

Colmonell Primary School

Award Winning Small School : Case Study



Architecture+DesignScotland
Ailtearachd is Dealbhadh na h-Alba

Colmonell Primary School

Project Reflections

Engagement

“Engagement, involvement and ownership are the keys to the whole success – out of that you’ll get the information that you need.”

Communication between the council, the school and community was key to a smooth process. There was a strong relationship between the staff at the school and the project team, and they were able to relate issues that came from the community. Day-to-day informal conversations worked well to smooth potential challenges, and regular contact avoided any sudden shocks.

Dealing with difficult debates early on, and ensuring the process maintained momentum and focus on the issues that mattered were key to the projects success.

Design Challenges

“It’s not a normal classroom you’re designing.”

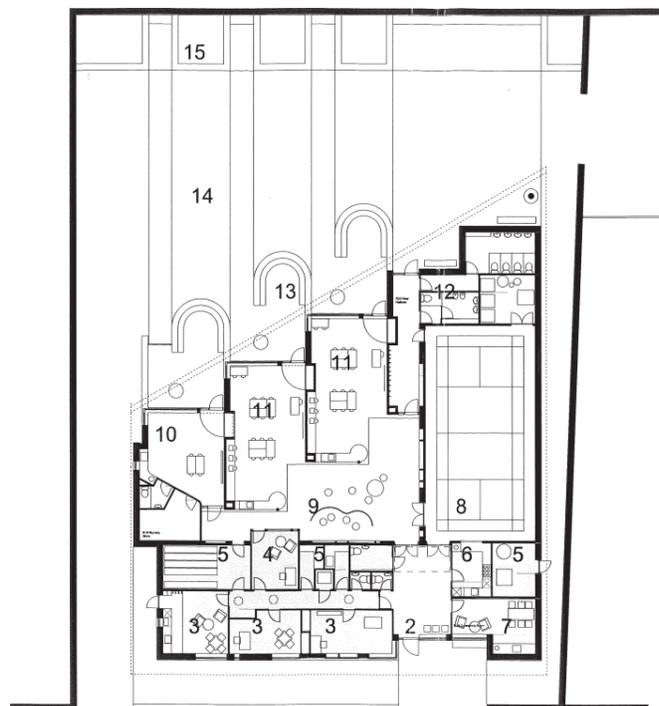
There are big challenges in designing a village school, because it’s not about designing a room for twenty-five eight year-olds, all of whom are getting taught at the same level at the same time. It’s about designing a space that allows five year-olds to do one thing, while eight-year olds do another, and the eleven year-olds get taught something more complicated.

The challenge was to create spaces within spaces, and different scales within the space!



^ Front of the School
 << View of Classrooms at Rear of the School

- 1 Main Street
- 2 Entrance hallway
- 3 Staff areas
- 4 Pupil support
- 5 Service spaces
- 6 Kitchen
- 7 Community Room
- 8 Main Hall
- 9 Open area
- 10 Nursery
- 11 Classroom
- 12 Toilets
- 13 Outdoor classrooms
- 14 Playground
- 15 Planters



COLMONELL PRIMARY SCHOOL
 GENERAL ARRANGEMENT PLAN
 SCALE 1:100 (2/11)
 DRAWN BY [signature]
 CHECKED BY [signature]
 DATE 1/10/11
 CLIENT SOUTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL
 APRIL ARCHITECTS
 11 HILLTOP SQUARE, A19
 TEL: 01292 28777

Colmonell Primary School

Context

Colmonell Primary is a small rural school in South Ayrshire, which opened the doors to its new building in January 2011. It sits at the heart of the village of Colmonell on the main street, in a valley to the south east of Girvan. It provides a striking civic presence to the village.

The decision to replace Colmonell came after a lengthy review by South Ayrshire Council of its existing assets between 2006-09, which looked at the quantity and quality of the buildings in the region. The replacement was not unanimously welcomed - there were difficult discussions about why the council was investing in such a small school. However, the response overall was positive, and it gave “a clear statement about South Ayrshire’s commitment to rural education and sustainability of rural areas”.

Early Participation and Consultation

“We were insistent that the success of the project was going to be through engagement”

The Council began the early stages of consultation in 2008 with the school and community. They began by asking what the pupils wanted from their new school, but also had more strategic discussions with the community about local facilities such as post office and shop, as well as site location for the new school.

Discussions about having the post office and shop didn’t go very far because the village already had a shop, and the issues was more about the sustainability of the shop rather than a location for it. However, this approach illustrates a ‘whole-place’ view of the project, and how the school might be a catalyst for the integration of local services.

The decision was made to build on the existing site, with temporary accommodation to be built on the village playground opposite the village hall. The community, who had been clear that they did not want the pupils to move to another school, supported this decision. The village hall was used for physical education (PE) and meals, and became a focal point for meetings and discussions about the new school.

Early discussions with the community about the future of education in Colmonell had laid the foundation for ongoing debate about the design of the new school.



^ View of the breakout area



Colmonell Primary School

Architects Role

In early 2009 local architect firm ARPL were selected after the council ran a mini design competition. Based on some of the briefing and principles set by the council, ARPL had produced an outline concept design. To develop it further, the architects started on a process of consultations involving the pupils, teachers, and wider community.

The architects presented a rough model, made of card and foam board at the village hall, which gave the children something visual to interact with. The pupils and teachers also presented the architects with drawings and sketches about what their ideal school was.

The village hall was an important focal point for meetings, and throughout the consultation process drawings and models stayed in the hall. It was a well-used space, and an important place for the community to meet. There were a lot of good debates, and challenges were made to the design of the school throughout. The architects made adaptations to the design and took the concepts back to the community a number of times.

Aside from the formal events, any other issues or concerns were raised via the school and were fed into the project meetings, usually by the Headteacher who had a central role in communication. These feedback mechanisms ensured that voices from the school and community were heard, and the meetings also allowed the architect and council to illustrate to the community that they were building something special.

“Something ‘hand-made’ for the village that wasn’t just about money but about quality and design.”

Design

The children were really keen on two key issues. Firstly, the environmental aspect and the idea that they could get a school that would be good for them, and good for the environment. This was something they were really engaged with.

The architects demonstrated in their presentations that the environmental aspect of the new building was really important, but that it was not just about the CO2 and energy consumption. They were keen to highlight the importance of creating a healthy environment for the children to be in – using natural non-toxic materials, natural carpets etc.

After moving into the school, the architects returned to talk to the children about the ‘house that nature built’. They demonstrated that the school is made of natural materials, for example they used recycled newspapers and goat hair carpets. This allowed the architects to share with the school an understanding of what the outcome was, and how they achieved it.

The second key issue for the children was the playground and garden space – the children were really keen to have somewhere to play, and to have an area outside to keep active. Outdoor learning is an important element in the teaching programme at Colmonell, particularly to be able to grow plants and vegetables in the environmental garden.



^ Water butt outside one of the classrooms
 << Top: Exterior shot of the rear of the school
 Bottom: Soft seating next to library area



Colmonell Primary School

Key Design Features

Learning Spaces

Two classrooms are semi-open planned, with a separation wall to create distinct spaces. They are joined by a break out area, which allows different activities to take place in different parts of the room.

Soft furnishing, different floor surfaces and lighting help to create different zones within the space, such as the library area, so that clusters of activity can happen anywhere in the space. Having a variety of different spaces within one area makes it easier for teachers and class helpers to deal with groups of children doing different things in the same space.

Furniture and Settings

Settings have been thoughtfully created to allow children of different ages and sizes to do different activities within the school. There are spaces where the worktop drops, which allows small children to either sit or kneel. There are bay windows at the end of the classrooms, where pupils can sit and read, and there is a comfy seating area next to the bookshelves which creates a small library and seating area.

The use of furniture of different shapes and sizes provides for the different ages and stages of the pupils.

Outdoor Learning

The views from the classrooms and playground are of the surrounding fields and countryside. This creates a strong connection to the outdoors. This is maximised by having outdoor learning and play areas directly linked to each classroom. These are also covered with an overhang, which allows for use even in bad weather.

Outdoor learning is an important part of the teaching programme at Colmonell, particularly to be able to grow plants and vegetables in the garden. There is ample space to do this, with raised beds all along the stone wall.

Non-teaching Spaces

Having a PE facility within the same building is really welcomed at the school. The gym hall is light and bright, with wooden panelled ceiling. It is used for lots of activities - drama, PE, acrobatics etc. The windows open automatically if it is too hot, and there are blinds which can be pulled down if it is too bright.

There are two additional meeting rooms in the school - one next to the main entrance, and one which is accessed both from the administration area and the classrooms. The room next to the classrooms is used regularly, and is a nice light room with views onto the classrooms. It also has floor to ceiling blinds over the windows if privacy is needed.

Key Design Lessons

Create a range of zones for learning

Creating different spaces for all ages and stages of learners is important in a small school. Linking the main learning area with different spaces allows children to work independently, or in groups, easily supervised.

Scale of space and furniture

In a small school there are a range of ages and size of pupils, therefore thinking about heights of worktops and size of tables and chairs is important.

Light and Links to the outdoors

Connecting to the outdoors is really important, and allowing learning to spill outside enhances opportunity for outdoor learning.



Comments and Reflections

From Case Study Visit

"The school is welcoming"

"Good signage"

"The environment can be controlled at the school - with ground source heat pump and solar gain from windows"

"Acoustics are ok, though in the classrooms it can sometimes be difficult to hear the teacher at the back of the room"

"The external overhang provides shelter for those waiting outside"

"Entrance space is good for parents to collect children"

"There is lots of light coming into the school"

"There is ample space for buggies in the entrance"

"Curved tables limit the number of pupils that fit around it - this can create limitations for group work"

"Having the whiteboard and blackboard separate but next to each other works well"

"It feels easy to get to where you want to get to in the school"

"Kitchen is a good space for cooking with the children"

"Environmental comfort is good"

"Getting the balance of seats and tables has been difficult - some of the chairs are taller and bigger than others, and this doesn't necessarily suit all ages and sizes"

"Light doesn't have a detrimental affect on viewing the white boards!"

"Plenty of good storage"

"There is good flow around the school"

"Coloured seats in the classrooms work well"

Good communication and engagement is key

"Engagement, involvement and ownership are the keys to the whole success – out of that you'll get the information that you need."

Listening to the needs of staff and students provides an insight into the ways they want to learn - this is invaluable information in creating good spaces that work for them.

Good communication between the council, the school and the community is key to a smooth process - and day-to-day informal conversations work well to smooth potential challenges.

Project Information

Location: Colmonell
Architects: ARPL Architects
Client: South Ayrshire Council
Completion Year: 2011
Age Range of Pupils: Nursery to P7
School Capacity: 50 primary, 10 nursery

Awards: Silver Award for Education and Sustainability
Categories, Roses Design Awards 2011

Best Education Design, Glasgow Institute of
Architects 2011

This Case Study has been produced by the Schools Programme
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