

# The Architects Behind the New Facilities at ISB

Jessica Thompson May 07, 2019



**Two experts in the architectural field explore how important design is in facilitating a productive learning environment for students.**

(Newswire.net -- May 7, 2019) Beijing, Beijing --

To create a world-class building, one must use world-class architects.

And that is exactly the sentiment the International School of Beijing (ISB) has followed with the development of their [new buildings](#).

The facilities, set to be opened in 2019 and 2020, includes a new [Elementary School \(ES\) Arts Center and Theater](#) , a new [Performing Arts Center for the Middle School \(MS\) and High School \(HS\)](#) , a remodeled [Early Years Center](#) and a remodeled [MS/HS Design Center](#).

The design of the new ISB facilities and spaces incorporate the educational needs of each learner in order to best help them excel.

According to Gerrick Monroe, Chief Financial Officer (CFO) at ISB, [by including teachers and program designers into the development of the new facilities](#), the school was able to implement the spaces, equipment and furnishings required for both students and teachers to excel.

But to understand how these innovative buildings are coming into fruition, one must understand the face and the story of the people behind the design.

## Experts in Architectural Design

Xiaoyi Ma is the Chief Designer for the [ISB project](#) and the founding partner of Inclusive Architectural Practice, a Beijing-based architectural design firm.

“My job at ISB is establishing design principles for the new buildings,” said Ma. “School projects, especially expansions to well-established educational facilities, are different from other building types. They require a designer’s tremendous flexibility and attention to detail in order to customize the design to meet and exceed teaching requirements with persistent forward-thinking.”

Ma has spearheaded numerous cutting-edge research pieces on education, hospitality, corporate projects, retail projects and mixed-use facilities. She has worked in China, the U.S., Europe and the Middle East, just to name some of the many locations.

In recent years, Ma has shifted to focus largely on school design. She has worked on 21st-century projects for a number of international, private and public schools.

“Before I went to college, I was determined to choose Architectural Design, a creative major that doesn’t feel like ‘studying’,” said Ma. “And over years of practice, I wouldn’t trade it with any other job, as design truly makes my life and other people’s lives better.”

Making other people’s lives better through design is something Andrew Jin, Associate Director in CBRE Beijing’s Project Management team and project management consultant for ISB’s new facilities, strongly agrees with.

With more than 12 years of experience covering various types of construction projects, from shopping malls, office building developments, entertainment projects to villa projects, Jin brings prowess to the project management work he’s doing at ISB.

And what got him started in this role were two, simple words.

“Inspiration and responsibility,” said Jin.



## Design and the Role it Plays in Education

In Ma's opinion, educational facilities play a pivotal role in a student's education.

"The learner-centered educational approaches have been used for over 100 years, yet never has it been as rapidly and world-widely implemented as in the past decade," said Ma. "Neither has the school environment been designed so responsive to education."

She used the example of the new ES Arts Center to exemplify her point further, as it incorporates art rooms, music rooms, informal exhibition and performing spaces, as well as a theater custom designed for young children.

"Elementary students will take it as a home base for visual arts, performing arts and all other artistic activities that may come up, transforming the mode of 'class-attending' into a community lifestyle."

According to Ma, the environment, natural or created, always has an impact on an individual's behaviors and emotions.

"Children are often more sensitive to colors, shapes, spaces, air and light than adults," said Ma. "A good school building should inspire a sense of calm in children and help them become joyful and focused, just like a home does."

"But in addition to a sense of home, an ideal school building is a center for community connections, a library of resources, a center of innovation, a gallery of art, a gym for sports and fun."

And to Ma, the importance of creating a learner-centered environment and moving away from a traditional classroom is pivotal for the future success of students.

"A traditional cell-and-bell school layout cannot foster communication and collaboration, whereas an open floor plan with minimum solid partitions will assist interactive and interdisciplinary learning as a community."

This sentiment was echoed by Jin, who agrees that educational facilities should be one where both collaboration and communication are easy to facilitate. He also focussed on flexibility and open spaces as being pillars to an innovative, 21st-century school.

## The Importance of Purpose-Built Educational Facilities

"Among different K-12 projects, my favorite type is purpose-built facilities because I enjoy the collaboration between educators and designers," said Ma.

"Often time educators are designers who think outside the box; in their mind, walls are not just walls and floors are not just floors, all are teaching tools."

Ma further explored this point by recounting the time when the ES teachers came to Ma and her team and told them young children might easily sink in the adult-size folding chairs in the theaters and therefore often stand.

“Through the conversation, we came up with the design,” Ma said. “Equipped with retractable audience seating and elevated/retractable staging system, the theater can be easily arranged as a proscenium theater, a vineyard black box or a completely open hall, supporting formal performances, informal performing activities and community gathering or even athletic events.”

“Club benches with low risers and a low stage were selected so that young children can be seated comfortably.”

Overall Jin and Ma are extremely satisfied with the ISB project thus far and are eager to see the doors open.

“The new buildings will be a better place for the students to live, learn and play,” Jin said.

Ma agreed and added that the expansion of ISB is a unique project that effectively integrates educational aspiration and design creativity.

“The design through collaboration is unique and memorable and will effectively facilitate teaching and learning at ISB,” Ma said. “Inclusive Architectural Practice is honored to be part of the project.”

([Newswire.net](#) -- May 7, 2019) Beijing, Beijing --

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Source: <http://newswire.net/newsroom/news/00109786-the-architects-behind-the-new-facilities-at-isb.html>