



# Bright Young Things | Tools at Schools

DESIGN | By ARLENE HIRST | JUNE 2, 2011, 1:46 PM



Tools at Schools, a collection of school furniture designed by eighth graders at The School at Columbia University in collaboration with the furniture company Bernhardt Design and the creative consultancy Aruliden, includes desks with hanging hooks and interchangeable desktop containers, chairs with racks for books and laptop cases, and lockers with specialized storage compartments. Photographs by Melissa Stewart

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FULL SCREEN

The biggest surprise of the [International Contemporary Furniture Fair](#), which took place last month at the Javits Center in New York, wasn't the latest objet by a global superstar. It was an amazingly polished collection of classroom furniture that was designed by a group of eighth graders. The project, Tools at Schools (which even won the Editor's Award for Best Design School, an honor usually reserved for college-level institutions showing work at the fair), was initiated by [Aruliden](#), a New York-based design consultancy, at the School at Columbia University, an independent school whose students include the children of Columbia's faculty as well as children from the neighborhood. Tools at Schools started when Rinat Aruh, a partner at Aruliden, offered to teach the school's middle-school students a seminar on design as a thank-you to the school for allowing Aruliden to conduct student focus groups.

The students' assignment: to design the classroom of the future. Aruh called in a friend, Jerry Helling — the president of [Bernhardt Design](#), a leading manufacturer of contemporary furniture — to give students the experience of designing for a real client, and he promptly became a full-fledged partner in the project. The 44 eighth graders immersed themselves in research and conceptualization, sketching, 3-D drawing and the creation of scale models. They learned how to sell their ideas, both verbally and in writing. A small group went to the Bernhardt factory in North Carolina to work on prototypes of their designs. The school integrated Tools at Schools into its yearlong curriculum. It became part of math class, where students studied ratios and proportion; science, where they investigated materials; and English, where they worked on their presentations.

The finished products include swiveling desk chairs with racks to hold books; graffiti-proof desks, with interchangeable compartments on the desktop to hold, say, test tubes for a science class; and lockers in a range of graduated blues with nameplates and mail slots on the door, adjustable shelves and ventilated bins for gym clothes. The students themselves led visitors through the exhibition, explaining the high points of their designs with the ease of seasoned salespeople. Now all they need is a school furniture manufacturer who's as smart as they are.

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