

SAIGON SOUTH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL



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Executive Summary

Saigon South International School (SSIS) is an independent, non-profit K-through-12 college preparatory school that serves students from over 40 countries in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Due to the city's population growth in the 2000s and 2010s, a masterplan developed in 2019 identified the need for a new middle school and STEAM design center on the SSIS campus. Using a shared architectural grammar of undulating balconies with plantings, glass-topped interior atria, and simple materials like bamboo, concrete, and glass, the two new buildings provide the campus with a refreshed, unified identity as well as state-of-the-art educational facilities.

In the middle school, classrooms with flexible partitions facilitate varying modes of teaching and learning. In the STEAM design center, programs including a digital media lab and maker spaces allow students to test their ideas hands-on. In both buildings, large atria and rows of windows bring in sunlight to illuminate the interior, while large louvers at the roof level and fins on the facades prevent overheating in the area's hot and humid climate. Together, these two new building support SSIS's mission of transparent, inquiry-based learning.

Scope and Costs

Owner: Saigon South International School
Middle School Area: 184,000 square feet
Middle School Capacity: 420
Middle Square Feet Per Student: 438
STEAM Design Center Area: 94,000 square feet
Total Construction Cost: \$24.3M
Construction Cost per Square Foot: \$87.41



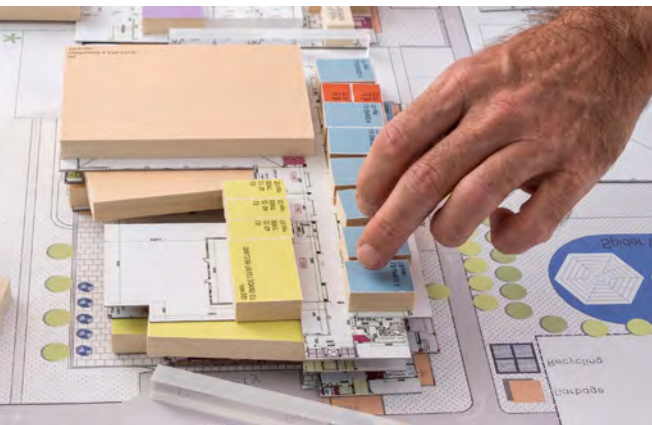
School & Community Research and Engagement



In the mid-1990s, the southern part of Ho Chi Minh City was entirely re-envisioned. On the peninsulas and islands created by the winding Rạch Đĩa River, the city's new masterplan placed schools and parks: The education of young people would serve as an anchor, helping to drive the city's growth. Over time, this decision attracted young professionals and families to the city, changing its demographic composition, and eventually necessitated a new masterplan for the Saigon South International School (SSIS), an independent, non-profit K-through-12 college preparatory school that serves students from over 40 countries. The site, a fourteen-and-a-half-acre parcel nestled into a snaking river bend, was home to a collection of buildings that did not quite cohere into a campus, and the school needed new facilities to accommodate its evolving curriculum.

On the peninsulas and islands created by the winding Rạch Đĩa River, the city's new masterplan placed schools and parks.

Due to the city's population growth in the 2000s and 2010s, a masterplan developed in 2019 identified the need for a new middle school and STEAM design center on the SSIS campus.



Design workshops used physical models to engage stakeholders.

A series of five design workshops with different subsets of the SSIS community and stakeholder groups—administrators, faculty, board members, parents, staff, and, most importantly, students—revealed further needs and desires. Each of these meetings was small and focused, as well as tailored to its participants, ensuring deep engagement and participation; a working physical model encouraged students and other stakeholders to concretely imagine what their learning environment could potentially look and feel like.



In these meetings, it emerged that the school needed dedicated lab and arts spaces to support its STEAM curriculum, and, crucially, that its middle school students held a desire to have a stronger identity on campus. As a result, two distinct buildings were proposed as part of a campus masterplan: a 184,000-square-foot middle school and a 94,000-square-foot STEAM design center.

The new buildings express the character of place while embracing students from many cultures.

These two new buildings would have to not only fulfill the identified programmatic needs but also contribute to establishing a coherent and unified campus identity. They would also have to manage the users' experience of the area's hot and humid climate while still providing interconnected and well-lit interior spaces for learning. And, finally, they would have to emerge from and express the local culture and character of place while embracing students and faculty from a wide range of national and cultural backgrounds.

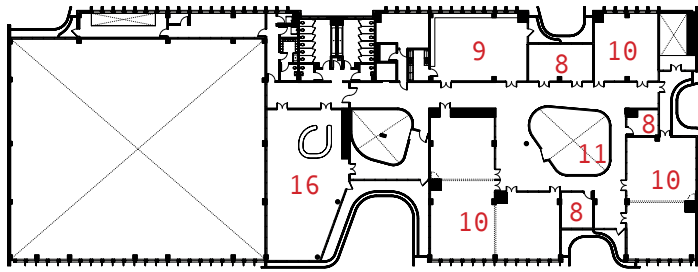
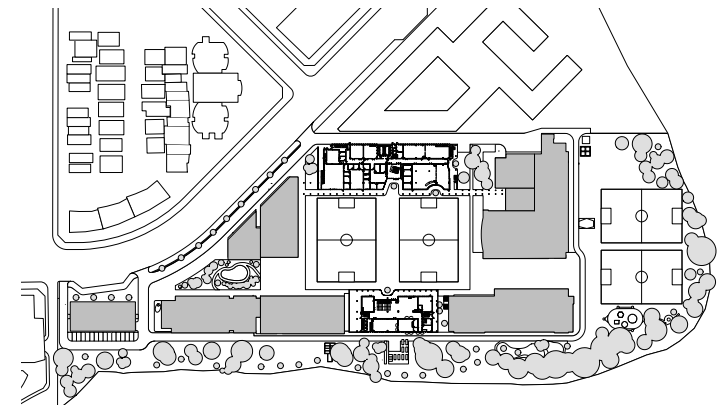


The new Middle School and STEAM Design Center combine to unify the campus around a central quad.

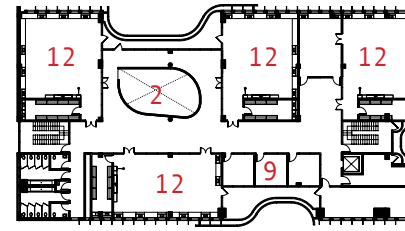


Physical Environment

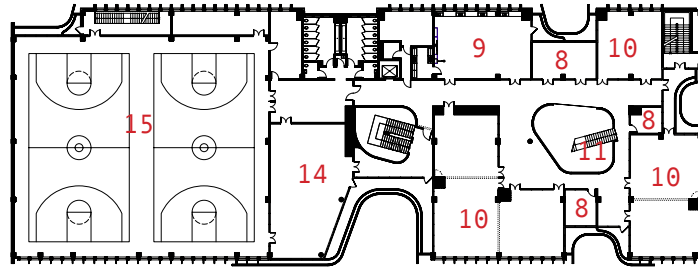
Sited on one of five walkable, mixed-use island neighborhoods, SSIS is connected to the surrounding vicinity by pathways that allow for foot and bike traffic. Along the south side of the site, the Rạch Đĩa River plays triple-duty as natural anchor, connector, and soothing visual element. The existing school buildings were simple, low-slung rectangular volumes whose arrangement suggested the potential for a quad space but didn't quite fulfill it.



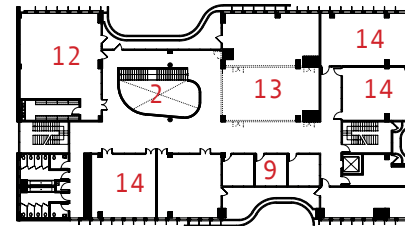
Fourth Floor



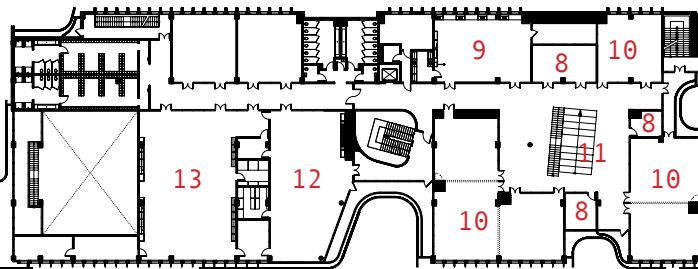
Fourth Floor



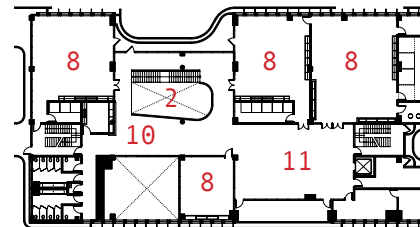
Third Floor



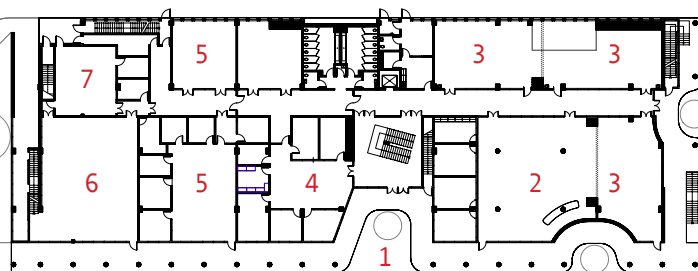
Third Floor



Second Floor

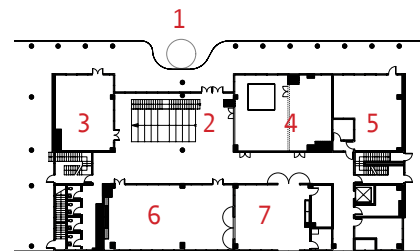


Second Floor



First Floor

MIDDLE SCHOOL



First Floor

STEAM DESIGN CENTER

STEAM Design Center

1. Entrance
2. Atrium
3. Digital Media
4. Maker Space
5. Film Studio
6. Robotics
7. Workshop
8. Art Studio
9. Small Group Meeting
10. Cafe
11. Art Gallery
12. Science Lab
13. Classroom "Loft"
14. Classroom

Middle School

1. Entrance
2. Library
3. Grade Level Team Room
4. Administration
5. Music Ensemble
6. Black Box
7. Drama
8. Small Group Meeting
9. Science Lab
10. Classroom "Loft"
11. Atrium
12. Maker Space
13. Art Studio
14. Dance Studio
15. Gymnasium
16. Dragon's Den

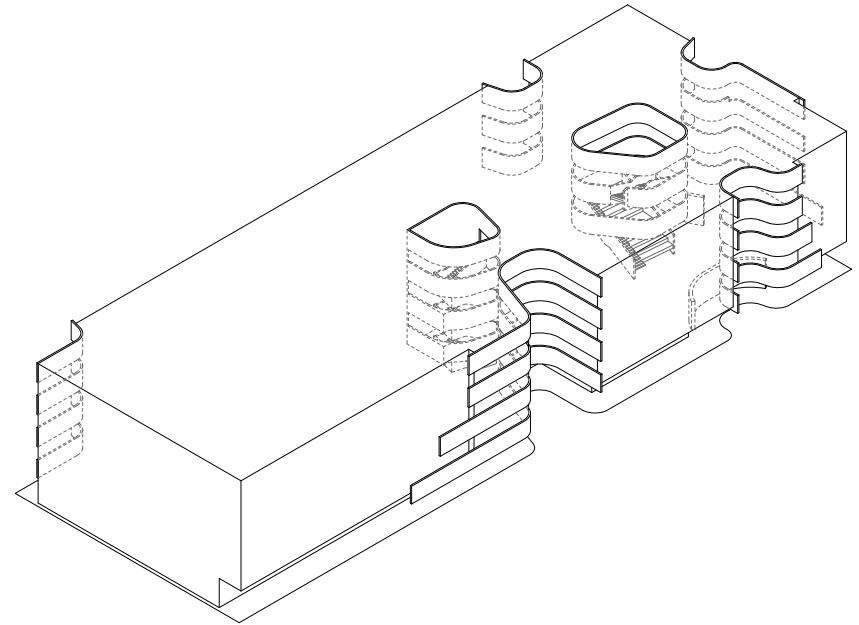


The buildings were sited across from one another and united by a covered colonnade.

To take advantage of the school's privileged location and realize the site's potential, the middle school and STEAM design center were sited across from one another, each on one end of the short axis that bisects campus quad they help to form. This quad arrangement is simple and classic, and it brings together the campus buildings not only in plan, but in practice: A covered colonnade stretches along the exterior ground level of both buildings, physically and visually uniting the new buildings with the existing ones, as well as guiding pedestrian traffic.



Using a shared architectural grammar of undulating balconies with plantings, glass-topped interior atria, and simple materials like bamboo, concrete, and glass, the two new buildings provide the campus with a re-freshed, unified identity.



The emblematic landscape of Sa Pa is evoked by sinuous balconies carved into gridded facades.

The middle school building, the first of the two to be designed, was envisioned to evoke the emblematic landscape of Sa Pa, a highland town in northwest Vietnam where the undulating edges of rice paddies cut into the earth. These shapes, a result of the meeting of natural plant growth and human intervention, served as inspiration for the four stories of curved panels that carve into the gridded façade. The sinuous balconies they create evoke the gentle geometries of both the rice paddies and the nearby riverbank, and the plantings that hang from their edges bring calming natural elements close, even on the building's highest stories.

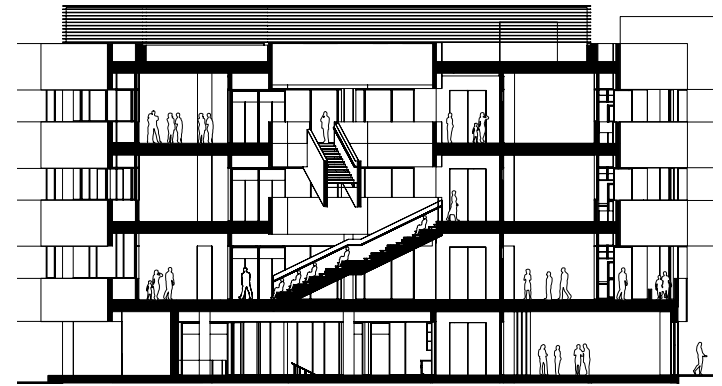


View of Sa Pa region of Vietnam



View of balcony





Planted balconies help ensure a healthy physical environment.

These balconies also create physical separation between the interior and the exterior, helping to manage solar heat gain in a notoriously hot and humid part of the world. Managing the climate was a central challenge—as well as a source of design inspiration and an opportunity to ensure a healthy physical environment. Water and air filtration systems keep these elements clean, and conditioned air makes the learning spaces comfortable.





Large louvers at the roof level and fins on the facades prevent overheating in the area's hot and humid climate.

On the grid of windows that lines the building's façade, perforated fins bring in daylight and lead the eye out to river views while keeping the interior from becoming too hot. And atop the two bamboo-wrapped central atria around which the building's spaces are organized, two-meter-tall louvers do the same, casting dynamic and interesting shadows across the space below.

The two buildings helps to reinforce the much-needed sense of shared identity on campus.

During the design process for the middle school, it became clear that in order to fulfill the masterplan's goal of unifying the campus, the STEAM design center would have to utilize a similar design language. The grammar developed in the middle school was deployed in a smaller building and in the service of more specialized programs. The resulting visual correspondence between the two buildings helps to reinforce the much-needed sense of shared identity on campus.



Educational Environment



In the middle school, classrooms with flexible partitions facilitate varying modes of teaching and learning.



SSIS's curriculum and pedagogical philosophy are centered on inquiry, student agency, and transparent learning. The new middle school and STEAM design center respond to these priorities programmatically as well as architecturally. Placed within a structural grid that uses the maximum possible concrete span, the classrooms in both the middle school and the STEAM design center were conceptualized as loft spaces with movable partitions, allowing for flexible layouts and variable learning environments. This keeps the learning experience for students dynamic and ensures that their educational environment can be tailored to a range of situations—from small-group hands-on learning, to team-teaching, to large-group lectures.

In the STEAM design center, programs including a digital media lab and maker spaces allow students to test their ideas hands-on.



Facilities reinforce the experience of visible teaching and learning.

Breakout rooms throughout each building empower students to take their education into their own hands, reinforcing their sense of agency and independence. Wide corridors allow for easy overflow and gentle transitions from circulation space into the classrooms, while glass partitions reinforce the experience of visible learning—so that, for example, when a group of sixth graders walks by a crew of eighth graders at work in a science lab, they might picture their future selves.





Spaces encourage hands-on learning and physical artistic expression.

Programmatic decisions foster a variety of teaching and learning scenarios: in the STEAM design center, a digital media lab gives students access to tools they wouldn't have in a regular classroom, while a maker space gives them room to try out ideas hands-on. In the middle school, the only black-box theater on campus, an art studio, and a dance studio provide spaces for performance and physical artistic expression. A library that overlooks the quad welcomes quiet reading and reflection. And gallery spaces allow students to show off their work.



Throughout, natural elements—the plantings that hang off the balconies, the bamboo that wraps the central atria, and the sunlight that bounces off their warm, curving surfaces—make for moments of visual respite within a dynamic educational environment.



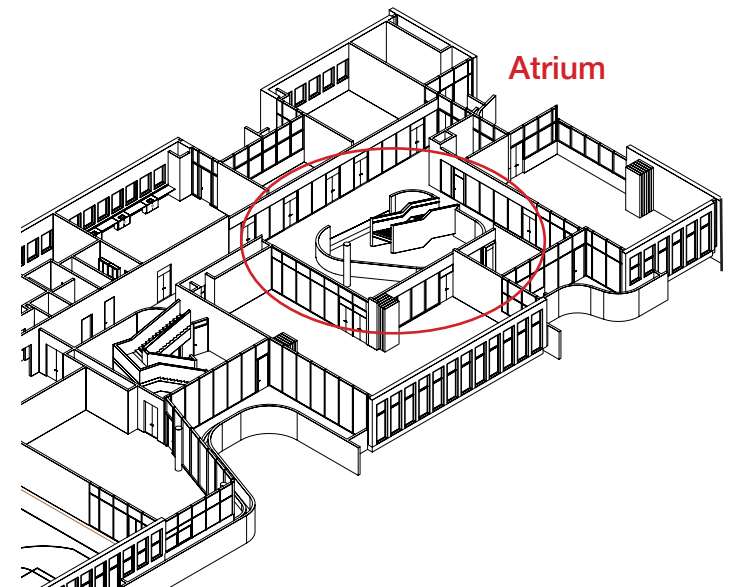
Ever-present green spaces provide a visual respite.

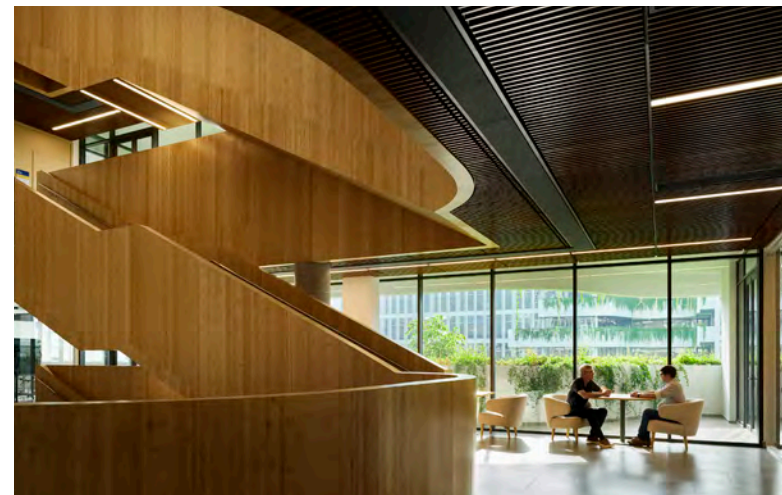
In both buildings, large atria and rows of windows bring in sunlight to illuminate the interior.



Atria enhance interconnectedness.

All spaces in the middle school and STEAM design center are organized around internal atria that fill the buildings with light. This arrangement reinforces the connection to the outdoors and surrounding environment and creates sightlines across the buildings' stories, enhancing the sense of interconnectedness.





They have become active social centers in both the middle school and STEAM design center





The quad has been useful for outdoor events that bring the whole school together, strengthening a sense of belonging.

Since their construction, SSIS's new buildings have reinforced the district's education-first identity, reaffirming the treatment of educational facilities as a key component of the built environment, and education itself as a cornerstone of the community. The quad created by the two new buildings has been used for outdoor events, like a daytime celebration of Tet, that bring the entire school together. The new, dedicated middle school building has given a new and unique identity to students at a particularly vulnerable stage in their development, strengthening their presence on campus and their sense of self. The central atrium has been particularly successful in this regard, and SSIS teachers report that middle schoolers increasingly see themselves as people with a permanent and stable space on campus, and also as serious learners with agency and freedom.

Results





Middle schoolers gather for an all-school meeting

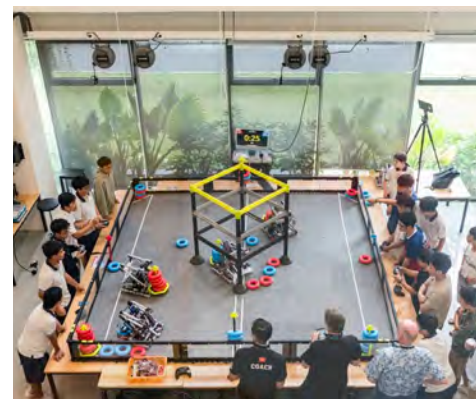
Flexible spaces and the large atria make larger community gatherings possible.

The middle school has been home to on-campus events that would not have been possible before its construction. In 2025, SSIS hosted the Model United Nations Conference, welcoming delegates from, among other countries, Vietnam, Australia, and Korea. SSIS held a mental health and holistic wellness conference, using its middle school dance studios for meditation and yoga sessions and its flexible classrooms for reflection exercises.



State-of-the-art facilities let educators shape cutting-edge curricula.

Meanwhile, the STEAM design center was home to the first-ever Full STEAM Ahead Conference, a gathering of educators from schools across Vietnam and East Asia aimed at pushing forward STEAM education. Using the design center's state-of-the-art facilities, the educators were able to explore topics such as AI, robotics, data science, and creative problem-solving in order to innovate in their classrooms and shape cutting-edge curricula.





Together, these two new building support SSIS's mission of transparent, inquiry-based learning.



Where possible, architectural elements and materials were locally sourced and selected so as to respond well to the hot and humid climate, as with the bamboo that lines the buildings' interior atria. Design decisions were executed in the most long-lasting, low-maintenance, and affordable ways possible: the buildings' exposed structure reduced up-front costs, and the glass facades are not curtain walls but punched-out windows, making them easier to build and maintain. In both buildings, adaptability is more than a matter of practicality: it is a core aspect of their long-term resiliency and, therefore, their sustainability.



STEAM DESIGN CENTER