

## **Dwelling in the space of Windsor House School: expanding the imagination of what is possible.**

The Cloverley site building was not built to be Windsor House School. It is a typical boxy 1970's Canadian public building widely recognizable as a school. However the space, as dwelled in by Windsor House, would likely not be widely recognizable as a school. Windsor House occupies this standard school building in distinctive, seemingly chaotic, ways; as a result much of the embedded curriculum of schooling has been altered. At Windsor House mobility, authority and governance interconnect to create a space intended towards diffusing authority and promoting self-regulation, this fosters shifted expectations about institutional space.

The ideological framework shaping the processes at this publicly funded democratic free school centers on ideas of academic non-coercion, parent participation, and participatory democracy. This paper explores the theory and practice involved in the use of space at Windsor House School. It is important to explore both the implicit and explicit lessons in considering how Windsor House uses this standard school building to reshape the lessons of the space because it serves as a reminder that standard school space is malleable rather than inevitable and because it can expand the imagination of what is possible.

### Space

Fundamentally this work is predicated on the idea that dwelling is a politicized activity with embedded lessons that link to ideology and pedagogy. The concept of space used is informed by feminist geographies; it refers to physical and conceptual structures as well as social organization. In this way, the space of Windsor House School is understood to include the physical building, the social use and conventions of dwelling in that building, the social concepts of belonging and exclusion, as well as what the school symbolizes and what is imagined as possible within that space.

Like all cultural production, imaginings of space emerge through shared meaning. The school building is a strong cultural symbol, imbued with meaning and expectations of particular human activities (Fain, 2004). This semiotic meaning is established through a process of cultural production, not because it is intrinsic to the structure. As Stuart Hall states: “meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced” (1997, p.24). The meaning of space is constructed, it is a product of practice that is not fixed (Hall, 1997) but rather continually being negotiated, contested and affirmed (Matthews, 1997). There is a reciprocal relation of creation between the production and the producers; while people produce cultural meaning, culture shapes what people produce. As a result often the possibility that space is malleable is forgotten as socially constructed meanings become so normative they are assumed to be natural and inevitable (Hall, 1997) restricting the imagination to the limits of what already exists.

Dwelling is the way one occupies, consumes, and produces space. Loretta Lees (2001) looks at the “embodied practices through which architecture is lived” (p. 53) and suggests that the meaning of place changes according to the interaction of the dwellers with the structure. As such dwelling is “a politicized practice through which social identities, environments and their interrelations are performed and transformed” (Lees, 2001, p. 56). This means that altering dwelling in the space alters the cultural meaning, and the embedded curriculum of the place. This potential to alter the meaning of place through social practices is achieved through what Lees terms “creative consumption” (2001, p. 72).

The idea of creative consumption of space focuses on “the ways that the built environment is shaped and given meaning through the active and embodied practices by which it is produced, appropriated and inhabited” (Lees, 2001, p. 56). Because the people consuming the space are actively shaping meanings of that space, the space cannot be thought of as fixed or essential. Instead, space is a result of an interrelated practice of production and consumption. Lees argues “a consideration of social practices enables us to appreciate the embodiment of gestures of emancipation within the formal imagery of a building” (Lees, 2001, p. 75).

Spaces are both constructed by, and play an important part of shaping, social norms and socializing people within them. They have socio-cultural and political meaning; inhabitants are implicated in making these meanings by virtue of being part of the space. It is necessary to engage with spaces as constructions in need of perpetual and simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction. This is the work of this project.

### Methodology

Ethnography is a social science research strategy focused on “making the implicit explicit” (Stack, 2002) through the “recording of human behavior in cultural terms” (Wolcott as quoted in Creswell, 1998, p. 39). Although this project does not have the breadth or depth to be a full ethnography, it is guided by ethnographic motivations and uses the ethnographic strategies of participant observation, observant participation, guided tours, discussions, reviewing field-based documents, and the creation and interpretation of fieldnotes. Guided by Lees (2001) I took the position that looking at the inhabitation of space for relationships between built environments and social practices necessitates the ethnographic researcher’s active and practical engagement with that space.

The epistemology of this work is informed by Donna Haraway’s web of situated knowledges; this means I approached this work with a respect that subjects have independent humours and knowledges that I as researcher can only partially glimpse. Drawing further from Haraway, as well as Paulo Freire who raises concerns about closing oneself into “circles of certainty” (1999, p. 20), I do not claim to present an objective ‘real’ analysis, or to eliminate accountability by proposing that all knowledge claims are of equal validity. Rather the claims of knowledge I assert here are “tuned to resonance, not dichotomy” (Haraway, 1991, p. 194).

I author this paper from a feminist, sociological position that advocates for radical pedagogy and position myself as a sympathetic outsider to the space of Windsor House School. I work from the assumptions that power constitutes all dynamics and that interpersonal and structural dynamics inform one another; hegemonic power functions through, but is not limited

to, aspects of 'gender,' 'sexuality,' 'ability,' age, 'race', culture, and space; and in any critical engagement it is necessary to tease out dynamics of power.

Permission to access the school was granted through the director of the school, the district superintendent, UBC ethics, and the Windsor House school council. I conducted forty-four hours of fieldwork in the spring of 2004 in one to five hour durations. I participated in both informal and formal activities. At all times I was working to understand and engage with the space by the norms of the school.

### The School

Since it began in 1971 Windsor House has occupied a number of different buildings. At the time of this fieldwork it had occupied the Cloverley site for eleven years and was facing a forced move. The school operates with 8.1 teaching positions and approximately 175 students, some of which combine their time with homeschooling. Windsor House officially offers kindergarten through grade 10, however some students stay beyond grade 10 and some younger children spend time in the school with their parents. Slightly over half of the students travel from outside of the district; most of these come from neighbouring Vancouver, however some commute even further distances. Parents are requested to participate in the school; they offer classes and activities, and are active in the administrative work, maintenance and organization of the space.

A person approaching the school building would see the entrance to the building, a slope of green space on the edge of the busy parking lot at the front of the school, and a path leading through the green space around to the side and back of the building. Following the path one finds a large blackberry bramble complete with student built paths and forts, a woodchip playground area with a variety of standard play equipment, a naturalized and well stewarded forest which feels very far away from anywhere and has a path through its woods on which one will likely find ropes hanging from trees and signs of tea parties. The back of the building has a sports field and a wide concrete area with painted games markers. Beyond the back of the property is a city park

that has tennis courts, a playground and more green space. When school is in session there are adults and students coming and going from the property as well as people clustered in large and small groups engaged in a variety of activities throughout the property. Usually there is a great deal of running around, and shouting as well as many quiet activities.

Walking into the school, one will pass through the gathering of, often loud, teenagers who typically occupy the benches on the front porch. Crossing the threshold one sees down the central hallway out to the matching set of doors at the opposite end of the hall. Almost all rooms connect to this central hall; as a result the hall has become the most active space in the school. It will almost always be full, loud, and have lots of movement, leaving a strong impression of chaos. Much of the administrative paperwork is in the entrance area. It is here where everyone entering or leaving the building must sign in and out,<sup>1</sup> where school notices will be posted, newsletters picked up, and where the regularly scheduled activities and classes are posted. The central hall has seven large classrooms, four small classrooms and nine little office rooms that attach to it. Additionally, there is a second smaller hall that has the administration offices, gym, band room, storage, dark room and another large classroom.

As people are not required to spend time in any one place in the school the rooms are themed around activities. Some of the rooms are: the library, set up with lots of little quiet nooks and small workspaces. The Milky Way, which has a kitchen area, many tables and chairs, and separate spaces made out of bookshelves to create play areas. The Big Muscle Room (BMR) is a large carpeted room that has a little loft in the corner and only large pillows and blocks for furnishings—this is a room for being loud and rambunctious. The Multimedia Room is a small room with the video editing capable computers. The Temple of the Flying Pig is where council meetings occur, it has a big oval table in the centre of the room and the unlocked file cabinet

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<sup>1</sup> This is done on hanging clipboards with each person's name and blank spaces for visitors. This monitors who is in the building; it is a negotiation between the administrative needs to know, and the membership needs for autonomous movement.

containing students' judicial council<sup>2</sup> records. The Unofficial Russian Embassy is a medium sized room used mostly by teenaged boys to play magic cards or other games. The Ocean's Eye is a little room used predominantly by pre-teen girls.

Walking through the school on any given day, there will be a lot going on. Almost always there will be a small energetic person hunting for someone to sponsor them in the BMR. There will be groups of people roaming; there will be students and parents sitting on desks, doing stuff with paper, working on computers. People will be reading or playing games. Inevitably there will be some loud imagination game going on somewhere and a meeting in process. While it does happen, it is relatively rare to see a large group of people involved in a synchronized activity. Many things give the impression that something non-standard is going on in this building, some of these things are: age groups mixing; lots of adults; children supervising other children, calm spaces of children raising their hands to vote; kids who appear to be doing nothing; the absence of desks; and the gigantic number of notices that seem to be posted everywhere.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

There is a great deal of theory and history informing the practice of dwelling at Windsor House. The word 'free' in free school covers a wide territory of meaning. Most predominantly it implies a freedom from the fears, harms, and coercions of schooling. Central to this is the freedom to think one's own thoughts and form one's own ideals free from anonymous or manipulative authority. To realize this, free schools are structured without prescriptive curriculum, mandatory classes, testing, grades, or performance assessments. Freedom of association and collaboration across ages, and across the boundaries of school and community are also advocated. A central division in the theorizing of free schools is whether or not freedom is understood as an individualistic or collectivist concept. Some understand freedom as something an individual strives for in terms of their personal comfort and psychology. Others understand that one cannot be free as long as oppression exists and see freedom as both a personal and

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<sup>2</sup> See *Learning and Living from the Space* for more information on judicial council.

collectively political journey. Both of these paradigms are at play at Windsor House. Democracy, in this context, refers to a strong, direct, or participatory democracy in which all members have ample opportunity to exercise a certainty of influence over the conditions that impact their life. At Windsor House, this process involves one person, one vote in a context where children and youth are the majority.

Free democratic schools connect to a long history of radical pedagogy which include the modern school movement, John Holt's call to unschooling, Paulo Freire's revolutionary critical pedagogy, folk educational endeavors such as Highlander and freedom summer, and A.S. Neill's self-named "free school" Summerhill, which was heavily influenced by psychology and intended to be the school built to fit the child. What differentiates free democratic schooling from other educational alternatives are the commitments to deschooling and the revolutionary potential of participatory democracy.

#### Living and Learning from the Space

The spaces at Windsor House are largely structured to minimize relationships of dependence and optimize self-regulation. This is a transformation of what Ivan Illich named as the strongest of schooled lessons—that of learning dependency and passivity (1971). Many physical aspects are organized to promote using the space as self-regulating agents; these include unmediated access to much of the supplies and bureaucratic processes and reducing the omnipresence of surveillance.

A significant part of how dependence is disrupted is through the creation of small spaces. This can be seen in student access to rooms intended for office spaces, arranging furniture and building lofts to create little spaces within big rooms, and by allowing children to construct and occupy small places such as the forts in the blackberry brambles or the little "room" created under the desk in the main office. These spaces allow students alone time, space to feel removed from direct surveillance, and room to get out of the ruckus. They also allow opportunities to be loud and obnoxious without disturbing others as for example the rambunctious girl who regularly shuts

herself up in a small room to dance to loud music. Facilitating independent access to small spaces is connected to the idea that children who have opportunities to control themselves consequently learn how to do so; it allows students an opportunity to experience being trusted to regulate themselves. Additionally, the act of appropriating and making a space one's own can engender a sense of ownership and responsibility to that space. This use of small spaces works to deflect the panoptical imprint that generally accompanies standard school buildings.

Another aspect of structuring the space toward self-regulation is reducing dependence on teachers to organize activities or classes. The majority of the activities at Windsor House occur separately from scheduled activity and students spearhead much of it; unreserved space accommodates this. This arrangement fosters a disruption of who traditionally has authority around knowledge production in a school; it interrupts the schooled lessons that learning is the product of teaching and professionalism (Holt, 1982), and that one must be dependant on authority for action to occur (Illich, 1971). Significantly, it is not mandatory that students attend classes, and they may move in and out of the classes while they are in session.

The organization of resources is likewise done with an agenda of being directly accessible in order to reduce dependence. For example Windsor House has a great history of theater productions and has accumulated an impressive collection of props and costumes. These are organized in boxes in the theater storage room, clearly marked on accessible shelving. The room has a mirror and staging area for students to play in. It also has a sign out sheet so that any member of the community may sign out these supplies. This can be done directly, without seeking the approval of anyone in charge. The majority of supplies are arranged like this. It is trusted that members will take responsibility for them; it is expected that all members will work together to foster this.

Chris Mercogliano, writing of a school similar to Windsor House states it this way: "our first and foremost goal is to help children learn how to manage themselves and structure their own experience" (2003, p. 12). This agenda of self-regulation rests on the presumption "that each

and every individual is best able to define their own interests, needs and desires” (Hern, 2003, p. 140) and that “children who are genuinely safe are those who are able to make thoughtful, responsible, independent decisions” (Hern, 1997, p. 155). One of the most impacting conversations I had at Windsor House was with its founder Helen Hughes. She said that people at this school learn the realization that it is their own life they are living and so they better figure out how to enjoy it (Field memory, June 23, 04). Helen said how she repeatedly witnessed people come into the school, wander around, appear lost and then slowly come to realize that it their life to direct and begin to be able to enact their life in a manner they find fulfilling. This is the process of coming to self-regulate; it means losing dependency on the school or teacher and learning to structure one’s own life. While at first glance this could seem a highly indulgent and self-centred approach, what happens in the space of Windsor House is that the lessons of self-regulation do not occur in isolation, but rather in a context of an engaged membership of people sharing and negotiating space collaboratively. Thus, in this context, the lessons of self-regulation are accountable to the diversity of people and needs present and deemed significant; this holds strong potential to learn social justice through practice.

Mobility facilitates the process of self-regulation. I observed one twelve-year-old student “Tea,” who had recently come to Windsor House from a place of deep emotional crisis. She was often distraught, angry and uncertain how to occupy herself. Over time I saw her begin to make points of connection. Some of how she did this was to spend time with the primary children. When I would see her in that context, she would be smiling, younger children were excited to have her play with them, and she seemed confident. This was in stark contrast to her behaviour with students her same age or older, where she would talk to herself and otherwise exhibit awkward behaviour. I witnessed her move in between places of comfort and authority (with the younger children) and fear and awkwardness (with her peer group). Chris Mercogliano (2003) suggests that being in the low pressure environment of the younger kids allows children who have difficulty socializing and controlling themselves to slowly be more at ease with themselves and

others. The mobility to go between these spaces allowed Tea to draw strength from one space to bring to the other, fostering her ability to regulate herself.

A key purpose of the high levels of mobility is negotiating claims of authority and reducing the strength of authoritarianism. As Matt Hern (2003) argues, all relationships hold multiple layers of authority; it is essential that people learn to distinguish and evaluate for themselves claims of authority. Traditional approaches to schooling typically conflate being respectful with being good, meek, and rule obeying. When students are in a position where they are restricted from responding to claims of authority based on how they perceive its value, the result is that all authority, by default, becomes authoritarian. Windsor House works to structure its self so that members have a relationship to authority where they are able to try out, question, refuse and embrace claims of authority and people in positions of authority. Some of the ways it does this are by: creating a space where members have access to multiple sources of authority and where they may refuse some and seek out alternatives; reducing student's dependency on teacher approval; by positioning each member as a respected authority over themselves and the conditions of their life; and by building a space where members are collaborative participants in shaping that space.

Members of Windsor House can have multiple roles and levels of responsibility in the school based on where they are and what responsibilities they take on there. They may sponsor someone for part of the day in the library, only to be sponsored themselves outside later that same day. They may vote on a peer's consequence in judicial council then spend time alone in a small room for another part of the day. Independent mobility between spaces and activities is central to facilitating the flux in roles of authority so its types and layers can begin to be felt.

Core findings of this project are about the rule structure. These findings stem from questions about what people think they can and cannot do, and how they know that. Part of the expression of democracy at Windsor House is that rules emerge from an expressed need or desire and are made by those they govern. The central meeting at which this occurs is the school

council, which meets four days a week.<sup>3</sup> The role of council is to discuss, debate and pass resolutions. Passed resolutions become the rules of the schools. The majority of resolutions are about negotiating mobility and use of space, they center on access to rooms, coming and going from the property, care for equipment, monitoring safety, and managing levels of annoyance.

Any member may submit a resolution for consideration at council. Passed resolutions are included in the weekly newsletter, and may be posted in the particular area they apply to. Otherwise no official record is maintained. The school is absolutely lousy with pieces of paper announcing what can and cannot be done in what places. While at first glance these postings appear to be dominating and highly restrictive, in practice they are rarely referred to and enforced sparingly.

The second half of the school council meeting is devoted to judicial council (JC). Disputes that cannot be settled in the moment are written up as complaints and sent to JC where they are taken up, discussed and consequences or warnings about behaviour are issued. Any member of Windsor House can write a complaint on another member of the school. Complaints do not necessarily go against a known or stated rule. There is an understanding that when someone is doing something annoying or unsafe, they have to stop when asked, if they do not a complaint will be threatened, and then issued. A primary finding in this study is that rules do not exist for their own sake but are understood to be for the purpose of mediating conflict and safety; if there is no conflict, or concern for safety then there is no need to make or enforce rules.

It appears that most people do not consciously think about rules as factors that guide their behaviour. Other than a few as 'super-rules' such as you are not allowed to exclude people, most people say they do not know the rules, and they say they are comfortable with that. Rules are used as a tool to assist in achieving a sense of resolution. The resolutions are codifications of the process. The process of negotiating through the conflicts and difficulties is what is important.

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<sup>3</sup> Some rooms have their own councils that determine the specifics for that space. Room councils must follow all of the resolutions passed by school council.

This is evident in the observation that often rules are neither evoked nor remembered. This is why Helen Hughes says “the curriculum of the school is making rules; once the rule has been made, it has had its use” (Fieldnote, June 23, 04).

There is a great deal of ambiguity involved in many of the rules. An example is the front porch rule of *no swearing when anyone who may be offended is within hearing distance*. This cannot be evoked unequivocally; people have to figure out for themselves, in relation with others, how to interpret it. This fosters discussion, and relationships of negotiation. Most negotiations take place outside of councils; people in the act of negotiating are implicated in the relations that rule them. Dorothy Smith (1987) argues that this sort of engagement brings people into line with ruling ideas. In the space of Windsor House, because of the constant need to negotiate space and rules, participatory democracy is saturated through the space; members enact it even if they do not attend council. In this way the venues themselves are insufficient to realize participatory democracy. The space of Windsor House is set up so that these negotiations are the core of the curriculum. Members are occupied by regulating themselves in relation, and with accountability to, those they share space with. Freire reminds us that for freedom to develop and mature it has to negotiate with other freedoms (2001). As such, the greater diversity of the voices within the collaborative democratic project, the better the freedom.

Windsor House has worked to build a context where while it is the adults who do much of the monitoring, students can use the system to monitor-back and counter balance adult claims of authority. They are supported in leaving, issuing complaints, and otherwise challenging adult claims to authority without academic consequence. With multiple age groups all sharing space, student are constantly under the vision of older and younger student who have and use the weight of bringing disciplinary measures on one another. Typical relationships between age and authority are being challenged.

One of the more surprising elements that emerged through this study is the observation that collectivity and individualism are interdependent; collectivity allows for the individualism,

and individualism allows for the collectivity; both are essential to the collaborative project of participatory democracy. The collective process of democracy is reliant on participants feeling capable and inspired to contribute dissenting or yet unconsidered components to the dialogue; participatory democracy does not work if all members follow a leader. This act requires a strong sense of autonomy. Likewise this individualism is fostered through collectivity. Because of the collective use, negotiation, monitoring, supervision, and responsibility for the school space independent freedoms are possible. If only a few were responsible for the actions and care of the space, the level of access and mobility would be reduced. The implication of this observation of interdependences is that one cannot be diminished without diminishing the other. If strong collaborative voices are desired, strong autonomy must be respected.

Windsor House has a flexible system that has built itself with a consideration of how voices that are not usually heard (children and youth) can be supported to exercise real power over the conditions of their lives and hold those who exert authority over them to a high level of public accountability. The system is accessible, and used, yet it does not dominate peoples actions allowing for high levels of self-regulation and autonomy. This is a politically hopeful model for envisioning structure: as systems that have the potential to foster diversity by bolstering power for those who typically do not have access to it. And as systems that can be evoked to interrogate and counterbalance typical relationships of power, and respect the relationship between autonomy and collaboration.

### Conclusion

Through the act of dwelling at Windsor House participants learn shifted expectations about institutional space; expectations that spaces be malleable to the needs of the people who inhabit them, that the people impacted by decisions ought to be able to participate in making them; expectations that authority in institutions can be challenged, and that one ought to be able to independently meet ones needs within institutions.

I recommend looking to Windsor House as a source of information and inspiration to challenge our imaginations of what is seen as malleable or inevitable in the spaces we occupy. Windsor House prompts important questions about how rules and mobility may work to foster or compromise autonomy, self-regulation, and collaboration. What lessons around authoritarianism, authority and dependence may be embedded in the spaces we occupy and what we wish to create the shared meaning of school to be. This space serves as a reminder that aspects of schooling commonly assumed to be inevitable, are not. It is an important story, and it is an important space, because it can expand our imagination of what may be possible when it comes to how we occupy our school buildings, negotiate spatial relations, and what lessons may be embedded in our practices.

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