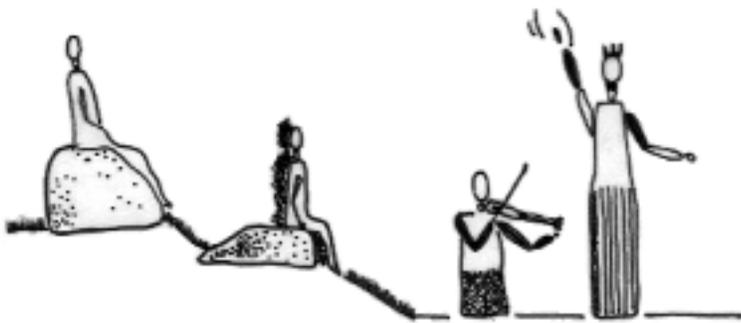




# Gathering Places

Creating formal gathering places on school grounds is crucial to support the use of outdoor classroom teaching as well as to provide a space for social gathering and organized school functions. The key element to providing successful outdoor lessons is a standard gathering place where teachers can begin and end their lessons each time. The gathering place provides structure and routine to outdoor lessons and tells students that outdoor classes are part of the formal curriculum and not play time.

As well, every school has that one area on their grounds where students tend to gather to discuss events, a class assignment, or what they are doing on the weekend. Yet, the distinctiveness of those areas is not expressed on a typically barren school ground. In general, shelter, seating, trees and cultural or artistic elements that help to provide character and interest to those areas — elements that make them special and functional — have not been thought of. Well-designed gathering spaces should be created to perform many functions:



- an area for small group socializing;
- an area for studying with small groups or individually;
- a place for a whole class to gather and start each of their outdoor lessons;
- a focal point for the school grounds;
- character, interest and a distinct sense of place to the school grounds; and
- a common space for school assemblies, plays, music concerts and school council meetings.



# Design details

## Tips for Creating Gathering Spaces on Your School Grounds

- ✦ Study your school grounds to determine where students currently gather and what activities take place in those areas
- ✦ Ask the whole school to participate in the design of your gathering space. Ask them what special places they value in their public spaces and in the community. Why do those spaces have meaning for them? What elements provide meaning for them? Express these values in the design of a gathering space.
- ✦ Think of ways this space can support outdoor learning. For instance, locate your gathering spaces at points of high accessibility (e.g. at main path crossings, entrances) or in secluded areas for privacy. This is an important consideration when you are using supplies and materials for outdoor study — you'll want to have easy access to those materials.
- ✦ Incorporate different types and sizes of spaces to accommodate a range of group sizes and needs.
- ✦ Make your gathering space unique to the needs of the students and teachers at your school. Incorporate cultural and symbolic values in your gathering space.
- ✦ Celebrate local biodiversity. Use materials (plant and built) that are local to your area to provide a distinct place that celebrates your school's natural identity.
- ✦ Provide protection from wind, sun and rain.
- ✦ Provide a diverse choice of seating and table options, allowing for variety, versatility and creative use of spaces.
- ✦ Incorporate different levels. For instance, provide areas to sit on the ground, on chairs, on informal seats like logs, along elevation changes on berms and on stairs. Be sure to make room for changing positions.
- ✦ Think about the use of hills for gathering and for sliding or rolling down.

## Types of Gathering Spaces

The following examples of gathering spaces designed by schools across the country are used for a range of activities from outdoor lessons, group study, quiet reflection or cultural celebration.

### 1 Amphitheatres

Amphitheatres can be formal, constructed using wood benches, or informal, by creating turf mounds in a semi or circular area where students can gather and sit.



Our Lady of Mount Carmel



Toniata Public School

### The Centre Court

Toniata Public School, Brockville, Ontario

The outdoor classroom was made with an interlocking brick centre court, raised stone gardens and mini-bleachers that were made by students at a local high school. This area provides a central meeting place for students and is an amphitheatre for outdoor classes. Gardening areas have been created around the centre court area to support outdoor study. The gardens include a Bird Habitat Learning Gardens, the Butterfly and Hummingbird Learning Gardens and the Rocks and Minerals Learning Gardens.



## The Council Ring

Maurice Cody Public School,  
Toronto, Ontario

2

The Council Ring is a 15-foot diameter seating area covered with shredded bark mulch. It is defined by logs and boulders placed in a circle under existing pine trees. The Council Ring is intended as a gathering place where all people are equal. Students will gather to participate in free and honest discussions, to read poetry or tell stories, to act out dramas or simply to think. The Council Ring also encourages the companionship of humanity and nature.



3

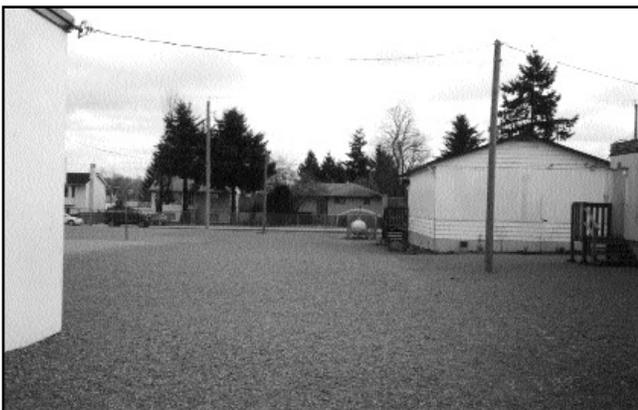
## Cultural, Historical and Symbolic Places

K.B. Woodward Elementary School, Surrey, British Columbia

The site chosen for the "Gathering Place" was a barren gravel area next to the asphalt basketball court and the Aboriginal students' cottage. This is an area where groups of intermediate students gather, but there was no seating other than concrete steps, and the area was prone to flooding during the rainy months of the year. Mrs. Phylis Weeks, our school's Aboriginal students' support worker collaborated with Chris Sandy, a First Nations student to draft the proposal for the site. We all wanted a site where the trees and plants used by the Sto : Lo nation, the first people who would have travelled and used our school site, could provide a pleasant meeting area for our intermediate students and as well as an environmental teaching area for all students to learn about the Sto : Lo use of native plants.

River rock was placed along the swale to represent the Fraser River, recognizing that Sto : Lo means people of the river. Three large boulders were also placed in the gathering space to represent the transformer rocks, mythical figures and everyday people believed to have been transformed into stone. The trees and shrubs planted in and around the gathering space were selected for their significance and use by the Sto : Lo people.

The Sto : Lo cultural centre in Sardis was consulted on the design and K.B Woodward staff visited the centre's interpretive Sto : Lo ethnobotanical garden. The final plan included three traditional pit houses buried in the ground in a small circle with sod placed over them to create a natural looking hump in the landscape. The campfires typically found in the pit houses were represented with black granite stones placed in the centre of the pit house. Log benches and boulders were placed around the pit house for seating.



K.B. Woodward Elementary School — BEFORE



K.B. Woodward Elementary School — AFTER



# 4

## The Story Circle

Altadore Elementary School Calgary, Alberta

The Story Circle is an area where students gather on log benches (or other seats) around a story chair. The Story Circle can be used with all ages for informal reading lessons, story time for pre-schoolers, or to share poems and creative writing that students have produced. Students can each take their turn in the story chair to share their work. The Story Circle creates a magical space where the storyteller is transformed when sitting in the story chair. For more information on the story chair see the *Seating* fact sheet in Built Features.

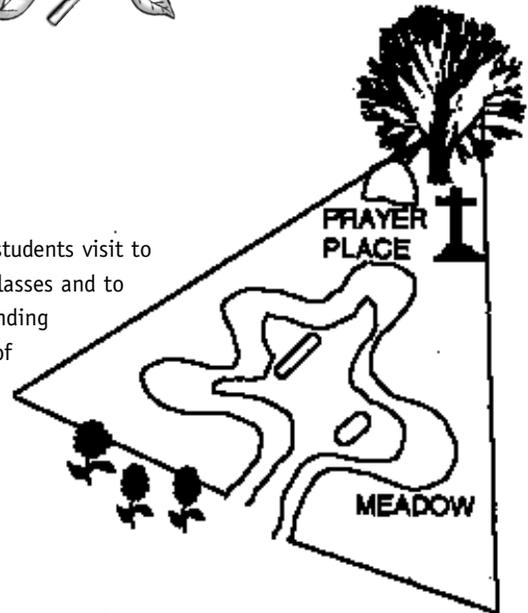


# 5

## A Prayer Place

St. Monica's School Barrie, Ontario

The Prayer Place provides a quiet, peaceful place where students visit to reflect on the beauty of nature, to hold religious study classes and to learn about trees and wildlife. The Prayer Place has a winding wood chip path that weaves its way through a meadow of shrubs and wildflowers. At the top of the trail is a large sugar maple.



## Where to *go* from here?

### Sources for this fact sheet

K.B. Woodward School. *Schoolgrounds Naturalization Project. Phase Six: The Gathering Place.* Surrey, British Columbia, Fall 1999.

Learning through Landscapes. "Local Distinctiveness." *E-scape*, Issue 5, Spring 1994.  
Available from Learning through Landscapes, [www.ltl.org.uk](http://www.ltl.org.uk).

Maurice Cody Public School. *Education in Blossom: Maurice Cody Public School Discovery Gardens.* Toronto, Ontario, date unknown.

Moore, Robin C., Goltsman, Susan M. and Iacofano, Daniel S. *Play for All Guidelines: Planning, Design and Management of Outdoor Play Settings for All Children.* Berkeley, California: MIG Communications, 1987, 1992.

### Example projects

- Altadore Elementary School, Calgary, Alberta: (403) 777-6910
- K.B. Woodward Elementary School, Surrey, British Columbia: (604) 588-5918
- Maurice Cody Public School, Toronto, Ontario: (416) 393-9240
- Olympic Heights, Calgary, Alberta: (403) 777-8370
- St. Monica's School, Barrie, Ontario: (705) 726-8221
- Toniata Public School, Brockville, Ontario: (613) 342-6310