

Texas Architect

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Through a Child's Eyes

Designing schools for students remains the architect's most critical objective

IN this edition that spotlights architecture for education the wisdom of the late William W. Caudill, FAIA, is appropriate. Caudill, that indefatigable innovator, wrote a column in 1978 published in these pages titled "That Precious Tomato" in which he recounted a conversation with Richard Neutra, to whom Caudill had posed the question: How would he go about designing a school? "I would design it just as I would a tomato cannery," Neutra unhesitatingly replied. "My approach to designing a tomato cannery is first to passionately study the precious tomato—how it is grown, picked, brought in from the fields, cleaned, cooked, canned, packaged, and shipped. Most certainly I would want to study the process of preserving and reinforcing its God-given qualities and nature's endowment. The same would hold true in the design of a school. First I would study the tender, living, growing young humans—the most sensitive, precious goods on the planet. Then I would become intimately acquainted with the educative process to make sure we are readying and preparing them for shipment into our communities of tomorrow."

Recalling years later Neutra's astonishing profundity, Caudill stated: "That hit home. And hard. My obsession with self-contained classrooms, cross ventilation, team teaching, integrated subject matter, curriculum, building systems, age-level classroom grouping, schools within a school, sun controls, pods, and open plans seemed incidental. They were. They still are. These concepts—like fashion in men's shirts and ties, like ribbon windows and punched hole windows—come and go. But Mr. Neutra's tomato notion has never lost its truth—the student is the real client and is more important than educational or architectural concepts."

Substitute the concepts popular then with the buzzwords of today—the nebulous "sustainability" quickly comes to mind—and we still arrive at the truth of Neutra's tomato notion. However, after viewing many of the schools built recently in Texas, one might wonder if anybody factored the student into the equation. A closer look at a few of them begs the question: Who are today's schools designed for? The school board? The design awards jury? Fellow practitioners?

"My biggest concern with our profession is that we design for ourselves," says James Kirkpatrick, AIA, of Denton, who has the fortunate viewpoint of a second-time-around father. He already had reared a trio of daughters into young adulthood when, seven years ago, Cole came along. Now a third-grader at Jennings Elementary School, Cole is teaching her dad how to see again through a child's eyes. "You forget after 15 or 20 years," Kirkpatrick says. "It's human nature. The farther we get from things the more we forget about those things. But having a young one gets you back into their mindset to understand how they see the world." He wonders sometimes about the "factory approach" in school design. "Often you can't tell if it's a middle school or an elementary school," he says. "Our client, of course, is the school board but the child is the user." While governmental mandates determine much of school design and security is a top priority, Kirkpatrick says, architects must grasp every opportunity to create educational spaces that will engender interest in the children for their environments, not just their classrooms but in their world. "We're influencing an entire generation by designing the spaces we're putting them into."

In Brenham a new private pre-school (for ages six weeks to four years) designed by the local firm Upchurch Architects will certainly interest the infants and toddlers. Not quite complete, the Christ Lutheran Day School already has the adults speaking admiringly about its playful design and cheerful facades. Firm principal Thomas Hayne Upchurch, AIA, points to the 8 x 8-foot windows in each classroom as a critical feature. "It was real important to me to have windows as focal points, and exaggerating the size of the windows so what's going on outdoors becomes an extension of each classroom," he says. In other words, the large windows are intended to help the children understand their environment, whether inside or outside. "On



Christ Lutheran Day School, Brenham

the inside they have an idea of where they are, and on the outside they have the opportunity to connect as they approach the building." But it's not the windows that attract the most attention. It's the fanciful exterior, the bright palette that may best be described as childlike. "The kids are kind of giddy and the adults are kind of thankful," Upchurch says, adding that nothing else in Brenham comes close to the school's vivid exterior. "It was not intended to be an architectural statement. It was about color for the children. It was about the kids and about them identifying with the school and seeing colors they don't see on any other schools or on any other buildings."

STEPHEN SHARPE

TA Welcomes New Staff

Texas Architect has added to its masthead three individuals who each brings enthusiasm and skill to the magazine's staff.

Rachel Wyatt joins TA as associate editor, a position responsible for the graphic design. Rachel graduated last May from the UT Austin with a master's in visual communication. She takes over duties from Adam Fortner, who is now associate art director of Los Angeles-based *Western Interiors and Design*.

Linda Van Trinh became TA's associate publisher in September. A graduate of St. Edward's University in Austin with a bachelor's in communication, she manages the business operations. Linda takes over for Judey Dozeto, who now works with the public affairs office of Austin's mass transit authority Capital Metro.

Tammie Peschka is TA's new circulation manager. She adds those tasks to her work as TSA's receptionist/administrative assistant. Tammie brings a wealth of expertise in marketing and sales.