

# CHILEAN SCHOOL FAÇADES: AESTHETIC MATRIXES, EDUCATIONAL INSIGHTS

For the past two decades, Chile has been focusing a significant amount of economic and human resources on the improvement of its educational system. For example: the school day was extended; primary and secondary curricula are regularly reviewed and updated; students are subject to national standardized tests; and a vast teacher education reform is underway which will include mandatory periodic certification of pedagogic and disciplinary knowledge.

Whereas these initiatives have granted a slow but sustained improvement in comparative international tests like PISA<sup>1</sup> and TIMSS,<sup>2</sup> there are some domains of Chilean education that remain neglected. In particular, the relationship between everyday aesthetics and education is barely considered. This relationship is significant because it would enrich the meaning of 'quality' in education by raising the issue of how everyday aesthetic choices, practices and orientations may 'influence, and sometimes determine, our attitudes and actions' (Saito, 2007: 55). From this perspective, the way in which the school environment is designed and perceived (its forms, spaces, materiality, colours, visual images, objects) is linked with key educational aspects such as school climate, sense of belonging, institutional aims and the community's ethos, amongst other considerations.

## VISUAL ESSAY

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## KEY WORDS

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Visual Culture • Chile • Education

## EVERYDAY AESTHETICS OF SCHOOLS

Historic concern about school environments has been limited to complying with basic physical conditions such as air quality, acoustics, ventilation and insulation (Higgins, 2005). However, as philosophical aesthetics began to consider the phenomena of the everyday (Berleant, 2010; Leddy, 2012; Marini, 2014), it is possible to extend an aesthetic discussion to a consideration of a school's building and milieu (Pineau, 2013).

Everyday aesthetics is concerned with aspects of daily life 'marked by widely shared routines and patterns' that may seem invisible or 'negative' at first glance, but demand attention (Dowling, 2010) due to their capacity to express diverse symbolic relationships. From this stance, Mandoki (2007: 177–182) posits the notion of 'school aesthetic matrixes' as criteria that organize sensitivity, which allow naming and interpreting school realities as 'home-like', 'factory-like', 'jail', 'hospital', to suggest just a few.

Consequently, everyday school aesthetics may contribute to improving the quality of education not only from an environmental perspective (Errázuriz, 2015) but also by highlighting the complex interchange between students, teachers and administrators with their institutional and neighbourhood surroundings (Haapala, 2005). If 'space educates' (Lippman, 2010) and 'the walls speak' (Uline and Tschannen-Moran, 2007) then there are no decisions about the school environment – no matter how sustainable, renowned or beautiful – that could be justified without taking into consideration the voice of the school community (Saito, 2007).

## VISUAL CULTURE OF SCHOOLS

The 'visual culture of schools' is made up of 'the physical meanings of the school's surroundings' (Prosser, 2007) as well as its 'visualities' or 'practices of looking beyond the facts we see' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001).

From this viewpoint, Margolis (1999) has contributed to the field by demonstrating the existence of a 'visible yet hidden curriculum' – the school's building, its infrastructure, design, colour, etc. – which is interpretatively subsumed in 'forms of decoration or didactic instruments' that prevent contesting 'their political, ideological and/or social motivations' (Bryson, 1988: 94). This is paradoxical. In an age with far more visual stimuli than capacities to discuss them (Mirzoeff, 1999), one would expect the school to promote instances of analysis and improvement of its own image vis-à-vis the prevailing visual culture.

Accordingly, this visual essay aims to challenge the 'immediate comprehension' or transparency of the so-called 'school's symbolic arsenal' (Smith, 2008: 108), by calling into question the visibility of the school's façade. If we surpass the obvious claim that the front constitutes a necessary building attribute, we might be able to account for the complexity between looking, context and intersubjective interactions and, therefore, the relationship between the façade and education at large.

## SCHOOL FAÇADES

From the viewpoint of a school's everyday aesthetics and visual culture, its façade is meaningful for at least two reasons: on the one hand, the front of the building constitutes the first image the community (students, teachers, administrators, parents) perceives of the school as an institution. In fact, the front often has crucial identification data such as names, insignia and flags that act both as 'face' and 'doorway' to the entire school.

On the other hand, the façade always carries a symbolic load; it is never neutral although it may be invisible in one way or another. Eventually, it may act as the school's 'self-portrait' or 'mask': for students, it may convey the very first impressions or insights into what education is all about; for parents, it could be the access point to a life plan for their children; for the surrounding community, it could embody a 'classical or romantic' (Lawton, 1975) or emergent view of school education. Therefore, attempting to decode school façades may open up questions such as:

- A. What does the façade reveal about the school?
- B. What kind of 'educational model' (vision, paradigm, project) emerges or is manifested through the façade? What are the dominant features that the school front portrays (freedom, discipline, order, disorder, dullness, discovery, etc.)?
- C. To what extent does the façade express, reinforce, contradict, take advantage of or ignore the neighbourhood's environmental and/or socio-economic conditions? In what sense does the façade contribute to the community's environment (heritage, cultural and local development, aesthetic value, sustainability)?



**1** Rural school, 162 students: located in Trapén, approximately 600 inhabitants, between Puerto Varas and Puerto Montt in the south of Chile, about 552 miles south from Santiago, the country's capital.  
© Photograph: Josefina Buschmann.

Beyond the national flag in the center and the public school shield to the right, this image echoes the 19th-century beginnings of public education in Chile that used to take place in family homes (Egaña, 2000). Even today, this rural primary school's façade looks very much like the typical basic Chilean house module that is popular in the region and has been built throughout the country. This implies something about the educational experience in the area because school space depends on a 'house matrix' that was conceived more as a living environment than a formal teaching and learning one. In other words, considering materiality, size and room distribution, there are almost no differences between the places where students live and where they study.

Furthermore, the southern context is manifested in the durable pine tree panels, the triangular roof that offers a solution to the rainy weather and the green colour that blends the building with its natural surroundings. On the roof of the school and of the adjacent building to the right, the zinc pipes indicate that wood heating is still an integral part of everyday life, making the inner space comfortable, but leaving an enduring smell of smoke during the zone's long-lasting winters.



2

Rural artistic school, 186 students: Moluco, approximately 590 inhabitants, in the Greater Island of Chiloé, Pacific Ocean, 800 miles south from Santiago. Built in 2008.  
© Photograph: Josefina Buschmann.

When compared with Figure 1, the main vertical structure of this 2008 rural artistic school<sup>3</sup> demonstrates how the 'house matrix' persists. However, its traditional symbolic load associated with refuge, meeting place and community life metamorphoses into a 'big house' that congregates children from the local and nearby vicinities, expanding the original reference from a single family unit into the area's centre. From a design standpoint, the building integrates with the countryside through the green colour of the roof, gutters and window frames, the wooden fences and second floor sidings, and the general reference to farms, barns or stables. Emerging out of the basic structure, the right of the image shows a silo-like extension that serves as an entrance to the school and playground, and overlooks the landscape. The large window curtains and heating pipes account for the efforts to keep such a generous interior space warm and habitable.



**3** Urban school, 196 students: Los Alceres, 3000 inhabitants, near Puerto Montt city, approximately 600 miles south from Santiago. © Photograph: Josefina Buschmann.

This school seems to be located 'in the middle of nowhere'. As seen behind the neighbouring wall on the left of the image, the surroundings are alive with vegetation, yet the entrance parking lot and/or playground looks depressed. The impression of social and aesthetic inequality is so intense that one wonders about the experience that the local community has developed concerning learning, environment and ownership. The fact that the school is pompously named after one of the great 18th-century European composers<sup>4</sup> only adds to the tension between the proposed aims of educational quality and the actual faces – or masks – of everyday education. In addition, even though there seems to be a faint resemblance to the house matrix, the diversity of hybrid additions dissolves this school's visual identity somewhat into the style of a western favela. Where the façades in Figures 1 and 2 conveyed a fair sense of belonging, this façade looks uncomfortably similar to a warehouse or depot. In fact, it is difficult to conclude where this school's façade begins and ends, or what it is supposed to stand for.



4

Urban school, 616 students: city of Castro,  
30,000 inhabitants, Chiloé Archipelago,  
745 miles south from Santiago.  
© Photograph: Josefina Buschmann.

Located in a working-class area, this stadium-like school constitutes a landmark, perhaps related to a promise of social mobility. Taking advantage of its street corner location, it rises up from the street, allowing occupants to overlook the neighbourhood from above through windows on the upper floors. Nevertheless, it remains approachable through the smaller scale modules to the left of the image that constitute the main entrance.

Two key features convey this school's positive appropriation of its visual identity (something that it is not easy to see in Figure 3). On the one hand, the colours blue and yellow, together with the aluminium windows are used to unify the main building with the new structures on the left-hand side. This provides a dynamic stamp to a construction that risked remaining monolithic. On the other hand, the external mural paintings that frame the ascending entrance to the edifice demonstrate a fluid dialogue between school and juvenile culture. Although humid weather represents a risk to outdoor painting, the complementary colours of those interventions and the school's main building seem to refer to a school that is concerned about the image it projects in the local community.



5

Urban school, 1020 students: Puerto Montt, 153,000 inhabitants, approximately 600 miles south from Santiago.

© Photograph: Josefina Buschmann.

Two different eras and ways of conceiving of education come together in this façade. On the one hand, it shows a classical Chilean public school, built at the beginning of the 1960s. It responds to the central government policy of that time, to build safe, concrete-based schools right after the Valdivia earthquake in 1960.<sup>5</sup> These buildings were replicated throughout the country, each consisting of a series of rectangular modules that converge on a longitudinal axis, resembling the functional design of a factory. When compared to Figures 1 and 2, there are resonances of the house matrix in the module further to the left, which has nonetheless transmuted into a large council flat.

On the other hand, the mural on the right depicting a Mapuche woman demonstrates how, since the return to Democracy in 1990, indigenous claims have gained prominence and made an impact on the region. One can only begin to imagine the many different exchanges, ideas and community discussions involved in the production process of this mural whose colours project into the entire façade unifying architecture and civic signs, in a similar manner to that in Figure 4.



**6** Semi-rural school, 360 students: Frutillar, 9,100 inhabitants, 50 miles north from Puerto Montt.  
© Photograph: Josefina Buschmann.

New architectural approaches to school buildings are emerging throughout Chile as a consequence of the current educational reform. This particularly eclectic structure resembles train or fire stations, combining materials such as metal, concrete, wood, aluminium and glass. Its façade is visually lighter and more transparent than Figure 5, something that may reflect a nation that has progressively opened up to the voice of local communities, thus becoming more democratically educated. In fact, this is the first school in the region that includes Mapudungún, the Mapuche language, in the daily curriculum.

In retrospect, when compared with Figure 1, the transformation is evident; only the school shield and flagpole remain. But even the fact that Figure 6 has two flagpoles speaks of a contemporary conception of education that has reached beyond the immediate locality and/or that has begun considering more than state-based guidelines in developing educational projects.



## CONCLUSIONS

There are two main approaches framing the similarities and contrasts between the school façades illustrated in Figures 1 to 6. On the one hand, there is a clear sense of progression. When taking into consideration aspects such as school building sizes and designs (spaces, colours, green areas, among other features), the increase in material and human resources is evident.

On the other hand, there are marked signs of evolution. The original 'family house' aesthetic matrix in Figure 1 has diversified into alternative models such as 'stadiums and stations', Figures 4 and 6, respectively. This is not only significant from a visual and architectural standpoint, but also from an educational one: changes in schools' façades, spaces, forms, materials and colours seem to account for changes in educational proposals.

However, although the last decades of educational work in Chile demonstrate some improvements concerning school design and architecture, it is our belief that the relation between schools' everyday aesthetics and the achievement of educational quality is not addressed in the public and political discussion regarding how 21st-century education should look and be seen.

Schools teach us about diverse things that are significant for life but they do not seem to acknowledge their own existence as an aesthetic and visual event. This neglect or oversight risks educating less sensitive students and citizens in regard to their aesthetic, architectural, social and cultural environment. More importantly, in times when global ecosystems demand more than 'financially sustainable approaches', schools' ability – and thereby the children's – to deal with their very own environment may be decisive in opening up new and healthier possibilities for generations to come.

1. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
2. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), developed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).
3. In Chile, artistic schools allocate more curricular time to the teaching and learning of Visual Art, Music, Drama and Dance.
4. Following the guidelines of our institutional Research Ethics Board (REB), we must protect the identity of all schools and individuals that participated in this research.
5. The Great Chilean earthquake of Sunday, 22 May 1960 was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded, rating 9.5 on the moment magnitude scale, used by seismologists to measure the size of earthquakes in terms of the energy released.

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