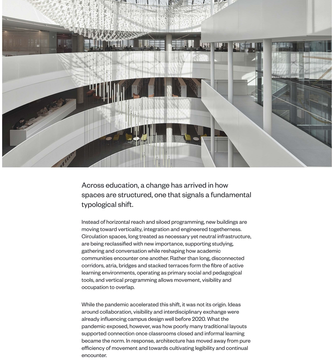
WHY THE POST-PANDEMIC CAMPUS HAS TAKEN A VERTICAL APPROACH

FRAME#149 07 JAN 2022 • INSTITUTIONS

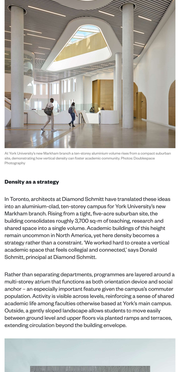
BOOKMARK ARTICLE

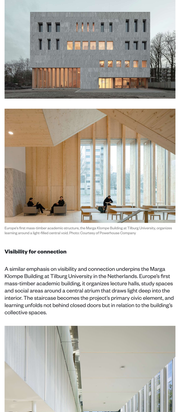


Across education, a change has arrived in how spaces are structured, one that signals a fundamental typological shift.

Instead of horizontal reach and siloed programming, new buildings are moving toward verticality, integration and engineered togetherness. Circulation spaces, long treated as necessary yet neutral infrastructure, are being reclassified with new importance, supporting studying, gathering and conversation while reshaping how academic communities encounter one another. Rather than long, disconnected corridors, atria, bridges and stacked terraces form the fibre of active learning environments, operating as primary social and pedagogical tools, and vertical programming allows movement, visibility and occupation to overlap.

While the pandemic accelerated this shift, it was not its origin. Ideas around collaboration, visibility and interdisciplinary exchange were already influencing campus design well before 2020. What the pandemic exposed, however, was how poorly many traditional layouts supported connection once classrooms closed and informal learning became the norm. In response, architecture has moved away from pure efficiency of movement and towards cultivating legibility and continual encounter.



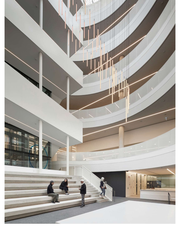


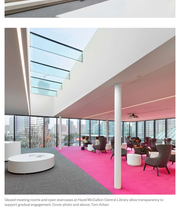
At York University's new Markham branch a ten-storey aluminium volume rises from a compact suburban site, demonstrating how vertical density can foster academic community. Photos: Doublespace Photography

Density as a strategy

In Toronto, architects at Diamond Schmitt have translated these ideas into an aluminium-clad, ten-storey campus for York University's new Markham branch. Rising from a tight, five-acre suburban site, the building consolidates roughly 3,700 sq m of teaching, research and shared space into a single volume. Academic buildings of this height remain uncommon in North America, yet here density becomes a strategy rather than a constraint. 'We worked hard to create a vertical academic space that feels collegial and connected,' says Donald Schmitt, principal at Diamond Schmitt.

Rather than separating departments, programmes are layered around a multi-storey atrium that functions as both orientation device and social anchor – an especially important feature given the campus's commuter population. Activity is visible across levels, reinforcing a sense of shared academic life among faculties otherwise based at York's main campus. Outside, a gently sloped landscape allows students to move easily between ground level and upper floors via planted ramps and terraces, extending circulation beyond the building envelope.





Europe's first mass-timber academic structure, the Marga Klompe Building at Tilburg University, organises learning around a light-filled central void. Photo: Courtesy of Powerhouse Company

Visibility for connection

A similar emphasis on visibility and connection underpins the Marga Klompe Building at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. Europe's first mass-timber academic building, it organises lecture halls, study spaces and social areas around a central atrium that draws light deep into the interior. The staircase becomes the project's primary civic element, and learning unfolds not behind closed doors but in relation to the building's collective spaces.

RDAI's adaptive reuse of a modernist building bears study spaces around open sightlines and interconnected levels, making library activity visible and inviting from multiple vantage points. Photo: Tom Arban

Rethinking the library

Libraries, too, reflect this structural rethinking. At the Hazel McCallion Central Library in Mississauga, a new civic hub, and the Story Arts Campus Library in Toronto, an adaptive reuse of a modernist building, Canadian firm RDAI uses vertical organization and flexible connectors as a framing language. Rather than reinforcing hierarchical, floor-by-floor separation, both projects rely on layered, coherent interiors that make activity visible and accessible.

'One post-pandemic effect on public and academic libraries has been the increased emphasis on small, medium and large glazed meeting rooms that integrate technology for virtual teleconferencing,' says Tyler Sharp, principal at RDAI. 'He notes, the architectural response goes beyond equipment. 'Vertical atrium spaces create both physical and perceptual connections between levels, helping users understand where programmes are and how they can engage.'

Raised meeting rooms and open staircases at Hazel McCallon Central Library allow transparency to support gradual engagement. Cover photo and above: Tom Arban

In both libraries, atria are deliberately informal, with open staircases and clear sightlines that allow users to see one another at work. This transparency supports what Sharp describes as a gradual process of engagement: visitors first perceive others participating, then understand how they themselves might take part.

When circulation becomes social infrastructure

At the University of California, Berkeley, the recently completed Grimes Engineering Center repositions circulation as social infrastructure. Designed by SOM as a renovation and addition to the Bechtel Engineering Center, the project introduces a two-storey glass-and-steel pavilion organized around a three-level open forum. What was once a utilitarian academic facility is reimagined as a fluid environment, where bridges, lounges and circulation zones double as informal study spaces.

SOM's glass-and-steel addition reimagines utilitarian academic infrastructure as fluid social space. Photo: Courtesy of SOM

Across these projects, vertical programming does more than conserve land or increase density. It reframes how academic communities occupy buildings, turning transitions into opportunity. Rather than a sole focus on wayfinding, students and faculty are encouraged to linger and interact. In the post-pandemic campus, togetherness is no longer left to chance; it is innate to the architecture itself.

WORDS Lauren Jones