

Hazelwood School, Glasgow, Scotland

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Since 1991 almost all state schools in the United Kingdom have been procured through a government initiative called the PPP (Private Public Partnership) commissioning process. Under this scheme, private consortia and building contractors entered into contracts with the public sector to bear the cost of constructing and maintaining schools, hospitals and other infrastructure projects, with local government councils and their taxpayers paying back the costs over a 30 year period.

This partnership between private business and the public sector was intended as a means to spread risk and to speed up the delivery of public projects. By harnessing the programming, technical and commercial expertise of business and construction companies, it was hoped to make the building of schools and hospitals quicker, more efficient and cost effective. Unfortunately, in many circumstances this did not happen. Costs were gradually inflated and contracts became inflexible. Little consideration was given to design and development, which often resulted in buildings of poor quality. Many of the new schools built under the Private Public Partnership have been problematic, with some now considered to be unfit for purpose. Building contracts were weighted toward companies, share-holders and contractors with cost control trumping the educational needs of teachers and pupils.



The local government clients for Hazelwood School-Glasgow City Council (GCC) considered that there were some schools that could not be procured under PPP because of their design complexity. These were schools which were to be located within conservation areas or to be commissioned for children with Special Needs. Glasgow chose to follow a more traditional architect/client commissioning route, through competition, where the architect was given time to develop the design and to work in concert with teachers, pupils, parents and the local community.

Hazelwood School teaches life skills to children and young people with highly complex needs and sits in a park land setting within a clearly defined neighbourhood and building conservation area, to the south of Glasgow. In 2004, the competition to select an architect was organised by GCC and six architects were invited to submit their initial design ideas and to articulate their approach to its development on the sensitive site. Those shortlisted were required to demonstrate that they understood the complexity of the project, the sensitivities of the particular client group and that the proposal was likely to generate much interest and perhaps, resistance from the local community. GCC considered that the commission called for a design characterised by empathy and



creativity that would satisfy needs of the pupils, their teachers and parents, but also would also respect the amenity of the surrounding neighbourhood. The competition was won by Alan Dunlop in late 2004.



The school educates 54 students with multiple disabilities. The children are aged from 2 to 19 and each has a combination of two or more of the following complex impairments: acute visual impairment, hearing impairment, mobility or cognitive impairment. All of the pupils are autistic, they will never be able to lead totally independent lives and each will require lifetime support. This range of complex clinical needs coupled with the hyper-sensitivity of the site made Hazelwood an extremely challenging proposition and the project design involved detailed pre-build analysis,

development and discussion with client groups, teachers, children and local community representatives over a period of 18 months.

That said, the pupils who attend the school have the same social and basic educational needs as others and have parents, carers and educationalists determined to develop and support their aspirations. As the architect, I was committed to the design of a place of safety and ambition that would free the teacher and inspire the child. It was a humbling and challenging task.

Due to the complex needs of the students an extended development stage for the brief was allowed for by GCC in the project's design programme. This stage included data gathering, site visits and consultations with pupil, parent and teachers and with specialist medical practitioners. The research and refinement of requirements that took place during this period was crucial to the creation of an innovative and functional building.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the information gathering and design development was the freedom given to me as the architect to be in continuous contact with those who had experience of the pupil's specific disabilities. This interaction, which involved clinicians and other specialists, gave me the opportunity to fully understand and to challenge the requirements, potentials and restraints of the project.

The Hazelwood School design focuses on creating a safe, stimulating environment for students and staff. I set out to eliminate any institutional feel and to avoid conventional thinking on school design. My aim was to create a bespoke building that designed-out long dark corridors and maximised levels of natural light. I designed and incorporated visual, sound and tactile clues. I believed that even the smallest feature of the architecture could be conceived as a learning aid.

The children and young people who attend Hazelwood School came from two run - down school buildings in different parts of the city which had both outlived their purpose and which did not meet their needs. One was a dilapidated timber building constructed in 1945 and the other was a converted Edwardian town house.

The children are not boarders and they live all over the west of Scotland. They are brought to the school every day by taxi and bus for 9am and are picked up again at 3pm. Easy access to the motorway network was therefore critical to the site selection, as much as being integrated within an established and supportive local community and being able to take advantage of a rich parkland environment.

The site is surrounded by mature lime trees with three beach trees in the centre and the building snakes through the site, curving around the existing trees to create a series of small garden spaces. These maximise the opportunity for more intimate external teaching environments as outside spaces are integral to the teaching practice of the school. It is vital that the children have a safe and accessible external environment, which allows them to breathe fresh air, to hear the wind rustling, to sense and touch the trees and to feel the rain. These sensory experiences form a critical part of a pupil's education and add to their physical and emotional wellbeing.



The choice of materials for the build was of great importance. In consultation with the teachers, I developed a palette of highly textured natural materials that would be stimulating to touch and smell. The school is built using an exposed timber post and beam structure and naturally weathering larch. Reclaimed slate tiles and zinc were used externally. Each one of the external materials was selected for its sensory qualities. The natural larch weatherboarding has a strong grain which is particularly evident when exposed to the elements and offers a gently rippled tactile quality for navigation using the sense of touch.

Roofing slate, which is hung vertically as cladding, has been used to contrast with the timber boarding. Noticeably harder to the touch, the slate walls define external spaces and have the advantage on the south elevations of being a strong heat source, providing another navigation tool for students.

As the gardens mature, it is intended that the building will settle down within its parkland setting, the larch cladding will grey to the colour of the surrounding tree bark and zinc roof will continue to mottle, so that, in time, it will be difficult to know where the schools stops and the gardens begin.

Ease of navigation and orientation through the building is critical for the pupils. We developed the concept of an internal trail rail, which doubled as a storage wall (like most children these children bring lots of clutter). This allows the children to move around the school with a greater level of freedom and independence than they would usually have. The wall is clad in cork, which has warmth and tactile qualities and provides signifiers or messages along the route to confirm the child's location within the school.

The school has been designed to deal with very specific issues whilst ensuring an architectural quality. It is a building that not only supports the senses but acts as an environment that stimulates the imagination.

Classrooms lie along the northern quiet edge of the site, overlooking verdant play spaces. The school steps and curves around the existing beech trees to create a sequence of safe, landscaped teaching gardens. High level clerestory glazing forms a substantial part of the façade of the north-facing classrooms, allowing for maximum daylight to penetrate deep into the spaces and ensuring even distribution of light. Storage boxes, two and a half metres tall, create a solid wall below the clerestory glazing. This reduces external visual distraction, highlighted by teaching staff as a significant cause of loss of concentration levels in some visually impaired students.



The ability to use toilet facilities un-aided offers great independence to the pupils. The location, type, size and fittings of the sanitary facilities were carefully selected to help educate students in the variety of toilet types they are likely to come into contact with in other social circumstances. The school has a hydrotherapy pool and both light and soft play areas. There is a dormitory and kitchen area where the older children can experience a degree of independence in a secure environment.

Hazelwood School has been much lauded architecturally but most importantly, it is acknowledged as a real success for the pupils and teachers. The children respond well to their new environment and make the most of the school facilities. The children are thriving and this is testimony to the love of their parents and the dedication and expertise of their carers and teachers.

The building represents a successful conclusion to an intense four-year design, consultation and construction process, involving all of the constituents- parents, teachers, clinicians and above all, the children themselves. It is the built embodiment of the care and aspirations of all who responded to the need of the pupils.