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The Architecture of Pedagogical Encounters

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Introduction

When teachers approach their first experience of classroom interaction, they often tend to focus on curricula, syllabi, schemes of work, educational technology, and the various challenges that have to be faced in teaching a group of around thirty different students who, though having the same age, are characterised by distinct personalities, abilities, aptitudes, interests and levels of motivation. The pedagogical encounter in this sense is very challenging indeed: decisions have to be made regarding what to teach, when to teach, how to teach and to whom. As teachers, we have to decide about the pace of the delivery of the lesson, how and when to involve students in participatory interactions, when to use small and large group teaching and so on. There are issues of discipline and order in the classroom, as there are ethical dilemmas that need to be resolved, related to all the aspects of the teaching-learning encounters mentioned above. There are also issues concerning not only relationships with students, but also relationships with policy-makers, colleagues, parents, and the wider community. All this takes place in a context of uncertainty, to the extent that no recipe-answers exist to that perennial question: how does a good teacher teach? Individuals and human, interactive contexts are far too complex, and it is therefore difficult if not impossible to predict responses and reactions in any communicative situation. Indeed, it is this very complexity that legitimizes teachers' claim that their work constitutes a 'profession', given the inadequacy of fixed responses to pedagogical challenges. Teachers can only be good workers by reflecting carefully on their own experience, and by drawing on their baggage of theoretical understandings so that they can improve as they go about their task.

But among this uncertainty of shifting foundations for human interaction, there is one context which is crucial and which is perhaps slightly more predictable and rather more subject to direct manipulation, and that is school and classroom architecture. The physical or material context in which teaching takes place is the most obvious, and unfortunately the least referred to - at least in local educational research - among the variables that have an influence on the pedagogical encounter. The fact that parents are so sensitive to the state of repair of school buildings does indicate, however, the extent to which there is a popular understanding of the link between teaching, and the context in which it is carried out. Let me explain what I am referring to by 'material context' before I proceed to examine what I am here calling 'the architecture of pedagogical encounters'.

The Material Contexts of Teaching

'Material context' refers to the ensemble of locations and spaces that are made use of when teachers go about their business in facilitating learning in formal, institutional settings. In this sense 'architecture' is nothing but the use of space for particular ends, and more often than not, this space is somehow delineated and delimited in structured ways so that particular ends are more effectively reached. Such delineation and delimitation from countless possibilities of organising space tells us a lot about how the particular activity to be enacted is percieved by the architect, by the commisioning body, and by the users. The structure of the edifice is therefore a function not only of the developments in the technology of materials and of building tools and skills, but is also a function of the conceptual approach to the activity or activities in question, the values associated with it, aesthetic sensibility and so on.

An appropriate exercise in this context would be to consider church architecture, and how this developed throughout the centuries in response to not only technological innovations and aesthetic taste, but also in response to different and evolving conceptions that prevailed about God, God's relationship to humanity and *vice versa*. There is a world of difference in such conceptualations between, say, the dramatic, heavy, and overwhelming detail of baroque architecture, and the elegant, ethereal transendence of the gothic. When Vatican Council II encouraged a less hierarchical basis for the relationship between God, humanity and the intermediary priest, the view of an accessible, personal deity was reinforced by a radical

change in both the edifice of churches, and the use of internal space. Circular constructions brought people closer together and emphasised face-to-face interaction; movable chairs replaced pews and fixed benches, priests went down from podia and pulpits and began facing people, even entering into a dialogue with them; territory previously reserved for the clergy now became accessible to the laity. The organisation and use of space changed, therefore, in response to new theological ideas.

One could also argue that the transformation of buildings influences and shapes the thoughts and perceptions of those inhabiting the new spaces. Thus, as with other structures in human interaction, such as language and social institutions for instance, one could claim that architecture is both an object and a subject of particular conceptualisations, to the extent that it draws on a specific philosophy (in the case of sacred/ religious buildings, a philosphy of god and relations between deity and humanity) created by particular conceptualisations and itself creates and reinforces such conceptualisations. To pursue the example given above, while specific church forms and styles reflect ideas about god, they also reinforce these same ideas by structuring the relations and interactions of people entering them, and by evoking feelings, emotions, and interests of a specific kind in those attending functions in them. There is therefore a duality in the structure of edifices: buildings are both constituted by human agency, and at the same time they are the very medium of this constitution.

Such reflections can be brought to bear on those spaces organised for the purpose of formal instruction and education. 'Schools' are a relatively modern invention, and their contemporary form can be traced back to the early 19th century and to the industrial revolution and the birth of the nation state which gave rise to mass compulsory elementary education for all. Of course, formal schooling of a sort existed for centuries before this in various societies around the world. However, modern schooling represents a rupture from the past not only in the sense that it became democratised, that is, offered to all rather than to a select élite, but also because increasingly it became to be seen as a specialised activity, to be exercised by a *cadre* of specially trained personnel who made use of specific pedagogical strategies that had to be learnt. Additionally, and most importantly given the focus of this volume, this pedagogical activity was not hosted in domestic houses, in palaces or in convents. Nor was it part and parcel of the flow of life, where young people learnt by observing and mimicking their elders, as was most often the case in pre-modern societies. Rather, the 19th century saw the rise of

A sixteenth century schoolroom that illustrates the coexistence of classing and individualized instruction. Note, too, the possible assistant teacher at the back of the schoolroom. Taken from a German broadsheet, translated into English, and published in 1575. (Euing Broadside Ballad No. 1, copy in Glasgow University Library Department of Special Collections).

specially built edifices which were concieved in such a way as to facilitate the fulfilment of educational goals. We can note the enthusiasm and excitement in Canon Paul Pullicino's 1858 report when, as the third and most influential Director of Maltese elementary schools, he comments about one of the first purpose-built schools, that of Floriana. Joseph Fenech's commentary on this report oulines the key features of this architecture, and how this reflected pedagogical concerns of the time.

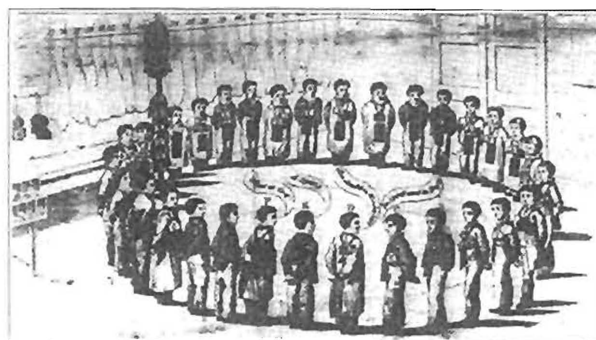
Thus, as with the example given earlier regarding churches, so too pupose-built schools structured pedagogical encounters. By looking at the way school buildings have developed since the 19th century, we have, as it were, a living document of the development of educators' conceptualisation of the pedagogical project, of beliefs about the learning child, of the value or otherwise of surveillance, open space, privacy, physical activity, recreation and so on. While not spelling out the relationship between architecture and changing conceptions of the educational enterprise, Conrad Thake does provide us with a useful historical outline of the development of school architecture in Malta. This historical dimension can also be gleaned from practically all the contributions in this issue. Students of education can delve into this 'archeology of forms' in order to construct a critical account of the history of pedagogical ideas.

In this critical historical glance at the past, we note both continuities and ruptures. Despite changing styles, school buildings in the 19th as much as in the 20th century are characterised by similar 'givens': closed edifices, often walled up to keep children 'in' and intruders 'out', with space parcelled up in what came to be known as 'classrooms', often (though not always)

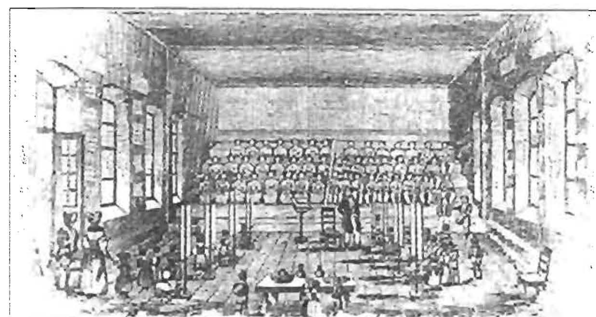
congregating groups of students according to specific criteria such as age or gender. These continuities and similarities are important indicators of the hard core or basic ideas that have structured our thinking about formal schooling for the past two hundred years. We realise the endurance of these concepts when we look at pictures of schools and classrooms in different European countries from the 1850s onwards. As my five year-old son exclaimed, pointing at one such illustration in a history of education book portraying life in a turn-of-the-century European teaching establishment: "That's my school!".

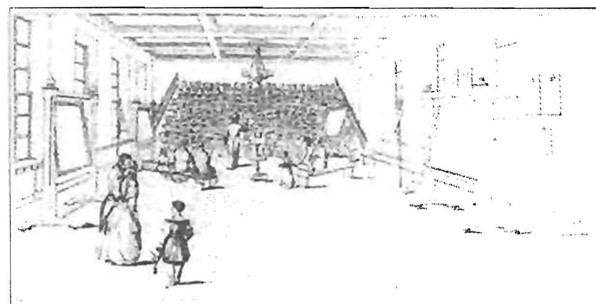
The durability of certain structures that configure school life becomes similarly clear to us when we consider what passes today as 'radical' education, which, in most cases, takes the school and the classroom in this 'classical' sense as given. Indeed, it is only Ivan Illich who has critiqued this basic structure of schools in any sustained manner by proposing that purpose-built edifices give way to 'networks of learning' organised through the home and the community. If we, like Illich, adopt to problematise the taken-for-granted view of grouping children in specialised spaces called schools, then we can begin to understand the social construction of these very same spaces, as well as their historical contingency. As anthropologists have pointed out, so-called 'primitive' cultures, like feudal societies of old, ensure the reproduction and transmission of knowledge and skills through interaction with parents and elders in a social group. Apprenticeship, the precursor of formal institutional learning was a way of learning directly from life and on - the - job, and not a few educators have questioned the extent to which schooling is, in fact, an improvement on immersion learning. Creatures from outer space visiting our planet might indeed be quite non-plussed by the curious fact that we spend such large amounts of energy and money to isolate children from life and pack them in schools, only to spend even more amounts of energy and money to bring life into the classroom through such means as audio-visual aids, textbooks, field-trips, and so on!

But it is also instructive to look beyond these basic continuities and to consider ruptures in the conceptualisation of what I have called 'the architecture of pedagogical encounters'. Despite superficial similarities, there is a world of difference, for instance, between the early schools based on the monitorial system, and classrooms in a modern school. This is a fundamental point made by Joseph Falzon in his analysis of the typology of school buildings. The monitoring classroom, pioneered by Bell and Lancaster in the early 1800s in Britian, and exported to the continent by a number of enthusiastic followers,



A version of mutual instruction derived from Bell's monitorial system. Taken from J. Stoat, *A Description of the System of Inquiry; or Examination by the Scholars themselves*, London, 1826 (Glasgow University Library)





Different representations of schoolrooms in the1836 and 1850 editions of David Stow's *The Training system* (Glasgow and London).

The Spirit of the 60s.

hosted hundreds of students of different ages at the same time. Monitors were chosen from among the best of these, and where placed in charge of groups of students in order to teach them specific subjects. The teacher became, under this system, a sort of orchestra maestro, and he or she sat high on a podium directing the monitors' efforts through a complex code of signs and sounds. Clearly, such a conception of the task of teaching had a direct influence on the type of school buildings that were erected. A school would typically house one very large classroom, and the internal design of space gave a premium to surveillance and discipline which, as Foucault has argued, were key 'epistemes' or organising principles in the construction of other new institutions that arose with the school at the turn of the 19th century, namely the factory and the prison. The 'panoptic' (all-seeing) structure of the monitorial classroom gives the archeologist of school buildings clear signs regarding the pedagogical encounter prevailing then: student-teacher interactions were built on a very clear hierarchy, with the teacher holding the reigns of power, with the monitors acting as floor supervisors, and with the pupils cast in a subservient and passive role, as consumers of knowledge.

Contrast this with what passes for teaching in modern schools: students are separated from each other according to age, and in some cases according to ability. Classes cater for thirty or so children in all, and the parcelling of school space is therefore quite different from that required by the monitoring system. In order to interpret these and and other changes and ruptures in the development of school buildings, we need a typology or paradigm of the various forms that have evolved as architects the world over grappled with the challenge of providing structures that welded form and function in response to the educational enterprise at hand. Joseph Falzon provides this typology, and draws on his expertise in architecture and his experience as an educator to show how features like location, size (both demographic and physical) and community context are of concern when it comes to providing a context for teaching. Falzon, the co-editor of this issue, does this by drawing comparisons with architectural practice in the United Kingdom, where standards of safety,besides those of function and comfort, have been regulated in tighter ways than they are currently in Malta, despite Legal Notice 150 which, since 1990, has stipulated the national minimum conditions for all school buildings.This comparative dimension is further enhanced through our interview with Professor Colin Stansfield-Smith, a British architect with a series of impressive achievements in the field that led to such honours as the Royal Gold Medal (1974), the Building of the Year Award (1987), and the B.B.C. Design Award. Stansfield-Smith reflects on both his achievements and his struggles in order to pioneer new approaches in the building of educational establishments in Britian.

The challenges that face us in Malta in this regard come into sharp focus on reading the report by architect Edwin Mintoff who, as director of a number of research projects within the Urban Design Stream of the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering at the University of Malta, presents us with an evaluative overview of the state of government schools. It is clear from this report that such schools fall far short from the ideal in a number of respects. However, Mintoff and his team do not stop at criticism. They come up with a series of recommendations that are as sensible as they are timely, recommendations that policy-makers would do well to take into account.

All the papers in this issue highlight the need for a concerted effort to tackle problems that are as real as they are pressing. In a sense, one could arguably claim that while the teaching profession and general education provision in Malta are geared to face the 21st century, the material context in which this education is to take place looks back at a distant past. Of course, it is often financially less exacting to change pedagogies rather than to change buildings! Reflecting on a global audit of accommodation in state secondary schools commissioned by his Ministry, Michael Falzon, present Minister of Education and Human Resources - and himself an architect by profession - notes some of the challenges he has had to face. He focuses not on the state of repair of older schools, but on a new school that is to be built at Santa Lucija. The Minister argues that this presents us with a unique opportunity to break away from previous typologies and to come up with a design that reflects the current conception of optimal educational practice.

Here again, as with all other articles collected in this issue, we note the intimate relationship between structures and action, between architecture and pedagogic encounters. In this regard, I find it apt to conclude by quoting at some length from the Consultative Committee's Report, commissioned by the Minister of Education and entitled *Tomorrow's Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures* (1995, p.16):

> *We know from detailed case-studies of different school buildings in Malta and Gozo that school sites are rarely safe or welcoming. Large glass panes, uneven and slippery floors, mouldy walls, inadequate lighting, excesses of heat and cold, inaccessible rooms for wheelchair-bound students, and so on are only part of the dark picture that requires immediate attention. Most*

schools are also bereft of a stimulating and pleasant environment, whether this concerns colour schemes, comfortable, functional and attractive furniture, decoration accessories, or landscaping of grounds. Compared to what most children are accustomed to in their own homes, schools look back to an indigent past, rather than to a relatively affluent present. They certainly fail to respond to the aspirations many parents have for the well-being of their own children. The situation is worse precisely for those schools that ought to be the priority of the state, if we are to adopt the principles of equity and economy. It is impossible for schools to become learning communities, and for students (or teachers and parents) to identify positively with their schools, if the places that we offer them fall far below the standards many of us would accept for our own homes. Indeed, the physical environment gives the first and arguably most important lesson in the covert curriculum of the school: it declares, through a state of affairs that speak louder than words, the kind of esteem children are held in.

It is through a concerted effort on the part of architects, educators and those that are ultimately responsible for the provision of quality education for all students in Malta, that our schools can indeed become suitable 'homes for learning'.