Read Between the Walls. Spatial Dimensions of the Hidden School

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Architecture matters. The space where education takes place matters. The spatial dimension of a school transforms an abstraction into a situated phenomenon. In doing so, the context intentionally or implicitly affects education.

The potential impact the physical environment and the implied connotations it carries on one's experience in and of it, is best argued by common sense. Consider the following example.

A wall is a boundary marker. Its function varies: to protect, to enclose, to constrain, to separate and differentiate between spaces, to redirect and flank. Erecting a wall, however, is an intentional design gesture, affiliated to the formation of a barrier, a division, a fortification and/or isolation. Those purposeful and associative properties of a wall are translated into one's embodied experience of a physical wall.

The existence of a wall between two entities, creates a spatial and psychological separation between them and therefore it hinders interaction to such an extent that they may not be aware of each other's presence on the opposing side of the wall.

In the alternative setup where a wall is not existent between two entities, several possibilities arise. The lack of a wall does not necessarily mean that the entities in question are to interact. However, what it does mean is that the action of both entities towards or against interaction with one another is not limited by a force external to them.

The example of the wall is oversimplified and seemingly reduces a complex system with both spatial and social implications to architectural determinism. The purpose of the wall illustration is solely to demonstrate that every single composite of the built environment possesses inherent potential to affect actors and actions within it: on the one hand through objective spatial properties, on the other — because of both semantics and semiotics. This suggests that architecture can be considered as a means to curate scenarios, anticipate and influence behaviour and even create a narrative. In that sense, architecture is an agent in what composes the hidden school.

In the case of educational spaces for architecture, the built environment is particularly influential as it is not only a representation of the idiosyncratic nature and program of an architecture school but also a reflection of its attitude towards the discipline and a statement about its aspirations and culture. Every aspect of an architecture school's physical presence can be interpreted as a statement about its character and spirit, despite the fact that those analyses may be inconclusive hypotheticals.

A school's location and context can be related to both its self-awareness and its attitude towards the outside world. Integration in the urban fabric suggest active involvement in

the life of the city (Strelka institute). An architecture school's situation within a campus environment, or in proximity to other faculties, can be interpreted by an effort towards stronger identification and multidisciplinarity (TU Delft). A central location implies status and speculates about an established institution (The Bartlett). Decentralization of a school on the other hand can be considered a statement towards a globalized world or an attempt to spread its influence via satellites (Columbia Studio X). Schools which are more introvert often seek undisturbed isolated environments far from the public gaze and retrieve to no-man-lands (Black Mountain College). The periphery is often favoured by alternative or experimental educational projects (Open city). Some even explicitly choose literally underground locations as if to underline their existence on the fringe (The Public School). The practical need of more space in relation to a programs' focus on real projects is another reason for leaving the traditional schools' premises (AA Hooke Park). Change in location can also demonstrate a shift in focus and agenda (The Berlage).

Where a school is situated does indeed make a difference. However, the spatial organization of a school is the main indicator of what its educational objectives and policy are. Collective studio spaces aim for a culture of collaboration (the Hive, NTU). Emphasis on learning commons blur the lines between informal and formal learning (Abedian School of Architecture). A definitive statement about the importance of flexibility and reconfigurations with regard to the dynamics of architectural education is the plain box structure (The Confluence). In contrast, a variety of facilities and spaces, conducive to a multifaceted process, is a mark for seeking excellence on all levels (ETH Zurich). Some schools, refraining from major changes in the curriculum, demonstrate a similar approach towards the places that host them (MARCHI). In the case of spaces re-appropriated for architectural schools, the choice of a building has symbolic value. Some occupy architectural landmarks, despite their confined spaces, bearing resemblance to the atmosphere and exclusive culture of clubs (AA), whereas others barely need walls at all and decide on large industrial buildings with plenty of room and open space (SCI-ARC).

There is more to the setting that translates to hidden meaning. Image and appearance are among the statement that architecture conveys. Many schools have opted for high profile architectural designs in recent years as a symbolic act (University of Cincinnati). In other cases, the token of tradition, culture and reputation can simply be a grand old tree (UTokyo). The vision of a school can be declared through its own engineering or materiality as well (UC Berkeley). Even the design of

the furniture within the school or the detailing can be revealing of the essence of its underlying culture (Bauhaus). The hidden school may present itself in every aspect of a space, place and its architecture. You just must read between the walls.

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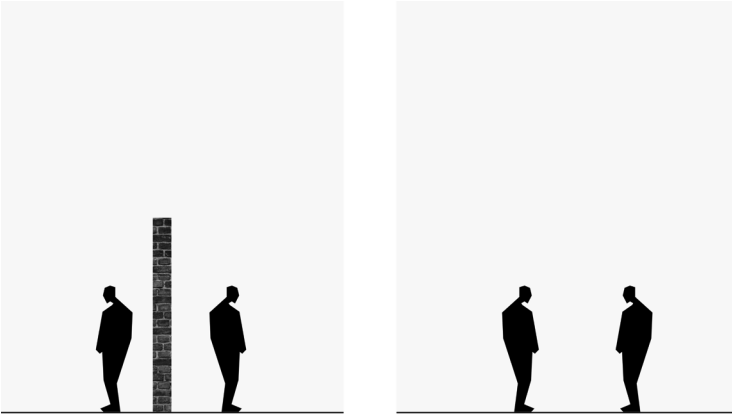
1: An illustration of possibilities of interaction between two entities with a wall between them to the left, and without a wall between them to the right
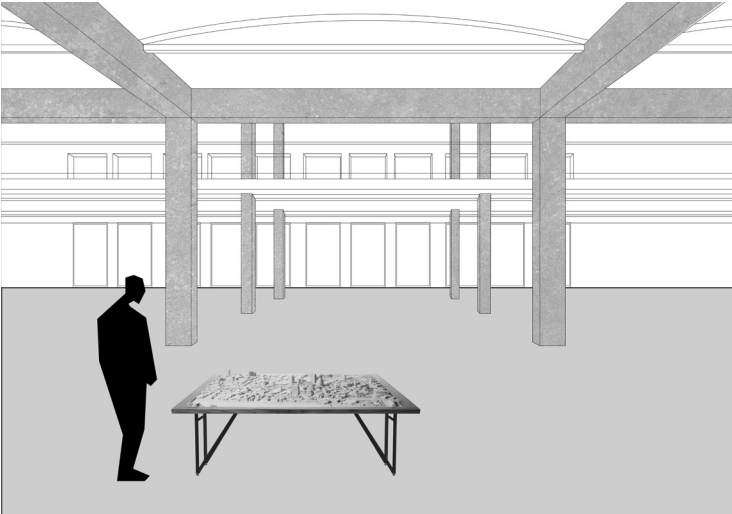
2: A studio space at Confluence Institute School of Architecture in Lyon

3: A room at Architectural Association London School of Architecture