Much has been written about the importance of lifelong learning in the 21st century and beyond. The world is changing too fast for, well, old-school notions of learning. In our hyperactive world, learning never really ends. In fact, it can’t. So far, though, not enough has happened to truly enable lifelong learning on a massive scale.

What if every person and organization insisted on opportunities for meaningful, lifelong learning wherever they might be and whatever they might be doing? What if lifelong learning were an expectation along the same lines of paved roads in urban areas? This would require that all of our spaces, places, and machines be designed to invite, enable, and encourage learning, whether to serve a practical purpose such as acquiring a job skill, to satisfy a personal interest, or both. In this scenario, spaces, places, and machines would earn our admiration and support based in no small part on how they make us smarter.

At SHP Leading Design, an architecture firm focused on the education market, we recently held a “Design Slam”—in essence, a low-tech hackathon—to explore lifelong learning spaces, places, and machines. This was the result of a company-wide “futurecasting” exercise in which our firm was challenged to envision its future role in the context of 21st-century lifelong learning. It’s through imaginative sessions like the Design Slam that we challenge ourselves to explore possibilities that exist outside of (or are buried deep within) traditional paradigms, processes, and prognostications. Having a clearer sense of where education is headed and what role we want to play sheds light on the kinds of talent we need to both develop and hire, and the kinds of partners we need to identify and collaborate with.

For the Design Slam, we formed nine teams of three. We gathered for a full day of exploration, ideation, and discussion. Each team was tasked with the following four steps:

- identify a unique situation or environment and how it might allow for lifelong learning;
- concoct a fictitious, but believable, prospective client that could operate in that environment, and describe its customer base and learning needs;
- identify the potential learning opportunities attached to that client and its customers; and
- design a solution and report out to the other teams and the rest of the company.
Ideas generated during the Design Slam included an organization that merges early childhood learning with geriatric care to enable the young to learn from their elders and vice versa. We explored communal maker spaces that were open to all ages and equipped with 3D printers, sentient tools, and more. We also re-imagined technical academies. Rather than thinking of them as stand-alone buildings, often disconnected from the community, we envisioned technical learning taking place in the context of actual workplaces.

One especially intriguing concept to come out of the Design Slam was Nourish, a working restaurant and brewery that would also serve as a venue for supporting lifelong learning (see Figure 1). People usually learn about food at home by searching new recipes online or watching the Food Network. But learning can be so much more fun and effective in relevant social settings—and food and drink are nothing if not social.

Here’s how our vision would be described if it were operating today:

Nourish is a restaurant that stimulates your curiosity as well as your taste buds—where lifelong learners come to eat, drink, and expand their minds. A working farm-to-table restaurant and microbrewery with teaching kitchens and an outdoor area for an urban garden and livestock, Nourish is open for dinner three nights a week, with classes on subjects such as gardening, animal husbandry, cooking, and brewing being offered on the other evenings. Classes are coordinated with local STEAM curriculums and adult education providers.

Nourish is committed to promoting lifelong learning through sustainability and scientific exploration, and regularly publishes reports on educational objectives, opportunities, and trends.

SHP Leading Design’s work on this concept and others exemplifies challenge-based learning as applied to its future business practices. The results will be used to foster dialogue about the future of education and to generate new concepts that promote the integration of lifelong learning into nontraditional, non-institutional settings. In fact, the work from the Design Slam is being incorporated into a soon-to-be-published book on the future of education environments (L. Della Bella and D. Thomas, 9 Billion Schools—Why the World Needs Personalized Lifelong Learning for All, Wordsworth Press, to be published in 2017; used with permission.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RICHARD S. THOMAS, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP, ALEP, is vice president of SHP Leading Design, an architecture firm helping to design and build the reality of lifelong learning for all. Contact him at dthomas@sph.com.

We believe that a future rooted in human dignity and progress depends on our ability to infuse what we do on a daily basis with learning objectives that advance the needs of all individuals and all communities. We believe it’s no longer acceptable, prudent, or responsible to bracket learning to a given period of life. Education should never stop, and every place, gadget, environment, and building we design should allow users to access some type of learning. What a beautiful—and smart—world that will be.

FIGURE 1. Nourish is a prototype restaurant and microbrewery that aims to provide both the body and the mind what they need to grow. (Source: L. Della Bella and D. Thomas, 9 Billion Schools—Why the World Needs Personalized Lifelong Learning for All, Wordsworth Press, to be published in 2017; used with permission.)