

[Image of a library in ruins during the London Blitz, a few readers still browsing books within the crumbling building]

The 'school of hard knocks' was always meant to refer to those tougher life lessons learnt outside the shelter-zone of formal education. Yet the very notion of school has become, in neoliberal terms, a concept for just another commercial product, forced to compete along with everything and everyone else for a place in the market. At least this has made it clear, in taking up arms in the consumer warfare of our age, that the convincing 'school-ness' of a school is disingenuously more important than anything it might offer as a place or space of open curiosity about the world.

Fortunately it is in the nature of learning that any overly-determined or, in our case, market-driven defini-

tion of what makes a school a school will always be challenged or countered by alternative approaches. Though I still find myself thinking, gloomily, that the best option would be not to go to school at all – to give up the pedagogical ghost of an immoral economy just as one would abandon a contaminated or broken building.

I know that is not enough of an answer either. So I thought I would talk here about how a school could learn instead to shed some of its 'school-ness'. Not necessarily by opening up the roof, or punching a few holes into the walls – even if interacting with the physical framework is one way to reveal the building itself as something less confined – but I mean to take school down from the inside, by learning from the 'world-ness' of its occupants and their areas of interest.

Here for example we have the school, and there, a bit further on, is the outside world, sealed off as if everything exists as a competing or separate entity. But why so separate? Isn't a school just a building with a school in it, as vulnerable, or as open to interpretive use (or destruction) as any other?

It doesn't even have to be a building in the strictest sense.

[Image, sketch for *Potteries Thinkbelt School*, Cedric Price]

The architect Cedric Price proposed a mobile school housed in train carriages. The trains were to run on disused tracks linking the English pottery towns of Staffordshire. It would have been part school, part commute to school, and part field-trip escape from it, all on the same return ticket.

The university of train carriages wasn't meant as a gimmick but to keep places and places of learning accessible to each other, as well as on the move. Price had said: 'Education, if it is to be a continuous human service run by the community, must be provided with the same lack of peculiarity as the supply of drinking water or free dental care.' In those days (Britain in the 1960s and 1970s),

Price, who grew up in Staffordshire, would have been keen to extend the limits of provincial education.

Today, in a world made apparently both smaller and larger (held together and torn apart?) by its supposed wealth of mobile telecommunications, we are constantly reminded that the academy is everywhere. Not that the issue is now simply one of resisting the global campus, since there may already be no escape from it. But network resources can also be used to localise many of the features of education and to tailor programmes to individual needs.

Despite what the promotional rhetoric tells us, schools are not here to 'create' learning, but to provide a structure adaptable enough to support learning's unpredictable requirements. Cedric Price had an instinct for this: his projects, whether realised or not – mostly not –

became architectural essays on flexibility, indeterminacy and impermanence. The *Potteries Thinkbelt School* came with inflatable lecture theatres; in another project, a plan for *Fun Palace* involved spaces that could be reconfigured for different uses. The Inter-Action Centre, a multipurpose community centre in London's Kentish Town (1971), was finally a working example of Price's interest in buildings that combined lightweight structure, a fixed lifespan, in this case thirty years, and a function that had yet to be decided.

These are ideas that apply perfectly to the space of a school which, after all, is a kind of drop-in centre where individual commitment coexists within a more easy going

social milieu of equally undecided functions.

On the other hand, if the logic of our world of constant movement and connection relies on a network of stops, airports, terminals and transfer points, there may be no need to re-conceive the school so literally as a mobile carriage moving from place to place.

In practice, a school is a hub of activity that more specifically mirrors the airports and bus or train stations than an actual transportation system – the kinds of places, characterised by their linkage to other places, that Michel Foucault famously defined as heterotopian space (*Other Spaces*, lecture by Michel Foucault, March 1967). Alongside his example of a transport centre, Foucault includes many other kinds of hubs and ports, such as theatres and cinemas, hotels and even the cemetery, a terminal resting

point though not perhaps spiritually or for the imagination.

Motivated by a connectivity to other places (not to mention other schools and trains of thought), the school is a provisional base from which to filter the world we live in or within in which we reorganise ourselves, a place to reflect on basic principles or to invent new ones. In this sense, the one thing that a school needs to maintain above all else is its ability to maintain a hub or focal point, and by this I would equally imply a sense of its own community. A school is far less the building housing it than the hub of people that channel the information and ideas passing through it.

Even so, the image of a moving building, with its passengers and crew all moving together, is still useful. Echoing Cedric Price's trains, Foucault refers to the constantly moving, floating space of the ship as a key example of heterotopian space, in which a community, fixed however temporarily, is essential to its operations and movement as well as its meaning. Particularly, as Price implies in so many of his projects, a building in which meaning is constantly on the move.

Many artists, in or out of schools, have explored this floating signifier of the building itself.

[Images: I am thinking here of Robert
Smithson's *Hotel Palenque* (1969–72)
– his ironic but also functionalist
reading of a building as if it were moving
backwards and forwards in time]

And of course there are plenty of other examples that address the special kind of pivotal energy or 'hub-ness' that should characterise a school, or make certain parts become momentarily more vital than others. I sometimes think, for example, that a library and a good canteen might be all that a school requires of its location – a place to meet and think and a place to meet and drink – or at times, to do both in both.

[Image of *Fibonacci Napoli*
(Factory Canteen), Mario Merz]

Set in a factory, one of Mario Merz's visualisations of the power of numbers could easily have taken place in a school canteen. In *Fibonacci Napoli* (Factory Canteen), a sequence of images shows first one person, then two, then three, then five, then eight, and so on through the first nine numbers of the Fibonacci sequence. A throng of voices soon populates the empty tables and chairs as a lone person is transformed into a partisan crowd.

The exponential growth of a numbers series could be compared to an activity such as learning. And since Merz simply shows people coming together, this could just as well be a lunch or a party, a seminar or a strike meeting.

Thinking of that other, quieter school space, we must all have known schools that survived as such only because of their libraries: even in smaller libraries, where a collec-

tion is still manageable and accessible, and more or less to the scale of the individual reader.

[Image of Martha Rosler in her library,
installed in Liverpool]

Martha Rosler's personal library of books (in this picture we see the library installed at Liverpool's John Moores University School of Art and Design, I also encountered it in Berlin and at the Frankfurter Kunstverein) accumulated over more than thirty years of working and teaching, has sent that singular unit of a school's 'hub-ness' into orbit around the world as a kind of rogue satellite of self-learning.

Rosler's collection of almost ten-thousand books is made available for public use, along with a catalogue of each item and a photocopy machine. Even the smallest, most independent workshops and courses can develop a library as a byproduct of their day-to-day momentum – or

why not let that become the object of its activity?
Then there are the lectures, which can always be held in a canteen or library, or anywhere, if the location is to be as useful as the lecture itself.

[Image: Robert Venturi and Denise
Scott Brown's field-trip course
Learning From Las Vegas comes to mind
as the classroom and pop-art
colloquium is ramped-up by a dazzling
neon strip of gambling palaces, set
in the Nevada desert]

Some of the best talks are when you forget that you are even attending one, or were never quite sure in the first place. Robert Smithson's *Hotel Palenque* slide show is one of those 'is-it-a...?' lectures, to which the body-popping cultural anthropology of Adrian Piper's *Funk Lessons* provides the perfect 'or-is-it-a-disco/dance-class?' riposte.

But the most satisfying question of all might be: 'Or is it even a school?'

When looking for resident artists to add to the general mix of the new experimental college at Black Mountain, John Andrew Rice was asked if it was to be an art school. His answer was no: 'God, no. That's the last thing I want. Schools are the most awful places in the world!'

Thankfully both of those terms, 'art' and 'school', are made equally problematic. Yet Rice intended art to be at

the centre of the Black Mountain curriculum because he saw it as one of few cultural forms equipped to demonstrate alternative approaches to institutionalised social life. Undermining the overly didactic by presenting information using modes and methods that are both multi-layered and open-ended remains a driving force for contemporary art. And many examples come to mind of artists responding to an experience of school in ways that undermine the kind of narrow-band faith in curricular orderliness that schools so often stand for.

[Image: Emma Kay's extemporaneous history of the world told from her own memory]

If ever art itself has something to teach us, I wouldn't assume it to happen directly through institutional critique à la Foucault, but more likely through a kind of raw intertextual drift that offers open ways of responding to the world. Not even a teacher needs to have answers to questions that don't necessarily have answers: questions that are just as important a part of the process of exploration, or of research intended to illuminate a field of connections and not necessarily draw a conclusion or offer explanations.

Or that contribute to the lesson that we shouldn't be afraid to work things out for ourselves.

What I remember most from reading Martin Duberman's study of Black Mountain College is his description of Josef and Anni Albers finally consenting to the book's publication. They simply encouraged its author to turn his immense research into a book about the impact that this new-found knowledge of Black Mountain was having on him.

Albers seemed to prefer the idea of the school to remain alive as an idea, or set of ideas, that could be continually invented through individual attempts to discover it or produce it. Hadn't Mies van der Rohe claimed, back in those days, that the Bauhaus was not an institution but an idea? It can seem more like an institution every day, as the worlds of art and commerce somnolently fold the Bauhaus idea into endlessly perfected reenactments. What we might retain in a sort of art-school memory-trace of Black Mountain is a learning process propelled forward more by an instinct for what a school, or social life for that matter, needn't be, than what it should be – neither an institution or an idea, but something more open-minded than either of those.

The Bauhaus taught the lessons of engagement

[Image of Josef and Anni kissing; a second image of them arm-in-arm at the Black Mountain Friday-night dance]

through an awareness of materials and form. It still sounds like a foundation course, parts of which might even still be useful. But there are other ways of engaging with the world. And students need time to explore what they already know as people. We all do. Perhaps finding our own ways to engage is one of the key lessons of life anyway – including, as Cedric Price taught, ways of engaging with the very buildings that define us, often by confining us.

An artist friend once told me that he thought a curriculum could be entirely practical – lessons, for example, in desktop publishing, welding, or how to wire the electrics of a building: 'Just show us how the thing works, how to put it together.'

Another friend, also an artist, but who was actually on an electrical engineering course, reminisces about her favourite lecturer: 'He just had that way of describing things without fully explaining them; made you want to go off and figure the thing out for yourself.' When I asked her what his specific subject was, she couldn't remember: 'I'm not sure', she said, 'something to do with wave-theory, I think.' It made me laugh. The most inspiring teacher of all and you almost don't need to know what he's talking about.

I'll end back on another train, if only for the sense that we're still moving. But also with a note that we are all always at our own physical and experiential, and even architectural, centre of a mobile world.

It seems to be the train's buffet car: but like Adrian Piper's dance class, the passengers aren't sure if this is a

nightclub or a public lecture. And the man singing (or is he lecturing?) doesn't seem to care either.

Mutual
Schools

[Film clip of Groucho performing
Lydia the Tattooed Lady]

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On the move, in the crowd, some older, some younger, studious and happy, attending images of cultural and political history, flickering across the screen of a building or drawn by the agile body of a living person; all things 'You can learn a lot from...'

A school is just a building with a school in it. It doesn't even have to be a building in the strictest sense. Take some of the school part out and it might work even better.