

Book Review: A Life in Education and Architecture: Mary Beaumont Medd

by Blog Admin

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*This book seeks to provide a detailed exploration of the relationships between individual architects, educators, artists and designers that laid the foundation and shaped the approach to designing new school buildings in postwar Britain. It explores the life and work of Mary Medd, one of the most important modernist architects of the 20th century. **Kerwin Datu** finds that this biography falls short in some places but is historically valuable when we compare Medd's ideas with the current state of British education.*



A Life in Education and Architecture: Mary Beaumont Medd. Catherine Burke. Ashgate. December 2012.

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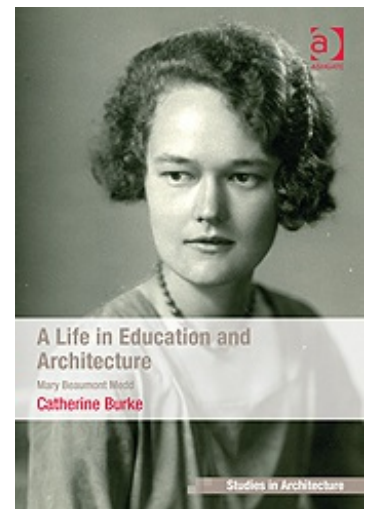
Mary Beaumont Medd (née Crowley; 1907 – 2005) was a Bradford-born architect who devoted her career to the reform and planning of primary, secondary and nursery schools in the postwar years, one of a number of progressive figures in the field of British education during this period. She is the subject of a biography by [Catherine Burke](#), senior lecturer in history of education at the University of Cambridge.

Medd's father was Ralph Henry Crowley, a medical officer heavily involved in child health and welfare and a pioneer of the [open air schools movement](#) in England, and both father and daughter shared the habit of travelling widely and regularly to study the most innovative learning environments being planned throughout northern Europe and the US.

Her own work aimed to lead school planning away from the rows and rows of desks of the Victorian era to an approach centred on the needs and perceptions of children. Through a succession of school plans, and a number of *Building Bulletins* that disseminated the ideas in each, the classroom was reconstituted as a family of heterogeneous spaces, each supporting different types of learning activities. The intention was to encourage teachers to embrace recent innovations in pedagogy that focused on the formation of the well-rounded child.

Two drawings entitled "Ingredients of Planning" published in 1971 illustrate her approach. The classroom may have a "general work area" consisting of relatively traditional desks and chairs in the centre, but it is surrounded by other spaces each with distinct architectural characters: the "home base", a place of "mutual trust" and furnished "with curtains, pictures, flowers, a carpet, window seat, possibly a bed to rest on"; an "enclosed room" either for "quiet activities such as reading or story telling or for making a noise such as music"; "particular bays" are architecturally more flexible but provide semi-enclosed task spaces for individuals and small groups; and a "covered area" ensures that every classroom comprises an outdoor space. The landscape surrounding the building should be provided with "sheltered gardens", "hard play areas", and "wild areas" to provide enough stimulus for inquisitive children.

After studying at the Architectural Association in London from 1936 – 1941, she pursued these interests first within the Hertfordshire Education Department, then at the Architects and Building Branch Development Group (A&BB) at the Ministry of Education, and in later years as an independent practising architect and international consultant. Most of this work was done together with her husband, architect David Medd (1917 – 2009).



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In *A Life in Education and Architecture*, Burke draws extensively from archival material at the Institute of Education, University of London, and from interviews conducted with Medd's husband after her death, and writes more in the idiom of an academic than a popular historian, using the detail to evidence her account rather than embellish it. Whether as a result of this idiomatic decision, or of the intimacy Burke established with her subject through the meetings with Medd's husband, or whatever else, a number of frustrating tendencies soon develop. Burke seems frequently distracted by trivial and sentimental anecdotes, such as the number of miles the Medds cycled on their honeymoon, or where they ate their meals when they were visiting schools in Stockholm, or which of them drove the rental car on a US tour. At the same time, Burke mentions only in passing the major debates taking place in education and in architecture throughout the postwar period which ought to have formed the backdrop to Medd's story, and into which Medd's story ought to have provided powerful insight. For example, Burke's account of how Medd finally left the Ministry of Education seems to place almost as much weight on petty office politics within the A&BB as on changing political attitudes towards progressivism during the 1970s. While both may be true, the latter is surely more salient for our understanding of the relationship between architecture and education.

The biography must also inevitably fall short as an architectural monograph, since this is the one discipline addressed in this book where Burke is writing as a layperson. Whereas an architectural historian brings a personal understanding of the dialectic between form and function, as well as knowledge of the currents of thought within the wider architectural profession, Burke is forced to take her sources' opinions (again often sentimental and biased) at their word, having no personal expertise with which to weigh them. So she seems too willing to report Medd's influence spreading throughout England and Northern Europe without being able to accurately delimit such reporting with knowledge of how much of Medd's philosophy was already shared by similar pioneers throughout the region, such as Walter Gropius, Jan Duiker, or Aldo van Eyck. Most of the floor plans of the schools, which for both architects and educators alike should be the centrepieces of the publication since they show more succinctly than any other method the implementation of Medd's pedagogical ideas, are published without detailed commentary, almost as if they were there merely to decorate the pages like any other photograph of smiling children.

It is also a great shame that Burke decided not to pursue at least one chapter on Medd's extensive international consulting to schools and foundations in contexts as diverse as Iran, Ethiopia, Fiji, Venezuela, El Salvador, Botswana, Oman, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Pakistan and Uganda, especially given that two whole chapters were devoted to the minutiae of her travels throughout the US and Northern Europe.

Burke is somewhat stronger when she compares Medd's ideas with the current state of British education—for example how contemporary paranoia about paedophilia make some of Medd's more closed and intimate spaces unusable, or how the pedagogical programme Medd promoted has been vindicated by children themselves in successive *Guardian* "Children's Manifesto" surveys, who express their ideal school in profoundly social and programmatic terms such as "a listening school" or "a respectful school", with a "chill-out room [...] and a quiet place inside at playtime", "chances for pupils to have quiet chats with teachers", and "opportunities for small group or private work". The perceptions of children are indeed instructive for architects and educators alike.

Kerwin Datu originally trained in architecture, in which he worked in Sydney, Paris and London, before completing the MSc in Urbanisation and Development at LSE. He is now pursuing a PhD on the role of the global city network in international economic development, focused on African cities. As Editor-in-chief of [The Global Urbanist](#), he receives and publishes essays and magazine articles on issues affecting urban development in cities around the world, and is always open to submissions from new contributors. [Read reviews by Kerwin.](#)