

## The Loaded 'In-between' as First Space

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the production of SVET VMES architectural practice from Ljubljana, Slovenia, which has been, from 2010 onwards, engaged in exploration of left over, 'in-between' spaces within educational and public buildings. By shifting between observation and action, SVET VMES analyses the existing dilapidated interior and exterior 'in-between' areas, to locate the sore points and to remediate, heal and transform them into places of events, potential, comfort, interaction, negotiation, delight and seclusion - what we call '*the loaded nooks*'. The importance of SVET VMES' *continuous act of loading* into the sore 'in-between', within longer renovation processes, is explored through the analysis of existing "Instructions for Building Elementary Schools" in Slovenia, where architectural design is overly controlled by the 'A+B+C' formula, allowing little design experimentation and delight. Our schools, designed as cost efficient, durable and sustainable machines, are put under scrutiny. A notion of *loaded 'in-between'* is introduced as a consequence of the continuous act of loading, where the *society of various loaded nooks* gradually transforms the sore left-over into a healthy and active informal First Space in educational buildings.

**Keywords.** Educational buildings; loaded in-between; the loaded nook; first space; delight.

### Introduction

Within my doctoral research<sup>1</sup> I am investigating the past and current production of our architectural practice SVET VMES<sup>2</sup> based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where we are exposing and exploring the potential of sore, left-over, 'in-between' space within the context of existing public and educational buildings. The fascination with the 'in-between' started a while ago, even before completing my Master Thesis<sup>3</sup>.

In 2008, still as a student I, together with my colleague, took part in an architectural competition for the Two Elementary Schools in Kamnik, Slovenia, for which we were awarded 2<sup>nd</sup> equal prize and a partial commission. I took part in this competition because I had just returned from my studies in Denmark, mesmerized by the contemporary architectural production of 3XN, PLOT and Dorte Mandrup (*Figure 1*). Especially the Ørestad Gymnasium (3XN, 2007) which was built as a case study that would support and launch the new educational visions and the secondary school reform's requirements for varied teaching methods (Martinussen, 2010, p. 37). I can still recall the effect of that grand open main entrance foyer on my body and all my senses. That was a different kind of school, its own universe of knowledge. It felt inviting, encouraging and most intriguing.

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<sup>1</sup> Title: RETHINKING THE 'IN-BETWEEN' Designing Collective Spaces for Social Change.

<sup>2</sup> Meaning: 'SVET' – 'world', is our chosen Slovene synonym (an old Slovenian word for a site, plot or your land) for your 'place' and it means a very personal, private, intimate world with familiar identity or perhaps a far more imaginative place - a place within your own thoughts (associations). 'VMES' – 'in between' means either unstable, undefined, ambiguous state, where things can fall either way, or a physical thing, being among the two built things, empty space, public space, a void.

<sup>3</sup> Title: Invitation to learn and play: Transformation of Tomo Brejc Primary School in Kamnik, Slovenia, (Kreč, 2009).



Figure 6

From left to right: Ørestad Gymnasium, Copenhagen, 3XN, 2007

(<http://www.3xn.com/#/architecture/by-year/78-ørestad-college>: Feb 2017).

Maritime Youth House, Copenhagen, PLOT, 2004

([http://www.earchitecture.co.uk/images/jpgs/copenhagen/maritime\\_youth\\_house\\_photo\\_julienesmedt\\_6.jpg](http://www.earchitecture.co.uk/images/jpgs/copenhagen/maritime_youth_house_photo_julienesmedt_6.jpg): Mar 2017).

H53 Seaplane Hangar, Copenhagen, Dorte Mandrup, 2001

(<http://www.dortemandrup.dk/work/seaplane-hangar-h53>: Mar 2017).

I returned home full of enthusiasm, not knowing how much this experience will influence my Master Thesis and my future work. The ‘Two Schools Competition’ was, despite the award, a disturbing view into the rigid “Instructions for Building Elementary Schools” in Republic of Slovenia, prepared by the Ministry of Education in 2007. In order, not to be completely excluded from the jury review, we had to find innovative design solutions within the rigid tripartite equation that functionally divides the elementary school building into three parts:

- A - spaces for teaching = 52 – 53 %
- B - other spaces = 25 - 26 %
- C - connecting spaces = approx. 22 %

([http://www.mss.gov.si/fileadmin/mss.gov.si/pageuploads/razpisi/investicije/prijava\\_investicij\\_navodila\\_OS\\_8\\_6\\_07.pdf](http://www.mss.gov.si/fileadmin/mss.gov.si/pageuploads/razpisi/investicije/prijava_investicij_navodila_OS_8_6_07.pdf): Feb 2017).

This ‘A+B+C formula’ seems to have its ideological roots in Modernism where form followed function – ‘the name of the room’. In my opinion, architects, after reading these “Instructions”, become too influenced by the ‘A+B+C formula’ which gives rise to continuously repeating patterns and dull spatial solutions, supporting the spatial hierarchy of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> space where:

- A = 1<sup>st</sup> space = rooms for the primary activity = teaching
- B = 2<sup>nd</sup> space = rooms that support the primary activity = service areas
- C = 3<sup>rd</sup> space = connecting primary and secondary activity = in-between

Here I would like to note that I am not referring to First, Second or Third Space as it is interpreted/recognized by Henri Lefebvre<sup>4</sup>, Edward W. Soja<sup>5</sup> nor American urban

<sup>4</sup> Henri Lefebvre in his book *The Production of Space* introduces First space as conceived, Second space as perceived, Third space as a social-lived space (Lefebvre, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Soja in his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places* builds on the theory of H. Lefebvre where First space represents the physical, built space, Second space

sociologist Ray Oldenburg<sup>6</sup>. Nor this paper and neither my research, aim to position themselves among their existing theories within the field of Sociology, even though studying them was extremely valuable to better understand what First, Second and Third Space could be/mean within our design practice.

In 2009, a year after the ‘Two Schools Competition’, the Slovene Ministry of Education organized an OECD<sup>7</sup> Conference on Sustainable School Buildings: ‘From concept to reality’, where they, among various topics, exposed the problems of school corridors. In a survey research that also commemorated the revolutionary corridor-free schools of Slovene architect Emil Navinšek<sup>8</sup> the Ministry of Education asked architects, pupils, teachers and parents to assess the corridors (the ‘C’ spaces) within their educational buildings. To quote just a few comments made by Slovene architects, many of them recipients of Plečnik Award for their educational architecture:

- Rok Benda, architect  
*»We should put more effort into increasing the normative part of the surface intended for informal education (socialization) – communication is part of the building in which pupils spend approx. 25-30% of the school time. «*
- Mitja Zorc, architect and assist. prof. at the Faculty of Architecture, Ljubljana  
*»We would wish for more spacious common and communication rooms – to encourage informal socialization and learning. «*
- Robert Potokar, architect:  
*»Above all, we would have changed the Regulations: limiting the quadrature caused the corridors to be narrowed to an utmost minimum. Nowadays, despite the Regulations, we would make wider corridors to make more space for the children. We would also enlarge our school dining room and separate it from the multipurpose room. «*
- Vesna Košir Vozlič in Matej Vozlič, architects:  
*»We would also consider rooms without a pre-set function – big, well lit, shaded, unfurnished, with water, electricity and phone. «*

(Bregar Golobič & Barši, 2017, p. 1)

([http://www.mizs.gov.si/si/delovna\\_podrocja/sluzba\\_za\\_mednarodno\\_sodelovanje\\_in\\_evropske\\_zadeve/arhiv/konferenca\\_oecd/#c17322](http://www.mizs.gov.si/si/delovna_podrocja/sluzba_za_mednarodno_sodelovanje_in_evropske_zadeve/arhiv/konferenca_oecd/#c17322): Feb 2017).

Today, 8 years later, not much has changed and therefore SVET VMES, as the above-mentioned architects, shares similar ideas and visions when it comes to common or transition spaces within our educational buildings that are governed by the rigid ‘A+B+C formula’.

Thinking about this system that is actually going beyond the problematics of educational buildings in Slovenia since we can find similar ‘A+B+C formula’ in almost every competition program brief for public buildings in Slovenia, makes me think of old Vitruvius’ notion “firmitas, utilitas, venustas” - firmness, commodity and beauty or

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as imagined and representational, and Third space as fully lived space, simultaneously real and imagined (Soja, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Ray Oldenburg understands First space as home, Second space as work, and Third place as informal spaces like bars, post office, shop, ... (Oldenburg, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Its mission is to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world. (<http://www.oecd.org/about>: Feb 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Emil Navinšek (1904 – 1991), architect of numerous corridor-free schools in Slovenia and a book author: The Revolutionary New Corridor-free Systems in Architecture from 1969.

instead of beauty rather **delight** - an interpretation/translation first used by Sir Henry Wotton in his book *The Elements of Architecture* from 1624:

*“Well building hath three conditions: Commoditie, Firmenes, and Delight”.*  
(<https://archive.org/details/architectureelem00wott>: Mar 2017).

The word delight has its origins in Latin: ‘delectare’ which means to charm. Contemporary synonyms are: pleasure, happiness, joy, joyfulness, thrill, captivation, excitement, amusement, enchantment, to take someone's breath away, etc. According to Ranulph Glanville<sup>9</sup> delight represents the central act of design, often left out from scientific research due to its unquantifiable nature. He writes:

*“The significance of delight in design finds expression in another aspect. Design is about doing more than simply satisfying the necessary (being well built and fit-for-purpose). Consider this statement attributed to the architect Sir Denys Lasdun who held: Our job is to give the client not what he wanted but what he never knew he wanted till he saw it. This statement insists the architect/designer should strive to do more than satisfy requirements, give more than the necessary. This is an act of generosity. The concept of generosity sits well with delight: it is delightful, as giving delight is generous.”* (Glanville, 2009, p. 178).

Here the question arises: **where is delight in our schools? How can we incorporate delight within our existing ‘A+B+C formula’? Should there even be a formula?**

It is obvious that the Instructions for Building Elementary Schools follow another set of criteria, designed to meet the investors’ requirements, in this case the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Above all they promote durability, cost efficiency and sustainability. With this said, I need to consider that things got worse due to the economic crisis which simultaneously hit Slovenia in 2010. The lack of funds in the public sector meant even bigger demands in cost efficiency. At the same time the sustainability frenzy with the newest energy conservation standards made buildings increasingly ‘fatter’. Triple glazing facades, thicker insulations, recuperation, artificial ventilation, etc. are relocating significant parts of the budget into the MEP<sup>10</sup> and HVAC<sup>11</sup> systems which leaves an ever-decreasing budget for innovative, inspiring architecture and evocative furniture design in educational (and public) buildings.

In my opinion we should rethink the ‘A+B+C formula’ – the program briefs for educational and public buildings – entirely, giving designers/architects enough space to experiment and interpret delight in their own way. Perhaps a new formula (should it be a formula?) is to be proposed that would build on defined and non-defined spaces which would leave enough room for design experimentation and delight, for example:

**((AB) defined spaces + C non-defined / ‘in-between’ spaces) \* D places of delight**

The question is how much of these *non-defined, ‘in-between’* spaces should there be? And an even tougher question, what are *places of delight* and how many should there be?

Dutch architect, Herman Hertzberger writes beautifully about the importance of these small, generous, delightful, informal places in one of his books<sup>12</sup>. He makes his case on

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<sup>9</sup> Ranulph Glanville (13 June 1946 – 20 December 2014) was a cybernetician and a design researcher, theorist, educator, ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranulph\\_Glanville](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranulph_Glanville): Mar 2017).

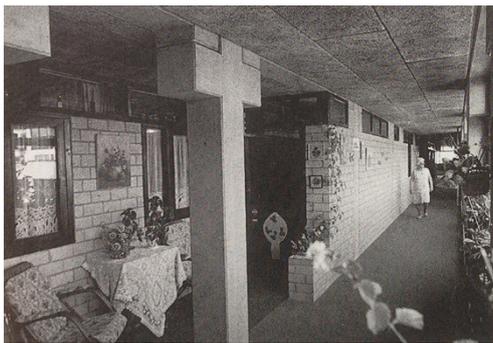
<sup>10</sup> Meaning: MEP = Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems

<sup>11</sup> Meaning: HVAC = Heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems

<sup>12</sup> *Lessons for Students in Architecture 01*, (Hertzberger, 1997).

the home for elderly (*Figure 2*), where people usually sit in front of their apartments and observe other tenants passing by. For them, the corridor in front of their homes is as important as the public street that is out of reach for some due to health issues. The corridor is a semi-public space where they meet and talk to their neighbours. Therefore, Hertzberger designed a small threshold – a veranda in front of the two apartment entrances. This is a generous gesture from the architect and a delightful place that belongs to neither the public nor the private realm. It can be appropriated by the two tenants who basically extend their home into the public domain and use it according to their needs. The architect writes:

*“It is extremely difficult to reserve the few square meters that are needed for such a purpose within the endless network of regulations and norms concerning minimum and maximum dimensions which govern every conceivable aspect of architectural design”* (Hertzberger, 1997, p. 40).



*Figure 2*  
Main entrance threshold space in a home for elderly, (Hertzberger, 1997, p. 40).

Here the architect puts in extra energy (act of generosity) to convince the client to invest in a larger corridor. The investor (like our Ministry of Education) is interested above all in the size of the apartments – ‘A spaces’ (spaces for primary activity) and useful area they can sell on the market. Therefore, the idea of having smaller apartments on the account of a larger, “delightful corridor” is not going to be accepted lightly.

An example that tries to quantify the non-defined and defined spaces in architectural design comes from the Japanese architects Kazuhiro Kojima + Kazuko Akamatsu (CA+) who rather design the activity instead of the room. According to them a new building is designed out of black and white spaces (*Figure 3*):

- Black spaces: places where the use and the space correspond one to one.
- White spaces: places that adopt different designations to the way they are used.



*Figure 3*  
The proposal for the Guggenheim in Helsinki, (Kojima, Kazuhiro; Akamatsu, Kazuko, 2016, p. 24).

According to CA, the amount of ‘white space’ (non-defined space) should take up to 50 % of the total building volume. They stated: “*the freedom for discovering and developing activities within the architectural space may be secured, without falling into the situation where the architecture enforces a certain kind of activity*” (Kojima, Kazuhiro; Akamatsu, Kazuko, 2016, p. 23).

In our current ‘A+B+C formula’ for Elementary Schools I found only approx. 30 % of such ‘white spaces’ or ‘in-between’ spaces, according to our understanding, summed up from A, B and C, that is if we include the entirety of communication areas:

- common space for 1<sup>st</sup> triad (found in group A) = 1,31 % of the whole building
- multipurpose hall & eating area (found in group B) = 6,6% (semi white space)
- connecting spaces = approx. 22 %

([http://www.mss.gov.si/fileadmin/mss.gov.si/pageuploads/razpisi/investicije/prijava\\_investicij\\_navodila\\_OS\\_8\\_6\\_07.pdf](http://www.mss.gov.si/fileadmin/mss.gov.si/pageuploads/razpisi/investicije/prijava_investicij_navodila_OS_8_6_07.pdf): Feb 2017).

30 % of ‘white space’ seems like a fair portion, but only as long as we do not notice the included 22% of communication space which is usually the absolute minimum a public building can be designed with. Taking this into consideration one can start to argue that this number is quite low. In addition, the architects are encouraged to further reduce this ratio by joining the multipurpose hall with the eating area – another defined space (B – service areas), which hosts the activity of eating during the whole day and every day. Consequently, the multipurpose hall very rarely becomes a large communal space that allows for various appropriations to happen. Therefore, the percentage of ‘white space’ or non-defined, ‘in-between’ space in our schools is even smaller and should be put under scrutiny.

### **The Loaded ‘In-between’**

Taking all the above into account, learning from the observations we have made, there came an urge to act and to find a way to incorporate delight (‘D’) within the existing ‘A+B+C’ educational buildings with narrow corridor typology. Working on new schools through architectural competitions within existing “Instructions and regulations” would not help the abundance of existing schools that had to adjust to new, more holistic teaching methods that usually instigate new spatial requirements.

In 2010, at the beginning of our practice, there were no architectural competitions, almost no construction sites due to the economic crisis. Architectural production was small or was shrunk down to interior design production. What bigger, established architectural offices experienced as a setback, we found as a great opportunity to act. Repairing the existing instead of building more (building new additions or extensions, enlarging area A, B or C) was a conscious decision that led SVET VMES to inventing its own way of **loading delight** into the existing educational or public buildings. We discovered that we do not need competitions to have an impact on the society, architecture of educational buildings, ‘A+B+C formula’, pedagogy, pupils, teachers, staff, etc.

By loading relatively small, well designed, strategically and precisely positioned interior or exterior spatial intervention - **the loaded nook** (*Figure 4*)- we can, over longer time span, repair the school building from the inside out. A nook is a comfortable, usually soft corner, a niche offering seclusion, protection and essentially makes us feel good. **A loaded nook is a comfortable niche, a precisely positioned nest, loaded with new, evocative, intriguing form, designed especially for that forgotten, sore ‘in-**

between' space, instigating various events, appropriations to happen, encouraging interaction, negotiation among pupils, offering comfort and delight.

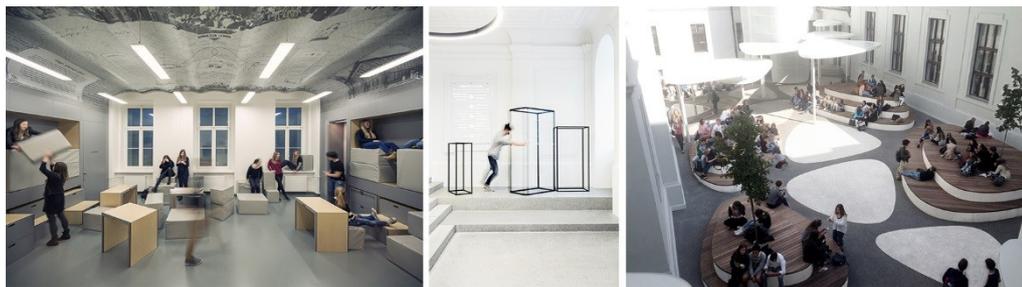


Figure 4

Loaded nooks: Loggia, 9 Frames, Pebble Atrium (SVET VMES, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Photos: Matevž Paternoster & SVET VMES archive.

One might find it surprising how many sore or left over 'in-betweens' ('C' spaces), can be found in schools. For example: there is almost always a small area underneath the main central school staircase formed with three landings (Figure 5) that is usually deserted, in best cases it hosts a temporary art installation or a wooden sitting bench. In our case the area was transformed into a semi-public learning area for four pupils called 'Under The Big Lamp' that gives light to a dark corner, offers protection underneath the lamp and gives reflection on the outer surface which reflects and entertains pupils and staff walking up and down the staircase.



Figure 5

Under The Big Lamp, Ledina Grammar School. (SVET VMES, 2016), Photo: Ana Kreč.



Figure 6

Blue Gallery, Ledina Grammar School. (SVET VMES, 2013), Photo: Matevž Paternoster.

Another example – 'Blue Gallery' (Figure 6) is exploiting the left over, double height space which used to be a changing room and is now a storage space with dressing room gallery on top, overlooking the courtyard through a large window that brings light to the elevated surface. This gallery is offering privacy from the various passers-by in the ground floor and is at the same time designed in such an open way on the top floor that can instigate various appropriations to happen.

'Idea Street' (Figure 7) shows a transformation of a 50-centimetre gap, a niche for lockers or entry doors for classrooms, on a typical 2.90-meter-wide corridor that connects the stacked classrooms positioned on both sides. A hard and boring wooden sitting bench, that repeats itself every few meters, has become a niche with an angulated wooden belt and soft cubes of various colors in front of classrooms, which can be positioned in numerous spatial configurations.



*Figure 7*  
*Idea Street, Phase 2, Koseze Primary School, Ljubljana, Slovenia.*  
*(SVET VMES, 2011), Photo: Ana Kreč.*

Last example (*Figure 8*) is showing a transformation of the unused secondary school entry into a ‘School Landscape’ – an angulated green surface with soft cushions for resting, reading, chatting, watching movies, etc. while remaining a fire escape exit. Sometimes, the less formal classes like psychology or philosophy or extracurricular activities and meetings are held here, since the space has a projector and sliding doors that can close the nook off from the nearby, busy corridor.



*Figure 8*  
*School Landscape, Renovation of the unused secondary school entry, Ledina Grammar School.*  
*(SVET VMES, 2013), Photo: Ana Kreč, Matevž Paternoster.*

By loading ‘D’ (delight) into the sore or left over, ‘in-between’ area ‘C’ we are instigating new ‘in-between’ behaviours and activities among students and staff members. The school becomes denser, even more efficient, because the ‘in-between’ - category ‘C’, shrinks by the amount of precisely positioned society of loaded nooks (*Figure 9*), creating a vibrant, healthy, delightful **‘loaded in-between’** that can over longer period (one loaded nook after another, when the resources are available), rejuvenate and renovate the school building, reforming its ‘in-between’ spatial identity, with a relatively small financial input.

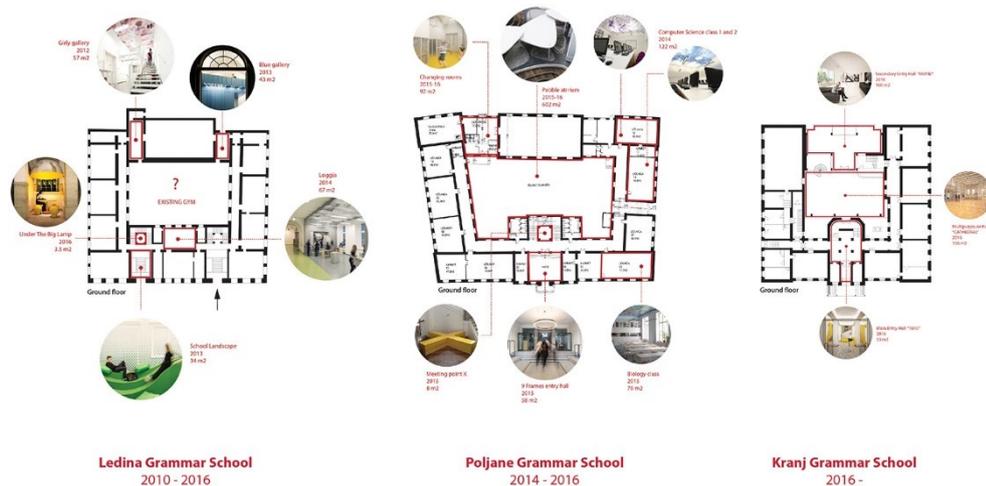


Figure 9  
Society of Loaded nooks at Ledina, Poljane and Kranj Grammar School, (SVET VMES, 2010 – 2017)

Therefore, our continuous act of loading in to the sore ‘in-between’ we started to transform the existing ‘A+B+C formula’ into:  $A+B+(C-D)*D$ . I argue that by loading delight ‘D’ into the sore ‘C’, the value of the existing building increases by the number greater than the deducted surface area ‘C’, that has been transformed. It is more than mere replacement and can have an effect much greater than the space in which it is positioned. The loaded nook can ‘vibrate’ beyond its physical margins.

## Conclusion

Personal experience from the ‘Two Schools competition’ led to my first observations about the “Instructions for Building Elementary Schools” in Republic of Slovenia from 2007. In turn, these initiated fascinations about the sore, left over ‘in-between’ space and its potential in educational buildings. The knowledge gained from the ‘Two Schools competition’, implemented in my Master Thesis became a tool for our first action – physical intervention in a form of the loaded nook. Without knowing that one nook will instigate another, we found ourselves in a continuous, self-referential, loading activity, where we were taking space from the left-over, sore ‘in-between’, replacing it by a vibrating, healthy, active, delightful and precisely positioned loaded nook. The ongoing, repetitive loading act, summarized in a formula:  $A+B+(C-D)*D$  stretched over several years, allowing us to learn from one intervention before moving to the next. **The continuous intervening changed the existing ‘in-between’, which was merely a transition, into Loaded ‘in-between’ – a new kind of place, that is in our view as important as the 1<sup>st</sup> space for primary activity of teaching. Healing nooks are spaces of delight. Spaces of delight should be First Space. Therefore, the informal Loaded ‘in between’, like spaces for teaching, forms First Space in educational buildings.**

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