The transformation of educational spaces: Ethics, aesthetics and politics.
Fermín Blanco

Hello, everyone. My name is Fermín Blanco. I sign my research articles as Fermín González Blanco and the kids know me as Mr. Lupo, and that's how I'm going to introduce myself today. First of all, I'd like to thank Kristine and Eneas for the invitation to take part in these "Post-Pandemic Cities" series which I've been following and which I am delighted to work on alongside so many leading names. Many of them are friends who I admire and have been following for many years.

My role here is to bring you into the hybrid world I work in. It is a world at the intersection of architecture, society, art, and education. Obviously, it is life and professional experience tied to Sistema Lupo, which is the collective that I manage and have the honour to coordinate. This is a collective made up of an excellent group of professionals, all of whom have a hybrid profile between architecture and teaching.

Our research experience since 2008 stems from playing with children and working from an architectural standpoint. But, fundamentally, we began, and that is important in placing us, in the world of contemporary art museums and cultural centres. Therefore, we started off in the world of non-formal education. After years of working with children who came to the centres voluntarily, who, of course, don't need to be tested, who we worked with using games, structured and non-structured materials, generally large scale, shared materials, in a setting where we interacted with ephemeral activities, with the families, with the artists... I'm establishing this dichotomy because it was the psychologists, the teachers, the educators who came to our workshops who really pushed us to make this transfer of all our experience to the world of formal education in schools.

And that is where, on the hand one, there was the clash between these two worlds and, on the other, what has brought me here today to talk to you about Malaguzzi's "environment as the third teacher". That change, that transformation of space which teaches, which has an effect on us. For us, It has been especially relevant that we switched from contemporary art museums, which are facilities made with very high architectural, aesthetic, artistic, environmental, lighting, spatial qualities... And then we came to schools, to the world of school facilities, which is, I would almost dare to say, the opposite.

Eneas has asked me to take you on a tour of those spaces to find out what the current state of them is. Some of you may not have been to a school or your old school for a long time. I would go as far as to say to you that if you decide to go back to your old school today, you will surely find something very similar. I mean you may find that your school has the same curtains, the same fluorescent lights, the same door handles.

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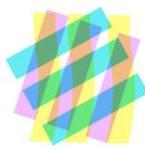
Perhaps in your case you will find that your school has been part of some patching up, some works generally concerned with accessibility. They had surely clumsily put in some sort of external lift or ramp, adapted to the existing architecture and structure. They'll likely have made a covered area or a gym into a canteen, without, of course, any acoustic conditioning in the space. Or they may have covered over a playground for rainy days, which will surely have been done at the cost of reducing the natural light in the library or in some classroom. I mean, a series of measures and improvements will have been implemented in an effort to resolve urgent needs in a strategy of short-term patching up of the building. At the same time, what happens outside in the playground? I'm sure many of you have memories of the trees you used to swing from or the areas of land you used to dig up. That is now possibly confined to your memories because if you go back to your playground there will maybe no longer be any trees, or there will be less bushes, the green space will have been paved over. You might find rubber surfaces that are now dark. I mean the green space, the trees, will have been lost and you will generally find a single-colour, single-theme, single-material (generally hard, asphalt), single-level, because they are normally flat, space. It'll definitely be singularly dreary, a space that offers no chance for play, where one activity will take precedence over others, and which is really causing issues on sharing the same space on a day-to-day basis, and the teachers, the educators who are there constantly, day in, day out, are well aware of this.

All of this that I'm saying as my introduction may sound pessimistic. That really isn't my intention. I always try to see the positive and optimistic side, but, of course, always from a realistic point of view. Therefore, it doesn't seem that denying the evidence is the most advisable course of action in an analytical process of this type.

When we are working with all this, which is generally included in active teaching practices as a method, with hands-on elements, with sharing.... well, COVID put a stop to that, like a tsunami, it brought chaos to us all, a case. It brought to light a series of issues that we were already working with and confirmed a lot of our analysis on the centres. Evidently, it is a very complex world. The world of education is full of layers, of people who are involved and therefore all this hit us during the strictest lockdown. It really came to light.

We were all affected in these layers as a family, as professionals, as citizens, and that community effect which we had been working on became more obvious.

In our area which I'm telling you about as Sistema Lupo, everything that has to do with the non-formal, with the workshops in museums, we tried to keep the online support for families going in programmes such as "Escoitas" through daily support with artists, connections, but, obviously, we were deprived of one of our biggest weapons which was the hands-on factor. However, we were able to continue using play, we were able to continue using the community aspect, presence. Everything involved in the projects to transform spaces carried on in assemblies, even positively so because in the online assemblies more people took part than in the in-person ones, which was a curious aspect. In some

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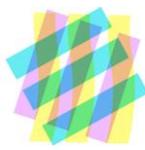
centres we even had more connection, more communication than normal. That was also another strange aspect. In the teaching programme, the schools obviously suffered a setback. All those schools where active teaching methods were becoming normal, where there was hard work, effort from the teachers... All that collapsed...It's stopped suddenly. All those steps towards a new type of education took a big hit. Playgrounds divided into sectors, children kept apart with social distancing, materials that couldn't be shared, individualised materials... Everything we have seen and everything we know and the fact is we are still actually following some of those protocols.

However, we're also going to be positive too. COVID has also allowed for a rethink of school spaces. It put architecture in the spotlight, the importance of spaces started to come under analysis and be appreciated and that became the centre of the debate. Some centres finally got the blueprints for the building. Ventilation and cleaning, not in the health sense but rather visual cleaning, began to be discussed. I talk about this with teachers a lot almost as a joke but it is true. One of the important things COVID has ushered in is cleaning classrooms, common spaces that were full, that had been filling up with containers, different things, and a decision has been made to go for the essential, sometimes excessively so. It also made clear the need for connection, communication, and care in the community.

But I would also like to highlight, almost as a personal reflection, that COVID made clear that there were many things that could be changed. We are trying to make transformations. Many things don't change because it is hard to change them in one aspect or another. There were things that seemed immovable and, suddenly, in the state of emergency, things changed overnight that really didn't seem to be typical. Obviously, many of those things changed in the direction that we don't want, but others did change in the way we want.

We are clear that there are many communities or some communities that have used this time to transform issues in the way that they wanted them to go. Access to centres, transport protocols were also being made use of. Right now, there is the rumour of the post-pandemic economic funds. Well, some centres are trying to use them for those planned reforms, but in a teaching-centred way in the extension of spaces, covers for playgrounds, rewilding, and so on.

The pandemic is dragging on and society is growing tired of it. Over and over again, there is talk of returning to the old normal. We are really terrified because the pandemic caught us precisely trying to transform that old normal and we refuse to accept that the future is a return to that starting point. In this specific case of educational architecture, we see that there were no blueprints, there were no plans. What there was was an attempt to patch up the seams of a system that was becoming obsolete in everyone's opinion. I mentioned earlier this issue of the blueprints... It really isn't an anecdote. The overwhelmed technical units used to say to us: "Fermín, mapping out all the schools to detail them in their current state would be revolutionary". We just don't have that. That would be revolutionary in itself. There are no blueprints or plans. There isn't anything. And there still isn't. In fact, in the best-case scenario, there were some programmes dressed up as institutional publicity material. I mean, the pandemic

happened during a process of transformation in school centres and there were many or there were many of us collectives who took over the baton from these communities.

Obviously, we aren't alone. Prior to the pandemic, we were already working in this area and on a national Spanish level I recommend following the "Ludantia Asociación – Arquitectura, educación, infancia" (Ludantia Association - Architecture, education, childhood, in English), which I have also been lucky and privileged enough to be the first president-coordinator of. We were already working in this area, on those meetings. We had established some international networks with some colleagues in which we learn and share our experiences with Latin-American and European associations. We, in particular, were working in Rome. We have recently been at the triennial public space conference in Rome, at MAXXI in Kiev, in Vancouver... I mean this is a universal issue, it is the issue of education. It is one of the main foundations and therefore the issue we are engaged in, involved in is a transnational issue.

Everyone, in their area of activity, tried to share their methodologies, their successes, their mistakes, with varying levels of institutional support. We looked for points of references, in the case of Quebec, in Canada, which is a key case of administration which came to the fore in a national plan to protect, improve educational spaces. There are now some movements in Catalonia.

In short, those initiatives that pave the way for improving the educational system, in a systematic manner, but based on the local context, on each school's own case, are so interesting. And that is what I want to get into a little bit. I'd like to offer up a thought on those issues. I mean the architectural project seems to be recurrent, but I think it must always be repeated. I mean, it is clear but it has to be repeated. The architectural project has to be tied into the educational project. In the same sense that a school has to have its own teaching project, it also has to have its own architectural project. In that regard, there are no one-size-fits-all answers.

Of course, we may also think this goes against the creation of manuals or the creation of standards, but, of course, we cannot forget that an educational system is, as its names suggests, a system and requires a certain level of systemisation. That's where it gets its name from. There is a series of questions that are widespread and affect schools, but there are other aspects that are specific. The issue is finding a balance between that generic part and that specific part. That is part of our work.

Another thing I like to say when we start one of these processes is that there is no such thing as an express transformation. We need time. Timeframes are needed both to make the changes, because architecture is slow, and for them to be taken on board and absorbed. And, on the other hand, the transformation never ends. What we would really like to believe is that a transformation is a state of mind, it is an attitude to life, and that there is always going to be something to change, there is always going to be something to maintain, maintenance work. Ultimately, there is always going to be a need to do
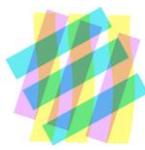
something. You have to be active and that is also what active teaching methods are based on. Being active agents in our lives, in our community.

Well, from this point on we could set out the different types of intervention. Obviously, all this that I'm talking about concerns public education. Private education is obviously a different story.

But we have two large families of activity. One is when we work with collectives or communities that already started without the means or the administration behind them. And the process itself has to assume the role of searching for funding. It's almost a type of teaching activism. This case would be as if the community absorbed the administration. It moves forward in the direction of Patrick Geddes, in Cities in Evolution, or Freiré and his pedagogy-social approach. In this case, it would fall under our "Foreman" line. In other cases, we work alongside the administration on a full strengthening of the institution starting with local government, which, for example, would be our "Escola proyectua" project in the Basque region of Navarre. But, in all cases, it's about what we know as "narrowing the gap between saying and doing". In other words, moving from theory into practice, because we can all be working at a theoretical level, but we like to take that jump into the practical. We have, on occasion, found ourselves with an excess of theory. It's not that it's an excess of theory because theory is never superfluous, but the truth is that sometimes with theory if you don't move onto the practical, you can end up stuck up there, on that cloud.

We have come across many teachers who had great training, spaces, and educational environments, who had trained, who had read, who had travelled to Reggio Emilia, to the centre of Europe, who had seen all the experiences, shared with other Spanish colleagues, but when they came back, to what they called "their small hell", they were not able to get these ideas going. They were incredibly knowledgeable but their fellow teachers weren't with them on it or their families weren't on the same page or the administrations didn't listen to them. Of course, that's very hard. It's the time when we really thought about setting up examples to create a network of schools that are transforming with nearby examples. And all those examples are from the public network in which all communities can feel included and identified.

As you can imagine, each of these stories opens up into a case. I can now provide a lot of examples here. That's not what I'm going to do. I'm going to talk to you, for example, about the first one of them all, which was very important for us. This is CEIP Ortigueira in Santa Cruz de Ribadulla, a state primary school that was also an educational prototype in 1927. It was built by architect Antonio Flórez, who in his day was known as "the school architect". Trained at the Institute of Free Education, with studies in Rome, in 1920 he was the head of the technical office of school buildings. That is where he drew up the technical hygiene regulations for school construction. And he would also draw up a series of educational prototypes based on the different climates of the Spanish regions. One of those schools, one of those prototypes was the very school where we are privileged to be able to constantly introduce new changes and which is almost like our laboratory.
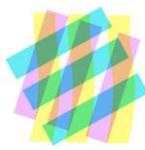
That's where we saw that it was working and we believed in the possibility of systematic action. In how to do that active listening, how to search...Basically what Antonio Flórez was looking for in his day: societal transformation through education. How could we give that support to each of those communities that were calling us? That's where we came across all the complexity involved in transformative processes. We also came across an issue linked to experimentation. Projects that were now being called teaching innovation projects. A strange term, but anyway, all teaching should include the term innovation in and of itself. But it is true that were was a level of fear of change and fear of the lack of success of failure.

Mistakes also had to be part of taking on responsibility. In that regard, I would like to finish up with the case of Labarta Pose school. It is a case from the Costa da Morte in Galicia that I am very fond of. It is one of many examples of a rural school located on the outskirts of urban land. It is a cul-de-sac, which has a very big, huge playground, which is all paved over. And on a reception playground, the families had an idea about making a change to improve the surface. It was chipping. The professionals identified the possibility of introducing those changes from a teaching perspective, making it greener with more green areas, softer, and that was the start of a story like so many others. And I got there and asked what was happening here, what do we have. Well, this is what we call Empty Spain, the rural areas; the young people are leaving us, there are increasingly fewer young people, less going on... And what is being done about it? Well, nothing at all. Ok, a motorway is being built, which was promised years ago. Well, if a motorway is being built, then many cubic metres of soil are being moved and we are going to use that as a material from the management to build play areas. And that was the start of setting up a project, as well as mapping out local industry. There was a company that makes recycling containers and they gave us, donated a series of old containers, that they were replacing. And with all that, we got to work. But I'm not giving you this example as if it were a catalogue, as a sample of one of the many possibilities out there for transformation. I'm using it to bring up here the great pressure the community is put under when it decides to transform something.

You have to imagine this now. We are in a podcast now. Imagine the scene: summer, August, everything closed, and the digging starts, the filling starts. What's more, the front part of the reception playground leads on to a very visible area of the school with mounds of earth, with the containers still arranged and looking as they were originally. We all identify them with waste, with rubbish. So, rumours then spread in the town: what will that be, they're filling up the playground with rubbish. And the doubts crept in. Tensions started to heighten. I remember that summer... the headteacher didn't want to go on her holidays and she called me, she said to me, "Fermín, do you think that when it starts to rain this isn't going to turn into a mire? Will it drain? Are we making a big mistake here?" There was so much tension building in the day-to-day that I also felt that pressure. You doubted whether it would drain... a tense atmosphere came about. Now, you will just have to see the photos of how it ended up.

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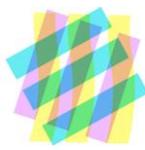
Obviously, the grass grew, but it actually rained non-stop from October to February. It was the highest recorded rainfall in the whole decade. And it did start to drain and all of us apprehensively started to look to see if there was a bigger puddle or smaller puddle, if there was mud or not. But that moment of tension is what you must accept, is what community leadership is subject to, and that also needs to be protected in these transformative processes.

From that point on in this case, the families took over the summer maintenance of the playground. What's more, a really lovely thing is that many families stay there to have an afternoon snack at the end of the school day. These play areas have become that public space connected to the town, which is in a little way the goal we wanted. The transfer of space into urban space. I could talk to you about several cases like these ones, but with this I have tried to think about education, about public education especially in this discussion. Because if there is one message I think the pandemic has left it is the conviction of the need to strengthen the public sphere and that feeling of community.

Thank you very much for listening to me, for letting us take part in this series. You can see that we have tried to explain a situation full of layers, complexity, people, in which aesthetics, ethics, politics shape the title of this talk because they are interconnected in many intersections that mutually affect and influence each other. All the best and thank you very much.

Fermín Blanco