

Two Schools of Thought

Swampscott

When the town of Swampscott, Massachusetts, faced a need for both a new high school and a senior center, community leaders faced the dilemma of limited site options and competing constituencies for limited funds. Last year, the town celebrated the opening of the Swampscott High School and Senior Center, two building programs joined under one roof.

What makes this project intriguing is not the idea of a shared roof — after all, Victoria's Secret and McDonald's share plenty of roofs in malls across the country with no redeeming effect. What makes the project worth scrutiny is the attention that was given to the resulting opportunities. The community worked with the architects, Symmes Maini McKee, to identify spaces and functions that might be scheduled for use by both students and elders, such as the gym, weight room, dance studio, computer lab, and ceramics studio — some of which are also available to townspeople after hours (the building is often busy until 10 PM). Today, the building hosts other unplanned synergies: kids give performances for Senior Center clients and help them with computers, e-mail, and cellphones; the hockey team even cleaned windows. The elders reciprocate as volunteers in the school library, cooking-class teachers, speakers in history classes. By combining a school and a senior center, the town has created a hybrid more valuable than either facility individually, an intergenerational community learning center.

Hogwarts

When J.K. Rowling imagined the school that was to be the focus of Harry Potter's adventures, she conceived of a place well-suited to a saga of good versus evil. Hogwarts evokes the familiar literature of English boarding schools; presided over by Albus Dumbledore, himself the product of the late Victorian era, it maintains strict social hierarchies while enforcing a traditional curriculum based on rote learning. Despite the advanced age of some of the faculty and staff, Hogwarts hardly functions as a senior center, any more than it serves as a community center for the larger wizard community. Hogwarts is a place of sharply drawn distinctions: good/evil; inside/outside; Muggle/wizard. Hybridity is an uncomfortable concept in this world — “half-blood” characters

never feel as though they fit, which is completely understandable in an environment where a treasured ritual is performed by the Sorting Hat.

Given the choice of the new Swampscott High School and Senior Center or Hogwarts, no doubt many teenagers would jump at the chance to enroll at Hogwarts; spells and potions offer their own form of enchantment. But in doing so, they would miss a more modern form of magic.

Hogwarts is emblematic of a familiar, structured mode of thought: the expansion of knowledge through taxonomy — ordered systems of classification. Swampscott is the product of a new kind of thinking: the expansion of knowledge and creativity through hybridity. Examples of hybrids and hybrid thought can be found throughout history, of course, but there is evidence that we are in the midst of a profound cultural and intellectual shift away from the dominance of taxonomic thinking toward the opportunities that come from hybrid approaches that combine dissimilar entities, ideas, or disciplines to create something new.

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We are already beginning to see the implications in design. “Hybrid” is the meme of the moment in academic studios and project names; firm names and marketing are soon to follow. More substantively, young designers (and a few adventuresome older ones, too) are exploring truly hybrid approaches to their practices and their processes. As always, architecture reflects the culture that creates it.

Hybridization is often a messy process — the results can be brilliant, disastrous, disappointing, bizarre, or in the case of the mythical jackalope, just plain goofy. The world of the 21st century will be a hybrid world, and the transition — as evidenced in the US presidential campaign and the recent Wall Street upheaval — will be sometimes rancorous. But the potential rewards are great: a whole new frontier of innovation and creativity. ■

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