

Educational Facilities Do Teach!

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Educational facilities—campuses, buildings, and classrooms in particular—can enhance (or inhibit) teaching and learning. The “relationship between learning and the design of instructional spaces within schools” is well documented in recent professional literature.¹ This has, however, been poorly understood throughout history. The ancient Greeks saw a school as any place where a teacher and his students happened to gather, often outdoors. The teacher, as depository of knowledge, was central to learning, while the setting was considered inconsequential.²

It may well have been the severe climate that forced early European and American educators to build “houses” for their schools. Beginning with the Colonial period and onward throughout most of the 19th century, schoolhousing was viewed as a necessity to protect the people involved from the weather. However, the indoor atmosphere received little attention, often being little better than a cattle barn. The larger schools of the late 19th century can best be characterized as an aggregation of smaller schools—containing many rooms, all essentially alike. Indeed, the idea that school facilities could be tools in the hands of teachers did not exist prior to recent times. It was this concept that spawned the school design and building revolution of the 20th century. By the end of the century, considerable research supported the idea that better educational facilities produce better results.

A New Idea

Currently, we find an even newer concept emerging—the idea that facilities play a role in learning that is independent of the teacher. Facilities are thus seen as not only teaching tools that can be utilized by creative teachers, but also as teachers themselves. In other words, whether for good or for ill, educational facilities *do* teach!

By David R. Streifling



The construction of a campus prayer garden demonstrates that we value time spent alone with God. Shown above, prayer garden and gate at Adventist Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines.

While this idea is a revolutionary one in contemporary professional literature, it is not really new. In the Scriptures, God told Moses: “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8, KJV). A thoughtful study of that house of worship reveals that it was designed as a teaching facility.

Seeing the tabernacle every day reminded the Israelites of God’s abiding presence and protection. Later, Solomon’s temple, too, taught important lessons. The silence maintained on the building site during its construction re-emphasized the principle of reverence unto the Lord. Indeed, every aspect of the design of the sanctuaries in the Old Testament—from the construction process to the services ultimately conducted in the Wilderness Tabernacle, in Solomon’s temple, and in the later rebuilt Temple—all were calculated to teach about God. “Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary” (Psalm 77:13, KJV).

In the book *Education*, Ellen White identifies a number of lessons they were to learn: “The revelation at Sinai could only impress [God’s people] with their need and helplessness. Another lesson the tabernacle, through its service of sacrifice, was to teach—the lesson of pardon of sin, and power through the Saviour for obedience unto life.

“Through Christ was to be fulfilled the purpose of which the tabernacle was a symbol—that glorious building, its walls of glistening gold reflecting in rainbow hues the curtains inwrought with cherubim, the fragrance of ever-burning in-

cense pervading all, the priests robed in spotless white, and in the deep mystery of the inner place, above the mercy seat, between the figures of the bowed, worshiping angels, the glory of the Holiest. In all, God desired His people to read His purpose for the human soul.”³

Ellen White also wrote about the teaching power of school facilities in a more modern context. Writing from Australia in the 1890s, she made this insightful observation: “In the erection of school buildings, in their furnishing, and in every feature of their management the strictest economy must be practiced. . . . In every feature they [buildings, furnishings, and management] are to teach correct lessons of simplicity, usefulness, thrift, and economy.”⁴

Secular researchers didn’t discover this idea for another hundred years. In their 1988 article “Architecture Can Teach,” Taylor, Aldrich, and Vlastos blended the concept of facilities actually teaching with the idea that they could be employed as tools by a teacher:

“Two of us (Taylor and Vlastos). . . are convinced that school environments have a largely untapped potential as active contributors to the learning process. . . . A number of learning opportunities can be woven into the structure of a school so that the built environment becomes an active, three-dimensional textbook or teaching tool, rather than a passive space housing a disarray of ‘things.’ . . . The archite-

tural environment, as a work of art in and of itself, can affect behavior. It can stimulate or subdue, aid creativity or slow mental perception, cause fear or joy. In fact, it can affect a whole range of psychological phenomena.”⁵

The most recent contribution to this theme appeared in book form in 2001. In their monograph, *Educating by Design*, authors Strange and Banning describe how facilities teach through subtle things such as the physical placement of student service facilities, which indicate the importance that the institution places upon its

students, or the ambiguity of directional signs, which may make newcomers or other users feel unimportant or unwelcome.⁶

So, What Are Our Facilities Actually Teaching?

For Seventh-day Adventist educators, the question logically follows: “Since educational facilities do teach, what messages are they giving to our students and constituents, and to the communities in which they exist?” The following list, created and compiled after considerable thought and study, as well as ideas solicited from both North American and Asian educators, suggests some answers:

By design, the development of this theme to date has focused on connections between facility design/operation and Christian principles; although as Strange and Banning have ably demonstrated,⁷ similar linkages exist between facility design and general philosophical principles (which Christian educators hold in common with other educators). In the following list, comments by Ellen White have been added where they appear to harmonize with or support the identified concept. No attempt has been made to prioritize the various items.

1. *Locating the school in a natural setting among the trees or near the sea, a lake, a waterfall, reinforces our belief in the Creator-God.* However, even schools in manmade surroundings can utilize flowers, grass, trees, and other types of landscaping to create natural beauty.

Ellen White commented: “Schools should be established where there is as much as possible to be found in nature to delight the senses and give variety to the scenery. . . . Let our students be placed where nature can speak to the senses, and in her voice they may hear the voice of God. Let them be where they can look upon His wondrous works, and through

nature behold her Creator.”⁸

2. *If the school buildings are constructed in a manner that harmonizes with nature, so that they “belong in their setting,”* this encourages students and teachers to order their priorities in harmony with God’s purposes for their lives.

3. *School facilities that are built economically (not to be confused with “cheaply”), and that conserve energy teach the principles of stewardship—accountability in managing capital resources and responsibility in caring for and conserving God’s creation (the environment).*

Ellen White commented: “Those in positions of trust are in all things to act as faithful stewards. . . . There must be



If the school buildings are constructed in a manner that harmonizes with nature, this encourages students and teachers to order their priorities in harmony with God’s purposes for their lives. Shown above, atrium at Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines.

care to prevent all needless outlay. In erecting buildings and providing facilities for the work, we should be careful not to make our preparation so elaborate as to consume money unnecessarily; for this means in every case inability to provide for the extension of the work in other fields, especially in foreign lands.”⁹

4. *Placing a church or house of worship in a prominent place on the campus teaches that we give God first place in our programming, and indeed in everything we do.* The design and materials of the chapel should be of the highest calibre. It should be culturally appropriate to its setting, but stand out architecturally as the finest and best building on campus. The accessibility of secluded wooded areas and/or the construction of a campus prayer garden demonstrate that we value time spent in communion with God. (This idea can also be “preached” through the scheduling of classes and activities.)

5. *A framed portrait of Jesus Christ strategically located in the*



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Religious art on campus sets a tone that tells visitors, employees, and students who we are and the values we espouse. Above, “The Glory of God’s Grace” by Alan Collins occupies a prominent place on the campus of La Sierra University, Riverside, California.

classrooms or elsewhere on campus reminds students and teachers that God is always watching, and that He should come first in their lives. Religious art on campus sets a tone that tells visitors, employees, and students who we are and what values we espouse.

6. *Creative and aesthetically pleasing works of art on the campus or in the school buildings teach that God is creative and a lover of the beautiful—and directly foster these traits in students.*

7. *Adapting the basic architectural design principles of proportion, balance, harmony, scale, and simplicity will encourage the development of valid priorities and Christian temperance.* Adequate and well-designed windows are fit representations of

God as the source of light and truth. By providing light, fresh air, and visual contact with the outdoors (facing scenes of nature and beauty as far as possible), they promote personal and environmental hygiene, as well as physical and psychological health.

Ellen White commented: “In the study of hygiene the earnest teacher will improve every opportunity to show the necessity of perfect cleanliness . . . in all one’s surroundings. . . . Attention should be given also to sunlight and ventilation.”¹⁰

8. *Adequate and well-organized storage areas model the philosophical principle that God is a God of order.* Conversely, the confusion resulting from a lack of adequate storage areas communicates the opposite concept.

9. *Appropriately placed signs on campus and in buildings communicate our respect for the navigational needs of students, staff, and visitors.* Nearby roads should also be marked to indicate how to reach the campus. Additional signage could include historical markers, the names of trees and plants, “Adopt a Road” signs indicating that our students and teachers have made a commitment to keeping nearby roads tidy, signs indicating donors of art, decorative windows, or benches; and concise information about the hours when the cafeteria and



Notable landmarks on campus can witness to the values of the school. Shown above, Gateway to Service arch at Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland.

offices are open. Monitoring the kinds of programs and services that are advertised on bulletin boards and removing out-of-date signs also indicates a commitment to an attractive, utilitarian campus that communicates our values.

10. *The construction/usage of gymnasia to the exclusion of manual labor or other exercise in the fresh air,* downplays the importance of outdoor exercise and the importance of manual labor and has significant implications regarding the profitable use of leisure time.

11. *Well-maintained and properly cleaned service areas (such as kitchens and toilet rooms) reinforce the Adventist belief that our bodies are the temple of God.*

Several comments from Ellen White lend support to this: “The kitchen and all other parts of the [college buildings] should be kept sweet and clean.”¹¹

“The necessity for much better facilities in the bathrooms [has been deeply impressed upon my mind]. . . . A small, crowded bathroom leaves on the mind an impression of cheapness and commonness, and this should not be.”¹²

“In the study of hygiene . . . show the necessity of perfect cleanliness both in personal habits and in all one’s surroundings. . . . Teach the pupils that a healthful sleeping room, a thoroughly clean kitchen, and a tastefully arranged, whole-



Appropriately placed signs on and near the campus communicate our respect for navigational needs of students, staff, and visitors. Above, a sign for La Sierra University on a nearby highway.

somely supplied table will go farther toward securing the happiness of the family and the regard of every sensible visitor than any amount of expensive furnishing in the drawing room.”¹³

Conclusion

Our educational facilities, both buildings and campuses, are a visible expression of our true educational philosophy—not what we say we believe (our “espoused philosophy”) but the way we actually put our philosophy into practice. In too many instances, our educational facilities actually undermine what we believe. The design and arrangement of buildings and campuses, as well as the manner in which they are operated and maintained, may proclaim undesired messages so loudly that our teachers have little hope of ever communicating what we really want them to teach. We must find ways to design and maintain facilities that will teach, reinforce, and complement the lofty goals of our school mission statements.

This article is only a beginning. More research needs to be done in this area. We need to identify and document other linkages that may exist, and further evaluate the educational significance of the linkages listed above. This is an urgent matter, because unless we change our ways, we may well continue to create problems for ourselves by designing facilities that teach lessons we actually oppose.

We cannot be too careful in considering the educational impact of our facilities on students, teachers, staff, and the community. Remember, facilities *do* teach! ✍

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Attractive, well-designed windows are fit representations of God as the source of light and truth and promote physical and psychological health. Above, the Atrium of the Don Love Building at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Since educational facilities do teach, what messages are they giving to our students and constituents, and to the communities in which they exist?

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 6, p. 208. Italics supplied.
5. Anne Taylor, Robert A. Aldrich, and George Vlastos, “Architecture Can Teach,” *In Context: a Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture* (Winter, 1988) Retrieved May 13, 2003, from <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC18/Taylor.htm>.
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7. Ibid.
8. Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1923), p. 320.
9. _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 215.
10. _____, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1954), p. 90.
11. Ibid., pp. 88, 89.
12. _____, *Child Guidance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1954), p. 365; “The Paulson Collection of Ellen G. White Letters.” Taken from Diary of April 25, 1899. File 68 (1899), p. 15. Note that in the context of this statement, the bathroom was actually a room for bathing, not specifically a toilet or rest room. However, the principle would nonetheless apply to the latter.
13. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 90.