

**Mary and David Medd's work: domesticity in Post-war British school design (1949-72)  
A gendered approach to the Development Projects**

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**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

RIBA President's Awards for Research 2020-21 - Book of Abstracts

**Citation (APA)**

Lacomba Montes, P., & Campos Uribe, A. (2022). Mary and David Medd's work: domesticity in Post-war British school design (1949-72): A gendered approach to the Development Projects. In D. Dixon, & J. Solloso (Eds.), *RIBA President's Awards for Research 2020-21 - Book of Abstracts* (pp. 96). RIBA Publishing.

**Important note**

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).  
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PRESIDENT'S AWARDS FOR RESEARCH 2020-21



## Book of Abstracts

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## Foreword

In my view good Practice is Research.

You meet a client or come across an opportunity or a need. You formulate an understanding of the physical, cultural, political and financial context. The synthesis of an understanding of these defines a definition of a problem as an opportunity. You solve it with design. The design is often a building - or at least the proposal for one. But it can take many different forms. Indeed it can be a re programming of activity or space to avoid construction: the great iconoclast Cedric Price once advised a husband and wife that they had no need of the house extension for which he was commissioned and would be better served by a Divorce!

Of course, practices cannot just assume research happens. You need to design your practice to ensure there is a continuous feedback loop. That an approach to design from concept to detail is captured, tested and shared. Shared from architect to architect, from project to project. In my own practice we look to define in each project, at inception, the key drivers that define the ambitions: spatial, constructional and operational that we will focus upon. We then ensure that all projects are documented on completion. Of course, much is lost or changed between initial inception and completion of construction. That is inevitable. But regardless this

is the way we ensure, as much as we can, that lessons are captured and then shared with the next project. We then carry out Post Occupation Evaluations, formally, and both generally and specifically (currently our focus is on embodied and operational carbon - design versus reality - all monitored against RIBA's 2030 Climate Challenge). This is design and research as one design project called practice. We carry it out to ensure there is a feedback loop to the design and use of the next series of projects. This is a research project that enables innovation by iteration; and that is important as design is about the careful offsetting of risk and ambition.

My call for the reconstruction of the RIBA as a House of Architecture is essentially a call for a return to our Learned Society roots in research into our discipline. The reinvention of RIBA as a global Institute of Ideas that collects and shares best practice models from around the world. The President's Awards for Research are vital as they highlight the benefits of taking time to capture, document and share. Making architecture in a competitive industry can be all consuming. But this publication illustrates how capturing project research actually frees up time to pursue ambitions. Research liberates architects and architecture: Research pays!

**Simon Allford,**  
RIBA President 2021-23

RIBA President's Awards for Research 2020-21 - Book of Abstracts  
©RIBA 2020-21. Registered Charity Number 210 566.

ISBN: 978-0-9564972-9-1

Edited by Dylan Dixon and Jaime Solloso. June 2022.

The editors wish to thank all contributors for allowing their work to be published in this book and work colleagues for their support.

## Mary and David Medd's work: domesticity in Post-war British school design (1949-72). A gendered approach to the Development Projects.

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Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin in *The Art of Building a Home*, 1901 (left). Finmere Primary School by Mary and David Medd, Ministry of Education, 1958-9 (right)  
© David and Mary Medd Collection at the Archives of the Institute of Education, (left) University College London (right)

What do they have in common the Red House by Baillie Scott and Finmere Primary school, designed and built between 1958-59 by the Ministry of Education? How did the bay windows or dining recesses, from the Arts and Crafts' houses by Scott, Shaw or Pugin, come to Post-war British school design to create homely environments? How do these foster an intimate and safe atmosphere that assists belongingness? This research tries to answer these questions by focusing on the schools developed by (specially) Mary and David Medd within the Ministry of Education in Great Britain, 1949-1976. As we will demonstrate, their main contribution to the field of Educational Architecture was the definition of a design strategy known as Built-in variety, where the self-contained classrooms (empty-box-school) disappeared in favour of a variety of dissimilar places. Indeed, the Medds sustained a very innovative view from which primary educational architecture was profoundly reconceptualized, getting closer to a

home than to an institution. Actually, we argue that it was precisely that driving principle—school as a home—what was responsible for the dismantlement of the traditional school types. By following Michael Baxandall's inferential criticism, the writing proposes a close look into the design process as an object of study in its own right, in search for the underlying ((un)conscious) principles. The acknowledgement of some features of the English house has been a good means for coming to understand the Medds' strategy and its domestic aura, for the schools' spatial hierarchy recalls the internal spatial structure of Arts and Crafts houses of the late 19th century.

This research, focusing on the domestic aspect of Educational Architecture, could constitute a key to reformulate school design principles, particularly under current circumstances, promoting the definition of small specific and safe areas, adapted to particular educational needs.