

School Buildings

A+DS Briefing Paper

Introduction

Architecture + Design Scotland (A+DS) examined 26 planned school projects between 2005 and 2007, and commissioned two research papers - a descriptive analysis of 28 secondary schools completed between January 1999 and October 2003, and a survey highlighting the views of a variety of stakeholders. This paper draws upon that work.

The new school programme represents one of the biggest public investments in communities for years. For Local Authorities' Directors of Education it offers the opportunity to get better quality, safer and more manageable education spaces - and to concentrate on educational matters rather than on maintaining school buildings. For local people, it provides an opportunity to get new and better facilities - a learning resource for children and the community. For the Scottish Government and Local Authorities it is an opportunity to establish a benchmark for quality buildings and spaces.

A+DS recognises that the Scottish Government through its investment in school building has a very strong commitment to improving school design and has provided considerable support, policy and guidance to Local Authorities. This is backed up by a vast amount of research and guidance published by academic institutions and the Commission for Architecture and the Building Environment (CABE) on how to design better schools.

Findings

1. There are some very good schools. These were proposals which took full advantage of the guidance and support available, and where:
 - a. the client's aspiration was to create a new community 'heart' or 'focus' as well as a location for learning. This aspiration meant that these schools also met many of the design and location criteria and an understanding of the urban design context of the site, which in turn led to an exemplar building involving good design and innovation.
 - b. new schools and the redevelopment of newly released sites were at the heart of local regeneration.
 - c. the architectural and urban design of the school and its landscape (both hard and soft) was seen as playing an integral part in enhancing and contributing to the pupils' learning environment and resources.
 - d. the process allowed sufficient time for consultation and design development.
 - e. the design was flexible and adaptable to both learning now and future educational needs.
 - f. internal circulation areas could be used as important social spaces and opportunities for spatial connections between floors.
 - g. environmental sustainability informed all aspects as part of an integrated concept, not merely sustainable 'features' which are often little more than token 'statements' or 'green jewellery'.
2. However, it is disappointing that the majority of schools reviewed in that period fall below the quality which Parliament endorsed through the Architecture Policy - despite the best intentions and the good quality published guidance. We believe that the poorer quality is the result of:
 - a. local authorities not aspiring to create the highest quality environment for our children, or considering the vital contribution that school buildings can make to the quality of place.

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- b. good design being regarded by clients as an 'add-on' rather than the key to a successful outcome.
 - c. the timetable imposed upon the programme which often leaves no time for anything other than a generic systemised solution, minimal consultation with building users and insufficient time for design development.
 - d. early intentions not being carried through to the delivery stage.
3. The procurement methods employed do not always ensure real engagement between the client and the design team, or that high aspirations for design quality are maintained through to delivery. While it is difficult to say that any single procurement method is responsible for producing poor quality it must be recognised that the constraints imposed by PPP/PFI processes (which predominated in the projects reviewed) have, in many cases, stifled debate and creativity. Transferring responsibility for the quality of the finished product to those less motivated in the wider public interest makes delivering a quality school more difficult to achieve.

Conclusions

A+DS's assessment of the new schools programme is similar to that by other people. Where good schools are being created, they do so where local authorities aspire to the highest design quality, have well developed skills in the management of the processes and ensure that sufficient time and resources are available for consultation and design development.

A+DS does not believe that more published guidance is needed; what is needed is to ensure that this guidance is being fully used, and that clients, design teams and developers aspire to higher quality.

Our Specific Recommendations

- **Local Authorities** should build into the process more time for consultation and development across the design team, the client and the community.
- **Local Authorities** should be encouraged to request assistance from A+DS through its enabling programme where the client is inexperienced or lacks an adequate design advisory resource.
- **Design teams** should be required to prepare a detailed design statement that reflects the key aspirations of all the interested groups and which will encourage and celebrate good design. This should be in the context of a masterplan that shows how the new school buildings contribute to local placemaking and regeneration. This can be re-inforced through rewarding innovation in the tendering process, incorporating design standards in audit reviews and using architectural competitions.
- **Government** should review its project assessment procedures to give higher priority to design considerations, measuring long-term community benefits from the schools programme through being well-designed, well-built and well-located. Long-term considerations should take precedence over short term considerations.
- **A+DS** should continue to assess the new schools programme; publish its assessments regularly on its website, particularly demonstrating successful projects; promote awareness and training programmes for Local Authority members and education staff; and develop links with post occupancy evaluation programmes that include user and community feedback.



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30/01/2008

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