

Designing a Physical Space for a Virtual University

How the German University of Digital Science and Steelcase partnered to create a flexible, future-ready space that supports the next generation of digital education.

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In a world where digital transformation is accelerating across every sector, the future of learning is being reimagined. The German University of Digital Science (German UDS) is leading this shift with a bold vision: a university that exists fully in the metaverse. While its foundation is digital, German UDS recognizes the critical role of physical space in fostering human connection, creativity, and community.

German UDS partnered with Steelcase to bring its concept to life through the shared belief that even the most futuristic, digital-first institutions need real-world spaces. Together, they co-created a headquarters in Potsdam, Germany, that serves as a dynamic hub for learning, collaboration, and innovation.

A VISIONARY CONCEPT: THE GERMAN UDS VIRTUAL CAMPUS

Founded by Prof. Dr. Mike Friedrichsen and Prof. Dr. Christoph Meinel, the vision for the German UDS is to become the world's first university built entirely in the virtual world. Drawing on decades of research in digital communication and education, Mike saw a chance to radically rethink how people learn, work, and connect in a hybrid world.

German UDS offers flexible, modular learning through micro-degrees, certifications, and immersive digital experiences that are tailored to the demands of today's workforce. Its mission is to democratize access to digital education, especially for learners in the Global South, and to empower people to shape the digital transformation in a humane and inclusive way.

The university's digital campus, the German UDS Virtual Campus, is currently being developed to include virtual classrooms and immersive environments. Professors can appear as interactive avatars that guide students through lessons, host discussions, and even hold office hours in the metaverse. Students can explore virtual libraries, attend lectures, and collaborate with peers from around the world, all without leaving their homes.

Yet despite its virtual campus model, the German UDS team knew that physical space would be essential. The physical campus became a vital counterpart to the digital one, creating a real-world space where ideas take shape, relationships grow, and the university's vision becomes tangible.

"We are human beings and still need places to meet and collaborate."

PROF. DR. MIKE FRIEDRICHSEN, CO-FOUNDER OF GERMAN UDS

THE ROLE OF SPACE IN A DIGITAL UNIVERSITY

The German UDS headquarters serve as the physical anchor for a university that otherwise exists in the cloud. “Digital platforms allow us to reach anyone, anywhere,” says Mike.

“But it’s in the physical spaces where human connection sparks creativity, trust, and innovation. That’s where ideas move from concept to reality.”

PROF. DR. MIKE FRIEDRICHSEN, CO-FOUNDER OF GERMAN UDS

Today, the German UDS space supports a wide range of activities: open lectures, team meetings, corporate events, startup workshops, and spontaneous gatherings. The space is intended to serve not only the staff and students of German UDS, but anyone who wants to be a part of a forward-thinking learning community.

DESIGNING FOR FLEXIBILITY AND BELONGING

The German UDS philosophy is reflected in the way the space is designed. “We wanted to remove the traditional barriers between sectors,” says Nele Friedrichsen, Project Manager at German UDS.

“Learning shouldn’t be siloed. It should be open, inclusive, and part of everyday life.”

NELE FRIEDRICHSEN, PROJECT MANAGER AT GERMAN UDS.

Open lecture areas invite anyone to join and listen, while collaboration labs foster group work and brainstorming. Quiet zones offer space for focused, individual tasks, and relaxed lounges with soft lighting and informal seating encourage rest and reflection. Cafés and informal workspaces are intentionally placed to support socializing. Each room is designed to signal its purpose through layout, lighting, and furniture chosen to support deep concentration, casual conversations, or creative exploration.

The space is also intentionally designed to nurture community and create a sense of belonging for everyone. It’s a place where ideas are exchanged freely and where the physical proximity of diverse thinkers sparks new possibilities.

“The environment gives people the freedom and flexibility to choose their space depending on the task. And it brings people together in a way that feels natural.”

SYSTER FRIEDRICHSEN, CHAIRWOMAN OF THE GERMAN UDS FOUNDATION

CO-CREATING THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

The Steelcase team worked closely with German UDS to co-create a space that embodies the university's values: openness, adaptability, and innovation. “We visited the Munich LINC at least three times to experience the community-oriented working and learning spaces in action,” says Syster.

“Steelcase encouraged us to be brave, think differently, and challenge norms.”

NELE FRIEDRICHSEN, PROJECT MANAGER AT GERMAN UDS

Steelcase's flexible solutions have enabled German UDS to host people in numerous capacities, from workshops to certification programs. The environment encourages spontaneous connection and cross-disciplinary dialogue. Whether you're a student, researcher, staff member, or a visitor, the space invites you in. “The space just works. It's ready for anything,” says Syster.

FORGING A NEW PATH IN EDUCATION

German UDS is redefining what digital learning looks like, and physical space plays a critical role in this model. It provides a tangible connection to the university's digital identity with a place where relationships are built and ideas are tested. German UDS is a perfect example of the enduring power of space to bring people together, even in an increasingly digital world. And as German UDS continues to grow, the space is designed to evolve with it. “This is a journey,” says Syster. “We're learning as we go, and the space is learning with us.”