

Space, place, design and the school library

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This article issues from a doctoral research journey concerned with the design of school libraries. It explore, raise questions and invite conversation. On an earlier 20+ year journey the writer worked a library consultant with Brisbane Catholic Education and co-principal researcher with QUT colleague (2000-1). The study recognised the potential for school library culture to influence the school community and research experiences provoked questions about school libraries as learning spaces. As the research that ASLA proposes a new publication 'Designing for the Future'.

Approaching the journey...

Performing Hybridity: impact of new technologies on the role of teacher-librarians (2002) explores the perceptions, beliefs and practices of teacher-librarians and principals in relation to new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The *performing hybridity* aspect of the title emerged from the essential core and grafted variations in practice revealed through the interviews and observations and eloquently expressed by one teacher-librarian describing her enactment of the role as 'hybrid'.

Among a range of findings, the *Performing Hybridity* (2001) study recognises the capacity of the school library culture - its ethos, physical layout, contents, and access - to affect the social, intellectual and emotional aspects of the school community. Degrees of complexity arise in this relationship, as the school library is concurrently the host space/place for learner engagement with those texts historically associated with the library as repository and recreational space, along with the new texts, new technologies and new forms of learning and literacy influenced by ICTs.

My proposal for a doctoral research project has emerged from a deep interest in the intricacies of this relationship, stimulating questions about how school library spaces are designed [imagined, created and adapted], about the kinds of learners who are held in mind during the design process, about assumptions and interpretations concerning place, time and space [material/geographic and virtual/cyber], and about the inter-relationships of those who have roles in the design of school libraries. Even the appellation 'school library' becomes contested in the struggle to come to terms with changing roles, relationships and priorities.

Engagement with perspectives from critical theory enables the associations and contestations among education, culture, society and governance to be explored. The critical theorist asks 'who and what is valued here?' 'Who is included, who is excluded?' If we stand back to interrogate school libraries what do we see? Beyond notions of spaces for objects, subjects, and selected events how are these spaces socially constructed? Are/how are, the dictates of institutional power visible in the design of these learning spaces? Who designs these spaces, and what agendas are fulfilled through designer roles? What forms of learning/work are valued? How do elements such as shape, size and relationships between spaces work to prohibit, permit, locate and order the ways in which learners and teachers are positioned and the ways in which learning takes place?

The research intends to address how school libraries 'come to be' in current complex contexts. As we pivot between the global and the local, the material and the cyber, this seems an opportune time to look to wider sources and adjacent disciplines to enrich, even *hybridise*, perspectives on school libraries as particular examples of contested learning spaces. Theories and reflections about space, place, space-time relationships and design have much to offer our deliberations.

Thinking about space and place

The human experience and interdependent concepts of space and place are expressed across the

disciplines – in art, philosophy, literature, geography, psychology and anthropology. Tuan (1977:6) proposes that ideas about space emerge from constructivist notions that experiences are the modes by which we construct reality. Theories about space and place include conceptions of space as static and concrete; space as location for objects, subjects and events; space as defined completely in terms of relationships and space as a form imposed by people. There is value in understanding space as socially produced (Lefebvre, 1991). This production [spatialisation] is achieved through human practices located in places/spaces, through representations of spaces such as maps/plans which regulate and organise space and through often contested social, cultural, political, and economic meanings. Humanity could be said to live in a continuum from the materiality of geographic space to the virtuality of cyberspace (Curry, 1998).

Commentary from the literature on the human dimensions of built spaces gives form to some of these theoretical and critical aspects and further enables an interrogative stance about school library spaces. Alexander (1979) explores the human dimensions of built spaces through the patterns of events which take 'place' in spaces (p.62). The quality of spaces - 'alive, holistic, balanced, self-sustaining, timeless, appropriate' - is partnered with the notion that 'the life and soul of a place depends not simply on the physical environment, but on the patterns of events that happen there' (p.167). These patterns of events extend beyond human activity to encompass diurnal and seasonal elements, cultural diversity and geometric relationships.

Thus for example, a footpath is a system which includes both the field of associated human actions and events, along with the field of mathematical relationships which defines its material geometry. Mumbai footpath culture and patterns of events differ from those of New York, Rio or Brisbane. Cultures name their patterns of events by naming the spaces which are an accepted part of that culture: theatre, restaurant, market, classroom, and library. What implications are there for the design of libraries in such perspectives? How are human actions and events, culture and ethos represented and enacted in the school library?

Examining the characteristics of spaces and the forces at work in spaces provokes deeper consideration of the critical theorist's question about 'who and what is valued here?' Lawson (2001) sees spaces as containing, separating, structuring, organising, facilitating, heightening and celebrating. Behaviour in space is akin to a language, a traditional vernacular, trailed and errored enough to get some things 'right' or at least the way we like them. Among the forces at work in spaces are those of privacy and community along with ritual, display and surveillance (Barker cited in Lawson, 2001:11). So how, for example, are tensions of privacy and community worked out for students in schools? It seems that from their earliest experiences in schools the 'group' predominates. It could be said that students are herded, that school is a herd activity. How does grouping/herding accord with the rhetoric of independent learning?

There is a sense in which 'we rely on space to create places appropriate to certain kinds of activity/behaviour and to tell us what these are' (Lawson 2001: 11). Other expectations we have of spaces include, stimulation, security, stability, and identity. Notwithstanding international signage, travellers often become adept at reading spaces as texts to meet their needs for shelter, food, safety and personal comfort. Space has a function in creating settings in which we are able to perform our roles and identities. How might a school library space be read as a text? Consider the kinds of messages sent/received by surveillance? How might the character of surveillance differ in a prison; an art gallery; a hospital; a school library? Is the electronic security system in the school library a taken-for-granted and unproblematic element in conveying expectations of learners?

The design of school library spaces to best facilitate learning deserves the particular attention of teacher-librarians. Carmen Luke (1990:110) maintains that our changing concepts of the child are most evident in the pedagogic discourses through which emerge the natural learner, the whole child, the learning disabled, the gifted, Chomskian, Skinnerian and Piagetian child. Concepts of the learner presented in curriculum and education policy documentation give further pause for thought. The knowledgeable, creative, reflective thinker and investigator envisaged by the Queensland school

syllabi contrasts somewhat with the apparent intentions for learners embedded in some national statements via the Department of Science and Training (DEST). ICTs are nominated as a 'major force in the re-engineering of schools' and a strategic tool to enable schools to 'more effectively align their teaching and learning programs with the requirements of the information economy and the need for lifelong learning'. Teaching is described as needing to be 'relevant to the information economy' providing children with 'a school education to enable them to participate successfully in and contribute to that world' (Toomey, 2001; DEST 2001).

While we are reminded of the imperatives of economic futures for the lives of learners, readers could be forgiven for noting an apparent 'industrial, fodder-for-the-machines' overtone in such descriptions wherein the multi-dimensional lives of people remain unmentioned. Are transformative possibilities more or less visible in views of education as a 'necessary utopia', exemplified in UNESCO's four pillars of learning: **learning to know, *learning to do, *learning to live together and with others and *learning to be?* (Delors, 1997). So how do we understand learners? What kinds of learners do we have in mind as we try to negotiate the tensions between such differing versions of learners? What kinds of learning experiences do we identify to underpin fulfilling personal and professional lives? What kinds of spaces support such experiences?

It could be observed that an architectural and educational chronology of Australian schools is visible in the presence/absence, placement, size, shape, design, space relationships and functionality of school libraries. Current preoccupations with digital/electronic information and telecommunication technologies with the accompanying promise of ICT-facilitated any-time, any-place learning create new tensions about access, privacy, and community.

Using the concepts of 'communal' and 'private' to analyse the nature and distribution of space in schools provides an opening for reflection about how learners and others are held in mind as spaces are allocated for learning and work. Who and what is valued here? Behind these understandings about learning and work in schools further reflection is possible about the social, cultural, political and economic influences on the design and building of schools – and indeed of school libraries. To what extent can we plan, design, and build for a future we cannot see, but can only anticipate with an eye to the signs of the times?

Changing notions of space-time and place...

The disruption of space-time relationships by ICTs is used to underpin concepts of any-time-any place learning. However arguments such as the 'death of distance' (Cairncross, cited in Dodge and Kitchin, 2001:13) may fail to account adequately for a continuing reliance on the placement of the physical objects and points of access to ICTs and the relational placement of those who use them. There are also tensions between local and global, cyber and material on a number of levels. In conjunction with emerging cyber-worlds, people live in material worlds made of a multitude of social, workplace and economic networks independent of or with varying dependence on ICTs.

For many people access to ICTs and predictions of runaway connectedness continue to be tempered by international and national statistics. The differing 'digital divide' and 'global village' perspectives seem to agree at least that only 2% - 5% of the world's population are Internet connected and the statistic persists that '80% of the world's population has not yet heard a dial-tone'. Even within Australia connectedness is variously described as 'the vast majority' or 48% depending on whether you are a singles dating service promoting client connections or An Australia Company promoting the business benefits of an Internet presence (Allport, 2001).

It is possible to conclude that while new spatial-temporal understandings are emerging, the space-time disruption of ICTs does not render space meaningless [spacelessness]. Rather material space can be regarded as being supplemented by virtual space - geography is still important Dodge and Kitchin (2001).

Changes to the relationship between people and places is evident in the promotion of 'online

communities' founded on areas of interest rather than geography. There is debate among commentators about the characteristics of these communities which render them 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' (Relph, 1976; Dodge and Kitchin, 2001). Descriptors such as a 'sense of place', an 'everydayness', linkage with other places of relevance to participants and a 'sense of belonging' which are used to typify authentic [both online and geographic] spaces will be tempered by the degree to which individuals feel they belong. Thus it is possible, for example, that an online community might be more authentic than a geographic community in terms of values or tolerance. Such online spaces call on different modes of interaction and are experienced quite differently to geographic spaces. The common ties, in-person social mingling and location which unify those in geographic spaces may give way to social cohesion around a time-bound issue, or new forms of moral commitment in an online community (Dodge and Kitchin, 2001:17). As mentioned previously, in spite of their 'online-ness' these activities are still 'placed' geographically in relation to physical access points. How are school libraries to be/ designed to consider changing concepts of and relationships among space, place and time?

Thinking about design....

In 1994 I worked with Brisbane Catholic Education colleagues to develop an educational brief for the design and planning of school libraries. The several versions of the document generated in the intervening years attempted to draw the voice of the educator into the process of design to effect a collaborative participation among the client, designer and user roles. It is worth being aware that there are significant differences in the character and outcomes of negotiations between designer and client as opposed to designer and user most particularly when the client [school system] is not the user [teacher/student].

A series of planning experiences with other educator/s, facility planners and architects demonstrated to me that the process often became unnecessarily fraught as professional perspectives competed for prominence, and roles assumed knowledge from outside their recognised fields. A jaundiced eye even led me to theorise that schools might well be designed by the Great School Arranger on the 'parachute principle' – thus, buildings are designed and parachuted in to the school site and subsequently people are parachuted into the buildings. Occasionally a planning experience was productive, participative and characterised by respect for the varieties of expertise and experience participants brought to the process. In these instances it seemed that the act of design became collaborative and synergistic as the project progressed.

Reading for this research project has revealed a range of perspectives on design as an activity, which support the value of the varied perspectives in the planning and designing process. Christopher Alexander (1979) and Bryan Lawson (1977) write convincingly about the history of design embedded in our vernacular understandings and experience of space and place. Design thinking as a skill is not the exclusive province of those with design training. Daily we are faced with design decisions in the clothes we select to wear, the arrangement of our desk space, the order of our tasks. With respect to built spaces, design capacity is inherited from a tradition vested in communities as part of the craft-based building of, for example, the highland croft, the bura or the igloo, without the involvement of the formally accredited designer/architect of our present experience.

Professionalisation of design raises, controls and unifies standards of design practice, just as technological advances both resolve and present design problems. The vernacular is now only part of the story. Day (2003) promotes participative or mediated consensus approaches to design using both vernacular and specialist knowledge. A distinction is made between democratic [majority view] approaches and consensus approaches which work towards agreement and rely on the surrender of entrenched personal positions. While consensus approaches may have significant potential as action based methods for advancing design knowledge – design as a form of research – it seems that time and commitment would be of prime importance. Again the critical theorist asks, 'Who designs?' 'Who is valued?' and 'What aspects and agendas come to prominence both inside and outside consensus processes?'

Beyond the designing of new school library spaces reside the cyclic and sometimes daily considerations related to the re-design/adaptation of spaces in which users live and work. It seems reasonable to suggest that majority of school library spaces were designed before ICTs were part of the landscape. The flexibility and responsiveness mentioned so regularly in the literature as characteristics of long-life learning spaces have been thoroughly tested in many older school libraries [and some not so old]. In seeking guidance for space modification it could be asked whether the plethora of published checklists and design templates are an adequate support for the regeneration of spaces for new purposes or the design of new spaces? Many generic publications related to the design of school libraries pay close attention to technical elements and processes but few texts devote a focus to planning for the human experience of these spaces.

It could be argued that circumstances and contexts so differ that a reductionist approach is the best possible, and specificity is in the hands of the singular project. However, if a pivot point of design and redesign could be described at the cusp of the relationship among patterns of events, people in their cultural contexts, the social constructedness of spaces and responsive configurations it seems unlikely that either the template or the 'parachute principle' will provide a satisfying response to design needs for the school library. How much more is school library design concerned with beyond technical specifications? What partnerships might support a rethinking of school library spaces?

As the research progresses.....

A critical ethnographic approach will be used to engage the voices of the educator, architect and facilities planner in a conversation about the design of the school library. Critical discourse analysis will be used with policy and documentation from the broader contexts within which school libraries operate. Data will be gathered via semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. I hope that the research will allow responses to many questions raised in this article, to 'grow out of the developmental currents already at work' (Day, 2003:220).

An invitation....

As a reader of ACCESS you are most welcome to join me on this journey. You may wish to email me on matters related to the research at r.elliottburns@qut.edu.au or raise a discussion on OZTL_NET. There is also an opportunity to join a wider conversation at the Council of Education Facility Planners International (CEFPI) conference 'Educating Design: ensuring facilities empower education' in Brisbane 28-30 May, details on EdNA (Events) and at <http://www.cefpi.asn.au/> The bibliography includes references made in the article, some of which may be thought and discussion provoking.

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