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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Educational architecture as cultural space: Structuralist influences in the work of Hestnes Ferreira

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural and architectural significance of the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School (JGFSS) in Lisbon, designed by Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, through the lens of Dutch structuralism and the humanist theories of Herman Hertzberger. More than an educational facility, the school is conceived as a civic and cultural microcosm: an adaptable urban fabric that fosters community interaction, symbolic meaning, and spatial versatility. Drawing on key structuralist principles such as Hertzberger's "architecture as a half-product," Aldo van Eyck's polyvalent space, and John Habraken's "Supports" theory, the study situates the school within a broader European discourse on architecture's social role. It also reflects on Ferreira's formative 1974 study trip to Scandinavia, which reinforced his commitment to human-centred design and spatial openness. The article aims to examine how structuralist principles informed the design of the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School, to analyse the influence of Hestnes Ferreira's engagement with Scandinavian educational architecture, and to assess how adaptability, modularity, and social space contribute to the school's role as a cultural and socially sustainable environment. This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology, combining archival research, analysis of architectural drawings, photographic documentation, and interpretation of interviews and recorded lectures by the architect. The research is grounded in a theoretical framework based on structuralist and humanist architectural theories. The findings highlight the school's enduring relevance as a model of culturally engaged architecture, where modularity, symbolism, and social adaptability converge to create a space that transcends its educational function and contributes to the cultural identity of its community.

Keywords: structuralist architecture, cultural space, modular design, social sustainability, Raúl Hestnes Ferreira

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1. Introduction

This article examines how educational architecture can serve as a cultural space, with a focus on the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School in Lisbon, designed by Raúl Hestnes Ferreira. Through an analysis of primary sources—including archival documents, interviews, and video lectures—the study explores the influence of Dutch structuralist theories, particularly those of Herman Hertzberger, on the school's spatial and conceptual framework.

In a time marked by increasing individualism and the erosion of communal life, revisiting the humanist and socially engaged legacy of Hestnes Ferreira offers a critical lens through which to rethink the ethical and cultural foundations of contemporary architecture. While many architects have moved beyond the constraints of functionalism and formalism, few have succeeded in developing a truly human-centred and culturally responsive design ethos.

The core question driving this research is: How can structuralist principles guide the transformation of educational buildings into spaces of cultural meaning and social sustainability? To explore this, the article analyses Hestnes Ferreira's engagement with the progressive architectural theories of the 1960s, the influence of his 1974 study trip to Scandinavia, and the integration of modularity, adaptability, and symbolic urbanism in the design of the José Gomes Ferreira School. Ultimately, the study aims to determine whether structuralist ideas exerted a dominant influence or formed part of a broader constellation of references that shaped the school's architectural identity.

This research is situated within the broader field of educational architecture as a cultural and social phenomenon. Previous studies have highlighted the role of school buildings as environments that extend beyond functional instruction, contributing to social interaction, identity formation, and community engagement (Hertzberger, 2006; Gehl, 2017; Rocha, 2022). More recent research on learning environments further reinforces the impact of spatial design on pedagogical practices and student engagement (Imms, Cleveland & Fisher, 2019).

Within this context, structuralist approaches have proven particularly relevant in redefining architecture as an open system shaped by users. This study builds on these perspectives to analyse how architectural design can actively support cultural and social sustainability.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in a single-case study methodology, focusing on the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School as a critical example for analysing the relationship between structuralist architectural theory and educational space. The case study method is particularly appropriate for investigating complex phenomena in their real-life contexts, enabling in-depth interpretation of the interactions among spatial design, social use, and cultural meaning (Yin, 2018).

The study is based on a triangulation of sources and methods, combining archival research, visual and spatial analysis, and theoretical interpretation. Archival research includes examining original drawings, project documentation, and historical materials related to the school's design and construction, enabling the reconstruction of the architectural intentions and design process. This is complemented by visual analysis of photographic records, including images produced during Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's study trips and documentation of the built project, which are analysed to identify spatial configurations, patterns of use, and architectural elements associated with structuralist principles.

In addition, the research integrates document analysis of key theoretical texts by authors including Herman Hertzberger, John Habraken, and Aldo van Eyck, thereby establishing a conceptual framework that informs the interpretation of the case study. These sources are critically examined to identify core concepts—such as adaptability, polyvalence, and user participation—and to assess their manifestation in the architectural design under study. The methodology also includes the interpretative analysis of recorded lectures and interviews with Hestnes Ferreira, providing insight into the architect's intentions, influences, and reflections.

The combination of these methods enables a comprehensive understanding of the case study, ensuring analytical depth through the cross-validation of data from diverse sources. This triangulated approach strengthens the reliability of the findings and supports the interpretation of the school not only as a physical structure but as a socially and culturally constructed space.

3. Structuralism and humanism in architecture

Structuralism in architecture emerged in the post-war European context as a reaction against the rigid functionalism of modernism. Rocha (2022, p. 82) states that this is an anthropological form of thought rooted in language, in its variable forms and invariant elements. The author adds that the movement emerged in France and that one of its most important representatives was Claude Lévi-Strauss, who studied primitive indigenous languages, also noting that architecture quickly aligned itself with the structuralist current due to its anthropological content.

During the 1950s and 1960s, architects associated with Team X began to question standardised solutions, advocating for more flexible, socially responsive environments (Frampton, 1980). This shift marked a broader transition towards human-centred design approaches that emphasised participation, adaptability, and the cultural dimension of space.

The theoretical foundation of this research is built upon key structuralist concepts in architecture, beginning with the work of John Habraken, followed by Herman Hertzberger and Aldo van Eyck. These authors provide a critical lens through which the public and social dimensions of architectural space are examined. Habraken's *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing* (1961) introduces the idea that architecture must respond to the diverse needs of its users, rejecting the notion of a universal form. His emphasis on user participation and spatial adaptability marks a pivotal moment in the development of structuralist thought.

Hertzberger's humanist approach, particularly in *Architecture Lessons* (2006), shifts the focus from form to space, advocating for architecture as a "half-product" that invites interpretation and transformation by its users. His concept of a "grammar of architecture" underscores the importance of spatial versatility and the role of architecture in fostering social interaction. Aldo van Eyck's contributions further reinforce the idea of architecture as a medium for human connection, aligning with Jan Gehl's later reflections on visibility and social contact in urban environments.

This theoretical framework also incorporates broader reflections on modern architecture through the works of Kenneth Frampton, Josep Maria Montaner, and Jan Gehl, while addressing the social implications of space with reference to Rocha (2022). These perspectives provide a contextual backdrop for understanding the architectural strategies employed by Raúl Hestnes Ferreira.

The second part of the framework focuses on Hestnes Ferreira's 1974 trip to Scandinavia, a formative experience that exposed him to architectural grammars centred on social engagement and spatial openness. This journey played a crucial role in shaping his design for the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School (1976–1980), which is examined in the article's final section. The school's social dimension is explored as a manifestation of the theoretical principles discussed, particularly those related to structuralist thinking and the humanist legacy of modern European architecture.

Contemporary studies on educational environments further extend these ideas by demonstrating how spatial configurations directly influence learning outcomes, collaboration, and student wellbeing (Imms, Cleveland & Fisher, 2019).

4. Structuralist foundations in European architecture: Hertzberger, Habraken, and van Eyck

This research is grounded in the structuralist theories that emerged in European architecture during the mid-20th century, with particular emphasis on the contributions of John Habraken, Herman Hertzberger, and Aldo van Eyck. These architects and theorists fundamentally redefined the relationship between architectural form, user agency, and social space.

John Habraken's seminal work, *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing* (1961), marked a decisive break from the modernist paradigm that prioritised standardised, universal solutions. Habraken argued that architecture should provide a permanent structural framework—comprising grids, technical systems, and access points—while allowing the infill and internal organisation to be determined and adapted by users over time (Habraken, 1972; Montaner, 2023). This distinction between "support" and "infill" enabled a dynamic, participatory approach to design, where buildings could evolve in response to changing needs (Frampton, 1980; Montaner, 2023). Habraken's ideas were put into practice through the SAR Foundation in Eindhoven, where multi-storey structures with prefabricated elements and undefined interiors were developed. However, technological constraints limited their full realisation (Frampton, 1980).

Herman Hertzberger expanded on these principles, advocating for architecture as a "half-product"—a concept that positions the building as an open system, inviting interpretation and transformation by its users (Hertzberger, 2006; 2014). In *Lessons for Students in Architecture* (2006), Hertzberger emphasises the importance of spatial versatility and the "grammar of architecture," which is not merely formal but experiential, rooted in the capacity of space to foster participation and interaction. He highlights the role of transitional spaces, such as corridors, staircases, and atriums, as social condensers, likening them to the "streets" and "squares" of a city (Hertzberger, 2006, p.177; Gehl, 2017). For Hertzberger, the structural grid should not impose rigidity but rather generate a multiplicity of spatial possibilities, supporting modularity, adaptability, and cost efficiency (Montaner, 2023; Hertzberger, 2014).

Aldo van Eyck played a pivotal role in shaping Dutch structuralism, particularly through his design of the Amsterdam Orphanage (1955–1960), which introduced a new architectural language based on unity and diversity (Eyck, 2008; Frampton, 1980). Van Eyck's concepts of "labyrinthine clarity" and "polyvalent space" emphasised the need for spaces that are open to multiple interpretations and uses, reconciling complexity with legibility (Frampton, 1980; Montaner, 2023). His critique of modern architecture's functionalism and his focus on communal, human-centred environments profoundly influenced Hertzberger and the broader Team X movement (Frampton, 1980).

The interplay between these theorists is evident in Hertzberger's own reflections on the Amsterdam Orphanage, which he described as a turning point in his understanding of architecture's social dimension (Hertzberger, 2006:128). Hertzberger's Centraal Beheer office building in Apeldoorn (1968–1972) exemplifies these ideas in practice: organised around a modular grid, the building's flexible spatial units, varied volumes, and open galleries create a dynamic, urban-like environment that encourages interaction and adaptation (Hertzberger, 2006; Montaner, 2023).

Collectively, the theories of Habraken, Hertzberger, and van Eyck advanced an architectural ethos that is adaptable, participatory, and deeply engaged with the social dimension of space. Their influence extends beyond the Netherlands, shaping debates on modern architecture, urbanism, and the role of the user in the design process (Frampton, 1980; Montaner, 2023; Gehl, 2017; Rocha, 2022).

5. Learning from Scandinavia: Hestnes Ferreira's study trip

Between 1970 and 1980, Raúl Hestnes Ferreira was actively involved in the General Board of School Constructions, contributing to major educational projects, including the revision of the Lisbon University City Plan (Saraiva, 2011). He also participated in international events—including the Luso-Brazilian Engineering Days (1971) and the International Seminar on School Construction in Buxton, UK (1973)—and undertook study visits to France, Germany, the UK, and Sweden, which broadened his architectural outlook.

A particularly formative experience was his field trip to Scandinavia in April and May 1974, just before designing the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School. Unlike the Portuguese government's focus on rapid, prefabricated school construction to meet urgent needs, Hestnes Ferreira sought to learn from Nordic models that prioritised quality, flexibility, and social engagement in educational spaces (Carrancho, 2021; Saraiva, 2011).

During his Scandinavian visit, he documented a variety of school buildings, such as the Community Centre in Haninge (Stockholm) and the Kindergarten School Group in Västerås (Sweden). His photographs and notes reveal a strong interest in the spatial and social qualities of these environments. Hestnes Ferreira paid close attention to libraries, changing rooms, auditoriums, laboratories, workshops, gyms, and outdoor playgrounds, spaces designed to encourage interaction and diverse learning activities. Features like abundant natural light, adaptable furniture, and the presence of students actively using the spaces reflected a humanist and flexible approach to school design.

This emphasis on humanisation, seen in the scale and adaptability of furniture and the ability to reconfigure spaces, mirrored core values of Nordic architecture and pedagogy, which deeply influenced Hestnes Ferreira's later work.

The trip also heightened his appreciation for the structural aspects of architecture. As Saraiva (2013) notes, the influence of brutalism, especially the use of exposed concrete, reinforced the humanist culture of the early 1960s. Hestnes Ferreira's exposure to Louis Kahn's work, with its focus on structure and permanence, further shaped his thinking. Reflecting on his time in Finland, he later acknowledged that it was the first time he truly understood the importance of structure in shaping spatial experience (Saraiva, 2011, p.287).

6. School as urban fabric: social space and adaptability

A defining feature of the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School (JGFSS) is its urban-inspired layout, which closely aligns with the principles of Dutch structuralism. Instead of a single building, the school consists of five independent structures arranged at different levels and perpendicular to the hillside. This composition was a deliberate choice by Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, who wanted the school to function like a small city, a network of interconnected spaces rather than a solitary object. The design draws symbolic inspiration from Lisbon's historic Mouraria district, subtly critiquing the rigid, functionalist planning common in the city's outskirts.

The school's organisation is based on a structural grid that creates "streets" and "squares," echoing the language of urban public space. These transitional areas are central to the school's daily life, fostering unity among the buildings and allowing for future expansions, such as the addition of the sports pavilion in 1980. Like a city, the school is designed to be open and adaptable, supporting new uses and programs over time. These shared spaces also play a vital social role, encouraging informal encounters and community interaction—an approach that reflects Hertzberger's concept of the "grammar of architecture," where spatial elements are articulated to support dialogue and participation.

Hestnes Ferreira also respected the site's natural topography, using the uneven terrain to enhance the monumentality and scale of the buildings. Influenced by his collaboration with Louis Kahn, he emphasised spatial transitions and the symbolic role of staircases, reinforcing the humanist dimension of the architecture.

A central square, positioned above the main building at the lowest point of the site, serves as a key gathering space. Framed by the landscape and overlooking Lisbon's historic centre, this square acts as a belvedere and a social hub. Its design, with curbs dividing the pavement and flexible areas for student use, encourages varied forms of occupation and interaction, even though some planned outdoor spaces, such as a vegetable garden and a public park, were never built.

Throughout the complex, Hestnes Ferreira prioritised making the school inviting and socially engaging. Outdoor galleries function as communal streets, with windowsills that double as seating, encouraging students to gather and interact. Façade niches along these galleries offer informal spaces for students to reinterpret and occupy, while circulation areas are designed for both movement and gathering, reflecting a user-centred and adaptable approach (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Outdoor galleries



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Internally, the school's programmatic complexity transforms it into a "town." Classrooms are organised around a central atrium, an amphitheatre, like a space that welcomes students and supports a range of activities, from classes to performances (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Outdoor galleries



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This multi-level atrium fosters visual connectivity and a sense of belonging, echoing the Scandinavian models Hestnes Ferreira studied. The use of warm materials like wood, contrasted with exposed concrete, and the abundant natural light, further enhances comfort and usability, making the school a place for both learning and living.

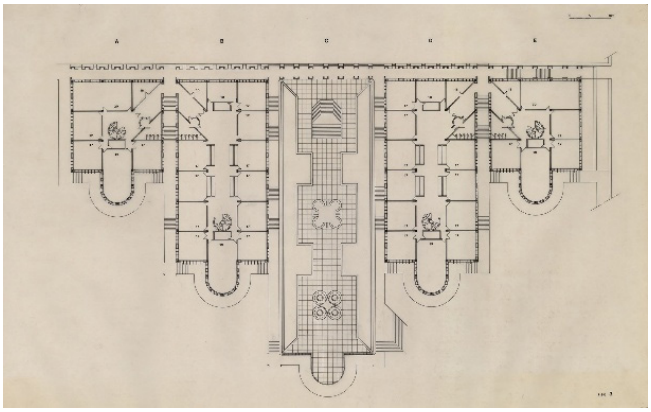
7. Modularity and adaptability in practice

Hestnes Ferreira conceived the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School as an "unfinished object", an open system designed to evolve and adapt over time (Saraiva, 2011; Montaner, 2023). This approach reflects a structuralist philosophy, prioritising flexibility and the capacity for future growth (Frampton, 1980; Hertzberger, 2006).

The school's spatial organization is based on a modular grid, with each classroom forming a 7.2 × 7.2 meter unit (Figura 3). This module determines the proportions of the five main buildings: A and E (21.6 m), B and D (43.2 m), and C (64.8 m) creating a coherent and scalable structural logic (Montaner, 2023; Hertzberger, 2014). The modular system not only streamlines construction but

also ensures that spaces can be easily adapted or repurposed as educational needs change. For example, during the 2011 refurbishment for Parque Escolar, laboratories in buildings A and E were converted into standard classrooms, with the original modular dimensions carefully preserved (Saraiva & Pinto, 2018). This geometric and structural rigour is also reflected in the building facades (Figure 4), where expressive grids of windows and panels regulate natural light and reinforce the human scale (Hertzberger, 2006; Montaner, 2023). The gymnasium, although differing in scale and function, follows the same modular and constructive logic. Its white concrete panels were cast in situ using large steel formworks, echoing the methods used for the original buildings.

Figure 3. JGFSS Plan



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Figure 4. JGFSS Façades



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Internally, the gymnasium is divided into three sports areas and a set of changing rooms, separated by transitional zones (e.g., stairs and ramps) that ensure both functional separation and visual continuity. Circulation elements such as ramps and staircases act as interior “streets,” connecting different uses and promoting interaction among users, in line with urban and structuralist design concepts (Gehl, 2017; Hertzberger, 2006).

Since the construction of the physical education pavilion, the school complex has remained largely

unchanged, with no new additions. Although further expansions were considered in the 2011 refurbishment project, only essential maintenance has been carried out. Nevertheless, the school's modular system has enabled it to remain relevant and adaptable, serving as a reference in the national architectural landscape (Saraiva, 2011).

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Raúl Hestnes Ferreira was deeply engaged with the structuralist theories advanced by Herman Hertzberger and other Dutch architects in the early 1960s. The design of the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School[1] reflects key principles of structuralist architecture, particularly Hertzberger's notion of architecture as a "half-product" and the emphasis on polyvalent spaces that invite diverse interpretations and uses.

Ferreira's architectural approach also reveals a broader commitment to the progressive and humanist ideals of the 1960s, as articulated by John Habraken and Aldo van Eyck. His focus on community spaces, user adaptability, and the separation between structural frameworks and flexible components positions the school not only as an educational facility but as a cultural space that fosters social interaction and collective identity.

While there is no direct evidence linking Ferreira's 1974 Scandinavian study trip to the specific design of the José Gomes Ferreira School, his sustained engagement with international architectural discourse and educational infrastructure is well documented. The conceptual parallels with Hertzberger's work underscore a shared vision of architecture as a socially responsive and culturally embedded practice.

Ultimately, the José Gomes Ferreira Secondary School stands as a compelling example of educational architecture conceived as cultural infrastructure. Through its modular design, symbolic urban references, and enduring adaptability, the school embodies a synthesis of avant-garde theory and local identity. It remains a significant contribution to modern Portuguese architecture and a model for socially sustainable design.

From an analytical perspective, the case study demonstrates how structuralist principles are not merely formal or theoretical constructs but operational tools that shape spatial practices. The modular grid, transitional spaces, and urban-inspired layout actively promote user interaction, adaptability, and a sense of belonging. These findings suggest that educational architecture can function as a mediating structure between built form and social behaviour.

Furthermore, the study highlights that the project's success lies in integrating multiple influences—structuralism, Scandinavian humanism, and Kahn's tectonic approach—rather than in a single dominant framework. These findings align with recent research on learning environments, which emphasises the role of spatial design in shaping educational practices and user experience (Imms, Cleveland & Fisher, 2019).

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[1] Its enduring value was formally acknowledged with the awarding of the prestigious Valmor Prize in 1982, highlighting its place in the architectural heritage of Lisbon and Portugal.

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