

Recently, [Raeco](#) and [Steelcase](#) organized a webinar featuring internationally renowned educational architect superstar Prakash Nair. The webinar was an insightful and informative session for anyone interested in creating inclusive, equitable and well-designed learning environments.

[Prakash Nair](#) has been working as an educational architect for more than 30 years, and his expertise is reflected in the ideas he shared during the webinar. He highlighted the importance of designing learning spaces that are not only functional and flexible, but also promote the wellbeing of the students and teachers who use them. He emphasized that wellbeing is a critical layer that should be integrated into the design of learning spaces to ensure that everyone who uses them feels supported, safe and comfortable. The webinar focused on the fundamental considerations for good library and learning space design, providing an evidence-based approach to incorporating wellbeing as a critical layer. This layer focusses on the neurological impact of design alongside the physical, psychological, practical and behavioural considerations.

One of the key points that Prakash made during the webinar was that wellbeing should be considered as an integral part of the design process, rather than an afterthought. It is suggested that the five critical layers for designing good learning spaces are safety, comfort, stimulation, inspiration, and wellbeing. By focusing on these five layers, designers can create spaces that are both functional and supportive of the learning process.

Prakash's presentation also addresses the issue of inequity and inclusion in learning. He highlighted the fact that certain students may feel excluded or marginalized in traditional learning spaces, and that it is important to create spaces that are welcoming and supportive of all students. He suggested that a focus on wellbeing can help to create a more inclusive learning environment, where students feel valued and supported.

Prakash attests that "Happiness is a goal worth pursuing for its own self", and his latest publication [Learning by Design: Live, Play, Engage/ Create](#) supports this notion, (2020: Nair, Doctori, Elmore) explores this very concept and its implications for design and lifelong learning. Nair (et al) posits that physical learning spaces should reflect our most powerful aspirations and our most promising ideas about learning. Learning by Design showcases spaces that expand learning and promote open access, and that adapt to focus on inclusion and diversity. Here the school building represents a metaphor for all that we know and think about learning and education. A mind shift is required to approach learning space design in this way (potentially challenging for many of us librarians who value established patterns and procedures, predictability and stability) to student led informed choice, flexibility and responsiveness. In this way Prakash has brought to light the theory of self-determination which focuses on autonomy, competence, and relatedness in his fundamentals of modern design. Indeed, as the public library service model has shifted from a model of transactional to conversational approaches and side by side enquiry, the model for contemporary education is provided as a much more empowered one that encourages active learning and enquiry. The focus at Steelcase has been looking at how to encourage learners and teachers to explore options through an engaged pilot process where the staff and students embark on an exploration journey. Learning together on what works and what doesn't and explore what might be the best outcomes. It is critical that students should feel empowered to control their spaces and their future learning which can start with engagement around what the future spaces should be and how they function.

Thoughtful design has become the catalyst to the redesign of education itself in the same way that public libraries aspire to be democratised learning spaces for all. This approach provides the way forward for libraries and learning spaces to fulfill an "ultimate promise" as the vehicle to build a more

fair and just society for all. There has been growing awareness and need to deploy Inclusive Design; a design approach to explore how the built environment can influence and enhance the wellbeing of users. Steelcase has been involved in this space for some time and provides further information here: <https://www.steelcase.com/inclusive-design-webinars/>

Libraries internationally have subscribed to this mantra – through their onboarding to help achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) as reflected in both the work of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in this space. More information can be found [here](#) about the UNSDGs and Libraries internationally and in Australia [here](#).

In recent years we have been made intimately aware of the impact of stress and toxins on our bodies and abilities to learn, function and live well. Covid times have introduced us to a whole new layer of consideration of impact regarding pathogens, as well as the impact of stress hormones.

Neuroarchitecture considers creating spaces that address these issues. This includes incorporating biophilia, and consideration to safer environments - those that minimise off gassing, potential allergens, and encourages the rebuilding of psycho-immunity, where the importance of the impact of stress and toxins on the body and the filtering of clean air and easy clean surfaces are also taken into account in library and learning space and furniture designs and products.

Nair attests that schools should be “part of life!” and this is where lessons from good public library design can be an inspiration to education space designers – they are all about lifelong learning and are designed with learning, recreational, individual and group zones in mind. Having a balance of 'quiet' vs 'joyous' spaces are crucial. It is not just the ratio, but the proximity of the location of such spaces. If the users find it hard to access/ locate 'quiet' spaces, they may end up not using them due to inconvenience or if they are not enjoyable and attractive spaces they will not use them.

The IFLA [Standing Committee Buildings and Equipment](#) who recently met in NSW Australia, as well as [ALIA's Library Design Awards](#) provide many exemplars of libraries that address the best possible solutions for learning and living well. These include approaches that consider Space x Technology deployment x Pedagogy as well as the different usage of library spaces – e.g. collaboration and focus learning as the basis of design. In award winning libraries users have more choice & control over the usage of spaces out of the variety of zones to better support their needs. By way of example, Steelcase SUST Library was picked as the best library out of over 100 Universities (Survey deployed over 2000+users in China) for this reason.

In our quest for recovery in recent years, the pandemic has taught us more than ever the importance of belonging and community connection. Creating a sense of belonging can be achieved through creating a sense of inclusion, building trust and having a shared purpose. From a design standpoint this means creating spaces that can be adapted to encourage groups to come together. Using an Australian point of view; being conscious of the historical context of the land the building sits and the nations and peoples that inhabited that land historically. Both Raeco and Steelcase Australia have brought together initiatives supporting the core pillars of Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP) – relationships, respect and opportunities. RAPs provide tangible and substantive benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For more information on Steelcase's work in this area see <https://www.steelcase.com/asia-en/research/articles/topics/culture-talent/dialoguing-designing-towards-reconciliation/>. This means actively making the effort to invite groups and speakers into our space and to consult the community on how the spaces could be better utilised. All this can help in the development of eco-system of partners and communities. Co-design is an important factor here. The development of Raeco's RAP underpins the work of developing an indigenous fabrics range – engaging aboriginal artist Peter Fowler in the authentic development of bespoke designs to provide

an opportunity for both aboriginal peoples to “see” themselves in our libraries but also to offer another opportunity for the provision of respect and reconciliation and recognition of the importance of indigenous culture in learning and the keeping and sharing of stories. Raeco’s range and story is linked [here](#). Raeco will be featuring more about their work in this space in an upcoming webinar in celebration of [NAIDOC](#) week.

The webinar provided valuable insights for anyone involved in designing learning spaces, from architects and designers to educators and administrators. The ideas and concepts presented by Prakash Nair were backed by research and evidence, grounded in the practical realities of creating functional, flexible and supportive learning spaces. The accompanying slide deck is linked [here](#).

Prakash welcomes enquires as does both Steelcase and Raeco about how to improve and design learning and library spaces focussed on wellbeing. The slides are a valuable resource for anyone interested in creating well-designed learning spaces. By emphasizing the importance of wellbeing as a critical layer in learning space design, Prakash Nair provided valuable insights and ideas for creating inclusive, equitable and supportive learning environments.

We look forward to bringing you more insightful and evidence-based presentations that support the library ecosystem and in addressing library and learning matters in future webinars. Please register your interest [here](#).

Author: **Paula Kelly Paull M.Ed (TL), GDGCE (K-12), Dip T (Primary), (AALIA CP CF)** **March 2023**  
*Paula is Raeco’s Ambassador for Libraries and Learning. Amongst other activities in this space, she facilitates the webinar presentations for Raeco and its partners. Library Lover, Reading Developer, Early Literacy Specialist and Educator, Provocateur of Innovation, Coach, Dream Weaver, and “Architect from the midnight garden of possibility!”*  
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/paulakelly65/?originalSubdomain=au>