THE NEXT BIG CLASSROOM

Schools are notorious for being conservative when it comes to the architectural floor plan. You'll still find those long, dreaded corridors and the sharp discrepancy between classroom and playground at most schools with a teacher's staff room tucked away somewhere dark. Not so in Kent, where a visionary head teacher, Chris Gerry, has taken it upon himself to revolutionise the classroom concept and ask: what could the classroom of the future be like?

SMC Alsop were the architects behind the first prototype Learning Plaza. "Gerry got funding to build a mock-up classroom, essentially an experiment to test the concept," explains Jonathan Leah, project director at Alsop. Leah had been interested in rethinking school models and types for a while so once he came across Gerry it was a natural marriage of ideas and architectural expertise. "I heard there was this headteacher who was knocking down walls," Leah recalls. So Gerry's company New Line Learning worked with Alsop and developed the Oldborough Learning Plaza based on the idea of a learning barn.

In effect the future classroom implies no more classrooms; getting rid of corridors and walls and creating a large volume in which three different learning models coexist. "We created one large space for a single year group, i.e. 80-90 eleven year old pupils in one room, to investigate a simple space solution to allow for personalised learning," Leah explains. "The plaza facilitates individual studying and collaborative projects as well as group work. In essence it's a grown-up attitude to learning. The key is the flexibility," says Leah, "all the furniture is custom-made to be portable and the rest is office furniture specified because school furniture simply doesn't come in that quality."

The mock up room is meant to test acoustics, lighting and colour to refine the idea of flexible learning where a child might want to spend more than 40 minutes on one task. It's less regimented and the space allows for a natural flow. "Gerry wanted to see how behaviour is changed through the space. We included graphics and encourage a change in footwear to slippers or something soft to feel more comfortable."

Gensler worked on a second generation design, and Gerry says: "The testing of this first prototype led to design improvements for the next generation of the plaza. This included changes to lighting, seating and display systems."

In terms of costing, the whole exercise showed that for a similar cost of three standard classrooms with 90 desks, they could fit out one volume with flexible solutions. They did away with a one desk per child policy and instead created three banana seating shapes, portable amphitheatre seating, three propeller tables for collaborative work and individual workstations on the perimeter. All the pupils have wireless tablets, the ICT strategy was developed together with the school and New Line Learning's coordinator. "There are no walls or partitions, so the staff are prevented from defaulting back to the traditional classroom model," Leah says. A lot of the learning barns success hangs on the teachers' ability to use the space as it is intended. But with three different learning models happening simultaneously good guidance and pupil management will be vital. But if there are just a few more Gerys out there, this maybe well be a future school type for a more intuitive rhythm of learning. So does Leah think this is the classroom of the future? "Well it is certainly one model, what has shifted is the aim to make a classroom as efficient as an office."
New launch: Newton

Gensler has launched a new ergonomics chair designed specifically for schools. It comes in a complete chair package, both available in dynamic black and in a range of flashes: orange and green as well as bespoke upholstery.

BSF’s biggest project

While the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) select committee of MPs predicted in January that the government’s multi-billion pound Building Schools of the Future (BSF) programme will become the next victim of the downturn due to cash-strapped private firms losing interest in investing in new schools, the BSF announcement next month will announce their next big step.

The Archial Group together with Alsop practice has been selected as the lead consultants on the biggest BSF initiative to date. The £2.4 billion programme will see 89 Birmingham secondary and special needs schools either refurbished or redeveloped by 2024, in a scheme led by Birmingham City Council and its local education partnership (LEP) partner, Catalyst Education.

Archial and Alsop will jointly deliver the largest of the three sample schemes that form a part of the £1.52 billion first phase, the remaining schools will be built over five further phases, using designs created by a group of local, national and international architects.

Dream Academy

BA Honors Students of the Interior Design and Technology course at the London Metropolitan University presented their graduate designs for a redesign of the existing building in Dalgety last month to jury members Enrico Cano and Philip Gillard from Gensler and onoffice editor Kerstin Zumstein. Their designs incorporated innovative solutions for what a university could be. The winning team was Absolute Design (Brent Kearney, Eoin Dillon, Petra Burkova, Sabrina Riccio and Yousef Zed). The team created an engaging space to counteract the current reality that students don’t spend much time at the institution. The ‘pool’ room on the ground floor for instance consists of 4 pods that look like pool balls but open up into a seat and desk space for students to use as more private study space. But it was the central atrium connecting all floors with the use of glass walls and especially the striking extension to the roof with its organic dome that made Absolute Design the winning team. Runners up were team Innovate and the Fifth Dimension.

Design the classroom of the future

Entries have been called for the Open Architecture Challenge 2009: ‘Design the classroom of the future’. The international competition, sponsored by Orient Global and Architecture for Humanity, asks architects to work with students and teachers on a progressive classroom design for a specific school. The school associated with the winning entry will receive $50,000 for construction and upgrading, while the architecture firm is set to receive a $5,000 grant. Submission deadline is 1 June. www.openarchitecturenetwork.org

Colour in education

Dulux Trade has launched its guide for the use of colour in the Schools for the Future programme, ‘Colour in Education’. The information pack details that decision makers, from schools and local authorities to contractors and specifiers, should consider when choosing colour for educational environments. Based on the results of studies and their own research it has created a range of moods, to help coordinate the colour selection for walls, doors, floors and worktops.