

Architecture

In Hingham, whimsy that works

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HINGHAM - Thanks to a creative young architect, the Old Colony School here has just been transformed from a box into a building as delightful and poetic as the children inside.

Weston Wright, the architect, accomplished his feat by waving the wand of good design. It's as if black-and-white Kansas has turned into Technicolor Oz. A white lump of a building, which resembled an abandoned gas station, has suddenly been transmuted into a magical multicolored storybook village.

Old Colony is a Montessori school. Maria Montessori was an Italian physician who invented a new kind of childhood education, based on the idea that kids should

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PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTON WRIGHT

Part of the new wing that symbolizes the "little red schoolhouse."

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He surrounded with interesting materials and then left pretty much alone to explore them.

She thought kids ought to have a place of their own, with furnishings scaled to kid size, a place where they could store their tools and possessions and take charge of their own lives the way adults do in grown-up houses. Wright makes architecture out of one of Montessori's own ideas. The Children's House would be a place where kids would be more than mere appendages in an adult world.

Attention to detail

Wright takes Montessori's "house" idea so literally you wonder at first if he isn't being too cute. Seen from outside, his school resembles a gifted 5-year-old's exaggerated crayon drawing of a house. It's like a face with a big mouth under a pointed, hat-like roof. But Wright isn't being cute. The school really works, inside and out, with careful attention to every detail — and all on a very modest budget.

What Wright has done is simple. He's added a new wing at one end of the old flat-roofed box of a building. The new wing has two parts. The big part is painted bright yellow and has a soaring curved roof. The small part is painted red and has a gabled roof and enormous windows and shutters. Lastly, Wright paints the old building green.

They're modest moves, but they work wonders. With three roof shapes instead of one, and three colors, too, the school suddenly reads as a humane little village instead of a single industrial shed. And because the little gabled cottage is painted barn red, it becomes an instant symbol of the "little red schoolhouse" of American rural legend. Those playfully huge windows and shutters make it seem even smaller than it is. They tell you this has got to be a place for kids.

Peacock in the forest

The whole thing works at the scale of the highway, too. The red cottage is placed a little bit forward from everything else, so that it becomes a billboard for the school. Old Colony is set back behind a thick swatch of trees. Driving by on Derby Street in the past, you didn't notice it at all. But now the bold colors and shapes catch your attention, as if you glimpsed a peacock deep in a forest.

Wright, whose office is in Quincy, likes the billboard look. "I wanted the architecture to say 'visual education' even seen from Derby Street," he says. "The school should boastfully acknowledge that children are here. It should be screaming about life, learning, fun, creativity."

He likes his shutters, too. "They're not flattened permanently against the wall like most shutters," he notes. "They stick out at right angles. They don't move, but you can see their shadows moving across the wall during the day. There's a big shadow at pickup time. It's a lesson about the sun. And I made them fat. I wanted fat solid permanent shapes, to create the feeling of a safe, secure, comfortable environment for the children."

Threshold to cross

Things are fat inside, too. Wright renovated the interior of the older part of the school by adding a thick blue arch at the entry. Passing through it, you feel a strong sense of penetration, of crossing a threshold into a new world. Beyond the arch are other new walls, one angled and painted green, another, more distant, curved and painted apricot. The green wall is the first thing you see as you come through the blue arch. It will become a little museum, displaying the kids' projects along with memorials to Maria Montessori.

Best of all, perhaps, is the interior of the new wing. Wright thinks kids' rooms should have high ceilings so grown-ups won't look, to the children, like giants. Maria Montessori believed classrooms should be spacious enough so each kid could have room to work privately, without being crowded by other children. The result of those two ideas is a high, wide volume of space, divided into two classrooms, beautifully daylit through a clerestory window that seems to blow the light, like wind, along a curving white ceiling that feels like a sail overhead. And then, in complete contrast to these generous spaces, you enter the "little red schoolhouse," a tiny 14-by-14-foot room, with those big windows that come all the way to the floor so even the smallest child can see out to the ground below and the purple trellis above.

"The little schoolhouse is a place to go by yourself for dreaming, for a quiet time," says Wright. "Or for gathering a small group in a more intimate setting."

The minus side

There are a few bugs in the new wing, as there are in most new buildings. The big volumes of the new classrooms are quite reverberant acoustically. They'd be excellent for a piano or a string quartet, but they're less than ideal for a group of noisy kids. Wright and the staff plan to tone them down with rugs and hanging quilts. You wonder, too, how durable will be those unprotected shutters and trellises in a New England climate. Another problem is good ideas that never got implemented, at least not yet. Wright still hopes to redo the dreary old main entrance, and the walk that leads to it, in a much livelier fashion.

Old Colony school is a remarkable example of how much an ingenious architect can accomplish with a few simple clear ideas.

"Most schools are little more than child repositories," says Wright. "They look like flexible storage boxes. There's a core of toilets and cubbies in the middle, and a ring of classrooms with movable partitions. We wanted something else. We wanted something more like a village, a cluster of houses."

"Children's houses."