# CHANGING LIVES THROUGH GOOD SCHOOL DESIGN

**Who do national governments, and many leading businesses and organisations, including Google, call for advice on educational design? Danish Kurani is a celebrated architect and Irena Barker spoke to him.**

At around the ages of seven and eight, Danish Kurani often found himself with time on his hands. His parents, immigrants from Pakistan and India who worked hard to run a dry-cleaning business in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, would leave him in the back of the shop to play with whatever was lying around.

Danish would while away the hours playing with coat hangers and shirt boxes. "I was really fascinated with creating things that had some sort of mechanical function to them," he tells *Planning Learning Spaces*. "I was always building things and seeing if I could get them to move and function."

Having the time to just mess around and experiment came out of necessity, but it turned out to be a luxury that many overscheduled children rarely have in the modern world. "I think if we look at kids today, or people in general, with all of our devices, we don't allow ourselves to be bored ever – and that's when your mind is free to wander and dream up things," he muses.

The space and time he had to play and explore as a child has also influenced which educational philosophies feed into his work.

"I feel like we have a propensity to push kids towards education technology – and those are good tools, but they are not the only things that kids need to be doing.

"Making sure that kids of all ages are allowed to learn by making and doing, using their hands, that activates different parts of the brain," he explains.

Having to invent new games with scarce resources was an important learning experience for Kurani, who is now known for the educational and social design projects produced by his Kurani architectural practice. It taught him, he says, divergent thinking, which might well be what has led to Kurani being so well known in the education world for his innovative designs.

An admirer of the Australian educational innovator Stephen Harris – "he just gets it" – and Saeed Arida, founder of the Nu Vu School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Kurani's thinking is highly progressive.

Talking to him by WhatsApp from Atlanta, he is clearly a designer who thinks long and deeply about how to lead a good life, what makes for a good education and how design can make an impact socially.

But he didn't start out in the education world. His first projects were in the corporate sector, working on hotels and office towers. It was while he was carrying out post-graduate study at Harvard University that he decided educational architecture was the best way for him to make a difference in the world: "I was doing funded research with Boston public schools, helping them think about schools in the year 2030 and what that might look like."

Then came a project working with Brazil's ministry of education to plan schools' provision in unmapped favelas with little infrastructure, which proved to be another seminal experience.

"I see us as a very reactive society; we have these problems in the world, whether it's climate change or economic failures or a housing crisis, and we're very reactive to the problem.

"I've always seen education as this proactive thing that we could be doing – if we educated everyone in the world extremely well, then we would create fewer problems."

Education should not just be about whether people know formulas and theories, but whether they know how to be good humans and citizens, he says.

"To me, taking this all-encompassing definition, education seemed to be the most proactive way I could help – as an architect – to educate people better around the world; that is, actually contributing to solutions and preventing problems in the first place."

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to convince governments and other decision-makers about what Kurani calls the "basic necessity" of good school design. Something that, he suggests, could be the fault of architects themselves.

"Part of it boils down to the fact that the general public doesn't understand the power of architecture and the

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built environment, and so it's seen as a luxury item as opposed to this basic building block of life, which is literally around us 24/7.

"Every person interacts with architecture every single day. Even if you're living in the most remote parts of the Amazon you will have some thatched roof or fence… it's inescapable, and to ignore such a large part of our lives is to me insane. Why don't we put more energy and research and thought and deliberation and care into it? Some of the onus is on us as architects; we need to better communicate the value of design for the general public."

Architects could spend less time showing off their sleek glassy towers and more time explaining why they have made design decisions, and researching the efficacy of their designs, he adds.

"We need to be at the conversation table with global leaders when they're talking about how do we solve climate change, how do we solve the housing crisis, how do we solve problems in education; no one's going to take us seriously enough to be at those conversation tables if we're just out producing junk and talking about the junk."

This is not something Kurani could be accused of. A glance at just a couple of his design practice's most recent projects shows a broad range of innovative environments with very specific goals.

He designed a New York tech lab for the innovative organisation Black Girls Code, which aims to open up the tech industry to girls and women of colour. Common pieces of technology are mounted on the walls so that the inner workings can be seen and interacted with. The ceiling of the lab is used to demonstrate how a motherboard works with copper circuits. These concepts, says Kurani, were introduced to "spark some curiosity and get kids to think deeper".

"We need more people in society to think deeply, challenge stuff, not just go with the flow. Think about when I'm using a piece of technology, have I ever stopped to think about how it works, what's inside it, what might make it this way, what makes it so great, what makes it not so great? Essentially, that curiosity is a way of teaching kids how to think deeper, how to slow down, how to look beyond the surface.

"Women and black kids often feel like outsiders [in tech], like they don't belong; we want the girls to feel like insiders. So, part of that was to pull back the curtain and show them it's not some exclusive, enigmatic, scary thing – it's actually quite simple and fun, it's not masculine or feminine. Part of getting them to feel like insiders was…exposing the hardware inside that's powering those things – let's make it less scary."

Another contrasting project is Riverbend School near Chennai in India, where happiness and well-being are the key elements of the curriculum. Funded by the SPI Incubator project set up by Kiran Reddy, CEO of the cinema chain SPI Group, Kurani says Riverbend "pushes the boundaries" of what a school can be (see P18-19).

He puts this originality down to the creative freedom he was given by the founding team, who have professional backgrounds in business, cinema, psychology and other sectors, rather than education.

"You can see that in the results. And you think about how progressive and advanced the thinking is, it's really pushing the boundaries of what education could be.

"I think that boils down to the fact we had creative freedom and they weren't bogged down by this nostalgic inertia of what education has always been; they just weren't from that world."

The weekly boarding school "flips" the current education model, moving away from an emphasis on content – because that can be obtained online – towards well-being, social and emotional skills, and problem-solving.

"What's hard to get – and what you really need in person – is that experiential learning where you're taught how to be a good human, you're taught how to be happy, you're taught how to have good character, be a good person in the world," he says.

These are values that no one could dispute, of course. And for Kurani, it's clear he walks the walk. Architecture and design are, for him, ways to change the world for the better. ■

**Kurani.us**

Schools pictured: P13: High Tech Elementary School. P14-15: Khan Lab School. P16-17: Black Girls Code