EDITORIAL
Memory, Loss, and Neighborhood Schools

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I edited this issue of Studies in Art Education as an estimated 50 million students enrolled in public schools across the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Although my son and daughter are no longer school age, I remember every year at this time their growing nostalgia for the summer just past and nervous anticipation about what the new school year would bring. Significant to my children’s experience of school was the building in which their education occurred. The most architecturally distinctive of their schools was Edison Elementary School, a small historic neighborhood school located in east Eugene, Oregon and built in 1926. With high ceilings, large windows and decorative brickwork, it embodied the sense of civic pride associated with public schools built during that period of time in Eugene.

Edison Elementary School continues to be a source of civic pride, enrolling children from throughout the larger school district and offering numerous community-based programs during after-school hours. It is not unusual to encounter parents of current students who also attended Edison. Continuity tied to a shared place contributes to understanding and appreciating belonging to a community.

Across the United States, historic neighborhood schools, like Edison Elementary, are being deserted, neglected, and demolished. Historic school buildings are among the 11 most endangered places targeted for preservation by the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) (2007). The Trust identifies “deferred maintenance, consolidation, development pressure, inadequate government funding, policies promoting the construction of mega schools in outlying locations, and an often misplaced belief in the superiority of new school construction” as contributing factors. Fortunately, the NTHP has been able to persuade the Council of Educational Facilities Planners International (CEFPI) to issue guidelines that encourage communities to save, renovate, and modernize historic school buildings. These guidelines are available on the CEFPI website at http://shop.cefpi.org/product.esiml?PID=106. Historic school buildings are being renovated to accommodate computer technology, people with disabilities, efficient climate control systems, safety measures, appropriate lighting, and improved classroom sizes.
The NTHP has also issued a series of papers arguing for the importance of historic school buildings to community and education. These papers are available free of charge on the website at: http://www.nationaltrust.org/.

Schools are one place where children, youth, and adults come together to find historical, social, and cultural commonality. This was the experience of my family at Edison Elementary School in Eugene. Of course, schools are also places where the rifts and tensions that exist within community are evidenced. Consider, for example, what has been occurring in Jena, Louisiana. Protestors gathered there on September 20, 2007 to decry the application of the unequal justice by school administrators to African American students (who faced criminal charges) and white students (who received school suspensions) in the local high school.

School buildings are part of larger social and cultural landscapes. Historic school buildings are particularly important because they embody the way that a community changes over time. In this regard, schools contribute to what Heath (2001) refers to as “the patina of place” or “cultural weathering.” Cultural weathering, according to Heath is the “record of incremental change left on the built environment by its inhabitants” (p. xix). The importance of cultural weathering is that it concretizes the “cumulative human adjustments that occur in response to an array of social, economic, and technological forces” (p. 185).

Experiencing cultural weathering allows people to witness the distinctions between communities and provide communities with character and a sense of place. Lima, Ohio lost much of its patina when, beginning in the year 2000, the local school board, in response to the Ohio School Facilities Commission Rebuild Ohio program, demolished 12 school buildings erected between the early 20th century to the period just after World War II (M. Huffman, personal communication, December 12, 2007). Given that the district is now made up of 9 schools, the significance and the history lost through the demolition of this number of schools is profound.

In Spring 2005, Mike Huffman, an alum of the Lima City Schools and then Director of Arts and Magnet Programs, along with the 12 art teachers in the district, decided to confront this loss by asking students in grades 3-12 to consider the question “How does a community deal with the sense of loss associated with the disappearance of neighborhood schools?” Six hundred students walked the sites where these 12 school buildings once stood, collected oral histories from the former students of these schools, and/or examined artifacts such as yearbooks and memorabilia. Students also considered the concept of “memorialization” through
the study of Greek and Etruscan column memorials as well as the shrines that are placed along the roadside following a fatal automobile accident (M. Huffman, personal communication, December 12, 2007).

From this research the “Shrines for Lost Schools” project emerged. Using sonotubes (12 ft. by 8 in.), students erected 12 column shrines from late May to June 16, 2006 throughout Lima. Students used a variety of materials and strategies in their memorials. Memorials were both representational and conceptual. One memorial was covered with shoes representing the presence of those who walked through a school over the course of its history. Another was covered with material that mirrored the faces of those encountering it, and another with the signs and symbols associated with a particular building.

Notes, flowers, and memorabilia marked visits to the shrines by the public. Visitors were invited to write thoughts and memories on the surface of the columns. In October 2006, the columns were exhibited in ArtSpace/Lima. On the exhibit’s opening evening, visitors were invited to record on videotape their memories of the schools that were demolished.

I had the opportunity to experience the “Shrines for Lost Schools” exhibit at ArtSpace/Lima during its opening reception. I also had the opportunity to talk at length with Mike Huffman, Lima City Schools’ art teachers, and students about the project. Together this group of Lima, Ohio residents, representing multiple generations, willingly embraced difficult issues associated with the politics of preservation, the economics of development, differences between history and memory, and who is able to contribute to historical narratives. The question of what students remember about schooling became very real to the teachers. Students learned from long-time residents what is remembered in the space of a lifetime. Together, students and teachers assisted the residents of Lima with the grief experienced when public schools are demolished and the ways in which important places that are no longer in existence continue to shape thought, emotion, and action.
Questions linger. What happens to communities associated with public spaces that are demolished? Where do those communities go? How can art educators and students work within community to document cultural weathering and assist city planners and policy makers sustain community hubs? What are the ways that art education curricula encourages art educators and students working within coalitions to prevent the demolition of historic public places and neighborhoods?

References


Editor’s Note
Thank you to Elizabeth Hoffman for comments associated with an earlier draft of this editorial.