



The Art Teacher or the Architect?



Fall was always Gwendolyn's favorite time of year and as she looked down on the world from 30,000 feet on her plane trip to Boston for a school design conference, she savored the joys she was going to experience in gorgeous New England: ever changing color and light which never failed to stir her soul. Some of her earliest poetry revolved around visits to her grandmother in a Boston suburb, with symmetry, love, joy and harmony all stirred by trips between giant trees whose leaves every day seemed to shimmer between green, then red, ochre, brown and finally startling lush yellows before wafting towards the ground to feed their home for yet another season. She was ever fascinated by the flowing patterns that evolved in the world below and her imagination ran wild with images of the humans who lived there.

Thirty miles away and 10,000 feet lower, in another plane also headed for Boston, Helmut sat erect in his seat frowning through his glasses at the world. A senior architect for a world-renowned company specializing in school design, he was known throughout the company as the "order man." He insisted that everything be in its place, just so. One of his quirks was his insistence that no human images appear in representational drawings of "his" schools, as they distracted from the stark organizational lines and functions of the buildings. His secret desire was an assignment where he could completely disregard the human element, and one of his earliest comforting dreams was of rows and rows of stark, tall concrete buildings in a virtual wasteland with nary a person in sight. If only the world could be preprocessed into the neat patterns he saw beneath the plane! Unfortunately, most of the attendees at the school design conference he was heading to would disagree with him, he knew. He sighed, and irately his attention returned to the little girl in the seat in front of him who insisted on playing peek-a-boo with the stern, smartly dressed, bespectacled man behind her. Why don't they have marked, sealed off sections for these young brats, he thought, to protect the real business travelers like himself; now, that was a design he could not help but heartily approve of.

Much later at the conference, as fate would have it, Helmut and Gwendolyn were in the same breakout session on the subject of *Educational Excellence in Infrastructure: Light, Air, Acoustics and Modern HVAC, Part 11*. Helmut could not help but be fascinated by the fiery-eyed red-haired woman who sat opposite him. With her colorful, fanciful clothing he knew she could not be an engineer or an architect, especially since every time the conversation turned to air volumes or change cycles or envelope insulation qualities, even he could see her anger increase more and more. Finally, she slammed her folder on the table, startling everyone, and said in a penetrating voice: "I don't think any of you have ever been inside a classroom in 30 years, so how in the hell do you expect to design one? Nothing we have talked about has the slightest relevance to supporting educational excellence! You might as well be designing buildings for robots, not humans!"

Terry, a mechanical engineer from Chicago, looked her straight in the eyes and said: "Well, you know, that's not a bad idea. Eighty percent of the problems I see with mechanical systems are caused by the clowns in schools who simply are not qualified or trained to operate them." At which Gwen took the binder and threw it across the table, startling Terry so much he and his chair fell over backwards while she stalked out of the room. Helmut watched all this with fascination and then followed her.

"Gwen, Gwen," he cried, "wait up, please!" She turned and looked at him. "And what the hell do you want?" As he slammed into a wall, Helmut stopped and said humbly, "You had a lot of great ideas in there. Really, I truly thought they were great, but, Gwen, I didn't understand half of what you said. Please, I need to understand." She looked at him sideways and said, "Exactly what do you do?" Helmut replied, "I am an architect who designs schools and my firm works really closely with many state agencies that mandate how schools are designed and built."



Gwen looked at him again and over raised eyebrows said “When was the last time you were in a classroom that you thought was really **great**?” Again stopped in his tracks, Helmut rattled off the names of many of his contracts, but Gwen stopped him again. “No, **no!** Not one you designed, but one you spent time in that you thought was **really** great and it made your heart sing just to be there. A room that had light in the morning like summer rain, had really great places to study and made you feel like: Wow! this is a really great place to be!” “But, Gwen,” Helmut looked at her with genuine puzzlement all over his face, “they are **only** classrooms. What on earth are you talking about?”

She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him down to sit at the nearest table, rummaged in her carry bag and slammed some books and a notepad and pen down on the table and said now describe the room we are in, write it down right now. He looked at her and said, “you mean here?” “Yes,” she replied, “here and now. You’re an architect; open your eyes and archi or whatever it is you claim to do!” He looked back at her in bemusement for a moment, and then began to look around the room as he systematically studied the foyer they were in. Then he proceeded to write in his neat small tidy draftsman like script.

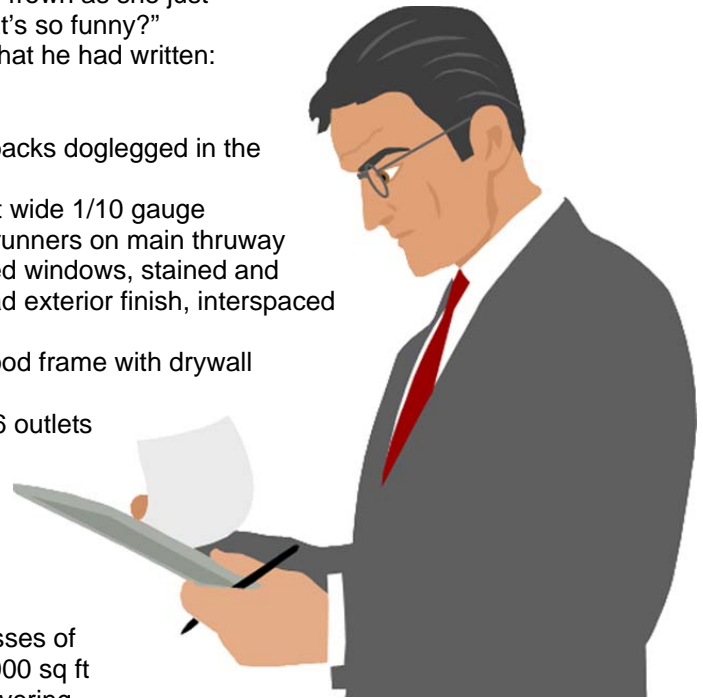
Silence reigned for many minutes and then eventually he passed his finished work across the table to her. She smiled as she read his work and then burst out laughing shaking her head all the time. Then she passed the pad back to him and said “Now do the same exercise, but describe the best classroom you have ever designed and built.” Puzzled, he cast his memory back and proceeded to do just that. Many minutes had passed and the evening shadows started to appear outside and, eventually, beaming he handed it over to her only to frown as she just laughed and laughed shaking her head again. “What’s so funny?” he stuttered and she proceeded to read him back what he had written:

Hotel Foyer and conference entryway

1. Approx 80' x 40'/3200 sq ft with 10' x 6' setbacks doglegged in the interior wall
2. Polished brown granite tile floor with 15-foot wide 1/10 gauge 36 ounce continuous filament nylon carpet runners on main thruway
3. 8' x 4' commercial single-hung double-glazed windows, stained and varnished wood interior finish, aluminum clad exterior finish, interspaced every 10 ft on exterior wall
4. Exterior walls masonry and interior walls wood frame with drywall cover and wooden trim
5. Central HVAC forced air with 4 inlets and 16 outlets
6. Direct/indirect recessed 2' x 4' commercial fluorescent light fixtures supplemented by 18" diameter alabaster wall sconces with incandescent lights.

Multipurpose Classroom

1. 50' x 40' with divider walls to create two classes of 1000 sq ft each or multi-purpose room of 2000 sq ft
2. Heavy duty stain resistant industrial floor covering
3. Sealed 4' x 4' commercial awning windows stained and varnished wood interior finish, aluminum clad exterior finish (two pair in each classroom)
4. Breeze block walls in all exterior and interior load bearing walls
5. Central HVAC and heating, dual inlets and outlets in each section
6. High-performance T8 fluorescent pendant lamps with high-efficiency ballasts



“OK,” Helmut said, “What’s wrong with that? It’s exactly what it is?”

“Exactly,” Gwen said, “That’s what’s wrong with it: it’s what it **is**, not what it does or is supposed to do.” With another shake of that mop of fiery red hair, Gwen grabbed the pad and pencil and proceeded to write, occasionally glancing around, then tilting her head up to look at nothing as she searched her memory, then thumbing through one of the books on the table for reference.

Curious, Helmut looked at the books as she wrote. Two of them were small, densely printed handbooks wrapped in simple yellow covers, titled *The Timeless Way Of Building* and *A Pattern Language*. There were two paperbacks: a thick one a bright cover called split vertically by a colored band emblazoned with a big, bold title, *Design Like You Give A Damn*, and a thinner one that looked like a workbook or manual entitled *The Language of School Design: Design Patterns for 21st Century Schools*. Curious, he started to leaf through them. Many minutes later (by now night had really arrived), Gwen slammed the notepad down on the table. Helmut jumped in surprise, as he had been totally absorbed in the books. He started to read what she had written:

Where we are now—the warm welcome

The hotel foyer is also used as the main side entrance to the convention and meeting area. It has a grandiose early Grecian-styled entryway with statues of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, and Hermes, god of travelers and commerce, at either side of the main doorway. Its enlarged portico, that narrows slightly as it joins the main foyer, both subtly reinforces the impression of grandeur and gently guides the welcome visitor into the main hall of the conference area, designed to allow visitors to interact before smoothly dispersing into individual conference rooms. At all times, the message of the design says: "You are a welcome guest." Niches carved out along the sides of the main hall become places of relaxation and rest, with *chaises longues*, Regency-styled high backed chairs and glass-topped tables, so that guests can either conduct semi-private meetings or just decompress for a moment as they read or simply observe the passing parade. The rear walls of the niches are papered with *trompe l'œil* wallpaper with renderings of bookshelves that appear to recede into a warmly lit library, adding a



studious touch to the inset. I have seen several guests actually run their hands across the paper as if they were touching the backs of real books. Sidelights opening onto the hotel gardens admit daylight to compliment the interior lighting and provide glimpses of a panorama of views of the ever-changing exterior scenery that, especially in the fall, adds a lush colorful background to the grand interior facade. The floor is finished with areas of dark-toned stone and shining maple wood that provide subtle cues for traffic flow, with lush green deep pile carpets to demarcate areas of rest from areas of movement. Wainscoting of a darker wood flows around the perimeter as another smooth rendering to denote the room's functions. The light that streams in early in the morning looks like summer rain and it is

fascinating just to watch the few dust motes as they float between the sunbeams. The entire area says: "Be at peace, rest, you are secure, all is well here." It's a delightful place and I am glad to be in it and so are the many people that I have seen here. I will carry fond memories of this delightful place with me when I leave.

Joyful learning center

The best place I ever taught in was a bright open room of irregular shape, with high airy ceilings. The main part of the room glowed gently with warm pastel colors. The clean lines of curved, moveable tables and brightly-cushioned task chairs added visual interest and variety. Different colors of bright resilient flooring designated a group learning/teaching space, a messy work/lab space and the entry/mud space. To one side of the rectangular main space, a curved wall bulged out to enclose a carpeted quiet area for reading or reflecting, filled with soft seating, low tables and gentle lighting. The quiet area was painted a soothing darker shade of blue, which was our pod identifier, and the lowered ceiling and embracing walls emphasized its intimacy and coziness. One wall, the moveable wall that opened up to the class next door for group teaching, had a

whiteboard and drop-down screen flanked with ample tackboards on which student work was displayed in a constant, rotating exhibit. Two walls of carefully angled large operable windows, one with a glass door to the outside classroom shared by our suite, and solar tubes let in ample daylight, filling the room with cheerful diffused natural light. In the project and quiet areas, adjustable task lighting was available to supplement the natural light, and in the main group area suspended lighting with light shelves provided supplemental light that mimicked the soft, diffused brightness of daylight when necessary. We entered the classroom from the pod common area through a glass door flanked by a large shop window that looked out on the common area, so that students could be reminded of the sheltering community to which they belonged. The air was always fresh and clean-smelling, thanks to natural air circulation patterns that brought in a gentle but constant flow of fresh air. My students were always happy to come to school and soon after they arrived, I could see them visibly relax and slowly become as cheerful as that room, making it easy to engage them in any learning activity. One of things I liked best about that room was the quality of the sound, the way we could work quietly in groups and not disturb each other, nor be disturbed by outside noise, while if I wanted the whole class' attention, I could stand in front of the whiteboard or any focal area and they could all hear me. I had everything I needed in that room: collaborative space, project space, break-out space, space for a little physical activity even if we couldn't go outdoors. And the views to the outdoors, the trees and shrubs and bird feeders, were soothing and stimulating at the same time. Oh, I loved that room!

"Two different views, same space!" she snapped, but then her attitude softened as she saw tears rolling down Helmut's cheeks. He looked at her in amazement and said, "Oh, gosh, now I get it, now I **get it**. This is just not in our architectural vocabulary. This is concept design for the soul!"

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So who would you rather have direct the design of **your** school, the art teacher or the architect?