Prefab schools debate heats up

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The profession is divided over the government's favoured option to revive hundreds of shelved BSF projects with modular construction. Merlin Fulcher reports

The possible return of prefab schools, built en masse in a strategy similar to the CLASP school-building programme of the 1950s and 60s, has split opinion among the profession.

According to sources close to the James Review (AJ 30.09.10) – which is tasked with finding cheaper alternatives to the doomed £55 billion Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme – the government is expected to endorse modular construction when the review's findings are released later this year.

‘While it is not difficult to sympathise with a wish to avoid expensive prima-donna designs for a typical school,’ said Dan O’Neill, an architect at Watkins Gray International, ‘from our experience in other sectors, prefabrication and modular construction is not the panacea that is being claimed.’

The government’s target cost per square metre is unknown, but education secretary Michael Gove has compared BSF’s £2,200 per square metre with the £500 per square metre of US schools.

Michal Cohen, director of architecture practice Walters and Cohen, said: ‘This approach might work for new-build schools – although £500 per square metre seems an impossible target – but will it work on extended and remodelled schools?’

‘We need to be realistic about the quality of spaces we are providing, or we will be demolishing these buildings in the next 20 years,’ added Cohen.

Pascale Scheurer, director of Surface to Air, said ironically: ‘Why not buy some flat-pack, super-insulated sheds from Poland or Germany or China? Whack them up Tesco-style, add a few internal partitions, stairs and toilet pods, plug in the WiFi and get the kids in.’

Jonathan Harford, director at Devereux Architects, is concerned that prefab would have an impact on the 'flexibility and adaptability' of learning environments, which he said ‘could be a backwards step in terms of forward-thinking curriculum delivery’.

According to Sarah Williams, a director at Aedas, the success of any offsite construction programme could be determined by the role of architects.

Williams worked with construction firm Laing O’Rourke on a prefab system of concrete sandwich panels, which is being used to deliver Salford and Wigan’s BSF programme.

She said: ‘For [modular construction] to be efficient financially, you have to have enough volume and repetition. Our role is to take that system and tailor it to different [teaching] approaches, to specific site issues and to any planning constraints.’

Stephen Wightman, managing director of supplier ModularUK, said: ‘Building through modular construction is not a reason to dispense with architects’ input, but a way of delivering their designs more efficiently.

Comment

Will Alsop, principal, Will Alsop at RMJM

BSF schools had become really dull; prefab will make it even worse. I agree with the government that you have to give responsibility to schools, but how does offsite construction do this? These classrooms are prescribed. There is nothing individual about them and individuality must lie at the heart of education. We’re creating a nation of people who are only good at putting entries into a computer. If the outcome of the James Review is only about money, we will just produce clones to service large multi-nationals.

Peter Clegg, senior partner, Fclideen Clegg Bradley Studios

CLASP, the Consortium of Local Authorities Special Programme created in 1957, quickly met the school-building needs of the 1950s. By the mid 1960s, they were building a school a week in West Yorkshire alone. However, they were built using cheap, uninsulated, lightweight construction materials and did not last, hence the high cost of maintenance. Today, what is becoming standardised is the type of structure. Virtually all our schools have two-way-spanning flat slabs with 300mm columns at about 8m centres. But every school site and brief is unique in a way they weren’t in the 60s. Then, local authorities were building schools to their own brief. Now, there are huge challenges of phasing and access around existing buildings in use. As for building costs, I suspect £500 per square metre is a complete myth. It was appalling that Michael Gove could quote that figure without anyone calling it into question.

Paul Bonaccorsi, sales and retail director, modular construction manufacturer Britspace

We have to drop the term 'prefab'. This word is associated with the quick-build dwellings erected at the end of the Second World War. Instead we should use the term 'offsite'. Offsite construction comes in many forms, but let’s stick with modular. Modular construction delivers the best value for money without cheapening the product. The worst place to build is a building site – it’s like constructing a car in your garden. Modular construction is not about standard boxes with a regulated size.