The Fawood Children’s Centre was commissioned by the Stonebridge Housing Action Trust to replace a nursery school. This is the initial step in a regeneration programme that will eventually see the centre overlooking new parkland. Currently it is squeezed in between Brutalist towers and sits like a jewel in the tip.

As well as the facilities provided by the existing nursery school for three-to-five-year-olds, the brief included a small unit for children with special needs (mostly autism); the provision of space for adults’ access to education; and a base for community education workers and consultation services. All this is in line with the government’s Sure Start initiative for combining such facilities under one roof.

And this is quite a roof. The design concept addressed the requirements of internal and external space in an unusual but highly commendable way, by having the accommodation as freestanding elements within a larger enclosure. The three-storey-high accommodation is made from refurbished and adapted sea containers. Under a part-translucent, part-transparent pitched roof, the enclosure is made from stainless steel mesh that incorporates coloured louvres at the upper level, where the mesh adopts a series of waved profiles. The mesh, closer in weave near the ground and opening up as it rises, is only forbidding to those who should be forbidden. For the children it’s rather fun. The resulting spaces between the cage and the containers accommodate different play areas and a yurt, one made not in Mongolia but in Devon.

Will Alsop is not perhaps an architect most obviously amenable to design-and-build contracts – he was novelty to the contractor, Durkan – but the shotgun marriage seems to have worked well, with time allowed for architect and subcontractor to work on mock-ups of the steel mesh.

The RIBA Awards jury was particularly impressed by the concept of the ‘friendly cage’ enclosing functional and play areas. This device addresses the

issue of protecting children without depriving them of daylight and fresh air. Most nurseries solve the problem by placing outdoor play spaces to the rear of the building, enclosing them with far less elegant fencing than here. But they are generally open to the elements and therefore of little use for large parts of the year. At Fawood the philosophy is: keep the children dry and they’ll keep warm by running around. The judges also liked the way in which the cage is animated by the play of light on the coloured louvres that stud the outer faces of the grille. And they admired the reuse of prefabricated boxes (albeit fixed and immovable) and the fact that the accommodation was multi-level rather than single-storey, adding further stimulus to the children’s play.

The enthusiastic Head reported that her charges seemed to be considerably healthier since the new building opened – a fine example of the beneficial effects of good architecture. She also reported that some of the older siblings of the nursery attenders had commented that they wished they were younger again. But there are two evenings a week of activities for older children at Fawood and the possibility of more to come. This is a nursery but also much, much more.

Although the initial jury was bemused by the project when they arrived, they left having been won over by its sheer bravado, carrying away impressions of amusement and delight. The Stirling jury also arrived without great expectations but were quickly enthusing. Max Fordham was very taken with the cage: “It could have been just a wire fence … it’s marvellous that. Also enabled that roof to be built, and the fact that you can’t classify what is indoor and what is outdoor space means that all those terrible acoustic regulations which are a straitjacket are turned upside down.” Jean thought the containers were “Will being willful, but otherwise she loved it. Jack had the final word, describing it as ‘a mini-Peckham, a minor piece perhaps but a very warm one. And at least you don’t get taxi drivers hurling abuse as they drive past, as they do at the Scottish Parliament.’ But then of course you can’t get a taxi driver to go anywhere near here.