

Book Review:



University planning and architecture: The search for perfection

Jonathan Coulson, Paul Roberts, & Isabelle Taylor.
New York, NY: Routledge, 2011. 263 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-57110-4

In his critical overview of university architects, Martin Pearce (2001) suggests that, "education is an invisible substance; architecture allows it to become material" (p. 32). Capturing the essence of education in architectural form has always been a central focus of learning space design. In the 21st century, attention has increasingly focused on internal space in the form of learning commons and writing centers, often with a disregard for exterior space and the embedded ideology of university planning. In *University Planning and Architecture: The Search for Perfection*, the authors provide an accessible, historical overview of university planning from the University of Bologna in 1088 to the University of Technology Petronas in 1997.

The first chapter provides a brief but thorough examination of historical architectural design in education, detailing the architectural movements that shaped some of the world's greatest colleges and universities. From Frederick Olmstead's philosophy of nature influencing the design of Washington University in St. Louis to the post-modernist design of Frank Gehry's Stata Centre at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the authors remind us that university design and architecture is not merely provocative, but proactive in the experience of the user. Whereas the Beaux-Arts Movement in architecture enclosed universities into miniature cities on a grid and axis, the Gothic Revival attempted to instill the concept of longevity to newer American universities. These embedded architectural ideologies color the student's educational experience.

The numerous case studies of individual universities in the second chapter illustrate that architecture may not only be the material manifestation of the invisible substance of education, but itself a product of the socio-historical context from which it arises. The case studies underscore the embedded ideologies of learning spaces and the challenges of reform and change. For example, the case study on Moscow State University discusses the exterior architecture as immersed in Stalinist urbanism expressed in bold form, but functionally inadequate. Embedded into the Moscow skyline, the university buildings encapsulate the propagandist aims of the Soviet state under Stalin.

The third and final chapter provides a useful rubric for developing a campus master plan in the 21st century. Aligning with a "learning landscape" approach, the authors understand that architectural design is a fluid concept far more expansive than mere "encounter management." Architectural design is a shared, multi-actor process between the architects or designers, the users of the space, and the facility managers. This triadic relationship emphasizes and deemphasizes different actors throughout the process, from initial plan (designers) to implementation (facility managers) to inhabitation (users).

In her work, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, Kim Dovey (2008) reminds us that, "though the relations of architecture to social behavior are complex and culturally embedded they should not be ignored" (p. 2). This book underscores the importance of a holistic approach to the design of learning spaces, not only considering the internal, but with recognition of external architecture as well. Though quibbles and tensions will inevitably arise concerning the relationship of interior to external learning spaces the quandary is worthy of consideration.

See Further Readings:

Boddington, A., & Boys, J. (2011). Re-shaping learning? A critical reader: *The future of learning spaces in a post-compulsory education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Dovey, K. (2008). *Framing places: Mediating power in built form*. The Architext Series. London: Routledge.

BOOK REVIEW: *UNIVERSITY PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE: THE SEARCH FOR PERFECTION*

Pearce, M. (2001). *University builders*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy.

Josh Finnell is the Humanities Librarian in the William Howard Doane Library, Denison University