

The Geography of Architecture in Education

AYAD RAHMANI

Washington State University

In light of the recent shootings in Colorado and elsewhere, it is probably a good time to reflect on the way school buildings affect students and perhaps inspire them to behave in a certain manner. Do school settings have any bearing on student psychology? In this paper I compare suburban schools with urban ones and shed some light on the burdens that suburban schools are likely to carry in advancing their mainstream values and making for a socially correct situation. In championing the urban school, I write about the mutual benefits that take place when a school engages its urban surrounding and invites students to learn from the dynamics of human interaction everywhere. At one point I use ideas on alternative education as a way to shape my discussion on the need to nurture and promote intellectual diversity, rather than, perhaps unselfconsciously, repress it.

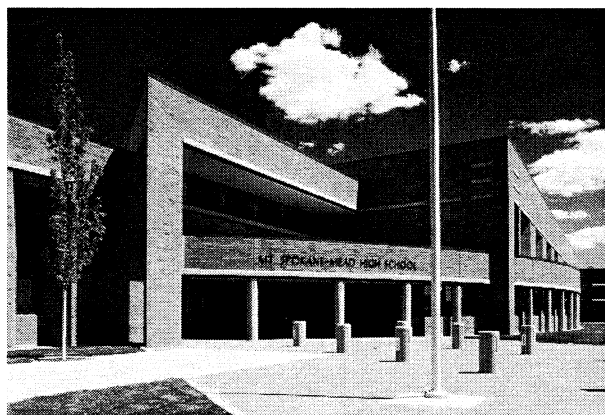


Fig. 1. A Typical Suburban School Entry Feature

If I were to ask the reader to conjure up a mental image of what a typical school in the United States might look like, it is more likely than not that the building will appear in the form of a brick container, composed of essentially two masses, a wing or wings of classrooms on one side and a Gymnasium, a theater or cafeteria on the other. Somewhere between the two blocks is the entrance, normally hyped up with either a Greek portico or, as in recent times, a corporate looking glass front. (Fig.1 and Fig.3) A variation on the theme may include a curved wall announcing a special part of the school such as the entrance or the auditorium, or it may include a unique feature such as a well-landscaped courtyard or a bell tower. (Fig.1 and Fig.5) But despite minor differences the common image will most likely place this typical school against a background largely defined by a sea of parking lots, athletic grounds and green fields. (Fig.2)

The picture I have just rendered, admittedly in broad strokes,

is one of the suburban school. The likelihood that our image of the typical school will appear in urban terms, where the ground floor is a melange of commercial activity and public life, and where classrooms are structured vertically rather than horizontally, is slim at best. Today almost 90% of all high schools are situated in suburban settings, which would not be a cause for mention had it not been for the fact that a number of studies have already shown that there is something amiss about this line of development. In light of recent high school shootings in Colorado and Atlanta and several others before that, it is probably a good time to sit up and reflect on the preconditions that have driven much of how high schools are shaped and situated today.



Fig. 2. An illustration showing the way parking lots dominate the surroundings of a suburban school. Parking is to the left and the school to the right.

The Persistent of Suburban Schools

Despite the fact that the city is showing healthy signs of return, suburban schools continue unabated. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that school locations are significantly driven by domestic proximity, which today is largely defined by suburban developments. Schools also tend to gravitate towards the suburbs for the reason that urban territory is too financially prohibitive for the tight manner in which most school boards decide to spend their money. Other factors may include the need to dodge difficult urban concerns such as aesthetic conformity and vehicular accessibility. It is much easier to start from scratch out in an open field where territorial claim is not an issue and where architecture can sprawl in an unmitigated fashion.

But the real driving force behind the persistence of the suburban school is not necessarily a product of a desire to solve physical and tangible problems; it is rather more sociologically based.

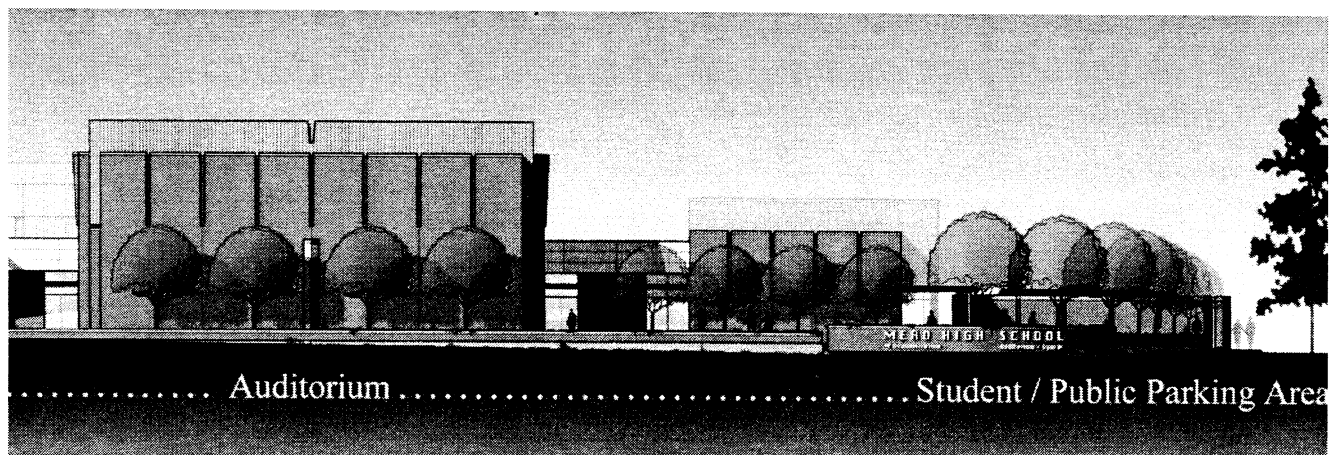


Fig. 3. Mead High School, Spokane, WA; South Elevation

Ever since the end of World War II, Americans have looked to the suburbs as a place where new freedoms and new hopes could be found and cultivated. The city had been plagued by a number of economic ills whose effect was made particularly visible by the depression of the 30's and by the excessive migrations from both overseas and the rural country. Pastoral settings then provided the terrain on which the past can be cleansed and new beginnings established, a place, in short, where a greener, cleaner and more expansive territory held a brighter outlook.¹

This plan of course included schools, which by the 50's had become a world unto themselves. Much like the way the suburban home had gained new independence through the incorporation of new appliances and new gadgets, so too the school through expanding its program and bringing within a singular world the diverse functions of eating, playing and learning. (Fig.5) In this self-sufficient container a whole society could now decontaminate the learning environment of undesirable encounters and as such establish a new moral agenda. This was further augmented by a new set of zoning laws that mandated the separation of functions deemed incongruent to each other. A daycare center, for instance, was deemed incompatible with the establishment of a bank, a bank with the setting up of a residential unit and so on and so forth, which ultimately led to the compartmentalization of life itself.

The stigma against urban settings persists even in my own city of Spokane, where neither urban decay nor the huge socio-

economic stratification that defines larger metropolitan cities like New York and San Francisco, is found. In fact prior to the final decision to renovate the Lewis and Clark High School, a local urban icon, (Fig. 4) a vigorous debate ensued as to whether to relocate the school in a more suburban environment or leave it in its current location. In the end, the decision to preserve the school prevailed but not quite for the love of urbanity. Bruce Blackmer whose firm is heading the renovation work on the school says that "the final decision to stay and renovate was not the product of strong sentiments in favor of downtown, but rather one based on the historical and traditional importance of the school."² Mindy Noble, a senior at LC, agrees: "my friends in the suburbs refer to our school as the ghetto school."

Looking at the city today, one would think that the latter view would hold little or no sway. With crime significantly down, the air and streets much cleaner than before, and the economic profile much healthier, it is only reasonable to expect a renaissance in urban schools. But that is not the case, studies continue to show that public opinion remains guided by the vision of the city as a place of illicit behavior where drugs are sold and derelicts loiter on the streets. In *The Power of Their Minds*, Deborah Meier corroborates this trend in defending her position of public urban schools. She writes: "[o]ur urban schools are viewed as scenes of daily violence unlike anything we adults ever witnessed in our day. Every time I tell people I teach in New York City, particularly if I mention Harlem, they think I'm taking my life in my hands." And in rebutting this myth, she maintains that "life threatening violence is not part of the daily routine in the vast majority of schools, [but rather] has always been a part of the urban educational scene."³



Fig. 4. Lewis and Clark High School, Spokane, WA

Suburban Schools and Mainstream Values

Suburban schools have since the fifties become the domain through which parents have hoped to see their children succeed and grow in their own image.⁴ Which meant that these parents saw in the suburban school the authority to reinforce mainstream values of upward mobility and formal conformity. The effect was constructive for some but not for all, for while parents may have wished that their sons and daughters could excel academically, attend an elite college, and finally enter the prestigious world of professional life, in truth we all learn differently. Some of us blossom academically early on, others may do so later in the course and still others may go a different route and find

success nonetheless. The homogenization of suburban schools have in essence dehumanized the natural divisions that exist between all of us and which make the world an interesting place to be. Rather than celebrating our diversity and giving it a space to dwell, suburban schools have pitted personal expressions against each other.

In *Jocks and Burnouts*, Penelope Eckert talked about this situation, arguing at one point that much of what exasperates the seemingly rebellious position of the Burnouts is the fact that they are given no space to express their contrarian ways. In their desire to move away from the mainstream, Burnouts seek the inner city during after-hours to hangout and show their art. The inner city, interestingly enough, presents to this group of students a neutral world in which neither their parents nor their teachers have power over them, a place where they can play out adult roles on their own terms. Eckert writes: “working class youngsters’ use of the streets as a hangout can be attributed to the fact that streets serve as an adventurous free area, in contrast to the antithetical constraining agencies of social control. This does not mean that the youngsters are free of control in the streets, but they are free of the constraint of an environment created by adults for adolescents.”⁵

It is in the neutrality of the city that a school like Lewis and Clark in Spokane finds its greatest sense of discipline and balance. Here, where the territory lies outside everyone’s turf, no one particular student has more ownership of the school than any one else and as such the ensuing feeling is one of publicity than privacy. Everyone arrives to the school with a sense of equality, ready to contribute to a collective pie than a personal one. “No one lives here, its in no one’s neighborhood,” John Hook, an LC faculty member, says of LC’s geographic position, “its neutral, its in no one’s turf, so I think this is a positive thing for our culture and educational climate.”

In a recent study comparing adolescents from suburban schools with those from urban ones, Professor Suniya Luthar of Teachers College at Columbia University, found out that the pressure to abide by mainstream values has resulted in serious psychological repercussions, in which substance abuse played a major role. Her study states that “...suburban students had higher scores on substance use, psychological anxiety, overall anxiety, and days absent from school than their inner-city counterparts...” And statistically speaking, the numbers showed that “...35% of suburban girls had used all of the substances at least once, followed by 32% of suburban boys, [compared with] 22% inner city boys, and 15% inner city girls.” In identifying a cause, Professor Luthar goes on to discuss:

“Findings of comparable distress in these two groups suggest that suburban youth may struggle with a set of unique life stressors, and distinct possibilities in this regard lie in high pressures to achieve. Conversations with the suburban students in this study and their school administrators indicated that for many of these teens, gaining admission to stellar colleges is emphasized a top priority. As a consequence, most feel highly

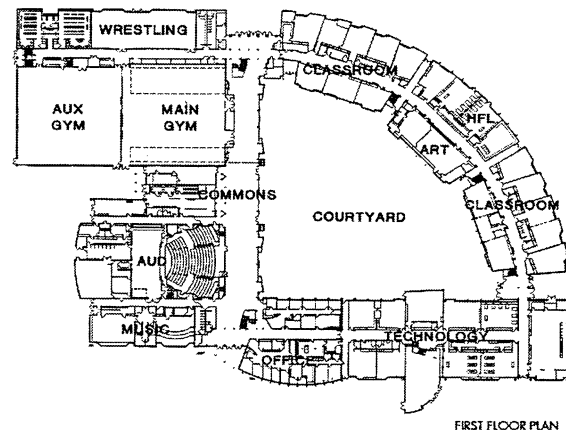


Fig. 5. Mead High School, Spokane, WA; Floor Plan



Fig. 6. Interior Mall-Like Space, Mead High School, Spokane, WA

driven to excel not only at academic pursuits but also at multiple extra-curricular activities.”⁶

Interestingly enough the study also stated that a great number of urban adolescents shy away from drugs and alcohol for the simple reason that they are all too aware of the damaging effects that substance can inflict on the health and sense of hope in a person.

In the absence of direct and spontaneous interaction with society, suburban schools have to stage certain civic roles and responsibilities. While urban schools can, and often do, depend on the commercial, civic and political infrastructure of the city, suburban schools are constantly burdened by the need for additional space to assimilate the value of practical communication with the world. And not only that, but suburban schools are also repeatedly challenged by the task of finding healthy and ample space for students to “hang around” and socialize. Again, in an urban situation, students are quick to use the streets and parks of the neighboring fabric for gathering, whereas in the suburban context they often struggle to find a place where they could disperse and be inconspicuous. Bruce Blackmer whose voice was previously quoted had the following to say in this light: namely “that often his firm is asked to provide a mall-like space replete with skylights, open stairs and cosmetic effects to compensate for the lack of social space around the building. This space is usually designed to double up as other functions: a gallery for art exhibits, an extension to athletic events and a hall for music concerts.”

And what happens when a school falls short of providing students with the spatial diversity that they need. It is more likely than not that those students will find themselves in the inevitable situation of forming cliques whose cause is a function of the way architecture contains space and exaggerates the presence of the body. The issue is one of scale. For instance, in a small place, say a classroom, the body is immediately announced and given a position whereas in a gymnasium it is lost and anonymous. And by extension, if we were to compare the school with the city, we quickly realize that by virtue of the way the city is open and multifarious, those expressions of counterculture that dwell in it are given space to dissipate and escape the punishing gaze of the mainstream.

The Geography of the School

The school’s surrounding is an important factor in shaping the behavior and self-awareness of a student. In urban situations, at the end of the day, students disperse throughout the fabric of the city and usually return home on foot. In the suburban context, on the other hand, students often congregate in and around the parking lot, often around one’s car. This has complex social implications, for what seemed to be a terrain of neutral value, quickly turns into one in which identities are played out and cliques formed. What should have been of simple utilitarian value, the car all of a sudden becomes a symbol of status, exas-

perating whatever socioeconomic divisions may have already begun to form inside the classrooms. John Hook from Lewis and Clark partially attributes his school’s sense of egalitarian unity to the fact that the school has no adjoining parking lot of its own and that when students do drive, their cars are seldom seen from the school. “LC’s parking lot is two blocks away from the school,” says Hook, “its not an attractive place to be, no one spends anytime there, it is invisible from the school. There is no status symbol in terms of the car, our parking lot is not a source of cultural hierarchy.”

In urban environments, schools are also more likely to borrow from the amenities nearby, which does not only help lead to increased spatial efficiency within the school, but also improves the economic activity on the street. In this spirit, LC’s principal, Mike Howson, recently stated proudly that being so close to a number of restaurants has essentially eliminated the need for a full-fledged cafeteria, enabling the school to siphon the remaining space to other functions such as a library. And the effect is more than practical, it is also sociological; namely that by allowing the students to disperse throughout the city, the school has diffused the tension that may, and often does, precipitate in interiors that foster confrontation. Eroding the role of the cafeteria destabilizes the instinct or the tendency to form cliques, as the latter traditionally depends on visibility and theatricality for self-legitimacy. The marginalization of the cafeteria ultimately denies those with a particular sense of superiority the stage from which to flaunt their behavior, which naturally leads to a more balanced social environment.

Relying on neighboring dining establishments has also empowered LC to galvanize the structure of the curriculum and strengthen feelings of camaraderie amongst the staff and the faculty. Principal Howson says “Most schools struggle with feeding a large group of students and have to create 2 or 3 lunch periods, here we have only one lunch period, which has meant that classes are disturbed less frequently and that faculty are together more often.” Using the city as an extension of the school has also enabled the students to gain a sense of freedom and responsibility, from which a foundation of trust is built and nurtured. “The students know that they have to be back within a specific time barrier,” says Howson, “and that late arrivals are simply not tolerated.”

Schools and Community

Ever since Jefferson used the school to define the size, form and value of a town, the term “community” has been invoked many times over, so much so that today it is unclear as to what we mean when we speak of our schools in terms of community. In many cases the liaison has meant little more than that the school facility is available for the community to use during after-hours. In some communities the school represents the sole agency for cultural assimilation through which everyone is meant to benefit. But to thinkers like John Dewey and William James early in this century this form of establishment still constituted a fun-

damental and disagreeable separation. Instead they called for a greater degree of mix and backlash effects between the two.

In the mid and late 60's, when the effects of isolation became abundantly clear, a number of architects and educators rebelled against the status quo and against what was, in the Italian architect Giancarlo de Carlo's words, an attempt to "hide conflicts by separating everything that can conflict."⁷ What this group saw in the community was not something other than the school, but the school itself. Here the relationship between the two realms was one akin to osmosis where the one acts as a kind of breeze-way for the other. The street, the theater, the office, the classroom—none of these spaces was seen as exclusive of any one particular group, but rather an open environment where learning is advanced for the holistic advantage of individuals. Of this kind of a school, de Carlo goes on to say that it:

"should not be a closed apparatus but a structure spread out in the network of social activities, capable of articulating itself to their continual variations. It should not be an object represented according to the rules of an aprioristic aesthetic code, but an unstable configuration continually recreated by the direct participation of the collectivity that uses it..."⁸

In the mid 70's and in the face of economic difficulties and rising school population, urban schools saw in the latter philosophy a way out. In their inability to build new structures or add to existing ones, they turned to their community for help. In large cities such as Boston, New York and Pittsburgh local civic structures were exploited, and where new classroom space was required, many derelict buildings, commonly referred to as "found space", were modestly renovated, bringing much life to their urban environment.

The fragmentation of a school may have been initially prompted by strict practical limitations, but the results, once in place, proved beneficial in other ways as well. In *The Power of Their Ideas*, Deborah Meier attributes a good part of the success in her experiments in Harlem schools to this very fragmentation, where overcrowding was mitigated by the way students were dispersed throughout the city. Speaking of trust, she says: "one obvious way of maintaining a climate that favors trust is by running a small rather than a large school...Experts at team building claim a group works best at somewhere between 15 and 20 people. By this standard, both class size and staff size should top around 20."⁹ As such students were never quite overwhelmed by the enormity of the schools, finding it less intimidating to speak out and voice their opinions.

The community can help the school in yet another way. In his thesis on *Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner argued that the human mind has the capacity and breadth for intelligence beyond the traditionally acclaimed cognitive centers of linguistics and mathematics, and that testing students along those two tracks alone in the traditional manner of pencil and paper, is too restrictive and debilitating. In constructing an alternative, he called for a new "individual-centered school" where a so-called

"community broker" can search:

"for educational opportunity for the student within the wider community...The goal of the school-community broker is to increase the likelihood that students will discover a vocational or avocational role that matches their own profile of intelligences."¹⁰

In this scenario, testing students is not necessarily handled by teachers alone but by the professionals or craftsmen with whom the students had apprenticed. Furthermore, he suggested that testing methods should break away from the past and include such evaluatory exchanges as exhibits and recommendations.¹¹ Mike Howson from LC maintains that his students live this spirit when they travel the streets and engage with neighboring professional venues:

"We have lots of businesses around us in which students spend half a day working with someone," he says. "Right next door, for instance, there is a hospital where 20 or 30 students spend 3 or 4 hours everyday for an entire semester working under someone, emerging at the end highly skilled in some area of the hospital."

A Final Statement

It has often been said that architects shape society, that by virtue of the way they manifest their ideas in 3dimensional physical terms, they help transform the way people live and behave. In the Renaissance, for instance, architects led the way in defining the culture of their cities through both writing and building. But the reverse is also true as well; namely that architects are also the product of what society allows them to build. Which means that suburban schools will continue to dominate the educational landscape as long as society wishes them to be so. School commissions are so economically significant that often architects will depend on them to sustain their offices and keep the ship financially secure. As such, architects seldom find themselves in a position to argue against the mainstream composition of school boards and their ensuing political infrastructure. In other words, to change course and begin affecting education, it is highly unlikely that architects can accomplish the task alone. Therefore, it is important that society becomes sensitized to the largely false accusations that have been mounting against urban settings and urban schools in particular, and in so doing invite students to unselfconsciously cultivate, through diversity and art, a sense of identity for themselves. Perhaps Andre Malraux, the French philosopher and politician, said it well when he placed the issue like this in one of his novels:

"How can one make the best use of one's life?"

And he answers

“By converting as wide a range of experiences as possible into conscious thought.”

NOTES

- 1 The culture of the post world war II era has been widely established. For a story telling approach to it, see John Steinbeck's lucid account in *America and Americans* or Peter Rowe's in *The Making of the Middle Landscape*
- 2 Throughout this paper I rely on a local source for information on urban schools. In particular I have used the current renovation work on Lewis and Clark, a Spokane urbane school, to achieve first hand accounts of and advance my points. Bruce Blackmer, quoted here, is a principal at Northwest Architectural Company in Spokane, a firm reputable for its experience in schools in and around the region.
- 3 Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Minds*, Bacon Press, Boston Massachusetts, 1993, p 72.
- 4 For a brief overview of the fifties, I suggest reading Alan Ehrenhalt's article entitled "Learning from the Fifties" which appeared in the summer 1995 issue of the *Wilson Quarterly*.
- 5 Penelope Eckert, *Jocks and Burnouts*, teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York, 1989, p 143.
- 6 This was culled from the as of yet unpublished study by Suniya Luthar and Karen D'Avango, both from Teachers College at Columbia. The study is entitled "Contextual factors in Substance Use: A Study of Suburban and Inner City Adolescents," and it was supported by an award from the Research Scientist Development Institution and funded by the William Grant Foundation.
- 7 Giancarlo de Carlo, "Why / How to build schools Buildings," *Harvard Educational Review*: "Architecture and Education," Vol. 39, No. 4, 1969, p 36.
- 8 Ibid, p 39.
- 9 Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Minds*, Bacon Press, Boston

Massachusetts, 1993, p 63.

- 10 Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, New York, 1993, p 73.
- 11 For recent articles on the subject of schools and community, I suggest reading "School Planning and Management," a trade magazine that publishes articles pertaining to the recent concerns and trends in school design and construction. In the January issue of 1999, an article by Michael Fickes was particularly germane for this paper.

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- 10 *Harvard Educational Review*, "Architecture and Education," Vol. 39, NO. 4, 1969.
- 11 *The New Schoolhouse in Vienna*, a journal of essays published on behalf of an exhibition on schools in Vienna between 1990 and 1996, Chamber of Architects and Consulting Engineers, Wien, Berlin.