

Spirit of Experiment: The Proposed Santa Luċija Secondary School

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Government's commitment to build a new secondary school at Sta Lucija is an indication of its modern direction in the face of today's needs in the education sector in Malta and of the fact that, despite the media explosion and all recent developments in information technology, the school will certainly remain the focal venue for information exchange and student interaction.

In March, 1992, the Education Division of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources undertook a global audit of accommodation in state secondary schools. The secondary sector was divided into four areas: boys' junior lyceums, girls' junior lyceums, boys' general secondary schools and girls' general secondary schools. The most glaring revelation arising from this survey was the fact that whereas the average population in State-run junior lyceums for boys stood at around 800, in the case of girls' junior lyceums, the average student population was around 1,200. This anomaly was further compounded by the fact that private schools were serving to relieve the pressure from State schools in the boys' sector whereas in the girls' sector a reverse trend was observed, with girls from private schools at primary level moving on to state secondary schools.

Among the recommendations arising from the report was the need to address the equity between boys' and girls' secondary schools with the construction of a girls' secondary school in the area between Blata l-Bajda and Żejtun.

In the words of the report: "It may be desirable to build a girl's junior lyceum which is complementary to the Corradino Boys' Junior Lyceum. If such is the case, Sta Luċija might be worth considering as a suitable location."

Subsequently, a decision was taken to build a junior lycuem for girls that would reflect contemporary ideas in education and update similar facilities offered in a State secondary school.

Consultation with the Planning Directorate of the Planning Authority resulted in a shortlist of three sites

for the proposed development in Sta Luċija, Luqa and Gudja. Of these the one at Sta Luċija was eventually considered the most advantageous.

The site having been selected, it became obvious that an image had to be clearly defined for the design of the new school. To what extent should the design be a copy or and imported version of a school? Or should it simply be an amalgamation of existing successful typologies? If none of these options worked, would it be justified to build a school basing oneself on intuition, i.e., merely on experimental grounds?

The evolution of local school typology had traversed three distinct models. In the first instance the period ranging from 1912 to 1955 saw the predominance of the quadrangle. This represented the teaching mentality of the day, whereby the school was expected to function as an institution, and the model of the military parade ground conformed with the concept of discipline through strict supervision. The last example of this archetype was the Hamrun Lyceum.

In school design, the two notable experiments responsible for the last half century of school typology were the pavilion type school in Frankfurt designed by Ernst May, and the open-air school by J. Duiker in Amsterdam. These resulted in the two generator models: the British pavilion type on the one side and the continental corridor and classroom type on the other.

In line with examples being constructed in Europe, the next phase saw the use of finger development with the emphasis still on providing a monolithic solution, albeit with more fragmented external areas.

Among the salient charecteristics, one finds an impossible entrance area and in many cases a hall able to accomodate a fair portion of the school population. Space utilisation is normally very rational and flow patterns are described by nondescript utilitarian corridors. The Corradino Secondary Technical School,

officially opened by the Duches of Kent in 1958, was built on this model.

The final model, akin to the pavilion system, is the school composed of separate blocks, as represented by three main examples, the Pawla Technical Institute (1960), the Żejtun Girls' Junior Lyceum and the Blata l-Bajda Junior Lyceum - not to mention the University of Malta, depicted as a showpiece of education typology when the foundation stone was laid in 1964.

From a survey carried out by the Works Division in conjunction with the Department of Education, it was concluded that the block system had the most to offer by way of reference model. This system apparently functioned best because it created spaces which were more human, and thereby conformed with the current direction of making the school an extension of the home. A further advantage was that students could identify with their own area rather than forming part of a large number in an unmanageable community.

Among the drawbacks listed were that communication between units left much to be desired, especially since they lacked any form of protected walkways. Teachers' quarters were located in some central administration block, creating further complications where the units were developed on three storeys. Above all, the aesthetic aspects of the examples selected had no pretension to anything remotely attractive, being made up of uniform blocks lacking in identity.

On the basis of this survey, along with a visual analysis of a number of award winning schools in Europe, Ivan Coleiro, an architect with the Building & Civil Engineering Department of the Works Division, drew up plans that, it is felt, best represent the spirit of a modern local school.

From the outset it was determined that the structure should be that of a number of self-supporting clusters that are well connected by a covered and enclosed walkway. In the final plans these clusters were designed as a configuration of classroom around a landscaped courtyard.

Unlike the British system of education, occasionally referred to as 'suiting', whereby classroom distribution is resource based, the local system favours a more 'territorial' approach with students being assigned to a particular classroom for a year where

they would normally follow 80 per cent of their curriculum. Hence the clusters thus formed are related to various age groups rather than subject based.

In an attempt to decentralise administration and render each cluster semi-autonomous, an assistant head and teachers' room were located as the fulcrum of teaching nuclei. Sanitary facilities are no longer relegated to some infill space in the far end of a corridor but are distributed among the clusters.

The eventual student population to be catered for was expected to rise to a maximum of 900 with a distribution of 180 students per year. This worked out at a total of 36 normal 'chalk and talk' classrooms with a number of informal 'classrooms' for special subjects. These rooms would be supported by full laboratory facilities, and craft and music rooms.

Moreover, a number of outdoor areas, such as the landscaped courtyards, can be used for teaching sessions. The location of a botanical garden in the vicinity should prove a further asset in the drive towards outdoor teaching sessions.

These requirements were eventually integrated into a configuration of three clusters over two floors. The presence of a large, centrally located reservoir on the site almost dictated the distribution of these forms as a 'ribbon'-like development along its perimeter. Another site constraint that influenced the final design in no small way was the main road running along the full length of the north side of the site.

This suggested retracting as far back into the available site as possible, while orienting the landscaped courtyards away from the main road.

In this plan the division between upper and lower forms is articulated by a circular library. This entity is intended to form the fulcrum of the proposed structure and is expected to operate on three interconnected levels, providing reading areas, lending areas and computer reference areas. The two extremities of the "strip" development are marked by two groups of laboratories for upper and lower forms respectively. The circulation space has been carefully studied as a visual experience combining short, straight stretches and articulation nodes, that may be used as exhibition space or informal gathering points.

These stretches alternate from single to double

loaded bays as they follow the curved contours of the courtyard clusters. There is no ceremony attached to the entrance hall but merely the design of an ante before proceeding to the general circulation.

Recreation areas are designed as a series of small open spaces linked to a large central play area atop the reservoir. The gym which will form part of the sports complex is expected to be built to international standards.

School buildings are expensive propositions, even more so when the spaces created are used less

than half the time. To render the project more viable, a number of areas such as laboratories, libraries and the gymnasium have been designed to be accessed and operate independently from the school with the intention of allowing them to be shared by the community thereby extending their useful period beyond school hours.

Although reference to various standards has been made, it must be remembered that a school is not just an amalgam of concerns but depends on the gestation of spaces provided. The success of the design lies in the ability to interpret its various aspects creatively.

