

Schools as Prisons

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Introduction

This short paper explores the space and language of schooling to suggest that they are very much linked to the penitentiary, despite a contemporary rhetorical framework that presents school as fun. The paper asks practitioners not to take student working conditions for granted.

Modern educationspeak and the festivisation of learning

We have moved further down the track of the society of the spectacle (Guy Debord) than many in the 60s would have thought possible. With hyperfestivised events such as the World Cup, Olympic Games and techno parades that, like giant road sweepers, push anything archaic out of their way, modern man, with an umbilical connection to his computer screen, is faced with a virtual reality where life seems like an endless, mindless party.

This is the thesis of the French essayist Philippe Muray, who went so far as to coin modern man *Homo Festivus*. *Homo Festivus* is beyond history, out of reach of any potential dialectic process and floating in a sea of bright lights, booming music and smiling faces. Muray's thesis pertains mainly to the 90s and, of course, almost exclusively to certain Western societies.

One could argue that in the world of today with its deep financial crises, incertitude, fear of pending natural disasters, wars and dictatorships, we are hardly in such a carnival. And yet one could also argue that in some sectors we are still bubbling with the effervescence of the 90s with its tacit moral imperative to consume and not to think and to make a noise about it as a right. Take, for instance, grown adults playing computer games, almost as a philosophical statement and the deadly serious institutionalization of festivals or "days": father's day, mother's day, Human Rights Day, day of the child, day of the tomato and so on.

And where does international education stand in all this? Consider the title of this conference, "Inspiring Education", or the fact that Eurodisney is the choice of venue for many workshops in international education (Goofy and Donald Duck can join your table for a hands-on activity), what do we make of the articles in education magazines and the beaming smiles that leap out at you from every page? Most education websites, logos, banners, promotional videos and so on show teachers smiling well and smiling hard, pointing to the whiteboard with joviality. The students have even larger smiles; they are having more fun in the classroom than they are in the playground. There are clearly no high stakes tests, no grumpy and unfair teachers, no punishment and fear, no boredom, nothing but *edutainment*.

Some of the phrases that characterize this festivisation of education – If we are going to call it that, which might be a bit strong – are as follows and these all come from the front covers of magazines in international education:

"Time to shine" (IB World, Sept 11)

“Education for Everyone” (IB World, Sept 11)
“Creativity, it’s not what you know” (IB World, May 11)
“If the teacher’s not on fire, neither are the students” (IB World, January 11)
“The power of humanity” (IB World, 2008)
“Celebrating Difference” (IB World, 2008)
“If life were perfect” (IB World, 2006)

To be clear, the order of the day is that education is exciting, it’s for everyone and it’s a celebration, a type of street carnival or “school pride”. If you are not being creative then you are shining, or even on fire.

The strongest expression of this politically correct rhetoric with its terrifying straightjacket of joy I heard was in an accreditation debriefing I attended where one of the visitors said that she was so moved by what she saw in the classroom that she had to leave the room, presumably to burst into tears. So education is not only fun and beautiful, colourful and creative, it makes us want to cry with joy.

Who are schools designed for?

But how does this shine with the students? What does it mean for them to be in class? Are they all crying with the beauty of it? Let’s answer that question with some other questions.

Movement:

Are students allowed to stay at home and not to go to school?
Are students allowed to miss lessons?
Are students allowed to run in the school?
Why can’t the little ones keep still in class?
Can they escape?

Time:

How long do students have to spend in school every day, every week, every month and every year?
When does school start and when does it end?
How long is a lesson and why?
How much repetition do you think there is in the life of a student going through, let’s say, 15 years of schooling?
How quickly do young children get out of the classroom when the bell goes .. and why?
How much time are they allowed to spend in the playground?
What is the proportion of time they spend doing sports and arts?
Do they have any real choice at all as to how they use their time?

Power:

Who decides when a student can leave the room or leave school?
Who evaluates them, how and why?
What are the procedures if a child does not abide by the rules?
How do you keep children quiet at assemblies?
How much are they allowed to talk with each other in class?

What sorts of punishments does your school use to discipline the students?

Of course many of the answers to these questions are linked to the age of the students and the fact that they need limits and cannot be left to their own devices. People like Alexander Sutherland Neill or Jean Jacques Rousseau might not have agreed with this fully though and how can we be sure that this is not merely the result of conditioned anti-anarchical belief?

Architecture and Ideology

We seem today to have lost sight of the original goal of architecture that is - to ennoble the place and the people who use it.

Arthur Erickson (Speech to McGill University School of Architecture)

The architecture of schools is core to the question of their function, purpose and the people for whom they are built. The question goes beyond one of ergonomics into aesthetics and further still into thought and language.

Traditional Models

The Church

The school system today performs the threefold function common to powerful churches throughout history. It is simultaneously the repository of society's myth, the institutionalization of that myth's contradictions, and the locus of the ritual which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and reality.

Ivan Illich (*Deschooling Society*, 54)

Many schools are like churches for obvious historical reasons. This goes back to the law in the Torah that every settlement should have a school and the relationship between schooling and religion we see in early Vedic society and of course, much later, in the Middle Ages where the Catholic Church was the centre of learning.

The ritual of prayer is inherently similar to some of the practices that have sustained themselves in education: the general assembly, the headmaster's address, songs at certain times and silence at others not to mention courses in ethics and the general monitoring of behaviour.

The space in schools and universities designed this way is often organised around a central quadrangle and there will usually be a general hall for congregations, reminding us of the common meeting place where students can be linked (*religio*) in the service of a higher being. A characteristic image of this type of school design is the high window, perhaps stain glassed, that lets the lofty light of reason permeate an otherwise dark place.

The language we use to describe education and learning is often heavily influenced by a semantic field of religion and faith: to "light fires" and "shed light", to "shine", to "pick one's self up", to have an "epiphany", to be "struck by an idea", to be "illuminated", we speak of "disciples", "initiates", "condisciples" and we learn "by heart".

Punishment, one of the historical vertebrae of teaching, something that has become obsolete, embarrassing and politically incorrect with the modern festification of education, resonates with the idea of sacrifice: the individual is taken aside and smote so as to propitiate the

heavens. The culture of punishment is, of course, heavily Judeo-Christian with its taste for confession, expulsion (excommunication) and penitence.

Arguably, the religious model drives home the idea and belief that the teacher is a type of psychopomp or priest, there to intercede for the student and occasionally let him or her glimpse the heavens from the bottom of an ink well. Encrypted in the dark labyrinthine structure is a discourse of self-hatred, shame, weakness and utter despondency that can be cured only by the wise and metaphysical hand of the master.

The way that the classroom is designed in this environment can vary from the teacher standing on a type of elevated platform to him being behind a rostrum, reminding us of the pontiff whose voice, *ex cathedra*, will not be questioned. Before him the students sit in rows, or should we say pews. The space close to the speaker, around his or her desk, is sacred, a type of altar. Those students that linger there probably do so to be admonished or punished.

The Victorian School

It was such a crowded scene, and there were so many objects to attract attention, that, at first, Nicholas stared about him, really without seeing anything at all. By degrees, however, the place resolved itself into a bare and dirty room, with a couple of windows, whereof a tenth part might be of glass, the remainder being stopped up with old copybooks and paper.
Charles Dickens (*Nicholas Nickleby*, 8:2)

If we are to look at a type of Dickensian model then we must continue down the long corridors leading to closed locked doors, unfriendly cabinets with instruments of power and knowledge on display in a mausoleum of learning. Some of the language we use to describe outdated patterns of thinking match this quite clearly: to have “tunnel vision”, to be “closed-minded”, to “go down the beaten path”, to be “in the darkness”, to be “unenlightened”.

The Victorian teacher is more than a morally superior being; he has physical, statutory power over the student – usually characterized by a cane that is used to lash the children when they step out of line. Another form of punishment to be associated with this type of school is of course detention. What better argument for schools being prisons than the practice of detaining a student in them as a punishment?

Here we have progressed from the sacred whisper of power of the Church school to the more explicitly stated discourse of power in school rules. Rules posted on the walls, rules drummed out by heart, rules upheld and rules for which one can be and irremediably will be thrashed. Hence buildings tend to be “tall and barrack-like” (Alexander, 178). Just as these schools and their rules are fundamentally unhappy, so too is the enterprise of learning as literary characters such as Gradgrind remind us: students are nothing but empty recipients to be filled with hard facts and beaten into knowing them. Anything that is enjoyable, of course, is distraction and will not feature in this type of school. All is hard, cold and dark.

Classroom space follows the previous model with students sitting in rows. The pupils’ desks are joined to the chair, emphasizing their enchainment. An easel and free standing board along with an abacus and globe would ordain the space and the teacher would teach from his desk. A number of literary accounts of the Victorian classroom, such as those found in Dickens, describe it as cluttered and dirty. We still use metaphors related to this spatial model

to describe states of confusion: to be “muddled”, “to have one’s mind “cluttered”, “mixed up”, “disorganized”.

The Gridiron Model

29: From a doctoral examination. — "What is the task of all higher education?" To turn men into machines. "What are the means?" Man must learn to be bored. Friedrich Nietzsche (Twilight of the Idols, 532)

The 20th century sees a more industrialized, functional model of building taking precedence, characterized by an angular gridiron floor plan – all is square and rectangular. We are in Euclid’s paradise what with rectangular pencil boxes, backpacks, tables, square windows, cubical lunchboxes, straight edged pens and pencils.

This geometry can be likened to some of the idioms we use to describe highly conventional thinking: to be “a square”, to be “linear” in your thinking, not to “think outside the box”, to be “boxed in”. On the other hand, you are expected to “matriculate” from school. The square school reminds us of a businesses or a factory and here again there is a long list of terms used in education to suggest this correlation: “value added”, “credit”, “averages”, “results”, “rates” and so on.

The ideology implicit in the floor plan of the factory or post industrial revolution school – the modern school if one likes – is one of efficiency, positivism and utilitarianism, a one-size-fits-all approach, extending Euclid’s mania all the way to the horizon, which presumably is a straight line that can be measured with a ruler. Here religion has moved away from the school, we are in a secular world that worships straight lines and statistics.

The classroom in this type of school is, needless to say, another box and squarely in the middle of the far wall, of course, there’s a blackboard – now a whiteboard. A recent extension of this is the computer class, either in a computer lab or with lap-tops. Here we have rectangular keyboards with square keys attached to rectangular screens on square desks in square rooms in square buildings. Such irregular organisms as trees, flowers or human beings must seem strange in such a neat universe.

These three models, traditional if you will, are still the predominant ones, especially the last. Many schools in this vein are not designed to give pleasure to those that are in them, they are there as austere, cold prison houses. Students shuffle from one room to the other and there are moments of chaos and spillage when a crowd swells too much but these moments of anarchy are soon fenced in again and we go back to the classroom (having queued outside, no doubt, waiting for the teacher to unlock it). Once in the classroom, of course, we immediately resort to that essentially bureaucratic posture of the so-called developed world, sitting down.

The teacher should stand, mostly in front of the board and talk while the students shunt their bodies from one side of the chair to the other to prevent pins and needles, trying to concentrate on the joys of learning. Then the bell goes, they stand up and move off to some other closed space where more learning will take place, presumably between four walls.

Needless to say the teacher in front, facing the students with the blackboard behind him, the ongoing model in these traditional designs (and an ongoing one in most classroom models) brings with it militaristic overtones of power and controlled production. Rows also suggest

conventionality and uniformity. Rituals and exercises in power such as making the class speak in unison, stand up and sit down together and timing exercises that start and end simultaneously, emphasise this and work on the collective subconscious to erode hopes of individualism or non-conformity.

Modern, progressive models

The Great Outdoors

[The] events of the sea [...] show in the light of day the inner worth of a man, the edge of his temper, and the fibre of his stuff; that reveal the quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretences, not only to others but also to himself.

Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim*, 50)

The first and most extreme reaction to the claustrophobia created by these earlier models is simply to get out of any closed space into the outdoors. Following the philosophy of Baden Powell's scouts or Kurt Hahn's Outward Bound movement, in experiments of the early and mid-20th century, we see the dark spaces give way to education in the woods.

The model, of course, goes back much further than this with Plato's *Phaedrus* far from the Megara by brooks under trees. An outdoor education is all about appreciating nature and freeing oneself from the corrupting influences of society with its bad smells, mean attitudes and unwholesome obsessions.

What a fabulous way to educate our children! How realistic this is, is another question. One can imagine all sorts of fanciful outdoor schools on boats, out of tents, on the beach. We will be reminded of Thoreau's *Walden* or Rousseau's *Emile*, that the idea is a Romantic one, to be cherished but realized only with considerable difficulty. Nonetheless, the playground is an essential feature of the school and this comes, in part, from the Romantics who influenced educators like Pestalozzi, Comenius, Montessori and Steiner. There are, of course, cultural variants: in his book *Culture and Pedagogy*, Robin Alexander tells us that in France and Russia playgrounds are usually asphalt whereas in India the space is usually unpaved (178).

We use a collection of great outdoors metaphors to describe education and learning such as "to open your mind", "to air your thoughts", "to explore ideas", "to jog your memory", "a trail of thought" or "freeing your mind", a "source of ideas", to "brainstorm", to "cover ground", to "wade through", to "cultivate". One can become an animal through learning too of course, a "book worm", "eager beaver", you can "ruminate" and "chew on something" and so on.

The way that students will be organized varies to the setting but one can expect small circular groups huddled at the feet of the teacher who might be standing under a tree. Children will be encouraged to sit cross-legged for obvious ergonomic reasons and the teacher, rather than using a blackboard to illustrate concepts and theories, will be handling objects like compasses or pen knives, showing their functionality and explaining *in situ*. More radical still, some of the learning could be on the move, discussing the environment during a hike through the countryside.

Whether the children have escaped school this way, though, depends on the teacher, who can follow them, counts them, keeps them in single file and can always warn of some sanction that will be dealt out once the group returns indoors.

The Beehive

Our aim is to discipline for activity, for work, for good; not for immobility, not for passivity, not for obedience.

Maria Montessori (*The Montessori Method*, 93)

A more common reaction to the school as mausoleum has been what I call the beehive: a popular alternative throughout the 60's, 70's and 80's. The idea here is that classrooms are all connected to a larger space, somewhat like cells of a beehive articulated around a central space, known as a "home bay" or "activity area" (Alexander, 178) where the queen bee of learning lies in wait.

This matriarchal model is based on the idea that group learning is at the core of social organisation. It deconstructs the politically incorrect corridor and replaces it with endless and no doubt felicitous interconnectedness. This model is fairly prominent in primary schools, particularly kindergartens, and fits well with theories of learning that place projects and collaboration at the centre.

The lexical field of the beehive with its unfortunate references to reproduction is rife in post WW2 education speak: "to pollinate", "the germ of an idea", a "brainchild", "growth of an idea", "make connections", to be a "prolific" reader, to have a "fertile imagination", to "grow" ...

One could argue that we have moved away from the prison here. But then again, one could also say that the activity area is merely a larger and less tightly structured cell and the students are now in an arena, they are on display so to speak.

Open Plan

Of over 2500 schools built in the period 1967 – 1969 in 43 states [in the United States], 50% had open designs.

Neville Bennett and Terry Hyland (*Open Plan – Open Education?*, 159)

More recently still there is the open space model, echoing the spatial organization of the modern work place. There are some examples of schools like this where the learning takes place at different stations and interaction is always possible through the continuum of borderless space.

This model fits the language of modern idioms to explain free and creative thinking: "blue sky", "open-ended", "open minded", "clear headed", "free-flowing", and so forth.

The open plan mirrors the educational philosophy of thinkers like Harold Rugg who preached interdisciplinarity and the breakdown of walls suggests a deconstruction of the subject specific delineations. The open plan model has influenced, on a microcosmic scale, the organization of many classroom activities that allow for differentiation with separate groups working simultaneously, breaking away from the notion that a single space implies a single homogenous group of learners.

Traditional classroom space is almost completely deconstructed here. We are not, thankfully, in the cellular prison anymore but one could argue that this feels a bit like one of Dante's

circles in the inferno where everyone is thrown together in a gigantic bolgia: *lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate*

Whilst this model is taking us away from the constricted cell of the classroom and allows for freedom of movement in one, all-encompassing space, there are now no walls to hide behind: all is under the gaze of the surveyor who has a panoptical view of the learning:

On inverse le principe du cachot ; ou plutôt de ses trois fonctions – enfermer, priver de lumière et cacher – on ne garde que la première et on supprime les deux autres. La pleine lumière et le regard d'un surveillant captent mieux que l'ombre, qui finalement protégeait. La visibilité est un piège (Foucault 233/4).ⁱ

Modern Classroom space

The main variants in modern classroom space that move away from rows are the horse shoe arrangement, separate groups or the round table. In different ways these suggest less autocracy than rows and play on ideas of democracy, community and lateral as opposed to uniquely frontal communication lines. Progressive educational practice involves a variety of activities, sharing and investigating as opposed to the older model of repetitious, ritualistic lectures from the master.

Hence there is more movement in the classroom as each lesson will bring with it some variation on the spatial organisation of the class.

Conclusion

Unlike ancient historians and poets (Herodotus, Thucydides and Homer) who gave a spatial dimension to their narratives, in the last few hundred years we have shown a tendency to overlook space when discussing ideas. Arguably, this is embedded in the way that mainstream Western theory of knowledge has developed:

Marx, Weber and Durkheim all have this in common: they prioritise time and history over space and geography and, where they treat the latter at all, tend to view them unproblematically as the stable context or site for historical action. The way in which space relations and geographical configurations are produced in the first place passes, for the most part unremarked, ignored. (Wittenberg 1)

Reflecting on the space of the school and the classroom allows for a more composite, balanced analysis of school life from the student's perspective. However, space is one representation of power amongst others. The ideology of curriculum and assessment, the exercise of power through discipline, punishment, exclusion, examinations and evaluation is a stronger invisible discourse of authority that turns the spotlight on the students as they become the site of power. Consider this quotation from Foucault: "l'examen, c'est la technique par laquelle le pouvoir au lieu d'émettre les signes de sa puissance, au lieu d'imposer sa marque à ses sujets, capte ceux-ci dans un mécanisme d'objectivation" (Foucault 220).ⁱⁱ

Students are constantly under the gaze of their teachers as signs of learning are looked for, investigated, monitored, assessed, scrutinized. If we are not careful, with the very best of

intentions, we can become prison warders, locking our students in the prism of our eyes and ears, the red ink of our pens and the comments we make on report cards that frame them in an invisible but strong edifice.

In many ways, the progressive model with the student at the centre, transparent criterion referenced assessment, activities to choose from, friendly faculty and strong learning support can put the student in the worst type of prison of all, a type of brightly lit asylum full of do-gooders where everything has been done so well and so carefully that there is nowhere to turn and disagree. In the end, if you fail, you only have yourself to blame. There is no cruel and unreasonable schoolmaster to blame, no dark corridor in which to hide and feel sorry for oneself.

Perhaps this is why some parents want their children to go back to more traditional models of education with its emphasis on strictness: to escape the panopticon and terrifying righteousness of *Homo Festivus* and his World Cup of Education with its bright colours and invisible chains.

The title of this conference is “inspiring education”, it will hopefully inspire us to go back into our schools with renewed energy and passion, but also perhaps remembering that school might not always be that fun for reasons that are subtle and locked in the very culture of institutionalized education. After all, the etymology of the word school is the Greek σχολή, meaning to “hold back”.

We are all in one prison or the other, in the work place, at home, in our bodies, in our minds. Let’s be kind to ourselves and to our students by remembering the instinct for freedom that means that young people might not want to spend 15 year of their lives sitting down and performing perfectly. Let’s allow them the spillages and errors that make us and them human and not machines, let’s keep the bars of the cell at a healthy distance.

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ⁱ It reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide -it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap (translation by Alan Sheridan).

ⁱⁱ The examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its strength, instead of marking its subjects with its signs, captures them in a system of objectification (my translation).