

	The Nation
	Column : The Observer
	Headline : Why do schools have such boring architecture ?
	Date : 20 January 2012



THE OBSERVER

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Why do schools have such boring architecture?

School is a place every child goes to from a certain age. It is a place where we spend at least 12 years of our life, if we are lucky enough to access proper education. But for some less fortunate ones, it could be a place where they spend their limited 6 or 9 years to make the best out of these opportunities.

School is made up of software and hardware. I am not an education expert so I won't touch on the software part of our education system but since I am someone in the real-estate business I think my opinion may be worthwhile if I touch on the hardware part. When we look at the actual physical entity of schools we have here in Thailand, compared to other types of public buildings, it seems to me that the schools where we currently send our children to get institutionalised have remained stagnant and unchanged in terms of design.

Have we ever wondered why we have deemed schools unworthy of investment in better design, materials, functions etc? I have to ask myself sometimes if the institution that is supposed to inspire our children is itself lacking inspiration. Isn't it worth investing to make the schools more beautiful, more creative, more inspiring, and more functional?

It is startling for me when you carefully look at the buildings, environment, and amount of time children spend each day in school. I would feel like spending my entire juvenile years in prison. You go to school in the morning. Then you sing the national anthem at 8am, followed by lessons in confining classrooms filled with lifeless desks and chairs. You have lunch in a very bland, uninspiring, and sometimes stuffy canteen. Then it's time back to the classroom again. After school, you can run around chasing balls with friends in untended field or worn out basketball courts. What a life for the young ones?

As a parent myself, the school environment should be taken into account, even given top priority, when we consider sending our children to one. I would want to see the school, where my children are going to spend their formative years, has an environment that feels less like a prison and more like a building that has been carefully designed and invested in. I am looking for a place that inspires comfort and respect for my children, a space that grooms them into a quality citizen.

But, unfortunately, I think an attitude still prevails among governmental officials and policy-makers, and even private school operators that spending money on architectural design of schools is an unnecessary luxury. This doesn't apply only to Thailand. There have been cases too in the West where budgets have been scrapped and initiatives have been called off like what happened in the UK where they cancelled the previous government's initiative of rebuilding more than 700 schools nationwide.

However, in some countries the tide is turning. I have seen in magazines that schools in countries like Japan, Finland, Australia, and even Colombia have embraced the idea that there is a correlation between good school design and good education statistics. Gone is the stacked-up building that consists of multiple classrooms on each floor. Gone is the focus on cost-cutting practice to make the school just usable. These are replaced with fresh ideas by a new generation of architects who understand the concept that good school architecture is a necessary investment, both human and financial.

Even in Japan, a country with a very competitive education system and where parents care more about finding a well-regarded kindergarten with a strong curriculum, some kindergartens and nursery schools have started to think more seriously about architecture. If we want to encourage our children to explore, let's not just tell them to do so but integrate some hidden spaces in the design for them to explore and feel that it belongs to them.

One of the most important implications that I think any agency and the school owners must consider when briefing and commissioning architects to design is the correlation between design theme and its psychological impact on the children. Basically, if we want our children to respect and value what is being taught and instructed at school, school design should make them feel valued and respected. I am sure that any professional architect can help translate anything conceptual into something tangible only if we intend it to be so.