

Learning Environments

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Democratic School Architecture: The Community Center Model

Prakash Nair and Annalise Gehling

A new model of school design would eliminate the “binary” structure that divides formal learning from students’ own time and would foster student motivation and learning.

The experiences that a young person can have within the confines of a classroom do not reflect the diversity of settings and relationships young people must learn to negotiate in order to thrive in the academy and the workplace.

— David Lemmel & Samuel Steinberg Seidel,
“Alternative High Schools”

There’s a definite and unfortunate divide in school time between formal lessons, during which students have limited control over their learning, and students’ own time, which is generally spent on social activities. The design of a majority of school buildings clearly reflects this divide. Formal learning takes place in classrooms and specialty areas like science labs, while social learning is relegated to unfurnished corridors, institutional cafeterias, and outside spaces of variable quality. Under this prevailing model of school, bells that signal the end of classroom time actually invite students to “switch off” from learning.

There are several problems with this model; in this article, we will discuss two.

1. *It does not create a culture of lifelong learning.*

If you are only able to identify learning as such when it is happening under tutelage, it is difficult to make other time “learning time” as well.

Remember when you were told you had “free time” at school, and how exciting that was? As a teenager, did you want to use this precious time for study? Of course not. We are conditioned into this binary of “work is hard and boring, so someone has to make you do it”/ “Play is about being social, not creative.” It is difficult to create a personal or community culture of lifelong learning within a system that is saying you can only learn when someone else packages the lessons for you.

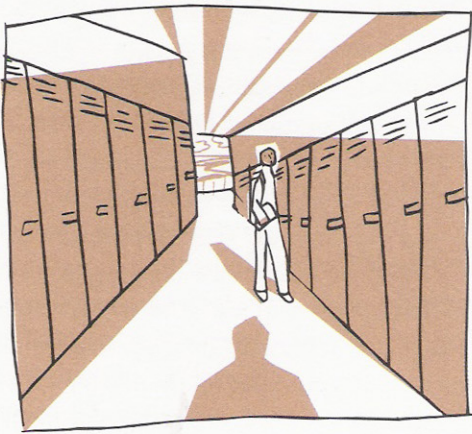
Recently, we spoke with a Ph.D. student who remarked, “I didn’t actually learn much at school. The most important things I learned were from Scouts.” In scouting, she had experienced leading and working with a small group over an extended period of time, figured out new skills “just in time” to use them, and discovered a love of healthy living. Scouting doesn’t have a

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“sit down and be quiet” time and a “go and play with your friends” time. At a Scout camp, the “work” really doesn’t stop, whether that involves setting up a scavenger hunt for the next-door Cub pack, cooking dinner, washing up, or looking for firewood. It’s full of learning experiences, but it isn’t a binary of work and play. Both involve being creative and doing things with each other.

2. *A pure focus on the social isn’t socially inclusive.*

Time in school that has not been fully programmed by an adult is quite limited, and the spaces students are able to occupy in this time are not designed for them to exercise creativity. The focus, then, is entirely on peer relationships – which is fine if you’re one of the coolest kids in school. If you’re not, this single focus is really stressful. One colleague recalls spending recess and lunchtimes walking purposefully from place to place so that it looked like she was busy, even if she wasn’t, just to appear not to be as lonely as she felt. It’s far easier to be social in the context of meaningful activities.



The Binary School Building

The design of school buildings reflects this binary of teacher-directed work and the peripheral spaces without active teacher direction, which are expressly noted as non-learning spaces. This section describes some commonly found parts of a school and some implications of the design of these spaces.

Classrooms

Classrooms are designed for classes led by a teacher. They are not designed to accommodate active learning with passive supervision. Typically, there is no transparency from other spaces to enable a line of sight into the room, so whenever students are in the room an adult also needs to be there. For explicit teaching, referred to by David Thornburg (2001) with the “primordial learning metaphor” of “Campfire,” they are reasonable, if not ideal, spaces.

But the Campfire mode should really only constitute a small part of each student’s learning program. Learning means doing, practicing, and discussing in search of an “Aha!” moment when the new puzzle piece clicks in among an earlier set of learning. Listening to the teacher may be a first step, but it doesn’t constitute learning. So in an ideal school, there could be space explicitly designed for direct instruction, but the percentage of the school that such spaces consume would only reflect the percentage of a student’s program that requires sitting and listening.

Corridors

Corridors are designed simply to get from room to room. The fact that many contain lockers is, perhaps, an accident rather than a design, since if one were to think critically about designing a space for a person’s belongings, it probably wouldn’t be a little

box mashed in with hundreds of others when you are expecting that all the students will want to access their things at the same time.

Double-loaded corridors (corridors with rooms off to both sides) aren't nice places to be. They tend to be dark and completely devoid of furnishings. If you want to relax in the corridor you often have only a sticky linoleum floor to sit on, not a comfortable couch or some café-style seats and tables.

Libraries

Libraries are often democratic in nature, encouraging individual browsing and small-group work or study around large tables. If students enter a library of their own accord, it is with the expectation that they will be autonomous learners there, able to browse, read, work at a computer, or, at least, just sit on a comfortable chair.

The experience is completely unlike that in a classroom, where students leave their responsibility for learning at the door, sit down, and expect that responsibility to be doled back out to them, piece by isolated piece. However, students spend so little time in the school library that it does not offer enough of a reprieve from the binary system discussed above.

Other Specialist Areas

Other specialist areas are simply modified classrooms and, so, support the same kind of power structure where teachers attempt to control students in order to tell them things. Even when there seems to be more active learning happening (as in a drama studio or science lab), the basic model remains largely unchanged, with the teacher firmly in command and with the time for the activity clearly prescribed.

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Outdoor Areas

Outdoor areas are, generally, chronically underfurnished and rarely connected to the main teaching and learning spaces. It is difficult for a teacher to send one or two students to work outside because often there isn't a direct connection between the main learning areas and the outside, there's no furniture to sit on out there, and supervision of the outside, from the inside, is difficult when there is no transparency.

Cafeterias

School cafeterias are designed to herd students, cattle-like, through a "refueling" process. They are designed without thought to honoring cultural rituals, sharing together, or involving students in the processes of food preparation. Generally, only one kind of furniture is available: long tables with bench seating, as opposed to more socially inclusive furniture which may be used to read, socialize, collaborate on projects, or complete school assignments. Contrast the typical school cafeteria with urban cafés that exude warmth and homeliness and invite individuals and small groups to work, read or share, and appreciate good food.

Figure 1.
 Concept diagram for a
 small learning community
 of 125 students and five
 to six teachers, utilizing the
 community center model



The Community Center Model for Schools

Like many compartmentalized cities, schools are usually devoid of true public space. Corridors masquerade as public space, but it's a role they fill very poorly. Urban planning expert Jan Gehl (2007) describes public space as having three roles: space to move, space to meet, and space to trade – or, as he says, “moving place, meeting place, and marketplace.” Corridors are designed purely as “moving space,” like a highway lined by gated communities.

Public space, on the other hand, looks like the cobble streets of Helsinki, or Federation Square in Melbourne, Australia, or Union Square

in Manhattan. In public space, there is a common expectation of self-control, and a number of different activities can be happening simultaneously.

How can schools also be designed around the notion of public space? One solution may be the *community center model*, an architectural solution that gives school communities an intimate “home base” from which to autonomously construct community- and school-based learning opportunities.

How Can It Be Used?

The community center model is capable of facilitating both student-directed, project-based learning and explicit instruction in small and large groups. The teaching group operates autonomously, enabling it to respond to the

specific interests and needs of its own community, enhancing the scope for interdisciplinary, inquiry-based learning and developing a common understanding of the student body it supports.

Because it enables passive supervision, the community center model allows teachers to focus on work with small groups in the knowledge that their colleagues will be passively supervising those students going about their own, student-directed work.

Why Is It Better?

All good teachers know that it's never a good idea to fight, or "up the ante," with an aggressive student. Yet the hidden curriculum of a standard classroom/corridor school design (aka "cells and bells") is one of domination, upping the ante from the moment the student enters the school. The community center model's hidden curriculum is an expectation of self-control, and the rights and responsibilities are built right into the space: respect for students means that they are welcomed into the space as responsible citizens.

Schools with a Community Center Model Design

A number of schools are designed explicitly to support this positive hidden curriculum through various interpretations of the community center model.

High School for the Recording Arts (HSRA) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was founded by MC/producer David "TC" Ellis after local disenfranchised youths pestered him for time in his recording studio. Ellis noted that the teenagers were passionate about music but had completely rejected the school system and, in many instances, lacked the literacy they needed to develop their passion into a livelihood.

HSRA, or "Hip Hop High" as it is also known, is a place that feels very much as though it is the domain of the students, and key to this is student-owned space in which it is socially acceptable to study, practice, perform, or socialize. The students' programs involve significant "class time," but the classes are small and supplemented with substantial time for learning at individual work stations clustered in small study groups.

Evidence of this school's success is the fact that 75 percent of all students who have attended the school have completed their high school diploma, even though the vast majority of students would otherwise not have remained at school.

Wooranna Park Primary School, in Melbourne, Australia, operates as a series of small learning communities in the community center model. With over 70 percent of students from a non-English-speaking background, and many of these from war-torn nations, the school faces a number of challenges. On standardized tests, the

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school performs above average among “like schools” (other schools with similar population characteristics).

However, the skills developed at this school go well beyond what can be measured on a standardized test. Students are not simply told how to manage their time here – they are expected to self-manage as a matter of course. Weekly one-on-one meetings with an advisor give students a chance to reflect on their performance, set goals, and devise work strategies for the weeks ahead. Assessment is personalized. Small-group tutorial sessions and inquiry-based workshops are held in the community in rooms designed expressly for that purpose.

Individual and small-group project work is then supported throughout the community, able to be supervised by the teachers who aren’t in explicit teaching sessions. It’s important to note that these individual and small-group

projects may be computer based or performance based, or may involve testing hypotheses and constructing art or design pieces. Facilities for all of those modes are available in the center.

The Community-as-School Model

In the 2006 *Edutopia* article “Getting Beyond the School as Temple,” we introduced the concept of *community as school*, or the idea that local businesses and community organizations become everyday partners in the life of the school, giving students access to authentic learning opportunities and avoiding unnecessary duplication of resources (Nair 2006).

The community-as-school model complements the community center model remarkably well. It enables community-based learning opportunities to be brought back to a home base where teachers and students can meet, plan, engage in direct instruction, and work on projects together. Another benefit of the combination that is particularly relevant for secondary schools is that because the community center model enables teaching autonomy within a small group, community-based learning opportunities are far easier to take advantage of when they arise. At the very least, it is far easier to organize field trips when you can simply negotiate with a less complex timetable.

A Blend of Two Models

The Met Center, in Providence, Rhode Island, is evidence of the successful marriage that can be achieved when the community center model and the community-as-school model are merged. At the Met, students spend two days a week in an internship with a local business or organization. The relationships formed in these place-



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ments are long-term, enabling students to learn in depth and reach a high level of proficiency.

The flexibility required by this arrangement is complemented well by the architecture of the campus, where there are no classrooms, no formal lessons, no bells, no grades, no uniforms, and no detentions, and the role of the teacher is more like that of “coach.”

Preparing for Lifelong Learning

Common to all of these case studies is that the schools truly embody the notion of preparation for lifelong learning. Students are free to socialize and work in the same spaces and, surprisingly, when given the chance, they choose to work more often than not. The building hasn't forced them into a specific learning mode that may or may not suit them – instead, it has invited them to realize their potential on their own terms.

On the Met Center Web site, school founder Dennis Littky writes, “To our surprise, students wouldn't leave the building when it was time to go home for Christmas vacation.” That's the attitude we believe purposeful, critical, big-picture-thinking school design can help foster.

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For further information

To learn more about the Community Center Model, visit Fielding Nair's Web site at <<http://fieldingnair.com>> or e-mail the authors at Prakash@FieldingNair.com or Annalise@FieldingNair.com.

High School for the Recording Arts:
<www.hsra.org>

Wooranna Park Primary School:
<www.woorannaparkps.vic.edu.au>

The Met School: <www.metcenter.org>