

## On the design of school spaces and their uses...

**DR CATHERINE BURKE** is a historian whose current research examines the relationship between innovation in teaching and the design of formal and informal learning spaces; the view of the child and young person in the design of education; the history of 20th century school architecture and its pioneers. A major focus of her research is bringing a historical awareness to current initiatives to 'transform' education through school building renewal.

Co-authored books include *The School I'd Like* published by RoutledgeFalmer (2003) and *School*, published by Reaktion Books (2008). Catherine's latest book is *A Life in Education and Architecture: Mary Beaumont Medd 1907-2005* and was published by Ashgate in 2013. She divides her time between Sheffield and Cambridge, where she is a Reader in the History of Childhood and Education.

### **Tell me about your first school**

The first school I attended was Our Lady's Catholic Primary school in Stechford in Birmingham. I went there in 1962 when I was five and I stayed there until I was about six when we went to live in another part of Birmingham. So this school was brand new, everybody was talking about it as a brand new building and it was two storeys, two or three storeys even: it must have been quite a big school and it was a series of classrooms along corridors, I remember. But the reception (class) room where I went was quite a big room and it had its own set of toilets, I remember quite well because I was sick once and I was told to go to the toilet to be sick in, which I thought was a bit odd (laughs). And I was sick and was put in a little camp-bed, which was in the reception room for children who perhaps felt a bit ill, or needed ....

### **So this was one big classroom ... with toilets?**

Yes, it had its own set of toilets, perhaps a set of six toilets, set out in an institutional sort of way and it was set out at the very end of the building, the reception area and yes, that's what I remember from that school. And in the playground there was nothing except some climbing bars and I hung out with a little boy on the climbing bars, not realising you had to go back into school on the first day (laughs) I remember that, being hauled back in.

### **Was there a place in the school that you felt particularly safe and secure?**

In that particular school on my own, tucked into that little camp-bed. It was like an army camp-bed, it wasn't particularly friendly, it was just that I could be alone and away from everybody else ... a bit sad really (laughs).

### **And were there places in the school where you didn't feel very happy?**

Well, I suppose the dining room with all the hectic noise and clutter and lining up. I didn't enjoy that very much. Apart from that I can't remember too much about that particular school because I was only there for a short while. I remember my brother being there and drawing a fantastic skeleton on the blackboard, I mean he must have only been about nine but he was remarkably talented at drawing. I can't remember any more about that school.

### **Did you learn to read at that school?**

Yes, I do remember learning to read at that school and I remember being taken along the corridor to one of the older classrooms where the older children were and shown off as 'a good reader' and I had to stand at the front and read for the older children, so I must have done well, been picked out as a good reader.

### **Do you remember the process of learning to read, how you were taught?**

Yes, I remember the alphabet, visually, on the wall, sitting on the floor and being taught the alphabet. I suppose it was phonetics that we were doing at the time and I think we must have had reading books, reading ... what are they called? like a ...

### **... reading scheme?**

... (nods) reading scheme books, I think. But I can't remember much about reading on my own.

### **You can't remember having to read out loud .. apart from this?**

Apart from that special time. I was quite proud that I'd been picked out. Apart from that I can't remember, no.



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### **Was there a place in the school where you felt any strong emotions, anything powerful that you can associate with that building?**

No, but the next school I went to was very different. It was a very Gothic building; another primary school in Birmingham. That was single storey. I suppose it was late-Victorian, very close to the Catholic church and I had very strong feelings about that school. I didn't enjoy going and I used to try not to go and at playtime I felt a little bit lost and I used to sit on a step outside. There were outdoor toilets, a yard with outdoor toilets and they were painted green and horrible things would happen in there and they were very spooky. So I have very strong memories of that school.

The infants was a Gothic building and they had a new building as well, for the primary school, which I eventually got into and the top class was for the best children: the ones who were likely to pass the eleven plus. So they had the top classroom with the most sunshine and I was in that class for a short while and then I was removed and put in a class on the very ground floor where it was very dull and dark and where you were not expected to pass the eleven plus. So I was removed from the A stream and put in the B stream and I remember that very vividly.

### **How did you feel about that?**

I was desperately upset. And it felt like I was moving from the sunlight into the darkness and you knew that the best teacher was teaching the best kids and the less experienced teacher was teaching the ...

### **... and was it the nicest room?**

It was the sunniest, nicest room, the best room and the 'B' room, well it felt like you were going down into the dungeon really, it was very crowded and you knew you were with children ... you didn't know them very well because you were removed from your peer group and you were very well aware ... I was expected ... my parents were told that I would feel easier in that class and I was expected to possibly scrape through the eleven plus, which I must have done (laughs). But yes, very strong emotions about that school. And, of course, it was a Catholic school so there were lots of priests and nuns and statues about.

### **Do you remember there being any private places that you could go in that school ... or any of your schools ... any secret dens or places that you ever found in school?**

In the outdoor area, yes, the sort of rough patch where you went to play rough sorts of games. The playground was divided by gender as well, the boys were on one side of a painted line and the girls were on another side. And we played ... there weren't so many nooks and crannies that were important but we played lots of games up against the walls and things like that. I remember playing quite a lot there, er, quite happily really, quite good games.

### **Can you remember when you think back to any of your schools, places where children were punished or sent to be punished and places where children were rewarded in some way and how that happened, in terms of actual spaces in the school?**

Hmmm, not immediately. I know that when I was punished, I was taken outside the classroom door and hit and then returned with a pink welt on my leg (laughs).

### **Why is school design so important to you?**

It wasn't always so important to me. I've always been interested in ... Can I say I have always been interested in space, materialities? But I became interested in learning and space and its restrictive qualities and its expansive qualities when I'd had children and I was trying to study at home. And that's when I started becoming aware of space. Especially space and technologies you need to have when you are learning, maybe pen and paper or computers or whatever, and time, the sort of axis between space and time; that's what came first when I was studying to do a masters with two small children and the gender dynamics of that as well, that's what started it.

But school space and architecture and design and materialities, that came from *The School I'd Like*. That came directly from children really, what they said and how they made a really strong connection between education, the experience of education, and knowledge and built environment. They seemed to need to say something about the built environment to talk about change in a way that ... perhaps much more strongly than teachers do. So it came from them, really, so when I was trying to make sense of their models and drawings and ideas I thought the best thing to do would be to contact, to get in touch with



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architects who are building schools today. And some architects responded (laughs) and some architects responded in different ways and that's where it started really, this interest in architecture and design.

And then history. Because I'm a historian I think I've got a tendency to look to the past to try and make sense of the present, and then it came from there really.

### **And why does it matter what children think about the schools that they're learning in?**

Why does it matter? Well it matters because they've got such valuable knowledge, valuable experiential knowledge and it matters that we appreciate their experience, partly because ... well, because they are there and they are the most important thing that is going on there. But I think it matters in a different way too because there's something consistent in what they say over generations and therefore what children have to say matters through that consistency of what matters to them. So you can say, 'oh, we don't really need to listen to children today, what do they know, they don't know what's best for them', but if you recognise the depth over time of this consistent thing that matters to them, or set of things that matters to them, then that matters, that builds a real strength of argument really.

And then in recent years I've recognised that the things that matter to children, like 'why is knowledge divided into different subject areas?', the things they struggle over really, 'why is school divided into lumps of time when you get into something and then you have to move onto something else?', why can't things be more connected .. those sorts of questions, when you realise that those sorts of questions were prominent in educationalists and architects minds when they were trying to reorganise and reform and change schooling in the post-war period then it's quite exciting because you can make a link between what children have had to say over a period of time and those very strong principles and ideas about relationships between time and education and knowledge that others, who have really been at the top of their game, have pushed for in the past.

### **If you could change one thing about schools ... if there's something you could bring from your experience of working with architects and with school design?**

To change something materially?

#### **Yes, to change something materially.**

Then that would be about (laughs) God, so many things I could think of there .. If I had a magic wand, it would be to remove everything from schools (laughs loudly) including all the clutter and all the paraphernalia and all the technology and all the stuff and then have a really good think about what was necessary to bring back. And to try and justify bringing everything back. And OK, bring it all back if it's got some justification but schools are ... that's just thinking about schools as containers, you know, they're very cluttered places, full of stuff that is .. it's like a museum piece really, you know, lots of layers of things that are not necessarily of use any more. But people don't have time, teachers and pupils don't have space and time to think about what is necessary and what's needed if they're going to learn and to learn in a particular kind of way.

### **Do you think that there is a fascination with newness, that people bring new stuff into schools all the time and the act of buying it sometimes is what influences what's bought and then there are layers of it ...**

Yes I do, and I think if you empty schools, this is quite an interesting idea, if you empty schools then you realise the richness of what's outside and then that becomes a little bit like Colin Ward's idea of the school being the city and teachers being somehow prepared or trained in order to use the city as a resource ... the city and, today, the world through the internet and so on.

**This interview between Dr Catherine Burke and Emma Dyer took place on 23rd April 2015 in Cambridge.**

