CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Spatial Uncertainties of Education Reform

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• Abstract (300 words):
Three years after the Henderson-Hopkins School’s opening—a K-8th school in East Baltimore, Baltimore Sun reported, the operators were planning to implement major changes in the building. The article mentioned impending plans to partition some of the multipurpose spaces in order to form conventional classrooms. Citing declining achievement rates, the Sun emphasized, “the building’s open spaces, meant to spark creativity, proved more distracting than helpful for teaching.” The reporting invoked conversion episodes of open-classroom buildings into traditional configurations, a widespread practice in the 1980s. Yet, Henderson-Hopkins was the result of a deliberate and participatory decision-making process, a compelling alternative to typical commissioning practices. What went wrong?

To address this question, the paper provides a history of the complex decision-making mechanisms that preceded the design of the school and situates it within the current debates on flexibility. Discussed in the shadow of the postwar school facilities, the
concepts of flexibility and open plan are often muddled and schools of the 1960s and 70s are viewed as products of misguided architectural thinking. This stale framework overlooks that many of the underlying design ideas of these facilities were articulated collectively by educators and architects to address postwar reformist anxieties. What started as a procedurally and ethically justified tool increasingly came to be considered an asset for better learning, a problematic claim that continues to reverberate in school design today. I argue that school design debates are indeed plagued with such displaced architectural concepts that contemporary reformist movements and architects continue to embrace uncritically.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Erkin Özay is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at University at Buffalo. His research is concerned with the architecture of institutional settings and their capacity to serve as spaces of collective experience. Working across multiple scales from urban to architectural, he investigates the formal and organizational conditions that mitigate external social and economic pressures, enable transformative civic experiences, and facilitate meaningful encounters and cooperation amongst diverse social groups.

Özay is currently working on a book project, Between City and Classroom, on a school-led redevelopment initiative in East Baltimore. He has also published on matters of refugee resettlement in the Rust Belt region. As an Aga Khan Fellow from 2011 to 2013 at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, he has worked on the issues of urban conservation, territorial expansion, and transportation infrastructure of Istanbul.

Özay previously taught at the Harvard GSD, University of Toronto, and Northeastern University, and practiced in various architecture and urban design firms, most notably, Foster and Partners, Hashim Sarkis Studios, and Peter Rose and Partners. A registered architect in Massachusetts, Özay received his B.Arch degree from Middle East Technical University in Ankara and his M.Arch degree from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.