PLAY/ACT

A PLACE TO BE
THE PLAY/ACT PLACEMAKING HANDBOOK

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This handbook is the result of the work carried out by the students of the PLAY/ACT project

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FINDING PLACE ATTACHED MEANING: EXPLORING LAYERS OF MEANING IN FAMILIAR PLACES

Keywords: meaning; memory; methodologies; visual representations

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Memory is paramount in our lives. The capacity of humans for retaining information about our daily life and later recalling it, sometimes many years later, is a process whose understanding is beyond the scope of this paper. While it is acknowledged that over time, as we age, we may observe the past and assign it different meanings to those associated with specific elements or actions, it is also believed that the experience of space with others is a powerful tool for preserving shared memories. In the placemaking process, memory may be questioned in order to obtain information on past values, identity, and cultural and social issues that only the experience of a particular space may enable an understanding of how these spaces facilitated peoples' needs and aspirations, both for them as individuals, and for their community as a whole.

The workshop conducted at Évora University in November 2022 with PLAY/ACT students (teachers also being invited to participate), challenged participants to "draw their secondary school". Each participant was given just five minutes to produce a drawing with any tool they liked on an A4 piece of paper and provide no further information. Considering that young adults in higher education had left their secondary education environments less than five years previously, PLAY/ACT project students were regarded as suitable participants as their life experience was considered to be recent and therefore relevant to the study. The participants were from different countries (Italy, Portugal, Hungary and Spain) and had different academic experiences (in the fields of architecture, journalism, psychology, landscape architecture, fine arts and multimedia).

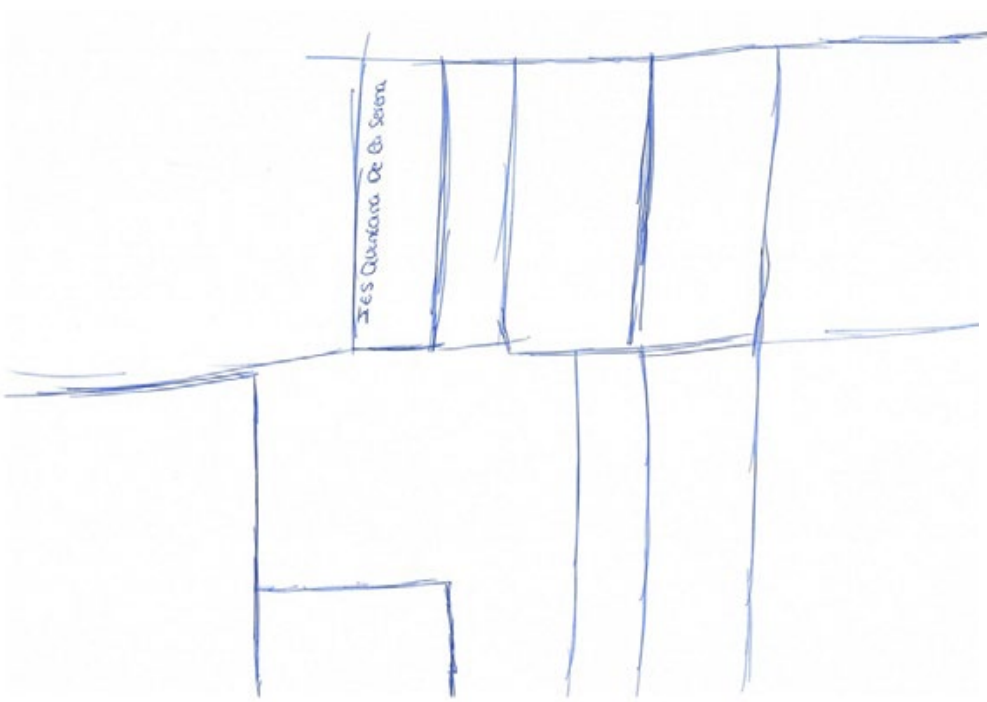
Yes, this was a task that raised unexpected questions in the mind of each participant. What did it mean to draw "my secondary school"? Does that mean the building? Or a classroom? Or the cafeteria? Or the playground? Or does it mean the place where I secretly hid with my buddies Mary and John to talk about things we did not want others to know about? Or the place where I first kissed Michael? Or does it mean the playing field where I spent most of my free time between classes playing basketball? Or the place where I challenged my closest friends to a running race? Or does it mean my special place under a shady tree on hot summer days? Or the bvench from which I looked out across the river and wondered "why is this happening to me"? Or the space where I felt safe and secure? Or the stairs I used to sit on and play the guitar with my friends?

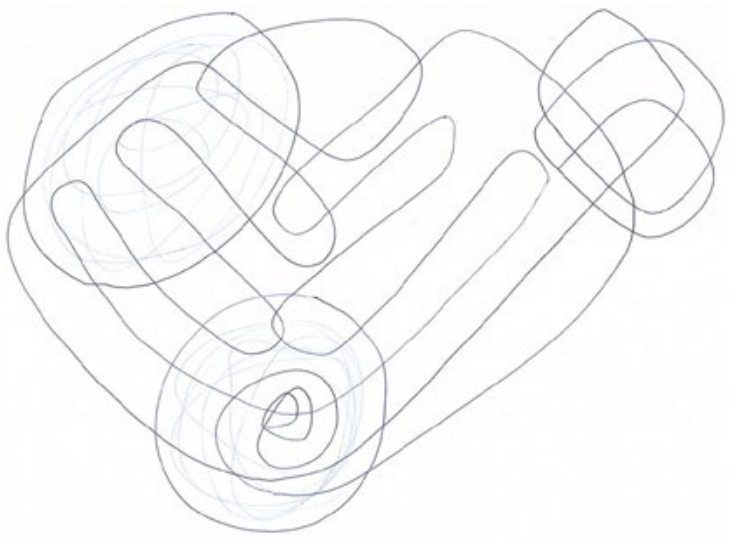
The finished drawings were spread out on a table and viewed by all: so many different ways of remembering in 25 perceptions of "my secondary school". We were all immensely interested in each others' response to the challenge: one aim achieved! Our comments revealed what fun it was to engage in such a simple task and showed our surprise at seeing how many of us had chosen the same elements to express the experienced perceptions

THE CHALLENGE

The drawings were full of relevant information for placemaking. The analysis that follows is spontaneous, having been conducted immediately after the task, on observing the drawings and being informed by diverse previous experiences conducted with a range of other students, ranging from kindergarten children to young adults in higher education. The aim of the talk that followed, in which participants were asked to contribute, was to establish a set of coherent strategies to be used in response to the task by a group of people with diverse experiences of secondary school, with different time decalage from its original use. The talk revealed a sense of belonging to and pride in the place, and enabled the establishment of what I term "layers of meanings", which I argue are most relevant when aiming at identifying place attachment. This activity did not allow for analysis to be extended any further, such as revealing reasons or justifications for different outputs, for example.

An initial examination revealed two types of participants, which I term "the sceptical" and "the engaged". The former, comprising a smaller group, drew abstract lines, as if they sought to keep the meaning of their drawing to themselves, focusing on the emotional (?) or physical (?) links between spaces (Figure 1).





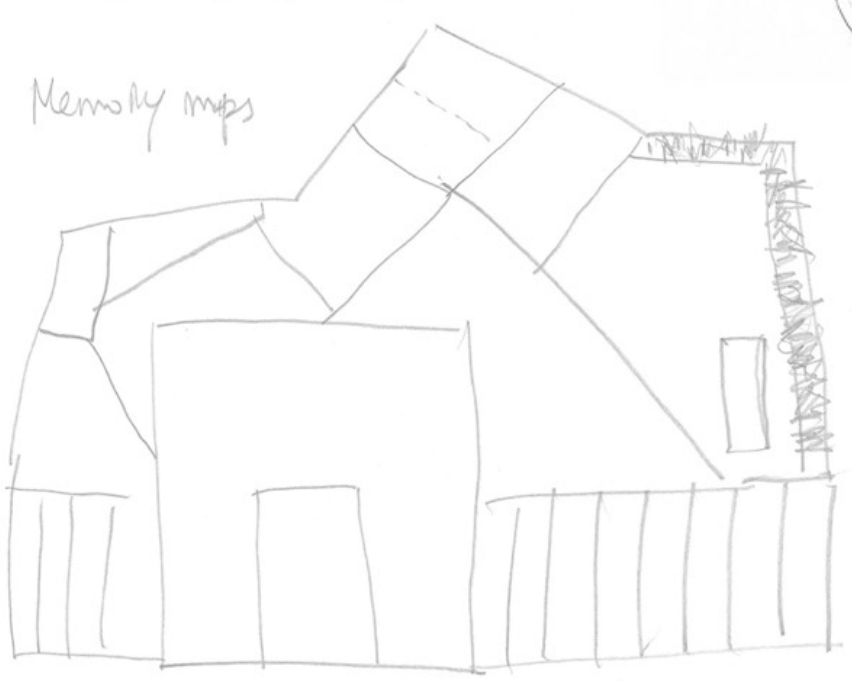


Figure 1. Abstract representations.

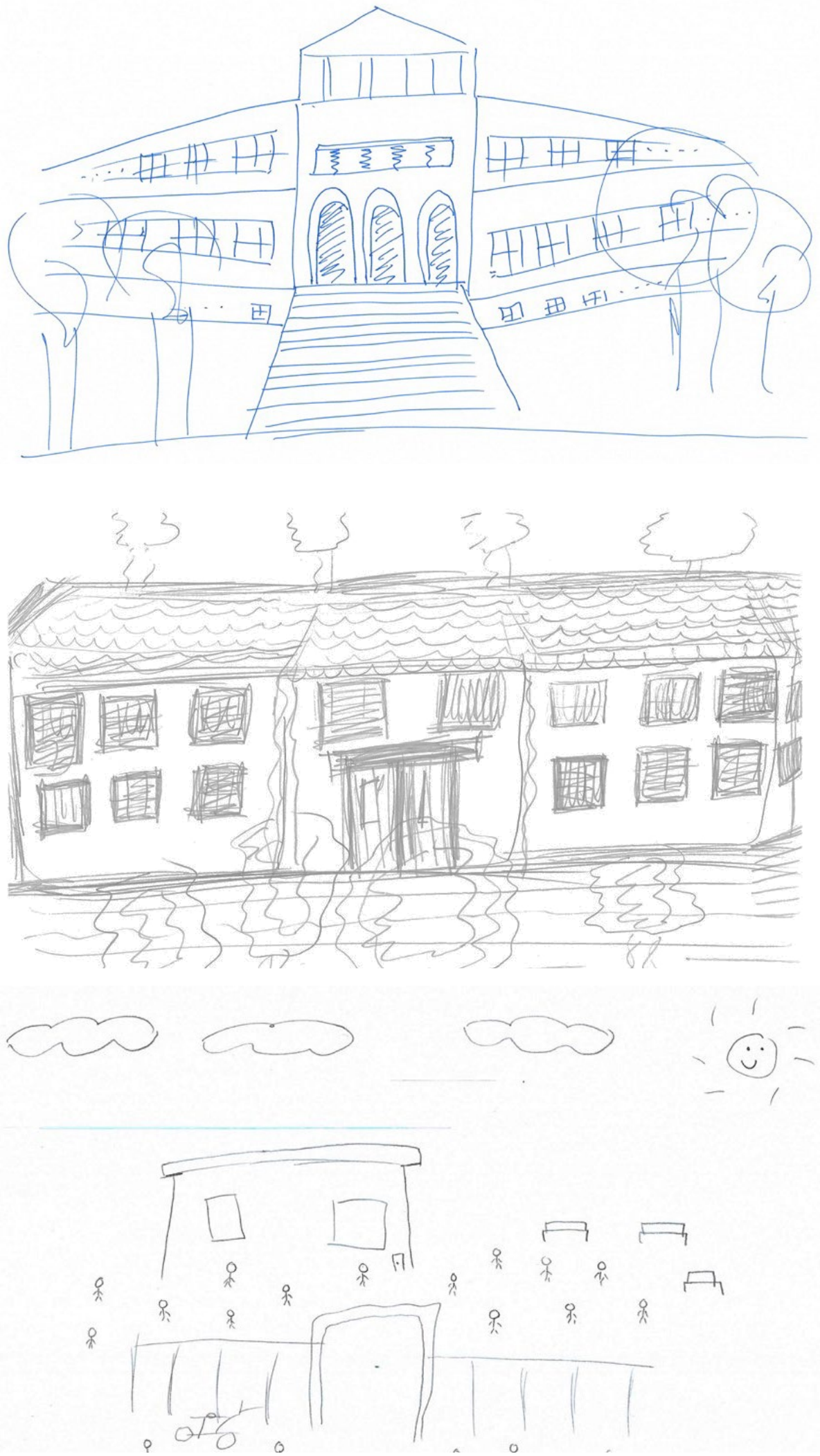


Figure 2. Main façade and the public realm image of education.

The drawings of the latter group were more relevant for the aim of this study, bringing up issues that identify and characterise a particular space such as scale and its human occupation, and the form and volume of the main façade with the windows and the main entrance (Figure 2), the type of boundary structure surrounding the campus, sports amenities, benches and trees in the outdoor space of the campus, etc.

Another layer of information is that the perception of the school space seems to be better drawn if the participant adopts a bird's-eye or aerial view of the whole campus, a strategy employed by the memory to capture the whole rather than specific features (Figure 3).

Figure. 3 Aerial views and the different architectural types of secondary school facilities.

Regarding the drawing of the main façade, another meaning arises, that of the public image of education, enhanced by the drawing of the boundary marker (fence or wall), as the establisher of the frontier between the "world of education" and the "real world outside". Furthermore, considering a brief architectural analysis, differences of culture and period may be found in the different types of secondary school facilities drawn, for example those which design complies with diverse concepts of surveillance or reflect the adaptation of school grounds to different learning requirements. Some drawings show a late-19th century northern European building with several floors, a roof with chimneys, looking out on a street, with the playground inside the built precinct and not open to the public street. In contrast, there are other representations of schools that portray a campus occupying the whole built precinct, providing a significant area in terms of outdoor space for the students to use freely, while establishing the fence or wall as the boundary between the educational space and the public space, as mentioned above. However, what is common to most drawings is the representation of the human figure: not just one but several. Interestingly, this does not align with most responses provided in several other contexts and thus may indicate a particular sensibility demonstrated by PLAY/ACT students as regards the importance of people in spaces, which is the main requirement, I would argue, for a space to become a place. This represents a great achievement after only two months since the start of the course.

To sum up, by asking university-level students to remember and record in a drawing their secondary school, their outputs revealed that the word "school" was interpreted not just as an educational facility but also as a community of people who shared similar experiences of education in different physical spaces, the memory of which is very vivid. Even though diverse physical environments were portrayed, common views were revealed, not just literally by observing the facility from an aerial perspective, but also in terms of the sharing of retained meanings drawn from the memory of each individual. Thus, this brief paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of placemaking, highlighting the importance of memory and attachment to the physical structures of a space which have an impact on the people who actually use it and find in shared meanings links for building a strong community.

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