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The Learning Environment:
Reflections on the Function
of Facilities

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THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNCTION OF FACILITIES

If you wish to respond to this article contributed by the director of a vocational school in Quebec, please send your comments to the PEB Secretariat (see page 28).

The rapid development of new types of interior and exterior architecture for public buildings in recent years has made us increasingly aware of the dynamic and subtle relationship that people establish with their immediate physical environment. The impact of architecture on this environment has long been neglected in our cities, hastily built to meet industrial and commercial needs, as our contemporary designers have often focused solely on visual and functional aspects.

Architects have assumed that the outer environment could be reduced almost exclusively to its conceptual dimension, as in a museum. Invariably, users have reacted to the cold and lifeless forms and materials by seeking continuously to make them more human. The environment should reflect people's state of mind and needs whatever they are doing; for, whether they are working, walking in the city, on holiday or in school, they are always affected by their



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The cafeteria



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surroundings. People live in a dynamic relationship with the outside world and perpetually seek to make this relationship harmonious. They must interact with their environment, and this must be borne in mind when we design the spaces in which we live and work.

Some modern architecture has not respected the dynamics of this interaction, which is a two-way street. Our professional designers have vainly sought to place people in a stage setting rather than a living environment. For example, it is impossible to create a working environment without the close involvement of the people who actually work in it, who must establish their own codes of communication. It is only by doing so that they will be able to live harmoniously in their environment.

Similarly, the architecture of educational buildings must be very different from that of commercial and/or industrial buildings. In recent years, too many public buildings have been built using designs based on values derived from modernism, concepts difficult to understand, abstract ideas and messages that are irrelevant to the concerns and interests of students as opposed to buildings in which students can feel at home.

To create a learning environment, architecture should use forms and materials that reflect educational values, academic concepts, self-fulfilment and high achievement and the on-going, lasting relationship that everyone must establish with their human and physical environment; it should embody projects that enable learners of all ages to become involved with their environment and should reflect other symbols of the role of education in society. In functional terms, the learning environment must include

the school facilities, premises and laboratories that support learning and educational attainment. This cannot be based solely on abstract concepts.

This environment, as well as mirroring the concerns of students, should stimulate and support them in their task of acquiring knowledge and mastering skills and in their individual personal, psychological, intellectual, moral, social and physical development. Students should find an atmosphere that is conducive to their intellectual and emotional growth and that projects an image of serenity, thoughtfulness, interpersonal communication and the organised flow of energy. Light, plants and the layout of rooms are some of the elements that should enable students to gather together and provide more intimate spaces that are relaxing, harmonious and comfortable.

Although the conditions conducive to learning must meet the needs of individuals, they must not prevent students from congregating or stifle the energy generated by hundreds of students interacting with each other and with their teachers. The sound management of this flow of energy will contribute to the personal and professional development of all students and help them to become well-rounded citizens, which is the ultimate goal of education and training in society.



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