il giornale dell'ARCHITETTURA.com
MAGAZINE LIBERO E INDIPENDENTE SULLE CULTURE DEL PROGETTO E DELLA CITTÀ

Designing the atmospheres of learning

Designing the atmospheres of learning

The New Phenomenology applied to learning spaces

Published 31 maggio 2024 – © riproduzione riservata

Inhabiting a school environment is something we have all experienced. Inhabiting one that is safe, healthy, and suitable for learning, on the other hand, is a privilege that still few can afford. As *FederCepi Costruzioni* – the *National Federation of Construction* – reports, most of Italy's 40,293 school buildings are old, dilapidated, and unsafe, and the economic resources allocated for securing the buildings, and for school construction in general, are too meager to meet the required environmental requirements.

This alarming picture highlights the reticence in considering the space as a valid support for teaching, or, in the words of the Italian pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), as a true "*third educator*" that should be attuned with teachers' skills and teaching programs to transform learning into a relational experience of openness, curiosity, and intellectual and emotional emancipation.

il giornale dell'ARCHITETTURA.com
MAGAZINE LIBERO E INDIPENDENTE SULLE CULTURE DEL PROGETTO E DELLA CITTÀ

In recent decades, thanks in part to technological development, pedagogy has taken **interdisciplinary paths** with such seemingly distant fields as architecture, neuroscience, environmental psychology, and phenomenology pushing research into uncharted territories.

In the book ***Atmospheres of Learning. How They Affect the Development of Our Children***, published with *Mimesis International* in 2019, Barbara Wolf converges research that investigates the **profound impact that space and atmospheres have on students' engagement, motivation, and overall learning outcomes**.

After a brief introduction devoted to the concept of atmosphere and its implications in context, the Professor of *Social Work* at *Internationale Berufsakademie* (IBA) in Cologne, and Dean of the *study course Social Work,* reviews several **atmospheres of learning** and describes how they act on the *lived-body* of teachers and learners to provide pedagogues and architects with some useful insights for designing nurturing, stimulating and inclusive learning environments.

The term **atmosphere**, whose etymology refers to the gaseous sphere that protects all living beings, is defined in phenomenology as that spatial phenomenon that touches us emotionally and, sometimes, overwhelms us to the point of affecting our moods (Wolf 2019, 17). But atmospheres are sensory and affective qualities spread throughout space that not only grasp and displace the individual but, in social sharing situations such as school environments, involve also groups of people.

Not surprisingly, the German pedagogist assumes that learning is strongly conditioned by the atmospheres created in built environments and that the pedagogue and the architect play a decisive role in their manipulation because in addition to having to keep track of **measurable factors** – such as social structure variables – they also have to deal with **bodily perceptible factors**, that are perceived and experienced through the felt-body (*ibid*, 159).

Designing an educational space is an arduous task that involves close collaboration among **different professionals**, who should always keep in mind two crucial aspects of the atmospheric experience in shared situations: the first concerns the **spatial qualities** that characterize the moods within classrooms: the materials, proportions, color, light, height, free space etc.; secondly **personal aspects** that develop between individuals or groups – for example, the relationship between a student and his or her teacher or the interactions in a peer group – that refer to intimate qualities such as hope, patience, perfectionism, humor and various aversions (*ibid*, 21).

The **pedagogue** possesses the tools that enable him or her to know the relationships that are

established between the object of learning and the qualities of perceived emotional attachment- and consequently the atmospheres generated by these relationships – in order to best plan and design the most suitable learning situations (*ibid*, 52). The **architect**, in turn, should be able to shape the qualities of the built environment to evoke and accommodate those atmospheres that produce a certain sense of belonging, facilitate relational exchanges, and foster concentration, willingness, and the learning process.

The space radiates a particular mood that has a strong influence on its frequenters, above all in the process from the accustomed parent-child-dyad to the educator-child-dyad that is often accompanied by strong feelings such as hesitation, fear, curiosity, uncertainty, or even panic (*ibid*, 93).

In toddlers, in fact, who are not yet able to gain distance to feelings, the atmospheres generated at school must carry out the transition from the more or less sheltered life within their close family circle to joining nursery school in a smooth and soft manner allowing the child to feel safe and comfortable (*ibid*, 114).

The book, more than a handbook, is an **invitation to conduct further research** on spatial and social atmospheres, based on those already conducted, to examine the effects these have on children's personal development and learning conditions (*ibid*, 164).

Barbara Wolf was Professor of Childhood Education at SRH University of Applied Sciences Heidelberg from 2013 to 2020 and is now Professor of Social Work at Internationale Berufsakademie (IBA) in Cologne and Dean of the study course Social Work. She was the Principal of the professional school for educators in Koblenz between 2012 and 2013 and Research assistant and doctoral studies at Koblenz University (2008-2012). She has many years of professional experience in social work and early childhood education.

- READ THE ARTICLE IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE