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## The spaces and places of schooling: historical perspectives

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'Whatever men think or say', observed the influential Victorian headmaster Edward Thring, 'the almighty wall is, after all, the supreme and final arbiter of schools' (Whyte, 2003, p. 619). His conviction that architecture irrevocably shaped school life was widely shared at the time and has a strong contemporary resonance. The London School Board produced hundreds of buildings from 1870 onwards: each designed to shape the learning of its pupils and all seen as symbolic of social and educational reform more generally. These elementary schools were, as Sherlock Holmes memorably apostrophised, 'Lighthouses! Beacons of the future! Capsules, with hundreds of bright little seeds in each, out of which will spring the wiser, better England of the future' (Conan Doyle, 1928, p. 515). They were also, as their architect, Edward Robson, asserted, all intended to be 'sermons in brick', raising the whole tone of their neighbourhood (Jackson, 1995, p. 41). A little over a century later, the British government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme represented a recrudescence of these ideas. No less than £55 billion was to be spent constructing or reconstructing no fewer than 3500 institutions. As one scholar puts it, BSF was a 'utopian' project. Its 'doubly allegorical promise was that architectural transformation would beget educational and social transformation' (Kraftl, 2012, p. 852).

The perceived importance of school buildings is, in many respects, hardly surprising. In the modern world, childhood has become the focus for intense anxieties (Cunningham, 2020). Education is, by the same token, the locus of tremendous hopes and ambitions (Harford & O'Donoghue, 2020). Architecture is the meeting point for these emotions. Moreover, it is widely accepted that buildings are never neutral containers and their design powerfully shapes behaviour. When the shaping of behaviour through teaching and learning is the principle purpose of the building – such as in the case of a school – that factor is amplified. The micro becomes magnified. Not only the interior design of spaces, but also the architecture within the space of the local community projects a view of the collective responsibility of society towards the education of its members and, at the same time, the role of the school in shaping that society. Not for nothing did the Italian psychologist Loris Malaguzzi once describe the environment of learning as the 'third teacher' alongside other children and the adults in a school (Holert, 2021, p. 51). From royalist Spain to revolutionary Mexico and from the Soviet Union to Apartheid-era South Africa: the spaces and places of schooling have consequently formed the subject of significant debate and substantial amounts of investment (Grosvenor & Burke, 2008; Karlsson, 2004; Schell, 2004).

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Indeed, precisely because these places demand vast amounts of capital resources in their provision, they often endure, functioning over many decades (Dovey & Fisher, 2014). Hence, schools designed a century ago are in many parts of the world still operating largely unaltered in spite of extraordinary advances in technologies and changes in society. Nor is this the only way in which the subject of school buildings is constantly in dialogue with the history. As other scholars have noted, building programmes often rely for their justification on the belief that previous efforts have in some way or other been failures. They often seek to 'learn the lessons' of the past. There is, thus, a strong sense that even the most ambitious and avant-garde design is generated in response to something that came before it (Grierson & Hyland, 2012; Kraftl, 2012; Woolner et al., 2007).

At the same time, the practice of pedagogy and technological innovation as well as re-occurring radical reconceptualisations as to the potential of changing societies through changing education have together produced challenges to what has been recognised as the 'traditional model' of the school. 'The least suitable place in which to carry out educational activity is the school building', argued the architect Giancarlo de Carlo in an archetypally radical article of 1969 (De Carlo, 1969, p. 21). Hence the attempts to challenge the so-called 'hegemony of the classroom' by altering its design and component parts have in the past and continue to be a principal concern for those intent on a radical reform of education. Designing the child-centred school came to be an aspiration around which certain progressive educators and architects from around the world could unite, especially in the mid-20th century (Burke, 2013).

These radicals contributed to a wider, and still ongoing, re-evaluation of the spaces and places of schooling by questioning assumptions about the singular importance of architecture, furniture, and fittings. Drawing on a diversity of theorists – Athusser, Deleuze and Guattari, and the phenomenological approaches of writers like Merleau-Ponty are frequent reference points – scholars and practitioners alike have looked beyond form to consider literally less concrete issues (Dovey & Fisher, 2014). They have explored the ways in which the school is constituted, or assembled, by flows of people, by sensation and by affect, by the memories and sense impressions of inhabitants as well as by more apparently tangible things. In recent years, scholars have even explored the ways in which the school site is employed, subverted, and reimagined through the practice of parkour (De Freitas, 2011).

This Special Issue of the journal brings together a collection of histories of spaces and places of learning as public institutions. Most are concerned with aspects of the school building, but other spaces of schooling such as public libraries and youth centres are also discussed. As such, each piece is contextualised with reference to a rich literature that, particularly over the past two decades, has emerged from the work of historians of education intent on expanding the range of source material in their research. In the main, journals specialising in educational research have rarely focused on the built environment in their special issues. There have, however, been exceptions. In 1969, the winter edition of the *Harvard Educational Review* produced a special issue. Entitled 'Architecture and Education', this issue featured contributions from eight prominent architects and planners, a child psychiatrist, an architectural historian and an illustrator-cartoonist all exploring the role of educational architecture in different ways but oriented towards a common question, asking 'if and how the physical environment informs and

shapes and liberates the human spirit' (*Harvard Educational Review*, 1969 Preface). This publication demonstrated the value of a multi-disciplinary approach to exploring relationships between notions of childhood agency, architecture and education.

The relationship between architecture and education has produced a rich research literature over the past half century. Roy Lowe locates the beginnings of recognising the school building as a primary source in educational research with the work of Seaborne (1985). Lowe's subsequent collaboration with Seaborne resulted in a two-volume study of the history of the English school architecture, the first comprehensive study from an educationalist's perspective (Seaborne & Lowe, 1977). Stuart Maclure, editor of the *Times Educational Supplement* (1969–1989) took more than a passing interest in school buildings and the significance of their design in education (Maclure, 1984). Andrew Saint's *Towards a Social Architecture* (Saint, 1987) was groundbreaking in opening up and revealing the seam of knowledge shared by architects and educationalists in the post-war decades.

At the turn of the millennium, new international networks were established by historians of education intent on broadening the research agenda (Grosvenor et al., 1999) drawing attention to largely untapped visual archives of schooling. In the same year, the first meeting of Network 17 (Histories of Education) of the European Educational Research Association (EERA) was held at Lahti, Finland. This network nurtured a new generation of historians of education, many of whom brought together in their work an interest in the visual and the material in exploring architectures of education (Burke, 2009; O'Donoghue, 2010; Thyssen, 2007). In 2005, historians of education across Europe contributed a series of articles to 'Containing the School Child: Architecture and Pedagogies' in a double Special Issue of the Journal *Paedagogica Historica* (Burke, 2005). In the same year, an edited collection of essays on materialities of schooling brought together contributions touching on the design of buildings and what they contain as agents of education beyond the traditional notion of the curriculum (Grosvenor & Lawn, 2005). This publication drew attention to the everyday taken for granted and overlooked material objects and routines constituting the fabric of schooling such as the school desk, pupils' uniforms, windows, keys as well as the representation of schooling through national and international exhibitions. A collaboration between the historian of education and childhood, Ning de Coninck-Smith and architectural historian Marta Gutman resulted in a seminal publication (2008) *Designing Modern Childhoods. History, Space and the Material Culture of Children*. In the same year, Burke and Grosvenor's *School* was published, which traced the relationship between architecture and education in the design of school buildings since the late nineteenth century. Research engagement in a wide range of international dimensions of this key relationship has continued over the past decade (Braster et al., 2011; Burke, 2013; Burke et al., 2014; Darian-Smith & Willis, 2016; Kozlovsky, 2015; Pietsch & Muller, 2015). Most recently, the International Standing Conference on the History of Education (ISCHE) proposed the theme 'Spaces and Places of Education' for its annual conference held in Porto, Portugal in July 2019. A special conference issue is published this year on the theme drawing together papers from around the world (Correia, 2021).

What distinguishes the collection of essays assembled here? The authors range from early career scholars to established, internationally recognised academics and their geographical spread is considerable. South America, Australia, Europe and the UK are represented here. A strong connecting theme in the collection concerns ways that

interpretation of the intended formal and informal in design has been an important influence in shaping the material conditions of teaching and learning. Lacomba Montes and Campos Uribe address the possible origins of the domestic character of schools designed for young children in post-war England locating these in the English House of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. Dussel discusses, in an Argentinian context, the significance of the space of the school toilet as a site of informal cultural exchange. Spencer-Bennett and Grosvenor consider the children's library as a sensorially rich space of informal learning that can be accessed through visual sources and oral testimonies. In a Belgian context, Herman and Tondeur have taken a biographical approach to investigating the everyday practices of teachers in rearranging the material conditions of their classrooms in an effort to understand how primary school teachers and the school spaces they inhabited have interacted over time. In this way, they address user experience, recognising that what architects have at some time intended has often been overlooked, ignored or usurped by teachers through their practice.

With such a wide geographical reach, the transnational and comparative perspective is a strong feature of this collection. McLeod and Rasmussen's piece, through the prism of the concept and design of the open school, embraces national education settings that, they suggest, have historically been constructed as on the edge of the so-called 'international'. By comparing Danish and Australian practices during the 1970s they advocate for a material and localised conceptualisation of the transnational in the forging of (open) school spaces. Alegre and Heitor discuss the impact of transnational institutions in the transformation of Portuguese school design during the latter years of the Dictatorship. They argue that the impact of these international connections, in particular the involvement of Portugal in the OECD Mediterranean Regional Project, affected Portuguese educational debate and deeply changed the paradigm of school architecture design in Portugal. Julie Willis, in her article on the early history of the Australian public school, similarly shows how a strongly centralised system nonetheless drew on transnational influences.

These articles also collectively consider the role of the modern nation state in shaping the spaces and places of schooling. The London Board Schools were self-evidently products of state action, designed to educate the newly enfranchised and to equip their pupils for the needs of the nation. The Australian, Danish, Portuguese, and British schools considered here were similarly intended to serve what was understood as the national interest – and were designed with that in mind. But the case studies also illustrate the limits of state power. Not least, Riaubiene and Nekrošius's account of the Lithuanian school-building programme highlights the tensions between the ideals of central planning expended by the Soviet Union and the far more complex process of construction. The ambitions of the architects, the constraints of the site, and the traditions of particular localities all frustrated the centralised state.

Finally, any collection of essays on the design of spaces for teaching and learning is confronted with the question of whether or not the material conditions matter, and if so *how* they matter in promoting growth and development, put broadly. There is a large research literature which over the years has attempted, and more often than not failed, to draw a direct correlation proving some measure of impact. A key publication, often cited, 'The Impact of School Environments. A Literature Review' (Higgins et al., 2005) concluded

that there was no direct measurable impact on learning. But this has not deterred subsequent research in attempting to assess the impact of design intentions on outcomes (Barrett & Barrett, 2019; Daniels et al., 2017).

Taken as a whole, this Special Issue repeatedly engages with that question. It shows how critically important to the experience of school life even overlooked spaces like the lavatory can be. It explores how the environment can facilitate often unexpected outcomes. It also shows how adaptable and creative the inhabitants and schools, libraries, and youth clubs prove to be. Avoiding any sort of environmental determinism, these articles instead tease out the interaction between people and places as they together create a learning space. Above all, what this collection illuminates is just how rich and still virtually unexplored is the terrain of the history of educational architecture across the globe. If it inspires further work on the subject, it will have served its purpose admirably.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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**Catherine Burke** is Emerita Professor of the History of Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She has specialised in cultural and material histories of educational contexts and in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Her research examines the relationship between innovation in teaching and the design of formal and informal learning environments; the view of the child and young person in the design of education; the history of 20th century school architecture and its pioneers. She has published widely on the history of school architecture, the participation of children in the design of education, as well as on contemporary school architecture. For many years she was editor of the Sources and Interpretations section of *History of Education Journal* and is currently, with Professor Jane Martin of the University of Birmingham, joint series editor of the Routledge Progressive Education series.

**William Whyte** is professor of social and architectural history and a fellow of St John's College, Oxford. His work on the history of education includes a previous special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* on 'The problem of dyslexia: historical perspectives', co-edited with Philip Kirby, Kate Nation, and Margaret Snowling. Other publications include his books, *Oxford Jackson: architecture, education, status, and style, 1835–1924* (Oxford, 2006) and *Redbrick: a social and architectural history of Britain's civic universities* (Oxford, 2015). He is currently working on a six-volume *Cultural History of Higher Learning* (co-edited with Ning de Coninck-Smith and Julia Horne) and a monograph, *The University: a material history*, for Harvard University Press. He will become chair of the editorial board of the *Oxford Review of Education* in 2022.

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