

# Exploring Learning Spaces and Places: The Photo Interview

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*School buildings are complex places that influence the occupants even as those occupants adapt to the environment.*

Over the last 40 years, researchers and educational facilities professionals have learned more about the ways in which the built environment of the school serves as a place where students construct their identities, where occupants create communities for learning, and where the outside community provides both context and support for the schools they build. In fact, students themselves may be best prepared to teach us about the ways learning spaces encourage or hinder their learning. And yet, how often do we ask?

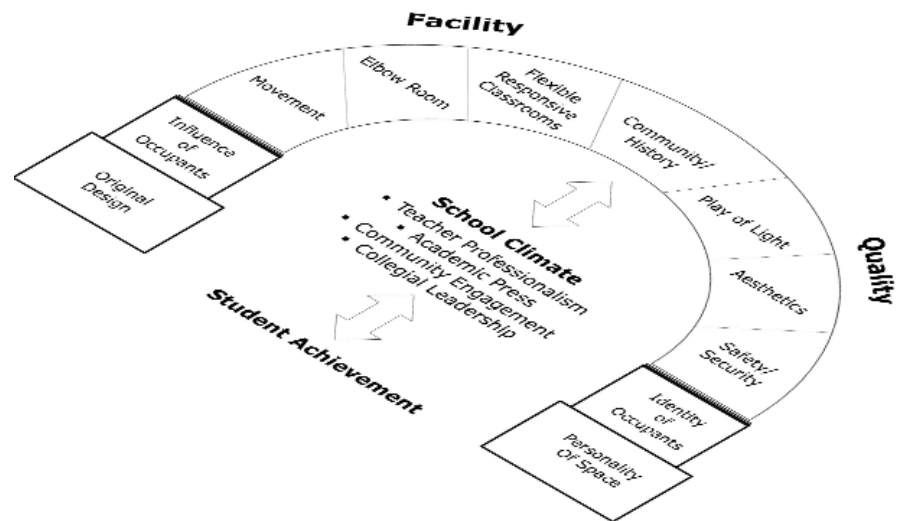
The present series of studies seeks to explore the relationship of the physical environment with school climate, achievement and identity development of students. The schools studied included buildings in the upper quartile of facility quality as well as buildings deemed to be substandard and, therefore, slated for significant renovations. In the latter schools, researchers collected data prior to start of renovations. Across the schools studied, students, along with their principals, teachers, parents and custodians were asked to tell their stories of the school environments within which they live and work. Student participants used both traditional and digital cameras to document how their school buildings influenced their learning, for good or bad.

## Background

Having first established a statistically significant relationship between school building quality, school climate and achievement (Uline and Tschannen-Moran 2008), we proposed a *Leadership-School Building Design* model to explore how six characteristics of facility quality, including *movement, aesthetics, play of light, flexible and responsive classrooms, elbow room and security* interact with four aspects of school climate, including academic press, teacher professionalism, collegial leadership and community engagement to support students' development and academic learning (see figure 1) (Uline, Tschannen-Moran,

Wolsey and Linn 2010). These broad themes related to building quality and school climate emerged from the research as central to the interaction between the built environment and building occupants in high quality school buildings but also robust descriptors in the substandard schools. In substandard facilities, the themes were often described as absent qualities or as anticipated qualities that would be added and/or enhanced through the upcoming renovations.

In all cases, students were observant and thoughtful in their approach to documenting the school. They noticed the strengths and limitations of the school build-



Leadership-School Building Design model



Figure 2: Paulo's photograph of the school exterior.

ings they inhabited and appeared exceptionally aware of the degree to which various aspects of the physical learning environment satisfied their needs, or failed to do so. They were perceptive in their assessments, describing both good and bad features and the feelings built environments elicited. The photographs mediated our interviews with students, while helping them organize and lend meaning to what had previously been commonplace to them.

### The Personality of the School Interacts with Identity of Occupants

The personality of a specific school building may or may not encourage a sense of belonging. The personality of the school environment can be thought of as a combination of various attributes, including events that have taken place within the school, affect of the people who inhabit and transform various spaces, the organization of the space as it was designed and so forth (Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Wolsey 2009). Significant to adolescent identity development is attachment to these significant places and people (e. g., Carter, 2006; Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand 2006).

### Photographs as Mediating Artifacts

Secondary schools with positive school climates, measured by the School Climate Index (Uline and Tschannen-Moran 2008), and which serve a population of students generally characterized in the lower quartiles of socio-economic status (SES), were selected (Uline, Tschannen-Moran and Wolsey

2009) as locations for this collective case study. The schools were located within urban and rural school districts in the eastern and western United States. Built environments appeal to the senses, and photographs potentially capture spatial and visual aspects of that environment. Photos help students who may lack adequate technical vocabulary to describe their perceptions within a school environment.

Students who represented the range of diversity at the school were chosen based on gender, level of academic participation, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Students in our study were given Polaroid® or digital cameras. After brief tutorials on the use of the cameras and an explanation of the research, students photographed building features and qualities that helped them learn or kept them from learning. Students received hall-passes so they could move freely about the school. This freedom encouraged them to tour the school with a critical eye. Once students completed the photography task, they were asked to group, categorize and label their photographs. Researchers interviewed students as they described their photography.

### Images and Interviews

Allison (all names are pseudonyms) used verbs to characterize her photographs. Like students at other schools (figure 2), she presented a hierarchy starting with the exterior of the building. Five of her images used the verb "come" to describe aspects of the school. A photograph of a stairwell she described as "come on down" while an image of the school auditorium is labeled, "Come class, sit down." By contrast, Makina grouped her images by the general purpose of the place she photographed. Four of her ten images were labeled "working places" and featured images of furnishings, students and staff members at work and the school library (see figure 3).

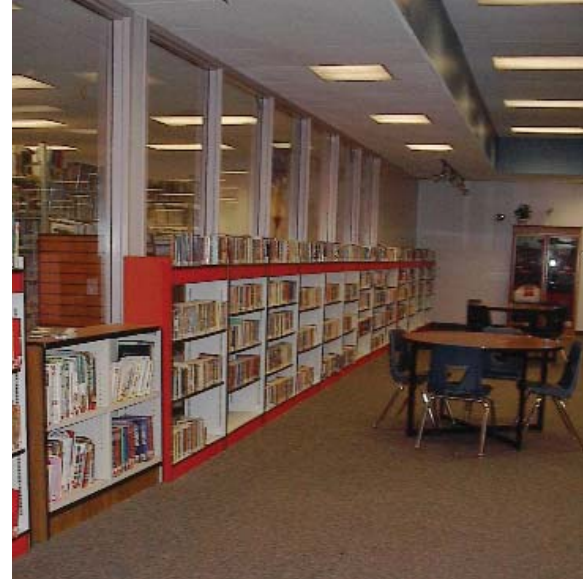


Figure 3: Anna's photograph of the school library.

### The photo interview.

Each student captured through photographs and through comments added during interviews an individual conception of their interactions with the built environment. One student in the second phase of the study (Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Wolsey 2009) included people in her photographs of the school because she could not conceive of a building without thinking about its occupants, for example.

What students told us helped us understand the ways students understood their school environments and their purposes while at school. For example, students at Lincoln Middle School photographed the large lobby area (see figure 4), a popular gathering place for students before school and dur-



Figure 4: Mark's photograph of the school lobby.

ing breaks between classes. At North Middle School, the principal installed an ornamental fountain a few years ago. Although the fountain was added before any of the current students arrived at North Middle, it remained a focal point for the students. The aesthetic qualities of the fountain as well as the arrangement of seating around the fountain provided an attractive place for students to gather (see figure 5). We asked: "Are there places that are good for socializing and hanging out? Are there [other] places for just hanging out with your friends or socializing?" Frankie responded: I think, like, everybody connects more around the fountain."

Alana made special note of the category under which she had placed a picture of her math classroom. "I decided to put this photograph in the category "special to me," because I really learn in this class. My teacher is getting all of us to pass math." From the photo-mediated interviews, researchers learned that students understood school as a place where their actions were consequential. They believed that school environments should be purposeful.

**The photo album.**

We used the term "photo album" to describe the collection of all students' photographs at each school. The collections created by individual students were illuminating. However, in comparing photographs made by a cross-section of students common themes emerged. The album made it possible for us to examine the school from the inside out. A central theme among student responses and photographs was the link between the school as a significant place in their lives and students' identities as learners. This theme permeated the photo albums. All of the students at South Middle School focused more than half of their photographs on common areas: the auditorium, the

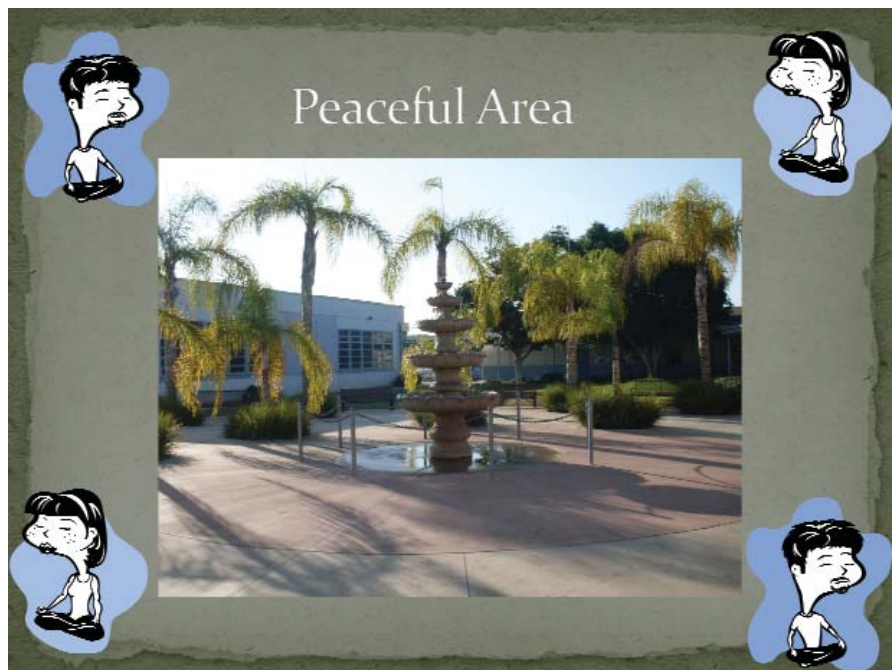


Figure 5: Frankie's photograph of the fountain – a popular gathering place.

cafeteria, the large lawns, and the area around the fountain mentioned earlier, for example. All of the students photographed the murals on the walls, and all included images of classrooms. In the classroom photographs, students often commented in interviews and identified in the labels they assigned to photographs furnishings that were comfortable or environments that were welcoming. Four of the six students at the school highlighted the new and

spacious computer labs underscoring their awareness of technology as a centerpiece of their lives (see figure 6).

**Implications**

School buildings contribute to the overall capacity of the occupants to provide an inviting, supportive, and safe environment. Erikson (1968) suggested that adolescents require flexibility as they resolve conceptions of their identities as learners with others around them. Students need

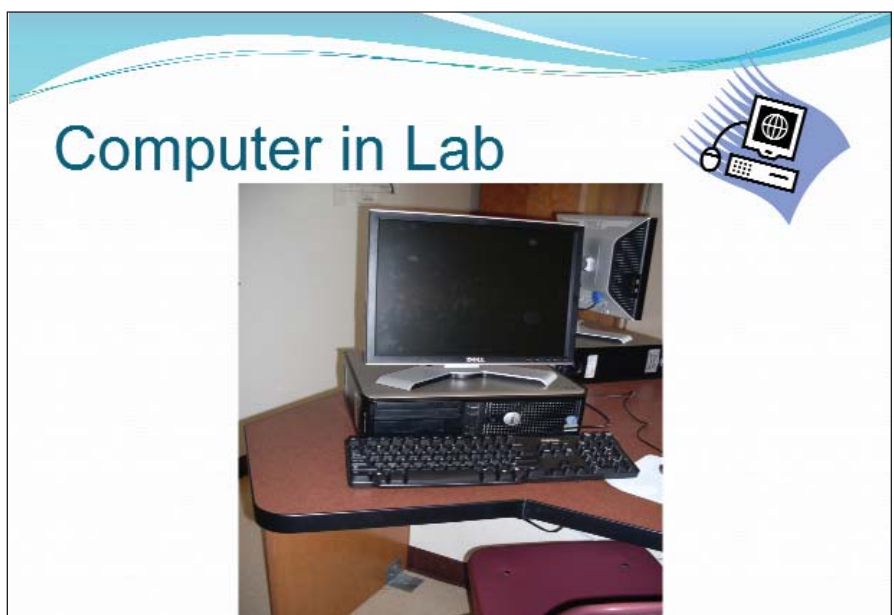


Figure 6: Katie and Philip's photograph of a computer lab.

spaces in which they can assert themselves and interact with others, yet they also need limits as to their use of spaces, helping to define them as members of a functional community. The spaces for learning were also enhanced in students' minds through historical aspects of the architecture, the aesthetic features of the building, and the responsiveness of the learning spaces. Schools constructed and utilized in flexible and responsive ways permit learners to think of themselves as part of the place. The place, in turn, becomes part of their identities, a dynamic that contributes to the character of the school.

### Conclusion

Schools are significant places in students' lives. Photo-mediated interviews helped students think about and organize their conceptions of school as a meaningful place. The photographs increased our understanding of the school

buildings as they were perceived by our student research participants. Photo-interviews provided data that we could not have gathered from interviews alone. Students valued many aspects of the school environment including the flexibility and responsiveness of the overall architectural design. However, they also noticed and appreciated the quality of furnishings and the space afforded them for social aspects of learning. At the same time, at schools slated for renovation they also were keenly aware of features of the built environment that were in need of repair or otherwise distracted them from the purposes of schooling. According to Marissa, "When we hear in the news that other schools are getting all-weather tracks and bigger classrooms, we think, 'Oh, aren't we as good as them?' But, we're not protesting or complaining. We do what we have to do to succeed."

Personal spaces and social spaces interact in ways that promote achievement and improve school climate (Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Wolsey 2009). The importance of space for students to move about is as important as spaces for students to interact in a safe and social manner, critical considerations for those who design and administer facilities. At the same time, school design that recognizes students' needs for both personal and social spaces, and facilitates their productive use of these spaces, increases the potential that students will identify themselves as competent learners. Attention to these important features may also contribute to the perceptions students construct of school as a place for learning. ■

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