

The Obduracies in Structures Preconceived

There is a strange air about an empty school, or college buildings out of term. One becomes abnormally aware of walls, the length of passageways, the loom of ceilings. There is hardly anybody about, and the lonely figures one does meet are strangely at home with the echoing structure, nonchalantly probing the entrails of floors and familiar with unexpected cupboards, blandly indifferent to the ghostly swarming that should fill these spaces. To them, the place is a building, to us it is something else. Each has its time of recognition.

We are working on a metaphor here. Most educational structures, stripped of their students and teachers, are uninteresting to the eye if not positively oppressive. Even in modern constructions one is struck by the frequency of walls, the strictness of doors, the rectitude and angularity of corridors that compel one along routes for robots, the blind surfaces and viewless vistas. The general principle is one of boxes within boxes. With an integrity that irony would call artistic, this style permeates the visible and invisible life of the building. Time is to be found in boxes on the vice-principal's wall, and on paper everywhere. People are boxed in groups as they move from room to room, their hourly actions and fugitive thoughts are set out in boxes in the teacher's mind and in their texts, and their very programs of life in the institution for years ahead lie ready stacked in neat boxes on the paper in boxed files within countless administrators' boxy desks. (And those administrators know where *they* are on the organization charts.)

No theme had been intended for this issue. Yet it is interesting that through the articles that have in their various ways come to hand there runs a certain consistency of implication: that education's business is not with the structures that one can see but with the spaces between. Our writers are all concerned, in Paddy Webb's memorable phrase, with "air as structure."

Two writers on administration and on politics are saying that the day has passed when the buildings of thought need the bearing walls that obstruct movement, and that the full range of resources now open to researchers should be exploited in unprecedented flow. Another tells of candidates in school board elections frustrated and hardly joyful over a process which should in theory have opened wide for them the public's window, if not a spacious door, into the obscure interior of the educational fortress system. We find that certain conditions have created several groups of young people for whom the air in high school proves either so thin or so stifling — it has for them no shape nor meaning — that they drop out. A college teacher explains how he quite simply lets the air of experience move in so that his students become aware of it. And a notable literary (and academic) figure traces our delusions of literacy to the absence, from the cloisters of our universities, of students who have much experience of life and the air outside.

Even the story of the Abbots of McGill, written without reference to our present states of mind about education, may without strain be said to illustrate the theme. From the life of one of them we learn how rickety at the beginning was the building of what has since become a large, strong, and elaborate educational institution. From another's we learn what obstacles the same structure, by then matured into a labyrinth, subsequently presented to a young woman who fortunately had the mental resource and the courage to overcome them. Her triumphant life-time spent in learning inevitably stirs one's admiration, and must strike the reader as exemplary of education as it should be. There are those, however, who would draw the moral that it is *because* of such obstacles that excellence is achieved, rather than in spite of them, and that adversity (however you may manage or arrange it for educational purposes) will bring out the best in other people. They would resolve the strange state of hiatus of the present, in which education seems poised neither to go forward nor to go back, by returning us all wholesale to the more rigid and obdurate structures of the past. But for every Maude Abbott who succeeded there were thousands of women less lucky in their upbringing — and men too — whom the man-made structures of the time firmly defeated.

The truth is that most of the structures of the past are with us yet. Few people seem to have a clear view of the general picture in our schools and universities, and of how little most things there have really changed. This is perhaps because we are all so dependent for our vision on the powerful but distorting lenses of modern media, that will cause a pimple to seem the whole face, or can have one small, perfect wild flower justify the desert. For every teacher or professor who now deals with structure invisibly and in the air, we would guess there are at least three who build hard, intrusive, ostentatious frameworks to hang onto in their classwork, and who never let go of them.

Editorial

The architects who designed the buildings that first did away with interior walls soon found that the members of our timorous race who worked in them became desperately uncomfortable without — what then had to be provided — divisions, corners, shelter, that would identify their spaces and afford a sense of privacy. Education is indeed a very private affair, conducted in highly public circumstances. The prospect of conducting this affair in the structures of the air, without references to walls, has terrified many more people than it has attracted.

But a teacher or researcher who clings to the wall—in the narrowest of places — is not even using the space he or she has got. Perhaps that has really been our trouble; it is what our writers seem to say.

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