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The primary purpose of this research project is to investigate if, and how, schools (especially school buildings and classrooms) are influenced and changed by new ideas about education. To achieve this end I will study the rebuilding and modernisation of a secondary school, namely Risbroskolan, in my hometown Fagersta during 1980s. The material that I will be working with consists of photographs and schematics of the school together with the minutes of meetings where city politicians, architects and teachers discuss reorganising and rebuilding of school. The discussion was based on curriculum changes in the Swedish school system in the 1970s.

Background

Schooling has always been – and still is, of course – a very important societal institution. Formal and structured education is a significant resource for states and politicians that want to disseminate values and behaviours, traditions and skills to future generations. That means that educational systems, school and even school buildings are influenced and changed by contemporary cultural, political and economic values. Consequently, as research in the history of education has shown, new ideas about education, pedagogy and teaching methods often result in architectural changes in school design. In School, their book about history of the school buildings and their changes, Catherine Burke and Ian Grosvenor write:

As historians of education we recognize that we are equally open to the charge leveled at an earlier account of school architecture –
of being ‘outsiders to the sub-culture which architects inhabit’ and being prone as ‘professional educational pundits’ to believe that ‘Form follows Curriculum’; that it is educational innovation that generates architectural progress in school building.  

In 1969 and 1970, new curricula for both compulsory and upper secondary schools were introduced in Sweden. The new objectives resulted in some significant changes in the former that, among other things, meant new subjects were to be taught in Swedish schools using new teaching methods. In Risbroskolan, in a small town in central Sweden, politicians and teachers discussed these changes.

Rebuilding, Modifying and Changing?

Risbroskolan is the only secondary school in Fagersta, with about 550 pupils between 12 and 16 years of age. Today the school consists of several different buildings but the first school building was completed in 1922. In 1958, when nine-year schooling became mandatory in Sweden, an additional build-

127 Burke and Grosvenor (2008), 24.
ing, the so-called “yellow annex”, was built. The reason was that the number of pupils was increasing due to the postwar baby boom and heavy migration to the city, primarily from Finland. In 1980, the school was modernised and rebuilt once again when the main building and yellow annex were connected by an intermediate building which today is home to the chemistry, biology and physics labs and administrative facilities (see Figure 1).

The Swedish compulsory school reform of the late 1960s caused heated debate and discussion among politicians and teachers in Fagersta though they mainly dealt with the reorganisation and rebuilding of the school. One of the main reasons for these changes, according to the minutes of a meeting between politicians and school personnel in Fagersta, was however innovation in the new curriculum. It was noted that new subjects were to be introduced (namely art, technology and economics). The new curriculum would also require changes in teachers’ working methods, which would require closer collaboration between pupils and teachers, who were expected to begin working in so-called “teaching teams”.

Many meetings about school reorganisation were held during the 1970s in Fagersta. The National School Board, the County School Board, the governing politicians in Fagersta and, last but not least, teachers and the teachers’ union at Risbroskolan discussed and made plans for reorganisation and rebuilding. The minutes of these various meetings reveal that there were other significant motives behind the decision to reorganise and rebuild, such as profitability and the increasing number of pupils expected to arrive in the 1980s. It would be much more financially profitable, according to the politicians, to rebuild and renovate an already existing school building than to build a brand-new one.

An additional and very interesting perspective that clearly emerges from various minutes is that all parties in this “process

Figure 2. Risbro School, floor 1 (yellow): Part of the intermediate building, after rebuilding.
Source: Risbroskolans arkiv.

Figure 3. Risbro School, floor 1: Teachers’ proposals before rebuilding and renovation.
Source: Risbroskolans arkiv.¹

¹ The teachers wrote “ground floor,” but the drawing proposal depicts what is called floor 1 on the schematic.
Figure 4. Risbro School: floor 2 (red): Part of the intermediate building, after rebuilding.  
Source: Risbroskolans arkiv

Figure 5. Risbro School: floor 2: Teachers’ proposals before rebuilding and renovation.  
Source: Risbroskolans arkiv.

2 The teachers wrote “floor 1” but the proposal depicts what is called floor 2 on the schematic.
of change” were allowed to express their opinion about the upcoming modification and rebuilding of Risbroskolan (with the exception of the pupils themselves, whose opinions are not at all illuminated in the available documents). The documents show that teachers and their unions were asked to present practical suggestions. Proposals by other school personnel were also submitted. As we can read in the minutes, personnel stated that there was a need for a new staff room and a new nursery room, while the long-term planning of the teachers themselves first and foremost concerned the lack of adequate classrooms for future needs. The minutes show that the teachers drew up proposals for dealing with the organisation, dimensions and design of the classrooms. Although the final decision was not in the hands of school personal and teachers, the teachers seem to have been deeply involved in the decision-making process.

It is interesting to discover that in comparing all the questions, suggestions and strategies noted in the minutes, the schematics submitted by the teachers and the actual final results are strikingly similar. It seems that the teachers’ proposals acted as both an inspiration and a starting point for the architects’ conceptions and final plans (cf. Figure 2 and 3, as well as Figure 4 and 5).

It seems that here, the teachers were anything but silent partners in educational design. It seems as though architects actually listened and deferred to the needs, if not of those who were to be taught, than of those who were to teach at the school. It may seem problematic to try to draw any definite conclusions about teachers’ participation in the rebuilding and adaptation process, given that the source material was not as extensive and rich as one would wish, but despite these limitations I would argue that one possible interpretation of the material could be that teachers’ involvement in architectural design and performance was both encouraged and absorbed.

Cooperation between architects and educators in designing and constructing school spaces and other learning environ-

132 Risbroskolans arkiv, Skolbygge om och tillbyggnad I (planering, lokalbehov), Risbroskolan, Konferens angående Risbroskolans om- och tillbyggnad, 76-02-17.
133 Risbroskolans arkiv, Skolbygge om och tillbyggnad I (planering, lokalbehov), Risbroskolan, Högstadiets utbyggnad, Konferensdag 76-02-18.
134 Burke and Grosvenor (2008), 116.
ments has, as previous research shows, never been a matter of course. Communication problems and lack of collaborative spirit is discussed in Alexander Koutamanis and Yolanda Majewski-Steijns’ article “An Architectural View of the Classroom”. Even if most of the architects are, as the authors argue, “well-intentioned professionals,” it is also true that:

On the other hand, architects can often be accused of playing to the gallery, i.e. primarily focusing on and serving architectural debates such as superiority of modernism over historicism or the design and construction of form such as blobs, so as to impress their peers and improve their standing. In such debates architects may use client requirements and ambitions as justification of their choices [...].

But it is also true that, “At different times, teachers, advisers, architects and designers have realized their unity of purpose in designing schools to fit needs of children and the wider society”. The school in this study was renovated and rebuilt during the 1980s, partly as a result of changes in both educational environment and pedagogical and didactic thinking that occurred during the 1970s. The 1970s was a decade when experimentation with new teaching methods and innovation within the so-called “progressive teaching” ideology was dominant and this progressive thinking is, to some extent, noticeable even in the material that I have analysed. Both teachers and politicians discussed educational and pedagogical changes with an eye to a future that should be met with adequate changes in the design of the school building.

But progressive teaching ideology and changes in pedagogical and didactic thinking do not seem to have played a role in the final classroom design in the case of Risbroskolan, which turned out rather classical in the end, with rectangular rooms and benches arranged in straight rows. While it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions, previous research has argued

that teachers can be quite conservative when it comes to adapting new teaching strategies. Burke and Grosvenor write:

Schools, however they are designed, are inhabited spaces, and although there were exceptions, most teachers were ill-prepared for working in radically changed environments and their initial training and preparation for a lifetime of professional service did not seriously consider the matter of material conditions of the spaces they would occupy.

Conclusion

In “Educational Change and Dutch Classroom Photographs: A Qualitative Analysis,” Sjaak Braster writes: “Images can support stories that are told by written documents, but can they be used as primary sources that tell us things that written or oral testimonies cannot? We think they can”. Working with visual material is a research process that might not always result in a new and radically different perspective, but consistent methodologically and analytically appropriate use can certainly generate new and important meanings and highlight new approaches. In my analysis, the use of an image combined with other material has created a new understanding and representation of knowledge that, I would argue, would not otherwise be possible.

The written documents in the form of minutes of meetings, which outlined the numerous discussions and debates among politicians and pedagogues about rebuilding Risbroskolan, provided important insight into how ideas were formed and developed. The visual material – photographs and schematics – proved to contain not only different aspects and new forms of knowledge about classroom organisation, but also new analytical perspectives regarding the issue of learning spaces. A comprehensive interpretation and analysis of the refurbishment of Risbroskolan in the 1970s and 1980s would be quite different.

138 Comber and Wall (2001), 100.
139 Burke and Grosvenor (2008), 152.
(and sorely deficient) without the “visual dimension”. Only by viewing and comparing the suggestions and schematics made by teachers with those of the architects was it possible to illustrate how visions and policy goals were transformed into concrete plans. Only this particular material made it possible to see and draw conclusions about possible cooperation and communication between the teachers at the Risbroskolan and the architects who turned the blueprints into buildings.