The power of "unofficial" space

Design experts Charlotte and Peter Fiell interview the legendary architect Herman Hertzberger.

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Can school design help us to realise a new vision for education in a fast-changing world?

It is not often one gets the chance to meet and interview one of the great humanist architects of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but recently, we were lucky enough to get that chance.

To celebrate the publication of a new book on school design entitled 'Planning Learning Spaces', we were asked to go to Amsterdam to interview Herman Hertzberger.

The venerated Dutch architect is the leading pedagogic thinker in professional practice famous for his Montessori School in Delft and the Apollo schools in Amsterdam, among others.

More than any other person working in the field of school design, Hertzberger has had a remarkable impact on how we now plan learning spaces. Indeed, his radical ideas from the 1960s and 1970s are seen as pretty much a given by today's architects working within the realm of educational buildings.

Having spent the last 60 years putting state-of-the-art pedagogic theory into practice, Hertzberger probably knows more about school design than anyone else on the planet.

Now at the age of 86 years old, he is still actively engaged in a host of new projects and is currently writing another book on his own design philosophy. To follow is a distillation of our interview, outlining his insights into how to design better, more intelligent learning spaces.

HH: I'm at this moment working on a book and its first chapter is called "Sources", because I'm convinced that where ideas come from is completely rooted in the home. It's all prepared by your surroundings. It is your whole education, your whole environment that feeds your brain. And, of course, it is one's openness to ideas that decides what you can and what you can't think.

CF: You've said it helps educationally to be content as a child, maybe you could explain what you mean by this.

HH: It helps if you have the right parents, the right education. For me, it started in my Montessori school. When you say Montessori, people say: "Oh, it's Italian, it's expensive, it's this and it's that". But the fundamental individual-centred ideas behind it let me do what I eventually did.

CF: And that was because it was teaching you how to think, rather than teaching you facts?

HH: There are basically two ways to educate people. One way is to tell them how the world works – a sort of "this is how it is, so remember!" And the other way of education is to let people develop thinking for themselves in their own direction. This has the risk that they might become an anarchist or part of any other

extreme way of thinking, but you should take that risk. I was luckily enough to have been educated at a time when there was this new belief that as a child you should be allowed to develop your own spirit. Today, education is rather tending towards the opposite direction, "You should get a good job, so you should be conformistic." So, schools are becoming more disciplined and there's a return to a stricter kind of "old school" education. As an architect who has spent his whole career designing schools, when I enter a school I can see at a glance what the ethos of the place is just by looking at the classrooms.

PF: Their design?

HH: Or how they've been arranged. When all the students are sitting in lines looking at the blackboard, then you have the strictest kind of teaching.

CF: Which is totally counter to the idea of self-learning, as postulated by Maria Montessori who believed that children's mental capacities had, if I understand rightly, a sort of educational optimal time slot?

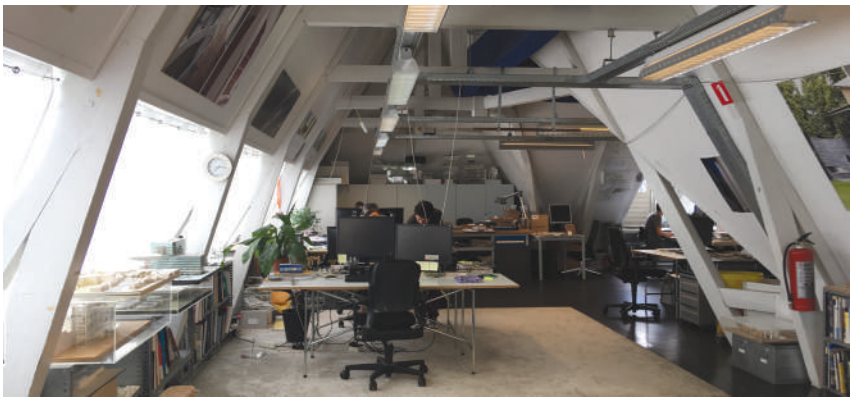
HH: What she meant was that your brain is like an information carrier, which at certain moments can process information. So, at very specific moments you learn specific things. But also when you miss the right moment this gap cannot be repaired afterwards.

CF: Presumably this has over the years led to more project-based teaching, which has transformed how a school needs to be set up.

HH: Exactly, so when I'm designing something, it is always related to what people will do with it, what people will think of it. The actual design is never up-front because for me, form, space and people are absolutely complementary.

PF: You are well-known for introducing raised "islands", sunken "pits" and large-stepped "grandstands" into the educational environment and I'm just wondering if it's the simplicity of these features that makes them so compelling to interact with. Because they're not difficult to understand, yet they're unexpected.

HH: Yes, it is all about creating "unofficial" space. Most things in space, like objects, are defined and also possessed by



something. So, for an architect all the things in a building are to some extent possessed by their conceptual significance. So that when you see the thing, you immediately know exactly what it is. However, what I try to do all the time is to create things in buildings that are not possessed per se but can instead be possessed by the people who use them, who interpret them for themselves.

CF: One of the most notable things about your career is how you have always embraced the possibility of future change, which a lot of architects are not so keen on countenancing. They want to create fundamentally static monuments, whereas you design-in flexibility to address change, even if you don't know what that change will be in the future. And that's quite an unpretentious approach to thinking about buildings.

HH: This idea of change is a continuation of the idea of interpretation. I've learnt over the years that people will want to change your buildings over time, because functional needs and concerns evolve. So, the next step is to design in such a way that allows change.

PF: Do you think for learning spaces more adaptiveness can be achieved somehow, perhaps in relation to static fixtures versus movable, modular elements? Is there something that could be done there that could make spaces perform better?

HH: You used to have in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s schools with completely open spaces and they don't work, because people are sort of disturbing each other. So, you have to articulate the space in such a way that different groups or individuals can work, while having an eye on each other, yet not being disturbed. I try to make undefined spaces, which can then be defined by moments, by the situation at any one time. The point is that you can facilitate freethinking education, which tries to develop people individually, by making a space or a room that is not defined. In other words: a space that can be temporarily defined personally by the user. For some of our school projects, both old and new, we've taken a large space and put in lots of sunken or island-like elements, or marked areas in it in other ways, which invite people to group together and work together. We were the first to do that, and it's a feature in all the new schools we are working on.

CF: Does the way you articulate space with pits, islands, grandstands and cocooning areas help with its navigation?

HH: Yes, they help both orientation and domestication. Orientation is also part of domestication and ensures that children never feel alienated in their surroundings. That, for me, is the central idea of architecture. You make spaces that people can feel familiar with and can take emotional ownership of. Make the space their own space. In the end, it's all about creating the feeling of homecoming. But more than this you are also trying to give a child not only the feeling of home, but also of horizon. It's important for them to feel safe, but it's also important to give children confidence, born of spaces that inspire learning for themselves, to look outwards, to seek adventure, new things, better things. So there's a sort of balance between the homecoming and the going out. Like birds in nests that have to fly out to find their own lives.