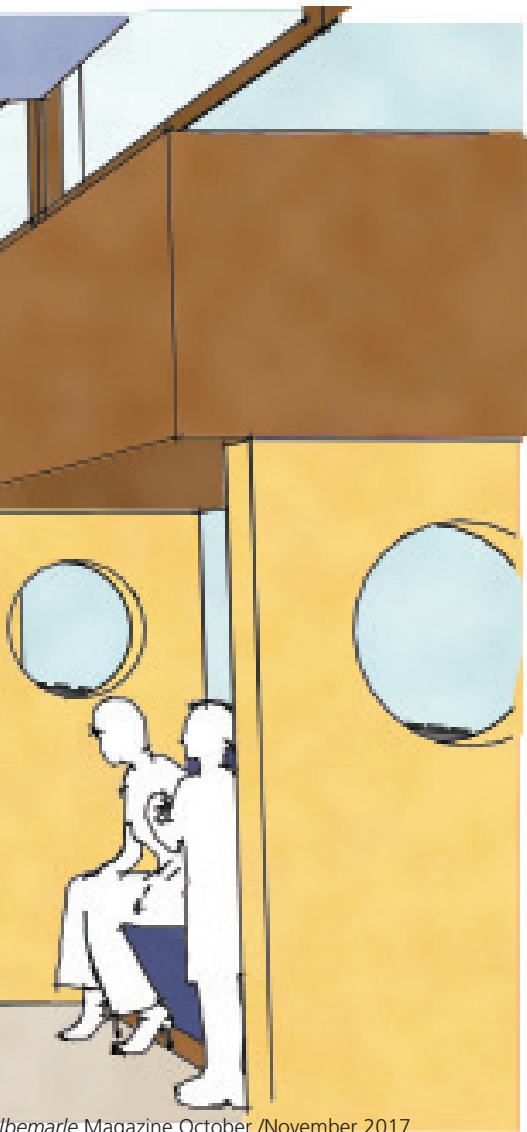
to accomplishing overall program success. This includes developing a comprehensive program that identifies all the primary and secondary connections for the facility. This is the fundamental groundwork for the design journey. Everything drawn and developed after laying out the best floor plan works to influence the experience and successful outcomes within each space and within the overall program.

For a special needs environment, there are several key factors that I assess and implement within the design. Some of these factors include strategizing visible connections to help reduce distraction and reinforce attention, minimizing auditory triggers, influencing tactile surfaces, employing highly durable materials, reducing path crossing and conflict, promoting wayfinding applications, developing social nodes, supporting vocational opportunities, employing technology systems, providing

confidence-boosting spaces, reinforcing independence and life skill exercises, and minimizing stressors.

Purposeful Architecture projects can include K through age 21 public and private special needs schools, adult day services programs, vocational programs, adult group homes, employment programs, and complete life campuses. The firm's Purposeful Architecture studio has included design work for the Ernie Els Center of Excellence School (Florida), Center for Discovery (New York), Benedictine School (Maryland), Pilot School (Delaware), Hartvigsen School (Utah), Green Chimneys (New York), Opportunity Builders (Maryland), Kurt Warner's Treasure House (Arizona), KCCS Public School (New Jersey), Summit School (Maryland), The Arc of Anne Arundel County (Maryland), New Horizons (Maryland), Lakemary Center (Kansas), and The Arundel Lodge (Maryland) to name a few.

My journey for my education regarding these environments was very personal. I came to learn as a mom that my child was developmentally delayed and that this ultimately meant exactly what the words expressed. My son was delayed in his development. If I was patient, he would develop. And in fact, this is exactly what happened for him. His younger brother passed his developmental age when he reached about 9 years of age. Matthew, my special needs son, was 14 at the time. It took until Matthew was about 23 to begin to parallel more of a 15 year old in many aspects. What was very true about my parenting technique is that I did not enable my son. I expected of him the same things I expected of my other children, just not at the same true age. I began teaching my son independence skills at a very early age, and I repeatedly exposed him to these skills. Today, he lives in a publicly-funded group



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home, has a job on an organic farm and is engaged.

There are so many family environments that can be managed strategically to assist in supporting success for your child and his or her siblings. When dining, I always requested a table for eight though we were a family of five. This allowed me to seat my children to prevent conflict. For travel, I learned I always had to have two separate rooms instead of one. One of us stayed with Matthew while the other stayed with our other two younger children. This reduced conflict. When driving, we always used our vehicle with three rows of seating, and I never sat in the front. I was always in arms reach of all three of my children. This reduced conflict. I put my son on the riding lawn mower to cut grass, and when I recognized he could not manage the right turn necessary to cut a square of grass, I had him cut in a circle. No corners. Success! These are

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all simple examples of how environmental strategies can help support more positive outcomes.

In educational environments, requiring some of our students to use steps by the placement location of their classroom prepares those students to maneuver the real world. Providing small seating cubbies may provide respite or an opportunity for social development on a one-on-one basis. Creating opportunities within the schools to include greeters, mail sorting, laundering, message delivery and school store sales allows students the opportunity to expand life skills. Providing clear color designations for circulation and waiting allow for successful movement and pause. Lastly, even the simplest strategy of offsetting interior classroom doors prevents visual distraction during lessons. Each strategy implemented provides an opportunity for success.

My professional goal within the Purposeful Architecture studio is to not only to positively influence the design to create the most successful buildings for individuals with special needs but also to educate how simple strategies can reach a long way in helping support children and adults with disabilities. Further, my goal is to help educate the general population to understand the abilities of our kids. It's not unusual to hear me encourage parents to assume their child can accomplish independence if they start the process early, and they find the patience for the long journey ahead. Parents must also be willing to redefine their expectation of independence. By making these two adjustments, success will be achieved.



Cathy Purple Cherry, AIA, LEED AP...

A special needs architect and founder of Purposeful Architecture, she is the mother of an adult son on the autism spectrum and sibling of a Down Syndrome brother. Through her lifelong interactions and observations of her brother and son, she has an acute awareness of triggers and environmental issues that impact individuals with disabilities. In addition to the numerous articles she has written on the topic, Cathy speaks nationally on purposeful designs that support the academic and therapeutic needs of individuals with disabilities. She engages her audiences and enables them to consider design applications and concepts that enhance their practice with respect to environments designed to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. She is tireless in her efforts to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities through Purposeful Architecture. For more information, visit purposefularchitecture.com.