## **Democratic Spaces: A Theoretical Introduction**

by Christian Timo Zenke
Bielefeld University

In recent years, the interdependence of space and pedagogy has been frequently discussed within the discourse on school development. But what does this mean for the field of democratic education? What role does the spatial design of school buildings play in the formation of a democratic school culture? How can it promote a sense of belonging for all its members? Is there perhaps even such a thing as a "democratic school architecture"?

The complex nature of these questions necessarily requires a nuanced answer: buildings in general and school buildings in particular may often have been created for specific political purposes and shaped by specific political intentions, but their subsequent use is often remarkably flexible in relation to their original purposes and intentions – which is why there cannot be such a thing as a "democratic school architecture" per se . On the one hand, this becomes apparent throughout the varying and shifting usage histories of prominent monumental buildings. On the other hand, there is the fact that many of today's school buildings still date back to the late 19th century, i.e. to a time when principles of democracy and cooperation between teachers and students were rarely at the centre of school life. However, even in such historic school buildings it is yet possible to conduct contemporary democratic education today.

Nevertheless, schools buildings and their interiour spatial arrangements strongly influence if and how schools can become democratic spaces. Not only are buildings able to speak a certain political language through their interior and external design (for example, the newly erected town hall that towers over the city in a prominent location and thus aesthetically stages its political function in a specific way), but the architectural design of a building is also very capable of shaping and influencing the life that takes place in it. As previously indicated, this does not work in the sense of a simple stimulus-response scheme ("high ceilings lead to free thinking"), but very much in the sense of facilitating or complicating certain forms of social interaction.

A particularly impressive (and in the context of this text perhaps at first glance somewhat out of place) example of the latter circumstance was given a few years ago by the "prison architect" Andrea Seelich in an interview with the German-language magazine *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In prison, according to Seelich, it is a matter of encouraging people to act in a more constructive manner through architectural interventions, so that the inmates do not "bash each other's heads in". And she specifies:

"If two people walk towards each other in a narrow corridor, one has to avoid the other at some point. This puts them in a situation that expresses a clear hierarchy. They cannot meet each other neutrally. But if the corridor is wide enough, they don't get too close to each other. For a prison to function well, it needs as little friction as possible." (Seelich, 2017, Translation C.T.Z.).

Although today's schools may have something more in mind than preventing its "inmates" from getting too close to each other in narrow corridors, the basic principle mentioned by Seelich nevertheless applies here as well. For it goes without saying that the way in which the school building is designed also has a direct impact on how its inhabitants meet during their everyday lives: whether they "bump into each other" informally and by chance or whether they almost never get to see each other; whether they have the space and opportunity for larger gatherings or whether they can hardly ever get together undisturbed with more than a handful of people; whether they have the possibility to create the conditions for group discussions in their teaching area or whether they have to get along with fixed seating facing the teacher's desk …

Whilst facilitating some of these opportunities does not automatically lead to a democratic school culture, certain practices of human interaction that are desirable from the point of view of democratic education can very well be *promoted* – or made more *difficult* – by architectural measures. This applies to the  aspects illustrated above: *enabling informal encounters* (e.g. through "marketplaces", tea kitchens or spacious outdoor areas) as well as the *provision of meeting facilities for different group sizes* (e.g. through assembly halls, student council rooms or other freely usable areas). In addition, this also applies to the following space-related participatory practices of democratic schools identified by Michael Retzar (2019, p. 297 ff.):

- *Creating transparency and a public sphere* (for example, through the use of glazing and information boards);

- *Demonstrating accessibility and openness* (for example, through open doors and access to all areas of the school);

- *Creating of a homely atmosphere* (for example, through carpeted floors or seating and reclining areas that convey comfort and suggest a kind of private appropriation of the school space);

- *Demonstrating egalitarianism* (for example, by demonstrative equality of teacher and student workplaces to suggest flat hierarchies).

Although some of these architectural measures were certainly  realised in many schools of the 19th century, , more and more attempts have been made to develop school buildings that support a democratic school culture not only "incidentally", but rather quite specifically since the beginning of the 1970s. A particularly prominent example of such an effort is arguably Laborschule Bielefeld in Germany: designed as an open-plan school, it almost completely dispenses with the spatial separation of individual groups in classrooms and instead endeavours to educate all students together in an open learning landscape under one large roof (see Fig. 1). An important reason for this decision was the intent to consciously design the school as a democratic

"embryonic society" (cf. Kurz et al., 2022): by creating a "civilising" public sphere through its open layout; by allowing the entire school community to experience each other as a unity when looking through the space; by providing a multitude of meeting possibilities and allowing all its inhabitants to switch flexibly and spontaneously between these possibilities; and by providing diverse, especially informal, opportunities for encounters between students as well as between the generations. For this last reason, the "staff room" of Laborschule Bielefeld is also part of the open-plan space – and as such freely accessible to all students.



*Figure 1: View of the open-plan layout of "Haus 1" at Laborschule Bielefeld (copyright: Dimitrie Harder)*

Even if Laborschule's open-plan architecture has certainly not proven itself in *all* respects: The fundamental idea of no longer designing schools as a string of corridors and classrooms, but instead focusing on innovative learning environments with more open spatial concepts, has become increasingly popular in recent years. Newer school buildings are increasingly using the potential of open spatial structures to support the development of a democratic school culture while at the same time responding to current challenges of dealing with the increasing heterogeneity of their student body (cf. Kricke et al., 2018; Alterator & Deed, 2018). If, in all of this, it is also possible to use the respective school as a "third space" – i.e. as a social meeting place for the surrounding city community – then the specific, geographically localisable place of the school can actually become a "place of democracy" in the truest sense of the word: A house that not only leaves time and space for encounters and democratic processes in the everyday school and classroom life, but is also able to take on a central role in the social life of the respective neighbourhood or city.

Even the path *towards* such an "open school" can be designed as a participatory process based on democratic cooperation. This is the case when all the inhabitants of a school (including the students) are involved in building-related decisions: for example, when a renovation is due or new furniture must be purchased. In such moments, there is a precious opportunity to jointly consider what the shared school should look like in the future: how it should be designed to improve not only learning, but also the democratic culture in everyday school life. If this succeeds, such an endeavour cannot only be characterised by a clear courage for more democracy in its *result*, but also in its concrete *implementation*: as a participatory project of all those involved in school life.

**Literature:**

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