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Anti-institutions: Schooling without School Buildings

In her 1954 essay "The Crisis In Education" Hannah Arendt wrote: "Now school is by no means the world and must not pretend to be: it is rather the institution we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all." This institutional imposition, a necessary one according to Arendt, was a persistent source of anxiety for socially non-conformist groups in Australia, as elsewhere, across the twentieth century. Evident from the interwar decades among spiritualists, theosophists and psychologists of various sorts, anti-institutionalism flourished in the milieu of the counter-culture in the late 1960s and 1970s. "De-schoolers" and other educational radicals, including a number of organised student groups, regarded the traditional school as a symbol and mechanism of thoughtless ideological reproduction and as a major source of social alienation. This paper explores the persistent themes of that critique as it concerned the spaces and physical settings of the school. It then considers some of the alternatives that were trialed and envisaged in the period, including the reuse of other building types for school and the eventual withering of the specifically designated school site altogether.

This paper seeks to illuminate the relationship between institutions and architecture by highlighting a period of disenchantment with educational institutions among educators and students in the 1960s and 1970s. Anti-institutionalism in educational thinking and practice flourished in the milieu of the counter-culture in that period. "De-schoolers" and other educational radicals in Australia, just as in Scandinavia, the UK, Latin America and the USA, depicted the traditional school as a symbol and mechanism of thoughtless social and ideological reproduction, and a deadening and alienating force in the life of children and young people. Teachers, education academics, parents groups as well students themselves all articulated versions of this ramifying critique of traditional schooling in the period. This paper identifies some of the persistent themes of that critique. The paper then examines some of the alternative visions that emerged, in particular the tendency to abandon traditional school buildings and campuses altogether. While efforts were underway to redesign the school in the period, especially to open it up and reduce the level of regimentation and physical separation within school buildings, a significant group of education radicals chose instead to occupy and reuse buildings designed for other purposes.[1]

Historical background

In the interwar decades, long before the heyday of the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, a diverse group of spiritualists and humanists in Australia looked to examples of what was called "the New Education" in the UK and Europe for ideas about how to transform schools. Child-centred and anti-institutional educational models such as A.S. Neill's Summerhill in rural Suffolk (1921), Beatrice Ensor's St. Christopher School (1915) in the model settlement Letchworth Garden City, and Ensor's later Frensham Heights School Surrey (1925), promoted student self-government and creativity and emphasised the importance of children's relationship with the natural environment. Australian experiments in the new education looked to these examples and trialled their own versions.

In the same period that a model development and ideal community was being constructed at Castlecrag on Sydney's north shore, several short-lived educational experiments in neighbouring areas espoused similar values to those pursued by the Walter Burley Griffin, Marion Mahony Griffin and their fellow travellers – a reverence for nature, an abhorrence of reductive utilitarianism and economism, and a suspicion of existing urban patterns. Theosophists established Morvern Garden School in a large house at Gore Hill in North Sydney in 1918 and another, the King Arthur School, also in a former residence on the Lower North Shore, in 1922. The schools were a direct reproach and a practical alternative to the secular state system and to the established religious, private schools, just as Castlecrag was a reproach and an alternative to conventional suburban development in Sydney in the period. As with the Theosophist run schools in the UK from the same period these Sydney schools tended to reflect the emerging philosophy of the New Education. They placed more emphasis on learning from nature and were more student-centred than the conventional state and private schools.[2]

One of the most interesting of the interwar schools connected with the "new education" was Quest Haven at Mona Vale, which described at the time as "Australia's first progressive school."[3] Established under the leadership of child psychologist Mary Sheridan in 1935 the school professed a strict opposition to the repressive and authoritarian characteristics of most schools of the period. Their prospectus noted that a central aim of the "new education" was to provide for the child an environment "free from fear and repressions".[4] Sheridan believed that such negative disciplinary regimes had a deleterious effect on childhood creativity and as a corollary, on the society as a whole. In her writings she reflected many of the characteristic themes of the international movement to reform education in the interwar period – pacifism, integration of the sexes, a holistic view of the child, and a focus on "object lessons" over textual training and abstract reasoning. Sheridan connected these values and approaches to education with the wider problem of individual freedom of thought and action. In a 1932 essay, Sheridan prefigured one of the characteristic motifs of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture. She posed the problem of childhood agency and creativity in stark terms and as a matter of individual choice. She asserted that parents may "choose the type of child they desire. A creative being or – a robot."[5]

Quest Haven operated in a former seaside resort at Mona Vale. There was, of course, nothing especially notable about the adaptive reuse of old buildings for educational purposes in the period. Most religiously-affiliated, private, preparatory schools and colleges were also based in, or developed around, a large estate or private dwelling in the period. But Quest Haven's promotional material, especially the pictorial evidence, suggest that they encouraged and made a virtue of ad hoc uses and creative re-imaginings of their building and setting. In other words, the old buildings were integral not just to Quest Haven's image, but also to their broader pedagogical attack on regimentation. In a series of Max Dupain photographs of the school, children are depicted in variety of casual settings in and out of doors and when children are shown working at desks they are decidedly not organised in rows, highlighting the school's anti-regimental ethic.[6]

In 1937 the New Education Fellowship conference was held in several cities around Australia, including Sydney, and Quest Haven became a stop on the itinerary of prominent international delegates. Pierre Bovet, the director of the Rousseau Institute in Geneva, visited the school and attracted the attention of the *The Telegraph*, which reported on the "absent-minded professor's" visit. F. W. Hart of the University of California likewise visited the school and other delegates corresponded with Quest Haven and expressed regret at not being able to observe their methods first hand. The wider discussion around the NEF conference created great interest in Australia and led some to assume that ideas put in practice at places such as Quest Haven and espoused by more radical NEF delegates would soon infuse the whole education system. But the story of progressivism and education alternatives did not unfold so clearly and inevitably.[7]

The historians of education Campbell and Sherrington have argued that progressive educational thought of the period 1900-1940 exercised a decisive influence on the crystallisation of the comprehensive high school as a mainstream educational model

after Word War II, one that was ascendant for much of the remainder of the twentieth century. Many progressive ideas also became educational common sense with respect to kindergarten and primary level education. In the post-war years, educational films and publications about how to design and run a satisfying school highlighted the importance of learning by doing and, therefore, of providing opportunities for students to move around. They also tended to emphasise the significance of the individual child, and the importance of visual arts and the new media – radio, film and television. But for all its influence on the theory of what a comprehensive education was for, Campbell and Sherrington have suggested that progressive, child-centred ideas and the work of schools such as Quest Haven, had relatively little impact on mainstream education in practice. Spatially rigid classrooms organised in linear blocks off corridors – "cells and bells" schools for "chalk and talk" teaching – remained the norm in Australian state education systems and most private schools too.[8]

During the post-war years state education systems faced the massive task of accommodating the rapidly growing number of pupils in new and expanded schools. The baby boom demographic bulge and a series of increases in the length of compulsory schooling drove this task, which dominated school architecture in the 1950s and 1960s. The search for standard plan types, efficient construction systems and modes of prefabrication occupied public works departments and educational authorities. Designing and delivering universal models and programs, focused on a good basic standard of accommodation took precedence over more pedagogically and philosophically-driven questions about spatial differentiation, interaction amongst children and teachers, and the autonomy and physical freedom that children might ideally enjoy in their schools. Perhaps the most thoroughly realised school building project in Australia in the period was the Light Timber Construction (LTC) system by the Victorian Public Works Department and its chief architect Percy Everett. Based around a standardised, extruded plan it underpinned almost two decades of school development in that state. But it was only one of several such developments around the country. In the early 1960s in NSW, Michael Dysart developed a new standard plan for the Government Architect's Branch that was composed of square donut blocks and also utilised a new construction process. In South Australia the Public Buildings Department developed SAMCON in the mid to late 1960s, a modular and partially prefabricated system based on English precedents. By the late 1960s, school design was rationalised, standardised and industrialised like never before in Australia. While, the critical anti-institutionalism of the progressive "New Education" movement of the interwar years persisted at places such as Melbourne's Preshil and Hobart's Friends School. But the impact of such thinking in the mainstream state education systems was not obvious.[9]

Education radicals of the 1960s and 1970s

While the challenges of population growth and the related need to create more new schools were still present in the late 1960s, the broad social consensus around what compulsory schooling should look like in Australia fractured. As social movement politics grew in strength and anti-war protests were mobilised, and as youth culture became more self-

consciously independent and more anti-authoritarian, social critics identified schools as sites of repression and unwanted ideological reproduction. The failings of school buildings and grounds formed part of this assault. Criticism focused in particular on the dispiriting atmosphere of schools and the school day. A 1969 film commissioned by the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association depicted a day in the life of high school mathematics teacher Gill Freeman at Moreland High School. In the film, Freeman evinces a somewhat depressed demeanour as he moves around the school highlighting the repetitiveness, physical confinement and dull, bureaucratic routine that characterised the environment and procedures of the school day. At one point he remarks that "it's the routine … It gets you down. It'll be up to the kids to give you that occasional worthwhile moment. That occasional moment of brightness."[10]

The negative commentary contained in the film about routine, environment and examinations did not appear from nowhere. One of the leading public voices in education in Australia during the period was academic and commentator Henry Schoenheimer. Among other things, he was *The Australian* newspaper's education writer from 1965-1975. One of Schoenheimer's central themes was the crisis in institutions and the need to reform them from the ground up. Drawing on the work of North American anarchist and psychotherapist Paul Goodman and echoing the concerns of the best known anti-institutional voice of the period, Ivan Illich, Schoenheimer repeatedly argued against uniforms, examinations and all of the other trappings of conventional institutional conformity and success. Others such as Bill Hannan, a driving intellectual force in the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association (VSTA) in the 1960s, supported this approach, working to diminish the role of examinations in the system in particular and promote a different idea about schools among teachers.[11]

In the teachers' journals during the 1970s disenchantment with the education system was strongly evident. In the South Australian journal *Pivot*, one teacher remarked that,

> What we do in the name of education is to a devastating degree destructive of spirit character and identity. I think it is basically true that our state educational system is still tied to the Industrial Revolution where it started and is designed to produce the right type of workers and the right type of professionals to suit the system. We condition students as if they were rats being taught to run in a maze.[12]

Accompanying the article was an illustration that depicted the school as a factory and the children who enter it steadily being transformed into robots.

A less obvious source of anti-school rhetoric was the mainstream architectural press. But even there editors and writers expressed the conviction that schools might be harming rather than educating students. A cartoon published in a 1974 special issue of *Architecture Australia* on school design depicted a young schoolboy with a cabbage for a head. The accompanying caption said, "How to turn your bright-eyed, inquisitive child into a living breathing vegetable … Send him to school."[13]

Students themselves were sensitised to the idea that school was creating robots and vegetables. Upper-level high school students joined the effort to undermine schools in their current form. Drawing inspiration from popular, counter-cultural publications of the period such as the *Little Red School Book* (1969) and the school kids issue of *Oz Magazine* (1971), high school pupils created self-consciously radical and anti-institutional student magazines. Alongside pieces that protested the war in Vietnam and articulated opposition to the capitalist system, students declaimed against the school environment and the repetitive and constraining procedures of the school day. The students at Melbourne's outer suburban Noble Park High School, for example, published a newsletter, 'Action: official organ of the Noble Park High School Liberation Front'. They implicitly compared the school and its routine to prison or internment. At the beginning of the week, "(t)hey file solemnly into the biliously pleasant surrounds of our school dressed uniformly as a deterent (sic) to individuality. Once inside the cyclone-fenced enclosure they cannot communicate with the outside world ..."[14] The student journalists go onto decry the fact that the apparent pathway to liberation is via a bureaucratically-administered examination system. The students thus drew on the prevalent critique of examinations and linked it, as other critics did, to a set of spaces and physical procedures: the separately enclosed individual classroom with its rows of desks, the institutional image of the school buildings and the inflexible, timetabled day. They objected to what Henry Schoenheimer called "the deadly dull, teacher dominated, examination-oriented, university imposed" learning environment, with its "departmental curricula, and timetables and despotic regulations."[15] They were opposed, in other words, to the "cells and bells" culture of the school and the testing regime that underpinned it.

Abandoning the institutional school

While some protested the institutional conditions of their schooling a small group of students in Victoria were already enjoying life on the outside. A new wave of community, alternative, experimental or free schools emerged in the period. Amidst this trend there was reawakening of the interwar progressive tradition, with its private experiments and retreat to the bushy fringe. But a new strand of protest and anti-institutionality also appeared from within state education. In Victoria, where the Secondary Teachers Association and the Technical Teachers Association had both been particularly vociferous in their criticism of the existing system, several new "community schools" opened as annexes to existing schools and technical training colleges. They were part of, or at least tolerated by, the state education system as long as they enjoyed the support of the principal of the school to which they were annexed. Several of these schools opted, in the first instance, out of both necessity and preference, to occupy available community or religious buildings rather than establish a new campus as such.[16]

As historian of education Julie McLeod has noted, The Swinburne Community School (1972-), connected with Swinburne Technical College, The Sydney Road Community School (1972), an annexe to Moreland High School, and Brinsley Road (1973-75), an annexe to Camberwell High School, each developed subtly different alternatives to their "straight" or mainstream parent school. In each case, however, their preparedness to do without the

conventional physical trappings of the school is instructive. Brinsley Road was established in a mansion, formerly owned by the Ballieu family in the heart of Melbourne's leafy eastern suburbs. Swinburne Community School primarily used a hall that had started life as a bank building, and Sydney Road used an old Wesleyan Church and hall in Brunswick.[17]

While each was different, the schools shared a common concern with the "authentic" emotional and intellectual life of the students. This was their professed point of departure in contrast to the institutional apparatus of the curriculum, timetable and classroom that dominated conventional schooling. In a documentary made about Sydney Road Community School in the early 1970s – a sort of follow up to *A Moment of Brightness* – the school's founder Gil Freeman characterised the ethic of the school in the following way.

> Normal schools tend to try and elide emotion and honesty as much as possible. Warmth isn't compatible with good form. Getting angry is unnatural and unpleasant. Same with being happy. Sydney Road's not like that. We've tried to eradicate roleplaying and some of the other institutional and dishonest forms of behaviour. This means things like creative tensions, personal involvement facing of personal anxiety and problems and discussion of them.[18]

Brinsley Road was no exception. But unlike the others it maintained some of the arcadian idealism of the private, progressive schools of the interwar period – a separated place in which students could explore their creativity and govern themselves. Henry Schoenheimer remarked in the early 1970s that one of the more disappointing things about recent Australian educational history was that some of the "newer schools have begun to march triumphantly into the 1930s. The flag of Summerhill is borne proudly before them, to be planted on the most distant outer-suburban battlements that transport could reasonably reach."[19] Among the international network that promoted de-schooling and other radical reinventions of education in the 1960s and 1970s, the great pioneers of child-centred education, such as Summerhill in England, were acknowledged as a vital source.[20] But by the late 1960s many also now viewed these interwar pioneers as outmoded and in need of dramatic revision. In 1969 the Sociologist of Education Maurice Punch wrote a piece in the English weekly magazine *New Society*, in which he asserted that the earlier wave of progressive schools "have a dated, prissy reputation" and asked how new progressive schools might "catch up with modern youth in town life."[21] Swinburne Community School, under the leadership of Gerry Tickell, and Sydney Road, with Gil Freeman in charge, strove to do just this. Both men and both schools sought a more active engagement in the community and the city.

Henry Schoenheimer explained the community school idea to his readers in 1971 newspaper column. The term, he said,

> implies that the school is small enough to be a community not a 1000 student factory; that the local community, especially the parent community, will be much involved in the school, as will visiting speakers from the community; and that the community will provide a significant part of the educative experiences.

> Students may spend only 50 per cent of their time in the school itself. A suitable church hall being the likeliest, but not the only open-space learning area used as a base. Other learning, guided and helped by the teachers where necessary, will take place wherever students find their own interest and activities: in theatres, dance studios, libraries, workshops, offices, laboratories or museum.[22]

The implication here was that only by engaging in the community, its businesses, services and cultural organisations, would students really learn something of their society, rather than being separated, isolated and institutionalised in schools.

Gil Freeman noted that "eventually school may just become a facilitator for making contacts and networks" in the community.[23] Freeman was closely associated with a network of educators and academics around the husband and wife unionists, activists and writers Bill and Lorna Hannan. The Hannans created the journal *The Open Book* (1972). *The Open Book* strove to be more than a journal and acted as a true network during the early and mid 1970s, coalescing interest in the dissolution of the traditional school and exercising significant influence even beyond the circle of very active Melbourne-based educators that formed its core. In the second issue of *The Open Book* Bill Hannan argued that the community school model, as represented by Swinburne and Sydney Road, was just an interim step on the way to a more thoroughgoing integration of education and community life. While they focused on incremental changes in educational process, and were especially intent on reducing formal assessment, many associated with *The Open Book* believed the institutional school, with its architecturally distinct presence in the community, was something that might ultimately be discarded. In other words, the overarching ambition was to promote education without schools.

So what then do we learn about the relationship between architecture and institutions in this period from the convictions and practices of de-schoolers and educational reformers? And what influence did these experiments have on wider trends in schooling and school architecture? Certainly it is clear that there was an environmental and spatial, perhaps even architectural, dimension to the critique. But it is equally clear that few, if any of the leading educational radicals of the period saw architecture as a means of transforming education. If the ultimate ambition was to diminish the institutionality of schools, and to see them disappear as fixed entities, simply redesigning the school was not going to achieve their aims. For Schoenheimer, the Hannans, Gill Freeman and Gerry Tickell, it was not a matter of finding the correct modern school programme, or even of simply loosening the programme. In the early 1970s they rejected the idea of an institutional strategy altogether. In other words they saw the educational environment in terms of situation, improvisation and reuse. The implication was that architecture, at least in the ordinary sense, where it involves an architect a client and a source of finance, was always invested with the kind of institutional power relations that they sought to undermine or evade. For educational leaders from other Australian states, the Victorian community schools, and the idea that educators and pupils

might abandon the school, while it engaged their attention was ultimately rejected as lacking applicability at any kind of scale.[24]

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1   The key proponent of "deschooling" was the Austrian-born philosopher, Catholic priest and radical educator Ivan Illich. His *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1971) became a touchstone for anti-institutional educational thinking in the 1970s.

2   R. C. Petersen, "Experimental Schools and Educational Experiments in Australia, 1906-1948" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1968), 63-88.

3   Allan M. Lewis, "Quest Haven – Sydney's First Progressive School," *Quest Haven Magazine*, Box 16 World Education Fellowship (NSW Section) Records 1925-1993, MLMSS7297.

4   "Quest Haven New Education School," prospectus Box 16, MLMSS7297, World Education Fellowship (NSW Section) Records 1925-1993, with records of the Australian Council, 1959-1970, State Library of NSW.

5   Mary Sheridan, *Collected Writings of Mary Sheridan* (Sydney: Australian Psychology Centre), 9.

6   Folio of Max Dupain prints, Box 16, MLMSS7297, World Education Fellowship (NSW Section) Records 1925-1993, with records of the Australian Council, 1959-1970, State Library of NSW.

7   "The Absent-minded professor" picture of Pierre Bovet on his visit to Quest Haven, *The Telegraph*, August 11, 1937; also see "Speakers at the New Education Fellowship Conference," Australia, August-September 1937, Box 16, MLMSS7297, World Education Fellowship (NSW Section) Records 1925-1993, with records of the Australian Council, 1959-1970; and a note from F. W. Hart to Quest Haven School, Box 16, MLMSS7297, World Education Fellowship (NSW Section) Records 1925-1993, with records of the Australian Council, 1959-1970, State Library of NSW. On the wider impact of the conference see J. Godfrey, "'Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most exciting event in the whole history of education in Australia': The 1937 New Education Fellowship Conference and New South Wales Examination Reform," *History of Education Review* 33, no.2 (2004): 45-58.

8   Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherrington, "A Genealogy of an Australian System of Comprehensive High Schools: The Contribution of Educational Progressivism to the One Best Form of Universal Secondary Education 1900-1940," *Paedagogica Historica* 42, no. 1-2 (2006): 191-210. A typical educational film of the post-war period that articulated official views of how schools should look and operate and incorporated progressive assumptions was *Building for Learning*, created by the Victorian Audio-Visual Education Centre (Melbourne, 1959), 16mm film. On this and other educational films of the period, see Hannah Lewi, "Back to School: Understanding the Evidential Value of the Modern Documentary," *The Journal of Architecture* 20, no. 2 (2015): 193-214.

9   Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980); LTC Schools in Victoria (Light Timber Construction) Photos, Negatives, Plans, P0003, Photographs and Negatives of Government Buildings VPRS 10516, Victorian Public Records Office; Interview with Michael Dysart, Sydney, November 10, 2011; South Australian Public Buildings Department, *SAMCON: General Report* (Adelaide: Public Buildings Dept., 1968).

10 *A Moment of Brightness*, directed by Peter Drummond (Beaumaris: Beaumaris Production Company and Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association Production Company, 1969), 16mm film.

11 Henry Schoenheimer, *Good Australian Schools and their Communities* (Melbourne: Victorian Technical Teachers Association, 1973); Gil Freeman, *Small School in a State of Change* (North Richmond: Deakin University Press and the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association, 1982), 2.

12 Graham Broughton, "Authority and Freedom," *Pivot* 4, no.1 (1976): 25.

13 Special education issue, *Architecture in Australia* (October 1974): 52.

14 'Action: official organ of the Noble Park High School Liberation Front', 1, part of the Students in Dissent collection, Reason in Revolt: Source Documents of Australian Radicalism, www.reasoninrevolt.net.au/objects/pdf/d0685.pdf.

15 Henry Schoenheimer, *Good Australian Schools and Their Communities* (Eltham: Technical Teachers Association of Victoria, 1973), 7.

16 Julie McLeod, "Experimenting with Education: Spaces of Freedom and Alternative Schooling in the 1970s," *History of Education Review* 43, no. 2 (2014): 172-189.

17 McLeod, "Experimenting with Education," 181-185.

18 *A Nice Place to Be*, directed by Dave McRae, produced by Patricia Edgar (Latrobe University Bundoora: Centre for the Study of Educational Communication and the Media, 1977).

19 Schoenheimer, *Good Australian Schools*, 2.

20 The republication of A. S. Neill's *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1960) in the United States in 1960 is often credited with reigniting interest and energy in progressive educational thinking.

21 Maurice Punch, "How to be a Progressive School Now," *New Society*, January 23, 1969, 123.

22 Henry Schoenheimer, *The Australian*, December 24, 1971, reprinted in *The Open Book for a Free Educative Society*, no. 2, 1972.

23 *A Nice Place to Be*.

24 Director General of Education NSW did not see anything in the schools that could not be achieved within the framework of the existing schools. McLeod, "Experimenting with Education," 179. Alby Jones, Director General in SA, saw much that he liked at Swinburne but some serious pitfalls with what was taking place at Brinsley Road on his 1973 visit to Melbourne. Alby Jones, "Brief Visits to Victorian Alternative Schools," Folder 2, Box 1 A. W. Jones – Manuscript Records, State Library of South Australia (SLSA) PRG 1501.