

THE TEACHER'S VIEWPOINT

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Any conscientious teacher surely wants a combination of circumstances in a school building that will encourage, permit and, indeed, inspire him to do his best work - to employ the methods of teaching that are his particular strengths and to provide the learning situations that will be of the greatest benefit to his students. The design, construction and fittings of the building cannot guarantee that these desired circumstances will exist, but at least they can make them possible, if enough thought goes into the project at the planning stage.

Whatever his wishes concerning the physical make-up of the school, first and foremost the teacher wants recognition and consideration before a school building is erected or even planned. Recognition of his existence and that of his students - recognition of the fact that he and his students must spend their working hours in close contact under the same roof - consideration of the fact that they are human beings, who come from architecturally planned homes where "comfortable living" and "labour-saving devices" have largely replaced the Spartan conditions of the pioneering days - recognition of the fact that environment and the experiences it provides are a big factor in shaping people's lives, particularly those of impressionable young people - in short, recognition of the inescapable fact that those who occupy school buildings are qualified to say, to some extent at least, how they should be designed and what they should contain.

When the administrator, whose responsibility is to spend public money to the best advantage, and the architect, whose task is to plan school buildings, seek out and incorporate opinions of teachers and students in their preliminary thinking, so will more functional and more congenial surroundings for the school population result. Many costly alterations, which so often have been found to be necessary immediately upon completion of the building, may thus be avoided. Generally better education should be the outcome of this research.

Convenience and comfort

Next, the teacher wants convenience. To carry out his duties to the best of his ability, to use his valuable teaching time to the maximum, to create the conditions for learning which modern educational theory demands, he must have "everything" he needs within easy reach.

Audio-visual equipment must be readily available, administration and ancillary services close at hand, office and storage space ample and accessible and students' amenities immediately adjacent to their working areas.

Finally, the teacher wants and expects to find comfort - not

luxury or extravagance, but a reasonable measure of comfort in keeping with standards existing in professional premises elsewhere. The industrialist, the medical man, the banker and the public servant generally spend their working days in hygienic, thoughtfully-planned, air-conditioned, insulated, well-lit, carpeted, cushioned, acoustically favourable and aesthetically attractive worlds. So should the teacher and so should his students.

Now, if these needs are to be met, what kind of building will fill the bill?

Choice of materials

Availability governs the structural materials to be used, but brick and mortar walls have a substantial, permanent and weather-proof appeal that timber, metal or pre-fabricated units cannot match. The same can be said for the stair-cases and covered walk-ways. In the event of fire, their value is obvious. Plaster acoustic ceilings and rough cast internal walls reduce the sound reflection in classrooms and transmission through corridors. Polished wood panels may look attractive, but their worth ends there. Large expanses of glass are also acoustically and climatically undesirable.

A non-slip, non-stain, vinyl-type floor covering laid on an underfelt stands hard wear and is easier on the feet (and ears) than concrete or bare boards. Staff accommodation should be carpeted throughout.

Studies into the amount of natural lighting needed for optimum working conditions are an important adjunct to the planning of the school building. What is best for one situation may be excessive in another, resulting in eye-strain and early fatigue. With evening classes for adults becoming more common, the problems of artificial lighting warrant close attention too. In fact, every room in the school needs to be well-lit for both day and night use. Invariably, store and locker rooms are just like the "black hole of Calcutta" and the incentive to keep them clean and tidy is consequently reduced.

Colour consultants are called in to advise on the interior decoration in the home. Why not in the school? The psychologist could probably offer some advice too about the shades likely to be conducive to the best working conditions.

Land costs, especially in urban areas, probably dictate that the structure is two or three storeys. Traditionally the shape has been that of "I", "L" or "LI". I suggest that for the same money a "wheel" design with a central hub and radiating spokes is more compact and functional.

The "home" room, where general academic subjects are studied, and the "specialist" rooms form the main working areas within the building. If they are isolated from each other too much by being at opposite ends, there is a tendency towards fragmentation rather than integration of the whole school programme. Sufficient "home" rooms to be real homes for their respective classes and not just "transit camps" are most desirable.

In the classroom

What does the teacher want or expect to find in the class-room? First of all sufficient space to accommodate his students and himself, for

storage, display and equipment with adequate space in between. Single unit "portable" desks and chairs are the rule these days and so too are wood and steel. Modern picnic furniture is lightweight, sturdy and silent aluminium and plastic. Perhaps there is a place for these materials in the school room too.

Whatever the seating plan, the room should be large enough to ensure that every student has some privacy from his "neighbour" and none should be so close to the front as to suffer a droplet shower when the teacher is speaking.

Adequate storage space is essential, consisting of cupboards (preferably dust-proof), some of which have laminated plastic tops and can double as work benches where a larger area than a desk-top is needed. Space underneath at intervals for the students' legs, while seated, is desirable. Sets of drawers for teaching aids and students' projects; show-cases and open shelves for collections of books, displays of models, etc. are other conveniences which are not luxuries but necessities for more effective teaching and learning. The same can be said for "pin-up" boards of felt (not caneite) and sundry fittings to permit the expeditious use of audio-visual equipment. It would be unrealistic to have a full range of such apparatus from tape recorder to television set to slide projector permanently installed, but power points (not in awkward places), projection screen and maps (roller-blind style or wall mounted), projector stand, radio and public address speaker, chalkboards (front and back at least), "blackout" blinds or curtains, movable room dividers and intra-school communications 'phone are all basic requirements. A sink with hot and cold water is very handy too.

While on the point of the chalkboard, if it must slide, then two or three leaves moving sideways, not up and down, are easier for the teacher to handle and less strain on the necks of the students at the front of the room. If some enterprising scientist could invent a better "board", which takes an absolutely dust-free "chalk", all teachers would welcome it and his fortune would be made. The overhead projector is a useful alternative, but not a satisfactory replacement.

To open and close windows a hydraulic system, which controls all units with one movement of a handle, is the most efficient and desirable.

Two doors, one leading to the playground and the other into the building, provide for more rapid movement at the change of lessons and in case of emergency.

An indoor signalling system based on flashing lights rather than buzzers or bells is kinder to everyone's ears and nerves.

Facilities for students

Students' storage lockers are best placed adjacent to their "home" rooms, above floor level and of reasonable height, large enough to take books, bags and clothes, and having folding doors. Combination locks deter the would-be thief and students seem more proficient at remembering a number code than a key.

The locker room is inclined to be crowded at "rush hours", so that the doorways are better arranged in pairs to allow for "in" and "out" traffic. Access from both the playground and the building is essential.

If changing rooms and toilet blocks adjoin, the lockers are available for safe-keeping of property at all times. Hot water, showers, basins, soap, disposable towels, mirrors and shoe-cleaning equipment are basic necessities in these areas. A refrigerated water fountain here, and in other convenient spots about the school, is certainly preferable to having students drinking from open taps.

Soft drink dispensers have their place alongside other food and refreshment facilities in the dining room. This most important area must be well appointed with sufficient seating and services to promote a high standard of eating habits. The kinds of foodstuffs to be offered for sale is a controversial topic these days and beyond the scope of this article. However, it must be mentioned that the idea that a dining room is not needed in a school, if the climate favours eating outside most of the year, is a fallacy. Playground lunches are too often eaten "on the run" and in quite unhygienic circumstances with a resultant accumulation of litter. A teacher's time is too valuable for some of it to be spent in supervising yard cleaning and rubbish disposal. With a platform or stage included in its design, the dining room can easily double as a formal assembly hall or for social functions, such as dances or parents' meetings.

Other desirable features

A gymnasium, properly equipped and adequately sound-proofed, with direct access to the locker and changing rooms, is essential if physical education is to be taught comprehensively. A stage for drama instruction and play presentation at one end and a projection room at the other would ensure that full use could be made of this area throughout the weekly timetable.

"Sick" rooms for ailing students are best placed in the quietest section of the building, as are the library and staff common room. Private study carrels for senior students are a worthwhile addition to the usual library facilities. In the future, self-teaching equipment using records, tapes and film is likely to be equally desirable as books on the shelves for students' use.

Offices, at least on a share basis, for staff to find privacy to get on with their many associated duties, make for greater efficiency and work volume. The common room should be reserved for relaxation and refreshment and not be cluttered up with piles of books or bundles of paper. Why public servants, who ultimately control the design of school buildings, believe that teachers can work well in difficult conditions, when they themselves take pains to guarantee their own comfort and convenience, is one of the mysteries of the age.

The need for "specialist" teaching rooms for certain subjects is apparent. What must be acknowledged is that the planning and equipping of these working spaces calls for special consideration. The co-operation and consultation referred to earlier between the administrator, the architect, the builder and the teacher is nowhere more important than in these areas. The great fund of experience built up over the years by many teachers working in unsatisfactory initial conditions, which they have modified, by their own efforts, into more pleasant, convenient and stimulating surroundings, cannot continue to be ignored if schools are going to keep up with advances elsewhere in this technological age.

What then does a teacher want in a school building? In short, a place in which he is proud to serve, in which his energies are freed from the bonds of inconvenience and frustration, in which learning and teaching are a pleasure and not just a business, in which the money spent thereon is regarded as an asset for the future, rather than a liability of the present. To fulfil its educational function a school must be a leader in the community; a centre of progress and development, even ahead of its times; an example to be imitated; an object of admiration and respect. The right kind of building can make this possible.