

LEARNING SPACES IN AFRICA

Critical Histories to 21st Century Challenges and Change

OLA UDUKU



Learning Spaces in Africa

With a key UN Sustainable Development Goal for 2030 being to make basic education available to all the world's children, *Learning Spaces in Africa* explores the architectural, socio-political and economic policy factors that have contributed to school design, the main spaces for education and learning in Africa. It traces the development of school building design, focusing on Western and Southern Africa, from its emergence in the 19th century to the present day. Uduku's analysis draws attention to the past historic links of schools to development processes, from their early 19th century missionary origins to their re-emergence as development hubs in the 21st century. *Learning Spaces in Africa* uses this research as a basis to suggest fundamental changes to basic education, which respond to new technological advances, and constituencies in learning. Illustrated case studies describe the use of tablets in refugee community schools, "hole-in-the wall" learning and shared school-community learning spaces. This book will be beneficial for students, academics and those interested in the history of educational architecture and its effect on social development, particularly in Africa and with relevance to countries elsewhere in the emerging world.

Ola Uduku is Professor of Architecture at the Manchester School of Architecture, UK. She completed MPhil and PhD degrees in Architecture at the University of Cambridge focusing on School Design in Nigeria and has taught at Liverpool, Strathclyde and Edinburgh universities. She has written on and researched extensively into the history of school design and its influence on education in Africa and has research interests in contested urbanism, West African modernist architecture, passive design and thermal comfort in the tropics.



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Ola Uduku

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This book is dedicated to my daughter Esmé and to my partner Bob who have both in different ways spurred me to get this task done.



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Foreword

Education remains one of the most pressing issues for development globally. Although there was a commitment to ensure that all Africans achieved full primary schooling by 1980, the latest round of international development targets, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), now offers 2030 as the new deadline. Indeed, in the discussions that have followed the SDGs, there are concerns that even though that target looks achievable at the level of attendance, perhaps one-third of children will not be supported to meeting even the most minimum acceptable learning standards. Though the right to quality education has long been accepted as a core part of international human rights law, many millions of African children will continue to be denied this right for at least another generation.

In the discussions that surrounded the development of SDG4 on quality education and lifelong learning for all, and subsequent considerations of how to deliver on this, a range of aspects of such delivery have taken centre stage. New ways of testing what children have learnt and new assessments of an emerging global core education are being developed. Technological solutions have found favour as many times in the past. Teachers have returned to the stage as acknowledged important actors in delivering quality education, notwithstanding the attempts by some on the political right to portray them more as problem than solution.

Yet, in all of this education discussion, the question of what constitute appropriate, conducive learning spaces remains waiting in the wings. Although we know the importance of the built environment on how we think, behave and work, the issue of the nature of the spaces in which we learn has not been a significant part of the recent debates of the education and development community about how we are to achieve quality learning for all.

It is this gap that the present book, on *Learning Spaces in Africa*, goes a long way to identifying and then filling. It is important reading if we are to fully grasp both the challenge and possibilities of achieving the long-missed goal of giving all children, both in Africa and globally, the opportunity to get a good quality education.

Ola Uduku is absolutely correct to insist on the importance of understanding the historical development of schooling and schools as a central factor in imagining how quality education might be thought about in the future. As she illustrates in both words and pictures, the current pervasive model of schooling and schools was not inevitable, but it has spread with incredible effectiveness across the globe. From the late 19th century, the school was one of the most visible signs of both Christian mission and colonial administration in the built environment of African communities, a bringer of industrial time discipline to locations where the factory has still not penetrated today.

The very success of the modern, Fordist school system and its instantiation in school buildings places severe limitations on what it is possible to imagine for future education approaches. It is hard to conceive of a way to move beyond this model, given all the investment sunk into the modern school and its bricks and mortar.

As Ola shows, more recent history has seen a dramatic turn in education governance that has served to make school design even less of a policy issue than it once was. She charts how the third-quarter of the 20th century saw major UNESCO and World Bank interest in educational planning stretch to the question of school architecture as many national school systems expanded quickly through the main era of decolonisation and modernisation. School building was heavily regulated in many systems, with the state often actively discouraging local involvement in design and planning decisions. With the arrival of neoliberalism and educational decentralisation in the 1980s, the importance of national planning was severely eroded. More recently, the phenomenon of ‘private schooling for the poor’, often with considerable donor and philanthropic support, has further eroded any sense of there being national or international standards for school buildings.

As she notes in Chapter 4:

Despite more than 150 years of educational provision across most of sub-Saharan Africa, the contemporary school classroom remains close in design conception and use to its Victorian predecessor. Learning concepts, methods and theories have changed and begun to influence national curriculums and educational content. In general school design however remains wedded to the past, which harks to the symbolism of Western education as it was delivered via the missions and colonial government to an initial elite group of indigenous citizens.

What then can be done to bring sound educational and architectural principles together in order to support quality learning for all by 2030? The book has a number of interesting and important things to contribute to answering this question.

Advances in learning technologies and understandings of learning processes have progressed without the mass of schools catching up. This is

hardly surprising, given the infrastructural investments required. Nonetheless, examples of innovative design for learning can be found and the consideration of some of these is the key future-looking contribution of the book. In reality, it is difficult to predict what new technologies will become pervasive in schools and how school design can best respond. What is clear is that schools and schooling are being reshaped, even in the poorest settings, by the rise of new technologies. The book offers some examples of how certain technological developments are influencing the construction of new learning spaces. Whilst the cutting edge here is very exciting, Ola also reminds us of the need to think about how we might design new and redesign existing schools to be more effective learning spaces as technologies do shift.

School gardens and kitchens are another example focused upon in the book. In Britain, there have been well-publicised campaigns to address the poor nutritional quality of school food, linking this to healthy diets and, increasingly, to wider issues of cooking skills and organic growing. In parts of Africa, concerns have been more about inadequate intake of calories and micronutrients. Not only are these linked to stunting but also to reduced educational attainment. Thus, school feeding schemes have received significant attention from organisations such as the World Bank. As in Britain, increasingly these have been linked to an awareness about growing, in particular, the opportunities for the community and local entrepreneurs to be involved in the supply of food to schools. As Ola shows, school design becomes an important element of this. Policies to get children eating better and even perhaps more involved in growing nutritious foodstuffs have frequently failed because schools lack the necessary facilities to grow, cook and/or serve food.

The Sustainable Development Goals place education within a wider setting of thinking about sustainable development. A third important strand of this book is a consideration of sustainable school design that also promotes wider notions and practices of sustainability. The case studies in Chapter 5 are good examples of how schools can be designed more sustainably. This must be grounded in the use of appropriate materials that are sustainably sourced and in designs that promote sustainable energy and water use. However, the examples also stress the importance of community involvement, a necessary component if schools are to be maintained long after the architects and builders have departed the stage.

Ola concludes by suggesting that we are entering a new era for thinking about school design in Africa. After the disruptions of the neoliberal era, the rise of new non-state actors and with the potentials of new learning technologies, the start of the SDG era is an important point at which to consider how architecture and education can better talk to each other. Whilst there is little scope for tearing down the modern school and building anew, it is apparent that there are opportunities for thinking innovatively about learning spaces that can better meet the needs of learners and communities, on the one hand,

and the possibilities of technological change, on the other. Ola suggests that, as in mobile telephony, Africa's historical disadvantage in school development may offer an opportunity for a leap forward.

For those concerned with imagining and delivering quality education for all by 2030, there is an urgent imperative to engage with new thinking about the learning spaces to support this. This book is an important step towards opening up a much-needed debate in this area.

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1 A background to school planning and design in Africa

Introduction

This chapter sets the background to this book by giving a brief account of the evolution of Western education in Africa and its influence on school design. It focuses mainly on its development in English speaking, former British colonies in West and Southern Africa. Drawing from research sources, it traces the involvement of Africans in Western education, from the children of the elite coastal traders to the mass education movements in the mid-20th century. Giving examples from schools in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa, it contextualises and compares the evolution process which took place across key Anglophone countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction – early schools in Africa: pre-Western education systems in Africa

Historically, Africa has often been portrayed in the public media and the local imagination as being the dark continent in which there has only been a limited and recent spread of formal Western education.¹ Factually, the continent has had a long and engaging encounter with European or Western education systems that now stretches back more than two centuries.² Prior to the transatlantic trade, traders from Europe were involved in commercial activities with indigenous coastal groups who engaged with the European merchants and developed trading systems for the transactions that took place. Whilst in these early days there was no established school system, often children of African traders and kings were sent to Europe for a proper ‘Western’ education.³

This is not to say that there were not historic indigenous education practices, usually associated with initiation rituals, that existed and still do so in different regions in Africa. The ‘fattening’ house system, for example, remains a traditional practice amongst the Efiks in southeastern Nigeria. The practice involves the sequestering of pubescent girls to a private dwelling and living area, where they are schooled in the arts of cookery and other domestic affairs for a month, whilst fed food to ‘fatten’ them. At graduation from the school, or fattening house, the graduates are presented as brides to men in the local community. Similar education ritual practices take place