Michael Faraday Community School, Aylesbury Estate, Southwark, by Alsop Sparch

25 November, 2010 | By Jay Merrick

The Michael Faraday Community School in south London is an important test of both urban history and the social future, and of the potential physical and symbolic values of contemporary modernist architecture in what is Europe’s largest housing development says Jay Merrick. Photography by Morley Von Sternberg

The 28ha Aylesbury estate contains more than 2,700 homes and 7,500 people. Here, in 1997, Tony Blair announced New Labour’s primary commitment to improving the lives of the underclass; and Michael Howard paused here too in 2005, to crow about the hubris of Blair’s declaration. The estate has become trivially sanctified as an example of socio-urban meltdown.

Today, via Southwark Council’s Aylesbury Regeneration scheme and the New Deal for Communities programme, the vast array of sub-Corbusian slab blocks designed in the 1960s by Derek Winch and completed in the mid-1970s, is now the subject of a confirmed £2.4bn transformation programme to replace the blocks with higher density towers embedded in larger expanses of open and connective public realm. The £8m Faraday school – replacing the original 1964 GLC-designed building – is the first shock-of-the-new moment in an urban setting whose ACORN demographic rating puts it among the lowest categories, nationally, in terms of deprivation and ‘inner city adversity’.

The resulting architecture is loud, experimental, cuckoo

In this milieu, the school’s design development was challenging. The first proposal, buildings as a ‘street’, quickly fell by the wayside: it seemed ‘like a barn’ to head teacher Karen Fowler. But the design process, says Will Alsop, ‘was always evolutionary from the very beginning, starting with workshops involving the community. One thing, from the children and parents, sticks in my mind. They wanted a school that would look really exciting and unusual so the kids would want to go there.’

This led to a rotunda form, surrounded by very generous segments of safe, outward-looking play spaces. Its general formal development, says Alsop Sparch education director Jonathan Leah, who together with Alsop led the team that won the commission in a 2007 RIBA competition, involved project architects Uve Frohmader and Poojah Asher, and many of the building’s expressive elements are typically Alsopian. The resulting architecture is a loud, experimental cuckoo in the surrounding nest of Winch’s bloodlessly inexpressive elevations. The form and details of the new school, in metal, glass and rather fine situ concrete, are not beautiful; they possess, instead, the feel of a 3D collage whose facade, wavering with vertical metal ribs, recalls the visuals for Alsop Architects’ Creative Prison campus scheme, conceived a year earlier.

But the Faraday school is not a prison, it’s a loose-fit building whose plan-form is based on a stark rupturing of a concentrically circular drum by complex interjections that crack open the shell of the building and tie it to the wider site, and to the separate Ballroom Pavilion, which acts as a dining hall, or a community hall out of school hours.

The main building, the Living Room, contains classrooms for the foundation class and years one and two at ground level, with those for years three, four and five on the upper level, along with the adult education, art, staff and administration rooms. A first-floor balcony cantilevers over the central internal space, and the upper rooms are ringed by an almost continuous 1.7m-wide outdoor balcony. Thus, at ground- and first-floor levels, the glazed facades get protection from the weather, and children can be taught outside in most conditions.

The fundamental idea at work is that the distinctly-inscribed circular central plan can morph into irregular patterns of use, supported by a heightened sense of visual porosity. The inner walls of the classrooms and the building’s outer skin are divided by glazing, so from the Living Room one can see through the classrooms into the outdoor play areas.

The inner glazed walls of the classrooms are figured with thick plywood projections to create a shopfront effect, the external context being sucked into the school, which is only five minutes walk from the East Street.
market. The lower-level classrooms have radiused work-tables for creative activities, and they edge into the open central Living Room.

The Living Room is dominated by large, playfully shaped purple sofas, and by the first of the scheme’s two most deliberately artistic forms: the Small Hall, which bulges brusquely and asymmetrically into the central space, contains a music studio. Its acid-yellow walls rise to form an angular top edge which encloses a slightly canted activity space – shades of the study pods at Peckham Library. This elevated space is only a few metres below the roof structure, a heavy and faceted glulam grid with projecting rooflights.

The abstruse geometry at play only makes formal and programmatic sense if considered as part of a conceptual flow of asymmetry which begins with the angular plan and rather FAT-ish decorative elevations of the metal-sheathed Ballroom. This flow continues in the irregular plans of the Living Room’s staircase, the sculpted Small Hall, and finally in the way the wood-fillet flooring is patterned to suggest a riverine passage through, and out of, the building’s eastern segment.

Alsop Sparch has introduced a new kind of educational environment to the Aylesbury estate, but the redoubtable head teacher was no doubt key in chivvying the school’s formal boldness out of the practice. Few, if any, of the school’s students will have encountered spaces like these, yet there is already a sense of composed engagement here.

The school’s immediate impact was charmingly revealing: the children queued to use the lavatories (they had demanded ‘beautiful’ ones) and some parents were so overcome by the architectural vivacity they were reduced to tears – of pleasure, one must assume. It is to be hoped the school will, just as Michael Faraday did in the 19th century, help to introduce a new kind of life-changing magnetism to life in this challenging fillet of south London.

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### Project data

- **Start on site** August 2009
- **Contract duration** 65 weeks
- **Cost (so far)** £8,053,500
- **Form of contract** GC WORKS/1 1998
- **Client** London Borough of Southwark, Children’s Services
- **Structural engineer** Buro Happold
- **M&E consultant** Buro Happold
- **CDM co-ordinator** Turner & Townsend Project Management
- **Quantity surveyor** EC Harris
- **Graphic and signage consultant** Cartlidge Levene
- **Main contractor** Galliford Try Construction South
- **Project manager** London Borough of Southwark
- **Net floor area** 1,300m²

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### Poll

Do you like the look of Michael Faraday Community School, Aylesbury Estate, Southwark, by Alsop Sparch?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Submit vote