

COMMENTARY

Schools of suitable magnificence

By Jerry Cammarata

Children can learn anywhere.

And they have.

They have learned in the shadows of majestic cathedrals in the earliest public schools in Europe. They have learned huddled together at the edge of a field in the "hedge schools" of persecuted Ireland. They have been taught in one-room red schoolhouses, and on vast campuses of great universities. They have listened with wonder on the knees of their parents, and listened in rows at the huge orphanages of the last century. Socrates taught them in the *agora*, the marketplace of Athens. Plato taught in an olive grove named Akademe, the namesake of every academy of today. Aristotle taught while he strolled along in a colonnade called the Lyceum.

In every case, those children, those young adults, learned.

In our day, our youngsters have the luxury of going to schools, centralized learning facilities, where they are required neither to hide from persecution, nor struggle with the distractions of shouting merchants. We provide them with temples in which to learn, shrines and treasuries where we house our most precious riches and teach them about our greatest achievements.

We are now at a time in our city's and our borough's history where there is much talk about the quantity of our classroom space, and this is fine. To be sure, we are woefully short of space on Staten Island, and every inch of ground we can wrest from budgetary constraint is needed.

However, we have rarely discussed the quality of that space.

It is time that we, as an educating community (it takes a whole borough to raise a child) began looking at our future spaces for learning with an eye not simply to how much there will be, but also how well that space will itself impart to our young people the messages we want to send to them.

It is time we built schools of suitable magnificence.

Imagine a young person approaching his or her school build-

ing, and compare the difference in signals sent by one of our modern schools and, say, the old Curtis High School. One is a great brick or cement block, nearly windowless, stark, utilitarian, forbidding, like some bunker awaiting disaster. But the other, the older building, is a cathedral of learning, detailed workmanship echoing the styles of the first and greatest English-speaking universities, Oxford and Cambridge.

The new building sends the message that school is, in some way, akin to prison: there are walls to keep you in, halls that seem designed for ease of disinfection, and nearly featureless common spaces. One feels almost that one is in some subterranean world, and the sense of being in a standard-issue government building is overwhelming.

Other districts around the nation have recognized the importance of architecture in setting the learning environment. The West Des Moines Community Schools in Iowa are in the midst of a herculean study of their facilities and the impact on learning created by architecture. All over, new schools are being designed with libraries and media centers — not tucked away beyond endless halls, but as open center courts around which classroom space is planned. "Pod" and modular systems are being developed, where middle school students, for instance, are grouped into thematic "houses" within a school, and clusters of classrooms are amalgamated around architectural reinforcements of the thematic motifs.

In some cases, architects are simply thinking logically about the needs of a school, which is after all a unique institution. One genius actually placed a double counter in the administration office of a school; one at a height comfortable for adults, and the other at just the right level for young children!

In other cases, bold new ideas are being explored: common spaces, hallways and the like, being designed for use as re-thought-out instructional areas;

classrooms designed not as boxes, but to encourage student participation; classrooms and open spaces integrally linked to accommodate new teaching techniques.

For too long it has been too much of a struggle to get the City of New York to build simply functional buildings, ones where the heating systems work properly, where there is no asbestos, where the elevators for handicapped young people work, where cafeterias are designed to hold more than just a fraction of the student population.

Now it is time we put real thought into our buildings, creating what architects now call "entry sequences," a series of architectural messages that are communicated to the person who enters the building, and makes his or her way to a classroom; giving students a sense of the majesty of what they are undertaking every day; providing architectural cues to the connections between the different learning modes they utilize.

It was never enough to simply provide a certain amount of floor space to teachers, and then fill that space with children. We seem to have forgotten that. Sometimes the strongest signals are communicated by the building itself.

Our children can indeed learn anywhere, but in our own time, given the bountiful resources of our affluent culture, why should they have to learn anywhere but in an environment most conducive to learning, that itself transmits the lessons we wish them to learn, that not only makes learning easier, but itself becomes part of the learning experience?

Our children too should learn in the shadows of cathedrals, cathedrals of learning we built for them. They should have the advantage of magnificent campuses. With careful planning, we can provide all of this with the very best of the intimacy of the one-room schoolhouse, and the advantage of the highest of high-tech facilities.

We may not be able to reproduce the environment of a parent's knee for each child, but we can come much closer than we have to giving them the best of academic homes.