

Making education: material school design and educational governance

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This recent addition to the expanding library of writing on the physical spaces of education makes a unique contribution through its exploration, across time and place, of the material manifestations of governance. It should attract readers with a range of interests to this rapidly developing area of research, policy and practice. The growth of scholarship parallels increased school building globally, and the effect of new technologies on education, but also reflects new ways to answer old questions about continuity and change, local enacting of policy and student experience. As we have come to expect in this area, the book's contributors are an international, interdisciplinary assembly, bringing a diversity of perspectives to the central question of how educational governance is enacted through the design and use of school premises.

The volume kicks off with a powerful opening chapter by the editors that does so much more than introduce the topics and issues to be covered. Both editors have expansive historic knowledge married with specialist understanding of the built environment of schooling, which enables them to treat us to a tour of buildings and ideas, punctuated with thought-provoking propositions, such as the following (p. 16):

A belief in the inherent capacity of material design to both support and enhance pedagogies has led politicians, schools and teachers to invest not only money but also hopes and dreams into the design of schools.

Following this initial chapter, the reader is certainly expecting some tensions, if not conflicts, between intentions and experiences, power and resistance, and we are not disappointed. Across the collection, there are fascinating contrasts of deliberate governance, through the design features of physical space, with incidental impact, and spaces used other than intended. Thus, in Part 1, an historian, an architect and two educationalists from three countries discuss how school yards, 1960s open-plan schools and current flexible spaces are intended to influence practices, but do not always do so. In his chapter, Gonçalo Canto Moniz reflects on architectural innovation, noting drily that the authoritarian regime of the Portuguese dictatorship succeeded in imposing a “democratising”, open-plan, school design, whereas it has been harder to implement open classrooms in democratic Portugal.

Given the background of the book's editors, and the important historical source that a school building provides, it is not surprising that a number of the contributors are educational historians. However, across the chapters there are concerns for how we understand the past, act in the present and prepare for the future. The final part of the volume specifically addresses the future, with two chapters focusing on the recent, as well as anticipated, effects of digital technologies.

Inés Dussel's central concern is how unplanned and, often, unacknowledged changes to classrooms occur through “local arrangements and budget constraints” (p. 175) rather than



designed innovation. Her chosen example for this process is the entrance, “silently”, into Argentinian classrooms, of the screen, replacing, she claims, windows, blackboards, playgrounds and field trips. She reflects that although, historically, school buildings underpinned governance, and radicals called for “de-schooling”, it seems that, in the digital age, abolishing the physical school would produce an ever more individualised, restrictive form of education. Similarly, Keri Facer’s more optimistic contribution also argues that the “radical potential” of much educational technology has not yet been realised, with digital power currently used for surveillance and accountability.

Facer’s solution to the perennial educational problem of “the future” is not to seek to “colonise” it with our own, current, values and practices, but to redesign schools and education systems so that they are spaces where young people, and the wider community, can explore possibilities. She ponders how such a vision of education’s relationship with the future would be materialised in a building, and comments that curricular and organisational changes might be as necessary as spatial reconfiguring. This throws us back again on the paradox of school space: that it is key to our understanding of education’s past, present and future, but can’t be considered in isolation. Neither, this volume suggests, can the material aspects of school experience be easily dispensed with. As Dussel concludes, the physical school building will continue to be required by “a world that is still needing such places where people can gather, talk, and learn from each other in multiple and unpredictable ways” (p. 194). This volume embodies that principle, gathering together an array of authors and ideas that interact and intersect, with unexpected results.

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