

G1. Built Environment Unit Overview

Focus

Built environment education pertains to a great variety of places, objects, and processes. Critical thinking, responsible citizenship, cultural literacy, social relevancy; these concerns of educators can be addressed through teaching and learning about the built environment. Objects in the built environment can be used to enhance teaching and learning in core subjects of social studies, language arts, sciences, art, etc.

The five main themes of geography education can easily be connected to objects in the built environment. These five themes are (1) location, (2) place, (3) human-environment interactions, (4) movement of people, ideas, goods, and (5) formation and change of regions.

Rationale

The tangible structures that humans have created (e.g., bridges, houses, factories, farms, monuments) including archaeological sites, historic landscapes, historic buildings and features of historical or architectural interest, designed parks, gardens and demesnes, industrial remains, shipwrecks and features of the shores and sea-bed all constitute the built environment. Together they form a precious resource for understanding and enjoying the past.

Built heritage education occurs whenever we interact with the world around us. By directly experiencing, examining, and evaluating buildings, monuments, workplaces, landscapes, and other historic sites and artifacts--objects in our material culture and built environment--learners gain knowledge, intellectual skills, and attitudes that enhance their capacities for maintenance and improvement of our society and ways of living.

Introducing the Built Environment to Students

Surprisingly, though it affects all of us, the "built environment" is an understudied topic in Canadian classrooms. When addressed, it is usually presented in Art or Art History, occasionally Social Studies and, infrequently, Math, usually in relation to geometry.

The built environment, however, shapes us now, in our daily lives, and will certainly have a profound impact on us in the future. For example, are the public buildings and institutions that we have created in our city truly accessible to the disabled? For the elderly? For children? How do we design better buildings and why have certain architectural styles been adopted into our conventions of design? Can we have beauty and accessibility?

How are architectural styles translated between cultures: for example, the arches of Islamic Africa and Spain appearing the Gothic cathedrals of Europe? How are these similarities explained in cultures that appear to have no ties of communication, such as the pyramid builders of Egypt and Meso-America? And why do these forms reappear in our modern design--consider Edmonton's City Hall.

The Heritage Community Foundation encourages projects that explore these issues, especially in relationship to the architectural heritage of Alberta (which certainly has impressive ancestors if we count the Egyptian or Meso-American pyramids as an antecedent to the design). We have funded a built environment and heritage project at Strathcona Composite High School that documented, through photographs, the environment at the Rosedale Power Plant, the closure of Eatons, the demolishing of a neighbourhood grocery and the final days of some of the grain elevators in Alberta.

Though these projects were larger in scope than most teachers would try to integrate into their lessons, the Foundation has developed a brief list of resources--mostly from the United States--to introduce some of these concepts to their students. The Foundation, and its partners, hopes to develop curriculum materials and resources to support this endeavour, with a Canadian and Albertan outlook, and encourages interested teachers to explore the possibility of adding the built environment to their lessons.

Alberta Association of Architects: Career Information
Human Resources Development Canada: Job Futures 2000