

Shaping Space

Shaping Space is a programme designed for fifteen to sixteen year olds, but it can also be used for young children or for older students.

Starting with their own homes and communities, young people explore a range of social, environmental, technical and aesthetic issues related to architecture and the built environment.

They look at different types of buildings and towns, explore planning, design, materials, building technology, conservation and preservation in Ireland and in other societies and other ages.

They can get involved in design exercises, sketching, drawing, plans and models, field trips, surveys and seminars. If the potential for Cross-Curricular Connections is exploited students can produce art or craft work, photographs, film, poetry, music, essays, furniture, landscapes, prototypes, scientific, social or economic reports, public presentations and debates.

Shaping Space is carefully designed to meet the real needs of schools, teachers and students. The programme can be adjusted to suit the needs of individual schools and students, and its format ensures that any school can include a single module or a year-long course within the academic year.

Why 'Shaping Space'?

'Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space'

Mies van der Rohe. Architect.

Two beliefs underlie the RIAI's initiative in producing *"Shaping Space"*. The first is that good architecture and a good environment are more likely to be achieved where there is a well-informed public. The second is that, as citizens, we all need and are entitled to know how we can influence the quality of what gets built around us.

We often tend to think of architecture in terms of walls and roofs, of style and decoration. But what we actually live in are the spaces surrounded by these things. Even when we are outdoors we move about in spaces defined by buildings, walls, fences, roads and hedges. And the shape, size and organisation of the spaces we make reflect the needs - and the values - of the society we live in.

Space is not just a functional necessity. When we say that a house is 'spacious', we do not mean only that there is enough room to fit a family, its belongings and its activities. It is the quality as much as the quantity of the space that we respond to. A house feels really comfortable if the rooms are of pleasant proportions, there is plenty of light and the sun shines in. It may be difficult to define "pleasant proportions", but we know them when we see them. Our first reactions to a building are sensory and emotional - intellectual analysis comes later. If someone's heart lifts when they go into a cathedral, it is not because it was built in the year 'x', as part of a 'y' kind of settlement pattern, and has columns in the 'z' style. It is because the space soars, the structure is heroic and the light beautiful.

Of all the arts, architecture probably has the most immediate and inescapable impact on the everyday lives of all of us. And it is an art which straddles most aspects of human thought

and experience. Architects have been inspired by poetry, philosophy, scientific theories, psychology, paintings, technological breakthroughs, social needs, religion, aesthetics, geometry... Architecture presents endless possibilities for learning experiences which embody the philosophy of the Transition Year.

If '*Shaping Space*' helps give young people a stronger sense of what makes good architecture and of how they themselves can influence the quality of the built environment it will have succeeded in its aims.

Shaping Space: Background

In 1994 the RIAI decided to take a serious look at producing a package on architecture for use in schools. It had always been felt that if we wanted a public which had some understanding and appreciation of architecture we needed to start with the children.

By the 1990s the Irish education system had undergone a seismic shift. It was recognised that the arts were neglected, that scientific and technological education was inadequate. There was agreement on the need to encourage critical thinking, expressive and creative abilities, and awareness of national and European heritage and identity. The benefits of cross-curricular activities and interdisciplinary projects were accepted, together with the notion of the use of the environment as a "...an integrating curricular principle and a pedagogically effective teaching method."

The other big change was the invention of the 'Transition Year', an educational breathing space between the Junior and Leaving Certificate Programmes for fifteen/sixteen year olds. There is no fixed curriculum for the Transition Year, which presented a huge challenge to schools but created an opening for curriculum materials supplied from outside the secondary school system. Architecture, because of its scope, seemed to present endless possibilities for learning experiences which fitted the aims and philosophy of the Transition Year. It was the obvious place to start.

However, it was also evident that both teachers and pupils were under pressure, with tension between rising expectations and limited resources. It was clear that the involvement of people working in secondary school education was critical. No matter how interesting the material might be to architects, if it did not meet the real needs of the teacher at the chalk-face it would never be used and the whole venture would be futile.

The result was *Shaping Space*, written and illustrated by a team of architects and teachers and published in December 1997. A book of almost 300 pages of lesson plans, worksheets, projects and homework assignments, it is structured around three modules, "*My Home*", "*Neighbourhood, Village, Town City*" and "*Buildings through History*" and includes advice on surveying, drawing and model-making. It was designed so that a teacher who knows nothing about architecture at the outset can take on a *Shaping Space* module with confidence, and it encourages collaboration between teachers from different disciplines. Teachers of history or geography, art or construction studies, mathematics or music, science, languages and literature, home economics, social, environmental, business, computer or media studies will all find opportunities.

It had been the experience of the Department of Education that in schools where a Transition Year Programme had been running there were ripple effects up and down the school into the Junior and Leaving Certificate cycles. This is what has happened. Elements of *Shaping Space* are now used in primary schools, in Junior Cert and Leaving Cert Applied programmes. And

it is being used in some teacher training colleges, to give primary school teachers the vocabulary they need to address architectural issues in the classroom.

Shaping Space: Credits & Acknowledgements

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'My Home' cover photograph: Mountshannon Housing, Lough Derg, Co. Clare. Architects: Murray O'Laoire Associates. Photo: Michael Blake.

'Neighbourhood, Village, Town, City' cover photograph: College Green, Dublin. Photo: Peter Barrow.

'Buildings through History' cover photograph: Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, Dublin. Architect: Sir William Robertson. Photo: Office of Public Works.

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