Transactive Environments

The Architecture of Progressive Education at Dartington Hall School

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary study contributes new knowledge on the architecture of twentieth-century progressive education by examining Dartington Hall School in Devon, England (1926-87). Founded by the philanthropists Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst, the progressive independent, coeducational boarding school for learners aged two to eighteen was part of Dartington Hall Estate, a larger experiment in rural and social reconstruction.

To date, the historiography of progressive education has not focused on educational architecture and if buildings or spaces are acknowledged they are dealt with descriptively. The research redresses this by positioning the School's educational and social life in relation to the architectural design and subsequent use of its buildings. In doing so, it highlights architecture's role in forming material and spatial conceptions of the progressive educational environment, as well as how the new education influenced architectural modernism. It argues that the architecture of progressive education was not a stable concept but contained multiple, shifting meanings that depended on the policies of the School's leaders and on who was experiencing it where and when. The work addresses the headships of William Curry (1930-57), Hu and Lois Child (1957-68) and Dr Royston Lambert (1969-72) that included collaborations with notable architects, such as Oswald P. Milne, William Lescaze and David and Mary Medd. Changing ideas about progressive education and architecture, which include attitudes towards the body, gender, democracy, pedagogy and class, as well as the relationship between state and independent schools in England, are central themes in the study as they informed actors' conceptions of, and interactions with, educational environments.

The thesis presents a creative, layered writing approach for the microhistory of educational architecture that places the marginalised voices of forgotten students or neglected staff alongside the traditionally more dominant of headmaster or architect. The method, drawn from the site and site-writing practices, is a response to Dartington's traditions of performance writing as well as an embodied relationship with place, underpinned by site-based investigations, archival research, existing histories and oral history interviews. With reference to John Dewey's concept of transactional process, the term 'transactive environment' is deployed to offer a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the historical experience of progressive educational architecture and space.
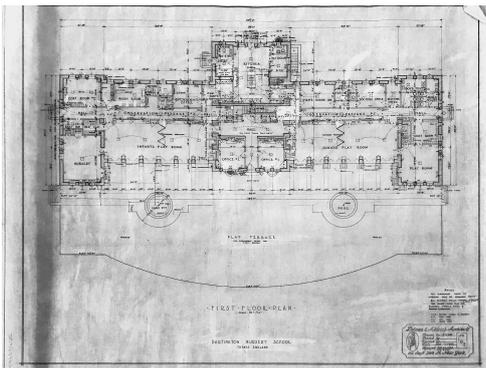
Keywords

Dartington Hall School; educational architecture; educational environments; microhistory; pedagogy of place; progressive education; site-writing

Indicative images (thumbnails)

The Dartington Hall Nursery School under construction, 1930
(Dartington Hall Trust Archives)

Ground floor plan,The Dartington Hall Nursery School, 1930
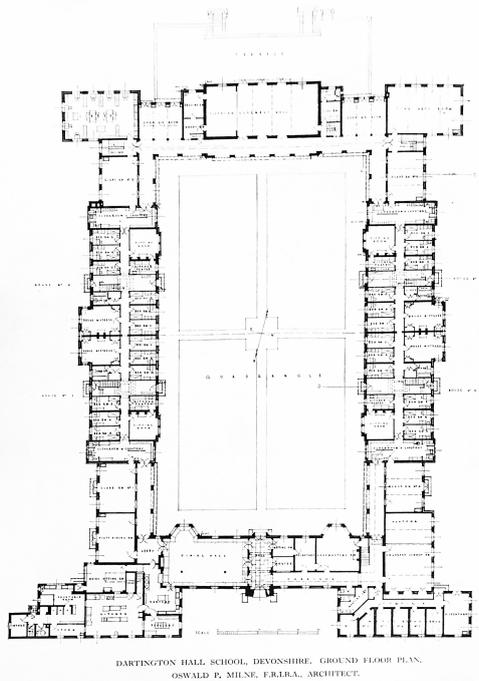(Dartington Hall Trust Archives)

Midday Meal in the Junior Playroom, Aller Park, c.1931
(Dartington Hall Trust Archives)

Main entrance, Foxhole, 1930
(RIBA Collections)

Square Game II, Foxhole
(Photograph: Constantine De Goguel, c.1957)

Ground floor plan, Foxhole
(*Architecture Illustrated*, 1936)

Blacklers Boarding House
(Photograph: Dell & Wainwright, 1934. RIBA Collections)

Dining Room, Blacklers Boarding House
(Photograph: Dell & Wainwright, 1934. RIBA Collections)

	South Entrance, Aller Park (Film Still: Kieran Mahon, 2016)
	Swimming Pool, Aller Park (Film Still: Kieran Mahon, 2016)
	The New Art and Craft Block, Foxhole (Film Still: Kieran Mahon, 2016)
	The Headmaster's Room, Foxhole (Film Still: Kieran Mahon, 2016)