

Context:

School location	Vesturbæjarskoli (Vesturbæjarskóli) was established at Öldugata 23 in 1958 and moved to Sólvallagata 67 in 1988. The school lies in the most western part of Reykjavik, not far from a historic harbour in the city's old centre.
Details about students	About 400 students from around 6 to 13 years old attend classes in grades 1 to 7.
School premises	A school building with relatively small halls and open plan hallway areas, as well as differently formed classrooms, often enjoying views to adjacent areas. The building was erected and taken into use in three steps, in 1988, 1999 and 2018. The original building included windows between classrooms and an open plan library. A glass house on roof top balconies crowns the most recent part. An old apartment house in the schoolyard is used by younger students for after school study hours, while older students attend leisure centres further away. The yard has just been renovated and furnished with equipment for sport and play. Noteworthy sculptures, large stones with metal horns, reside by the original entrance.
School context	Vesturbæjarskoli is a compulsory school serving a neighbourhood first erected by fishermen in the early days of Reykjavik, west of its' old centre. The school serves the current population and was noted for its' collaborative and student-centred approach to schooling back in the eighties and nighties. The initiative was begun in 1980 and a new school building, taken into use in 1988 for about 300 children, had windows between classrooms and an open plan library. The student population is relatively homogenous and the instructional language Icelandic.
Type of activity	Five focus groups of teachers reviewed historical, current and possible uses of selected areas within the school building, spaces in or tied into the most recent extension of the building. The three areas chosen for inspection were thought to have potential as venues for new uses, applications that the focus groups might be able to identify and come up with. Each group took on one area and used a digital wall or padlet (Padlet, n.d.) prepared in advance to document their findings.
Stage in design process	Post-occupancy evaluation after recent extensions.

Tool used

Stories of educational spaces (SES) (see <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/cored/tools/ses/>).

Description and rationale of the tool

Stories of educational spaces or *SES* are about “tracking the archived and lived architectural and educational (hi)stories of educational spaces” for developing their future uses and adaptive reuses. Liked and/or interesting spots are selected and their past, present and potential future uses “tracked, described, discussed and developed”. The spots are visited and processed on a worksheet (or in our case a pre-prepared and web based ‘padlet’ at <http://padlet.com>, a digital wall dedicated to the focus group and its’ selected spot). The findings are then exhibited or shared among all participants. The tool raises awareness of the learning environment in different school settings and can be used “for local and self-driven development, as well as for inputs into both smaller and larger renovation projects of existing buildings.”

Case study description: Process

A research interview and newspaper clips

The principal at Vesturbæjarskoli was interviewed at length to throw light on the history of the school building and the school practice. One of her administrative assistants was also of help by sharing with us sources reflecting the history of the school building, mainly newspaper articles on the construction and inauguration of the building, but also the pedagogic ideas practiced as the building in its’ earlier phases was being designed, constructed and taken into use. The principal explained how she and her co-workers at the administrative level had over the last few years managed to rekindle interest among the teaching staff in team teaching and student centred approaches, as well as acquire digital devices in large numbers, now applied to considerable extent all over the school.

Selection of places to review

The principal gave us a tour of the school building and helped us pinpoint three spots or spaces within or tied into the most recent part of the building, places where our evaluation tool might apply and be of use. These were the three places she thought her staff would possibly find new or unexpected uses for, spots or spaces that were seen as needing attention and not being used to their fullest. They included a glass construction or green house on top of the most recent part of the building, hallways and small open spaces adjacent to classrooms sheltered by extensive indoor windows, and finally an open plan school library and information centre in a central location on an upper floor with indoor balconies on top, somewhat hidden in the middle, up under the roof. This last and central area was within the oldest part of the building, from 1988, but closely knit into the two more recent parts, taken into use in 1999 and 2018.

A staff meeting used for a survey and focus group work

The school administration decided to dedicate one of their regular staff meetings to our study. The meeting took place after classroom hours in early December 2021. Close to twenty teachers attended.

The teachers were first asked to complete a short web based survey about strengths and weaknesses of the school building, as well as administrative aspects and school practice in that context, in their experience and from their point of view. They were then divided into five groups to focus on one particular area each group, two groups reviewed each of the first two areas mentioned above, the green house or glass construction upon the roof and the open hallway areas adjacent to classrooms, while the last group reviewed the third and final area, the open plan school library with indoor balconies hidden on top up under the roof over its' middle.

Pre-prepared padlet-pages or digital walls, with columns for historic, current and possible uses of the space under review had been laid out by us, the researchers, one for each group to document their findings. We the researchers, together with the principal, walked from one group to the other in their different locations, while they attended to their task. They allowed us to make a few photographs of their group under the process and we tried to help them decide how to go about their work. All five groups got together towards the end of the meeting and gave the documentation on all five pages or digital walls a quick glance. The whole process appeared to run smoothly and took less than two hours in all.



A focus group of teachers documenting thoughts and ideas about open areas in hallways.

Outcomes

Views represented in the survey

The survey contained eight questions and was designed to reflect how participants viewed the building, as an environment for teaching and learning, collaboration and organisation, whether they considered it in alignment with school policies and well suited for their everyday teaching practices. The teachers were also asked to indicate whether school administrators and the teaching staff shared the same appreciation of the affordances of the building, whether they were encouraged to apply varied practices and make the most of accessible spaces in that respect.

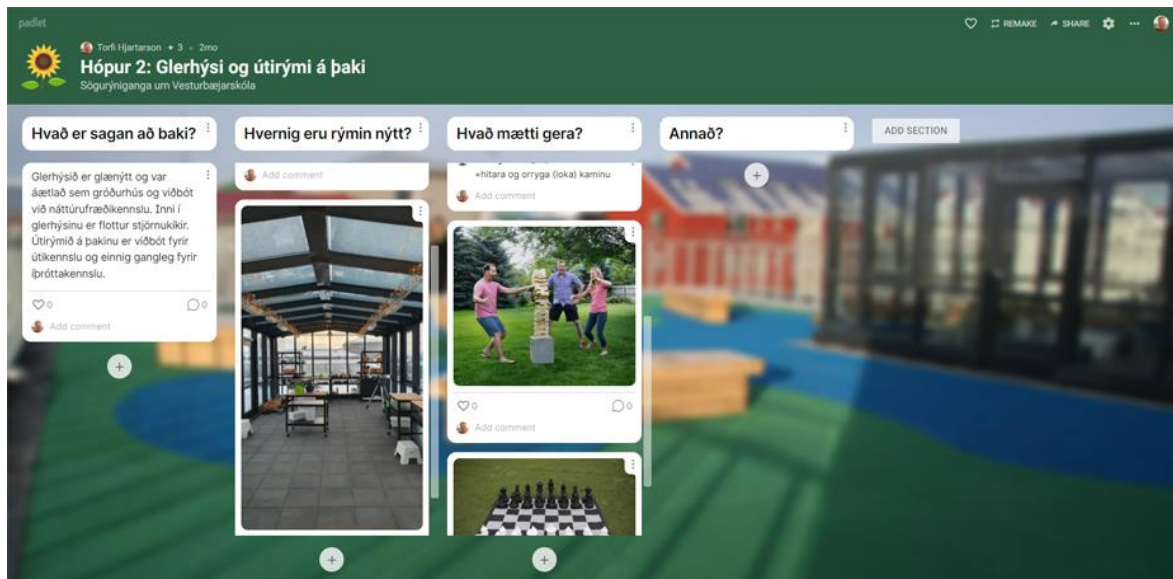
The general standpoint appeared to be quite positive, only two or three teachers out of eighteen respondents seemed to find the facilities in collision with school organisation, time schedules or educational emphasis of administration and staff. Four teachers seemed to find the school building not adequate enough for teacher collaboration and half of the participants seemed to think that they might benefit from some direction on how to make the most of the educational spaces the building had to offer. All eighteen respondents were of the opinion that their teaching facilities suited their teaching practice.

Notions about the glass house mounted on a roof

Ideas documented in focus groups, about how places selected for this study could be used in new ways, included many interesting suggestions. Of particular interest, when it came to the house of glass mounted on an open roof top surrounded by a glass partitioned fence, was the notion that the glass construct would have to be assigned to given teachers in given timeslots on regular basis were the facilities to play any significant role in daily school practice. The distance to the roof top from classrooms assigned to the youngest pupils were also an issue of concern in this respect.

The principal informed her teachers that she had been allowed to have the glass construct built in compensation for a classroom for natural sciences, that she was not able to pull through, as the newest part of the school building was being completed. She had not worked out in full how the construct could best be used and confirmed that both the construct and the roof top had not been used extensively as of yet.

Some plants, potatoes and trees had been cultivated in the glass construct and the roof top occasionally used for food breaks, sport activities and music lessons in times when the COVID epidemic called for special measures. One group drew attention to a telescope for watching stars, already in place on the roof. Suggestions for further uses included more cultivation of plants, yoga lessons, training of life skills, natural science activities, art lessons, selective subjects, art and crafts, storytelling hours, scientific experiments, singing lessons, Icelandic studies and lessons in mathematics. An outdoor kitchen, heaters, a safe fireplace or closed oven, and mattresses to sit or lie on, were proposed additions to the facilities, as were tripods for painting, chess boards, chess pieces and Jenga cubes in blown up sizes.



Padlet page with notions about a glass house and balconies on a roof top.

Notions about hallway areas outside classrooms

Open hallway areas and half-open corners in the newest part of the building, shared by four classrooms, and put in place instead of a fifth classroom, as the facilities were being planned, resonate older parts of the building. They were clearly considered a major asset for teachers and used by their pupils in relation to classroom activities in manifold ways. Current classroom activities, apparently, tend to “leak out of classrooms into the hallway spaces”, in particular in classroom hours where pupils have a selection of activities to choose from. Open corners with seating in the hallway areas outside classrooms were seen as “home base corners” for pupils, but also as classroom extensions in part viewable from inside classrooms through interior windows. They were often being used for leisure reading, lectures and discussions where cohorts from the same grade would be joined together, often with a large touch screen on wheels as aid. Small mattresses for comfortable seating on the floor were appreciated.

One note suggested that an even more open view from inside classrooms to corner areas in the hallways would be feasible. Foldable or removable walls for some of the classrooms and central areas were also proposed, as well as sofas with tall sheltering backs and dimmers to control lighting. Plants, mats and wall decorations on rotating basis were proposed to prevent pupils from running through a long hallway leading to the library. Cupboards to exhibit three dimensional objects, would serve the same purpose, as would floor decorations challenging pupils to solve mental and physical tasks. Movable partitions, preferably without wheels, or partitions drawn out of walls, were considered a feasible addition, as were Lazy Boy chairs, bean bags and removable hammocks for relaxation. Tables to work on and smaller sofas to replace long sofas mounted on the walls were also proposed. Staff to guard hallway areas would, furthermore, allow the teaching staff to send pupils to hallway areas further away from their classrooms than those currently in use.

Notions about the open plan school library with indoor balconies hidden above

The open plan school library, apparently, was considered well equipped and well suited for educational activities. It was from the outset in 1988 intended for varied uses outside of classrooms and later filled with computers no longer in place. The indoor balconies, on the other hand, half-hidden under the middle of the roof above the library was considered of limited use. They were currently being applied for occasional sessions for pupils with special needs and sometimes leisure reading from collections of older textbooks and old literature titles suitable for kids. They were, however, seen as a feasible venue for interior design of poetic dimensions, furnished to serve as an adventurous landscape with built-in holes or small caves, sofas, hanging seating and tents for reading in solitude or good company. Suggestions were made to recruit parents active in theatre to help with the design and have video surveillance put up to allow the school librarian or library teacher to keep an eye on children using this facility hidden above her desk. The soundscape would also have to be improved.



A focus group documenting thoughts and ideas about an open plan library with indoor balconies.

Conclusive remarks

Survey and tool proved practical and useful

The tool used in this case study, called *Stories of educational spaces* and proposed by our Danish collaborators, proved helpful and served its purpose without difficulties. Teachers who participated in the study took active part in lively discussions within their focus groups and proved willing to share information and ideas about previous, current and possible uses of educational spaces selected for the study. The idea to make use of digital walls or 'padlets' proved practical as well, the teachers were able to share ideas, pictures and links in a straight forward and easy manner. A short web based survey, at the beginning of our session with the teachers, reflected a positive stand among the teaching staff towards the school building, school policies and school practice. It did also serve as an orienting activity in the beginning of the session and helped to ignite interest in tasks laid out for the focus groups.

Padlets: [Group 1: Glass house and roof top balconies](#) – [Group 2: Glass house and roof top balconies](#) – [Group 3: School library and indoor balconies](#)
[Group 5: Hallway areas and corners outside classrooms](#) – [Group 6: Hallway areas and corners outside classrooms](#) – Participants were not many enough to allow for Group 4.



A focus group reflecting on the use of hallway areas outside classrooms.

The case study was conducted as part of CoReD in November and December 2021 by Anna Kristín Sigurðardóttir and Torfi Hjartarson from the University of Iceland.

Photographs included here were taken by Torfi Hjartarson.



Case Study: Stories of
Educational Spaces; Iceland



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