To reach the main entrance of Hellerup School, you walk through a special educational landscape featuring vegetation that winds its way across the schoolyard, small paved bumps that are painted in strong contrasting colors, and a pool with stepping stones. Arriving at the school proper, you take off your shoes and contribute to the landscape of footwear that both students and teachers establish every day when they change into slippers or socks for school. You feel an immediate difference, one that triggers your sensory apparatus. Without shoes, you have discarded a shield against reality: You are closer to the floor, and you can feel your feet in a different way. Without shoes, you feel at home. In this way, the first step inside Hellerup School is an awareness raising process in which you prepare mentally for school through the physical changes—now I step into the universe of the school, now my senses are ready for learning.

Once inside and without shoes, you arrive at a large staircase in an atrium, a room that serves as the school’s center and heart. Here you find stairs that are much more than a way to get from floor to floor. A great variety of activities happen on the stairs: movement, sitting, education, teamwork, presentation, and recreation—the stairs are seating for film screenings. Many students also have their lunch on the stairs. The staircase creates a flexible space that can be used in numerous, diversified learning situations. It also activates many senses by demanding action—do you want to go up or down, jump or stop, sit or stand—and in that way enables children to make choices and become more aware of their bodies.

The interior of Hellerup school is dominated by wood: the staircase, balconies, and panels around the building. The wood creates a warm atmosphere, which, together with the slippers, helps provide calm and tranquility. Wood is also a tactile material that speaks to the senses. There is a big difference between sitting on a concrete staircase and sitting on a wooden staircase.

Teaching mainly takes place in the students’ home areas, which are located in more quiet corners. The home areas are the children’s base for everyday school life: they are a more organic replacement of the traditional school structure of permanent classrooms. Designed as large, open areas—from 330 to 400 square meters—with space for several classes, they can be subdivided with mobile shelves and display walls. The layout can be specified to match the students’ age, and classes can, to a large extent, rule over their home areas and make them their own. At Hellerup School, contemporary forms of learning and physical organization fit together like two parts of the same story. Adapted from: Without shoes, without inhibitions—ready for learning. For more: www.aniforma.com

Slip off your shoes
Creating a learning space that’s safe and comfortable to navigate in socked or slippered feet offers an opportunity to use a physical act—the taking off of shoes—as mental preparation for learning.