AGRARIAN IDEALS IN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

In the United States, the school stands out as a building type attempting to coalesce American modernism and agrarianism. Stylistically rural schools built since the mid-twentieth century are typically modern, yet a few hint at representing an agrarian ideology that has persisted from Thomas Jefferson. Two case studies topically illustrate changing attitudes of agrarianism as found in school architecture over the last 75 years - Richard Neutra's unbuilt "School in the Neighborhood Center" (1944) and the Buckingham County Primary + Elementary School (2012) in Virginia by VMDO Architects. The former school appears at the transition from schools built for small towns to city suburbs while trying to preserve and embody aspects of a Jeffersonian agrarian society, a political orientation. The latter school design is a recent school project in a rural county expressing the qualities of the local land, an ecological orientation. Together, these schools suggest some possibilities and limits of associating agrarianism with architecture.

Keywords: Agrarianism, Schools, Richard Neutra, VMDO Architects

With a country that is as culturally, climatically, and socially diverse as the United States, architectural identity based on national and regional settings is tensive if not contradictory. Since the nation's founding, Americans have struggled to define both American architecture and the American citizen. One persistent interpretation is agrarianism, which is relatively obscure in academic scholarship but has nonetheless existed since the Early Republic era (1780s-1850s). As the name implies agrarianism refers to a primarily agricultural society in terms of economics and politics. It is an ideology that is reactionary to modernism if understood as technological advancement and industrialization. It is certainly anti-urban by encouraging people to leave cities and resettle on farms and in market towns. In other words, it defies what we would consider architecture, but it is latent in American architectural theory and frequently manifests in rural grade schools.

The school is an overlooked but exemplary building type associated with agrarian values in the United States, partly because of Jefferson's belief in an educated society as a safeguard for democracy and the US's predominately rural population until the twentieth century. During the nineteenth century, education reformers in the Northeast gave considerable attention to improving rural schools by including educational gardens and fixing dilapidated school buildings in order to dignify American villages (Downing, 1853; Barnard 1850). One hundred years later, once the American population concentrated around cities, idealized plans for American schools depicted buildings with a domestic scale in a landscaped site to ensure one's individuality in a rural-esque setting against the then perceived threat of Communism's urban socialism (Esenwein, 2016a). In both generalized instances, there is an analogy in envisioning the school building as the cultural centre of a small community nurturing American individuality and democracy in a natural setting that is either authentically agrarian or a representation of an agrarian community (i.e., the suburb).

The two case studies presented here are distant chronologically and stylistically, but are close topically. The first case study, by Richard Neutra, is a new school proposal, with a seemingly nostalgic idea. Neutra's description of the plan includes references to homesteaders and children growing up on farms, an agrarian vision which contradicts the reality of childhood in the post-war suburbs for which his schools were built. The second case study, by VMDO Architects, is one of the few recent rural school projects aimed at improving the dignity of a rural community, another agrarian vision, but ignored the decreasing population of the area as people move to larger cities. Both schools thus depict ideals of agrarianism, such as learning from the land and representations of rural values in the building's design while having to balance modern society becoming increasingly urbanised. The comparison of the two schools also demonstrate that while Neutra's ideal plan is optimistic in embodying an agrarian society, the VMDO school suggests that in today's American society, the values of agrarianism can only be, at best, signified on the building.

Agrarian Ideals and American Modernism

The premise of agrarian ideology is in an idealized characterization of the American farmer. Thomas Jefferson (1785, Letter) was one of the most notable formulators of agrarian virtue, claiming: '…*cultivators of the earth* [i.e., common farmers] *are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to it's liberty & interests by the most lasting bands*.' Jefferson's agrarian description has European antecedents, being closer to Locke's natural right of property than the French Physiocratic class structure and single tax plan, which would hurt small farmers (Eisinger, 1947). In turn, Jefferson's critique of cities was a moral position as much as economical though his scathing criticism of the ills of European cities, though he softened his position later in life (Jefferson, 1787). Another proto-agrarian was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1904), whose essay on farming famously describes how cities made people artificial and that true human character can be found in those who practice farming. Jefferson, Emerson, as well as a number of American intellectuals had an ambivalent relationship to the city, for while they held it in contempt they also patronized its high-culture institutions (White, 1964). Jefferson was very active in the Parisian *salons* and Emerson regularly went to Boston society clubs, but both found respite at their homes just beyond the edges of the city. Leo Marx (2000) labelled this tension as the "middle landscape" which was a nineteenth century rationality for mediating between the American landscape and modernity, particularly in terms of technology. This tension continued into the twentieth century, partly with regards to technology and considerably with regards to a perceived loss of community engagement that was associated with the rural small town. The architecture of rural modern schools, therefore, had to reanimate the citizenship of the farmer by questioning the degree of urbanity of an agrarian town.

When the Modern Movement began to appear in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, there was a minority group of literary critics and historians in the South who were critical of the political and economic influence the North had over the region. The agrarians accused the North of enticing southerners to leave the farms and move into the cities while at the same time industrializing family

farms into large commercial operations. This resulted in a massive population migration to Northern cities for better opportunities while those who remained became tenant farmers who no longer had any control over their land. In turn, farmers were frustrated in loss of ownership which was seen as a loss of independence that they equated to the worker's plight in Northern factories.

Because southerners still saw themselves as being regionally distinct culturally and economically from the North, they decided to redevelop their agricultural economy to counter industrialization. The hope was that they could convince southerners to remain on their farms. While this was a regional ambition specifically focused on the South, the more ambitious agrarians hoped to inspire other regions in the US, particularly out West, to politically and economically resist the influence of the North (Stewart, 1965).

One of the southern agrarian leaders, Frank Owsley (1935), identified five pillars of agrarianism as an attempt to try to define the core tenents of their ideology and begin to outline a practical course of action for a new southern society. In brief they were: 1) to have the government purchase land that was currently neglected by commercial ownership and lease it to farmers who had no property but demonstrated the industriousness and a willingness to work the land; 2) improve farming techniques that made the soil more productive for agriculture rather than having the nutrients being wasted away; 3) to do this would necessitate that the reorganized farms to first grow subsistence crops for food then, additionally, grow cash crops; 4) that farmers would be given the same tax benefits and commercial fairness as what had been relegated for industry by government policies; 5) to establish regional governments rather than state governments so that the districting would be based upon land-use considerations so that representation in government more accurately reflected actual ways of local living conditions.

Given the agrarians concentration in the South and their anti-urban, and arguably anti-modern, rhetoric, it would seem unlikely that modern American architects would have any affinity for agrarianism. Frank Lloyd Wright would be the one obvious exception with respect to his Taliesin Fellowship program and Broadacre

City proposal. While historians associate Wright's ideas with those of Jefferson, any influence by the southern agrarians remains unclear in Wright scholarship (Fishman, 1982; De Long, 1998; Levine, 2016). That is a topic for another paper, for our purposes it is important to note that Wright remains the definitive advocate for the complete dismantling of the modern city without rebuilding it and that he presents his ideas around the same time as the Southern agrarians are publishing their anti-urban rhetoric.

Wright may have been the most emphatic modern architect with an agrarian vision, but he was not alone in seeking an architecture that was appropriate for rural areas. His former employee Richard Neutra also challenged architects to sincerely consider ways in which architecture could improve rural living. Perhaps his time working and living at Taliesin during the 1920s instilled a sensitivity for farming communities. If not, his appointment as a design supervisor in Puerto Rico during WWII certainly compelled him to undertake building programs aimed at improving life in isolated parts of the island with new schools and health clinics (Neutra, 1948; Esenwein, 2016b). The culmination of these small projects around Puerto Rico appeared in an ideal school plan that was meant as a model for rural American town.

Neutra's Agrarian Academical Village

Neutra had an affinity for the agrarian model of education when he thought about school designs. In a 1935 issue of *Architecture Forum* he wrote: '*These children (for example on a farmstead) acquired experience at home in working with others, in overcoming practical difficulties, in learning the value of work and the worth of the things about them*' (Neutra, 1935, p. 25). He reiterated the value of learning on a farm at an urban planning symposium held in New York in 1944 by explaining that the farm was a classroom and that children learned by doing chores which was part of the farm's operations and thereby contributing to what was essentially a small community (Neutra 1944a). Throughout his mid-career, Neutra was sensitive to rural education and indeed found value in it. His frequency of comparing the farm to the classrooms seemed to be more than lip service by

observing that contemporary pedagogical practices lacked direct experience. Typical school designs of the day, which were based on Beaux Arts plans and classical facades, reflected typical pedagogy by containing children in a box room with full attention to the teacher lecturing. If school designs were to reflect John Dewey's (1978) progressive education, they had to be equally progressive in their plans and appearance.

In his 1944 New York presentation, Neutra quoted at great length a W.P.A. (Work Progress Administration) guide on Vermont schools and how these schools, with limited means, instructed students to be engaged citizens in the community as well as working on the farm. Neutra was enthusiastic about the possibilities for school architecture on a national level and was supportive of the experiments in Vermont. In particular, his critique of the Vermont rural schools led him to imagine the New England town Common as a space, or rather field, encouraging community engagement. His concluding remark on the W.P.A. passage was: '*The school and its ground may be significant supplement and the normal nucleus of the neighborhood!*' (1944a, p. 67). In the context of Neutra's idyllic New England Common, the role of the ground was doubly important, not only as a public lot for the school but that the shaping of the ground as part of the school implied an architectural gesture. It was a statement in which Neutra translated the agrarian ideal of the ground into an architectural consideration.

Neutra's "School in the Neighborhood Center" appeared in the March 1944 issue of *Architectural Record*, the same year he presented the value of rural schools at the New York symposium (Fig. 1). In the neighbourhood centre description, Neutra related the facility to a nineteenth century prairie settlement: '*As in the days of the pioneers and the homesteaders, children may again share spaces and facilities with adults…There will be shops for all, stables, sties, a farmyard for animal husbandry, a green nursery and gardens*' (1944b, p. 98). Indeed, this school plan levelled a common ground for an entire town; it included a library, gymnasium, agricultural fields and stables, a grocery store, an exhibition hall, and a health clinic. The classrooms were adjacent to the town Common, both at the conceptual centre of the facility.

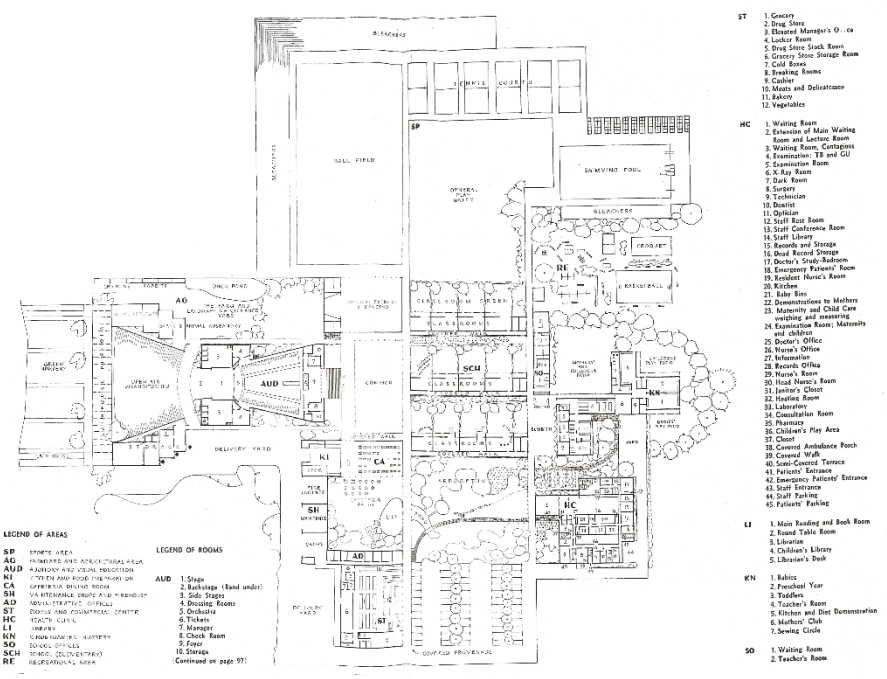

Figure 1. Richard J. Neutra (1944). "The School in the Neighborhood Center". Plan from *Architectural Record* (March).

While Neutra did not directly describe in detail the areas labelled on his plan, his previous designs in Puerto Rico and his later book *Survival Through Design* (1954) would imply that food and hygiene were paramount to its organization. Children learned about plants in the vegetable gardens at the rear of the outdoor classrooms. As they grew older, they could join the farmers in learning about new agricultural practices. Even the health clinic had a medicinal garden so that nurses or future doctors could combine their childhood knowledge of plants with a more specialized knowledge in medicine (Neutra 1948; 1954). On the opposite side of the complex, the kitchen would serve produce and meat from the fields and pastures. The same would be true for the grocery store noted at the very bottom area of the plan, which shares the same delivery drive passing the agricultural fields and kitchen. Agriculture served as a general course of study which helped unify various trades across the school and their relationships among classroom garden, medicinal garden, and field were all organized by the plan. Neutra's school plan was an agrarian market town centred on education.

Neutra scholarship has yet to make tangible connections between his ideas and the agrarian movement during the 1930s when he began experimenting with school design. It is very possible he had no knowledge of the group given their limited regional influence in the South while Neutra was establishing himself in California (Hines, 2005; Lamprecht, 2010). Nonetheless, there are clear affinities between the two with respect to elevating the quality of American agrarian towns and trying to address a perceived loss in how people engage each other and the environment. Neutra translated this into shaping a common ground for society to gather which became a school, an idea shared by colonial New Englanders and Thomas Jefferson. Thus, like the Southern agrarians who prioritized engaging the earth and questioning the merits of cities, Neutra's school architecture had an intellectual grounding in a rural American society.

VMDO's Contemporary Agrarian School Architecture

There was a vast number of schools built in rural areas following the post-war population boom; though many shared characteristics of Neutra's modernist schools in California, they often did not have the agrarian philosophical considerations he seemed to be engaged with. This seems to be the case in contemporary school designs as well. A case in point are two mid-century modernist schools on the edge of Dillwyn, Virginia (population: 500) in Buckingham County, Virginia, which had a modern aesthetic but without a strong connection to agriculture featured in a Neutra school. This changed in 2012 when VMDO Architects refurbished the two buildings and articulated a design intention that revisited agrarian ideals of the ground, garden, and ecology. In describing the program of the school, VMDO stated: '*Themed around health, the school highlights natural ecologies and local resources to spark environmental awareness, stewardship opportunities, and hands-on learning*' (2012, p. 2).

There are three direct references to agrarianism in the VMDO design, one is shaping the ground, another is nurturing hygiene, and the third correlating areas of the building plan with geographic zones in Virginia. The first is addressed in the architecture, the second in pedagogy, and the third as signage.

The significant ground feature for the school is the rainwater drainage and collection systems. For draining, VMDO made bio swales and shaped the drainage to a retention pond at the rear of the school property. VMDO also designed an elaborate drainage system to collect water in cisterns to be used for plant irrigation for the gardens. The main swale, passing through the connector between the pre-existing buildings, also indicates ground composition, particularly by using slate tiles for an impervious drainage bed to prevent the underlying clay from eroding. There is thus a stratification of the ground revealed in the rain system, grass on top, clay next, and slate as the foundation.

Figure 2. VMDO Architects (2012). Buckingham County Primary + Elementary Schools. Dillwyn, Virginia. Exterior façade materials and bio swale. Photo by author.

Likewise, the school facade appears to represent this same stratification. The ground level of the building entry is clad with slate tile, the second floor is clad with brick, and an appurtenance recessed from the façade plane, made of metal panels, supports the green roof (Fig. 2). The elevation is thus stone, clay, and finish surface, but the materials are now part of artifice. The stone is no longer solid bedrock but tiles with a honed surface mounted vertically with exposed metal clips and the clay has been moulded and harden into bricks, and the roof has plant material. The façade of the school can be interpreted as an architectural

translation of the agrarian concern for the soil, literal enough to make the stratification clear but artificial enough to avoid becoming a postmodern architectural sign.

Figure 3. VMDO Architects (2012). Buckingham County Primary + Elementary Schools. Dillwyn, Virginia. Dining Commons with reflection of entry court on glass. Photo by author.

The focal interior feature for both buildings is the shared "dining common" which consists of the cafeteria, kitchen, and two class areas for food preparation (Fig. 3). The dining common is VMDO's term, which alludes to the New England town Common, though this time situated in the South. Not only does it function as the school cafeteria, but adjoins the "community meeting room" which replaces the auditorium assembly hall commonly found in most schools. VMDO's plan is even more spatially open than Neutra's because the community meeting room and dining common are separated only by a few steps in the floor and the food lab defined by a counter height wall; the two areas are one continuous space which visually extends through glass facing the entry court and the rear garden areas. It must be remembered that the food labs are a pedagogical intention, not an architectural one, so the architects can only provide the programed areas for such activities to take place. It is the ensemble of areas – kitchen, dining common,

community meeting, entry court, and outdoor gardens – that demonstrates an architectural understanding of a model agrarian community.

The school also encourages a regional identity rather than national identity by emphasizing ecological differences instead of political ones. The zoning of the building reflects the various ecological zones found in Virginia. Each grade level, from K-5 is associated with a particular habitat: mountains (kindergarten), forests (1st Grade), prairies (2nd Grade), wetlands (3rd Grade), rivers (4th Grade), and oceans (5th Grade); zones in the primary school are terrestrial habitats and those in the elementary school are aquatic. The educational intention for this zoning is to help students observe distinction in habitats but to do so relies considerably on signage. The limitation is that the students are not as direct in participating with the architecture in order to understand the environment around them. VMDO's design still separates the outdoor ecology and the indoor environment, despite their intentions, to a greater degree than Neutra's schools.

Limits of Agrarianism in Architecture

There are instances where agrarianism with regional concerns productively interacts with modernism's approach to a universal aesthetic. However, it should be pointed out that architecturally there are significant limitations. VMDO's design, for example, uses signage and a kitchen laboratories which are not themselves architectural. The former is a text just as with one would read out of a science textbook the latter is a scientific lab for experimentation where the architecture merely allocates areas for those activities. Yet the façade and drainage system for the school are architectural features contributing to the understanding of the land by representing a cross section of soil stratification through material artifice. In Neutra's school, all the necessary services are part of the ensemble for the community centre and its relationship to agriculture and education, aspiring towards a Jeffersonian vision of a rural town. However, the school was never built and remained an ideal. Neutra himself would design a number of schools following his 1944 proposal while experimenting with the new building materials and technologies he questioned in writing earlier in his career.

Thus agrarianism is not an absolute ideology to strictly follow when designing a rural building, but its underlying precepts have a persistent enough value to consider the degrees in which people engage buildings the way farmers engage the soil. Agrarian ideology has changed over time, from Jefferson's yeoman farmer as the standard of citizenship to VMDO's ecological stewardship of the land, but the persistent principles are our relationship to the ground and how we engage the world around us, not as contrasting entities, but as participants in regional settings with a national citizenship.

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