School is Another Place: the making and meaning of the school environment in the twentieth century

Hosted by the ‘Designing Australian Schools’ Research Project, University of Melbourne

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In 1936 progressive American educator Lester Dix argued that for new schools, “motifs borrowed from the hospital, the office building or the warehouse should give way to the atmosphere of a restfully designed home.” This focus on the deinstitutionalisation, naturalisation and domestication of school environments was a characteristic theme of school reform throughout the twentieth century and has been remarked upon widely in the literature that addresses the history of school design. From the postwar period onwards, however, architects and educators in a range of national and colonial settings around the globe augmented this emphasis on creating a stronger domestic identity for the school with a wider set of civic and community associations. In particular they invoked the neighbourhood, town square and street. In so doing, they recognized that the school could never simply be home, but was always a space of mediation between home and the wider world, private and public realms, domesticity and work: never fully one or the other. This recognition, which appears in school plans as well as educational policy, allows us to see that each attempt to reform the school environment is also a proposition about the school’s role in mediating the child’s passage from domestic protection to public participation. The ways in which such analogies with the civic realm beyond the school gates have been used to influence and understand what happens inside schools, enables us to think about the very nature of the school and the ways in which the meanings and uses of the school environment have changed over time.

Site Plan for NSW High Schools by the NSW Government Architect’s Branch (Michael Dysart), 1962.

This international, interdisciplinary symposium exploring the history of school design and use in the twentieth-century will address the following questions: How have architects, planning consultants and educational authorities given concrete expression to educational aspirations by promoting certain plan types and physical forms in the school? And how did changing ideas about institution, neighbourhood and town influence their thinking? How have teachers and other intellectuals imagined, named and enacted the school environment? And which ideas and associations about environment, community and society have they reinforced via these activities? How have students used the physical environment of
the school to map out their own relationships to knowledge, authority and society? And what are the names, ideas and games that have been drawn from the wider world to define and perform the spaces of the school?

For their part, students, teachers and school leaders were often unpredictable collaborators in this process of making the identity of the twentieth century school environment. Students in particular, representing different age groups, genders and social backgrounds, cut across official designations as they used and abused the different parts of the school, adapting the programmed spaces of the school to their own ends. At the same time, across the whole century and in widely varying geographical and institutional settings, students also absorbed basic lessons about decorum, formality and authority from school, as well as lessons about group identity, intimacy and play. Contributions that document and analyse how the architecturally and educationally programmed spaces of schools were re-coded and renegotiated by their users, will form an important component of this symposium.

The intention of the event is to address spatial reforms and innovations in twentieth century schools all around the world – including Latin America, North America, Western Europe and Scandinavia as well as the Eastern bloc and in colonial and postcolonial settings in Asia and Africa. It will do so by reference to four main themes:

1. **Connections** – the circulation of new ideas about school building and use globally through key international educational organizations, such as the New Educational Fellowship (NEF); through architecture and planning networks, including the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) or CIAM, and the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA); as well as through other personal, professional and governmental links that brought together educators, architects and policy-makers.
2. **Design** – the innovations in planning and architectural expression generated through school design across the century, especially those that were focused on new ways of thinking about the school-aged child and new methods for educating them.
3. **Experience** – the ways in which children and teachers in particular have recorded and reflected upon twentieth century school environments through visual art, written recollection and oral testimony
4. **Government** – the techniques and representations that situate school buildings and grounds in relation to state authority. These might include funding regimes, policy innovations and industrial conflict as well physical regimes of observation and control and resistance to those regimes.

One of the main goals of the symposium is to foster a shared terrain for researchers to consider architectural strategies, educational aspirations and social expectations connected to the school environment, across the twentieth century. To this end we are organizing an event that includes contributions from scholars working in a range of disciplinary areas, including history, architecture, education and urban planning.

In addition to a book based on papers contributed to the event, the organizers expect to produce a journal special issue related to a key theme that emerges from the paper presentations.

The event is being organised under the auspices of the research project ‘Designing Australian Schools’, a project funded by the Australian Research Council and based at the University of Melbourne. For more information about the project please go to [http://www.abp.unimelb.edu.au/research/designing-australian-schools](http://www.abp.unimelb.edu.au/research/designing-australian-schools)

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