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DESIGN MATTERS

Montessori School Art Barn Stores Human Potential

By Jeffrey Stein

MARIA MONTESSORI DESCRIBED THE SPACE required for early childhood education as a “prepared environment.” Montessori was Italy’s first female physician. Her work treating children through the University of Rome into the early 1900s led her to develop an educational method that allowed children to realize their potentials physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

A prepared environment is simply one that is designed to be a stimulating place in which children can learn step-by-step to take responsibility for their own educational explorations. In this sort of controlled learning situation, children spontaneously choose materials and challenges embedded in exercises provided by the teacher – the “keeper” of the environment. As they absorb knowledge from their designed surroundings and their focused activities within them, children learn to gauge their own progress and thus become their own teachers.

Montessori’s work came to be known as the Montessori method. It has spawned hundreds of schools throughout the United States and thousands more in almost every country on earth. In Massachusetts there are some 70 Montessori schools. One of the most interesting of these is the Montessori Community School, with 230 children, on the South Shore at 46 Watch Hill Drive in Scituate.

Donna Milani Luther, head of school at MCS, refers to the artist Corita Kent’s idea of “scaffolding” when she explains Montessori education. Kent, like Montessori, imagined that as children climb educational scaffolding, “taking larger steps and asking bigger questions, they build themselves a whole new building – a self – that can stand on its own once the scaffolding is removed.” That is the metaphor that Milani Luther used early on to discuss the school’s new addition with its designers, the Boston firm Moskow Architects.

That addition serves as a multi-function space for music, theatre, movement, sports and community assemblies. It’s an “Art Barn”

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A circular stairway in the new Art Barn addition to the Montessori Community School in Scituate, designed by Moskow Architects, is among a number of dramatic and flexible spatial elements that will help teachers create a prepared learning environment.



that was just completed during the past school year. Keith Moskow's design for it is a kind of scaffold on which can be placed understanding and activities – not to mention banners, ropes and wall hangings – that transform the building into something unimposing, something its child clients can make their own.

Moskow's own children were enrolled at this school several years ago. Thus, he came to the project with a keen sense of the requirements for its 6,250 square feet of space. The architect understood that this building needed to be quiet on its exterior and feel at home in Sci-

tuatate. It needed to provide a subtle background to the rest of its hillside Montessori campus. It needed to defer somewhat to the rest of its residential neighborhood as well, especially since one of the uphill neighbors has a "view easement" across the Montessori property to the ocean a mile away. The Art Barn had to adhere to a tight budget and be efficient both to construct and to maintain over years of life. And it needed to be barn-like, with a bare-bones interior that would allow for untold possibilities in terms of creating a prepared learning environment.

Plain Wrapper

The Art Barn was designed by Moskow with input at every step from the Montessori community. It contains many of those possibilities within a wrapper that does not boast of them. The building has a plain exterior, though with lots of windows, its crisp geometry clad in cedar shakes that give it a rather "homey" feeling. And with much of its mass pushed into its hillside site, the Art Barn's perceived bulk is lessened. This act has also reduced both the heating and cooling load on the building due to the constant temperature of the earth that surrounds it. The community's original notion, that it be timber-framed like a traditional barn, was cost-prohibitive. Yet the desire to expose its structure so all could understand how the building holds itself up was a strong one. Moskow's solution was to frame the building with a lightweight steel structure, which can

be seen doing its work throughout the interior. Wooden wall and ceiling surfaces have been very carefully crafted in how they meet steel structural elements to give those elements the courtesy they are due. And, of course, the steel structure works to remind its users of the scaffold that underlies their education.

Inside, Moskow has made much of a series of required vertical circulation elements, a circular stair, a one-story elevator (the entire building is quite accessible) and a rectangular stair. In raw space that is enlivened by sunlight streaming through skylights, much the way light streams through roof openings in a real barn, these elements stand like sentinels – creatures of exaggerated scale that inhabit the building. They are focal points in the room, shrouded in wooden garments. The wood is applied to them with a variety of degrees of openness, so there is mystery, fun and excitement in using them. The elevator becomes a balcony for a Shakespeare play; the stair tower a choir loft. Children – and adults – appear, disappear and re-appear as they climb the circular stair: a prepared environment.

"Does it expand human possibility?" That is the question Stanford Anderson, longtime head of MIT's school of architecture, poses of building design. That was Maria Montessori's requirement, too. It is a condition well met in this Scituate school that carries on her work. ■

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