



Redbrook Hayes School

location:
Rugeley

The domestic scale and sense of space and light create a calm, highly-functional environment both inside and out. Designed by Walters and Cohen.

The school is in Rugeley, a former mining community that suffers from relatively high levels of deprivation. Up to 20 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals and the elevated site is surrounded on four sides by a large social housing estate. The gigantic concrete cooling towers of the former colliery power station dominate views to the south: a constant reminder of Rugeley's industrial heritage.



In the decades following the closure of the pit, many families migrated to other parts of the country. Falling school rolls enforced the closure of smaller schools in the surrounding area and the need for a new building emerged. After careful consideration of different sites, Staffordshire local education authority committed to building a new school on the Talbot Road site in late 2002. It was conceived as a flagship for the regeneration of this deprived area, with architectural quality and innovative design the highest priority.

The new building was procured traditionally through local authority statutory financial needs funding. Following interviews and competitive fee bids, London-based architecture practice Walters and Cohen was selected. Crucial to the success of its pitch was a commitment to in-depth user consultation and a shared vision that matched the high social and educational aspirations of the school head and her staff.

Introduction

The school is a single-storey building with two linear classroom blocks orientated east to west and a third higher central block in between. The central block contains communal learning zones and is affectionately referred to as 'the heart of the school'. Hard playground areas running along three sides of the building are connected to classrooms by way of mini courtyards. There is one courtyard for each classroom, indented into the east and west facades. Since the school was completed these areas have been roofed over to provide wet weather outside play and much-needed shelter for this somewhat exposed site.



Visitors enter the school building on its northern end first, passing across a large formal open space, paved with geometric flagstones, tree planting, notice boards, seating and bicycle racks. This space set back from the street acts as an interface between the school

and its wider community. It is an important place where parents gather at the beginning and end of the school day and where markets and fetes are sometimes held at weekends. Community involvement is further promoted by the inclusion of a new public library built to replace an existing dilapidated library building on another site.

The internal space of the building has a rich and vibrant atmosphere full of light and activity. A core design principle was that the traditional school idea of closed classrooms off long corridors would be consigned to history. Instead, as many activities as possible are brought into the heart of the school so that staff, children and visiting parents are in constant contact with daily school activities. The internal court acts not only as a main circulation area but also includes the hall/dining room (with full-height folding wall panels when separation is required) at one end, a library at the opposite end and a series of art, domestic science and storage zones, with a chill-out space in between.

Off from each side of the central court is a full range of closed classrooms each partially glazed permitting a sense of spatial transparency. This transparency is further enhanced by generous floor to ceiling zones, with natural daylight pouring in from high-level clerestory windows running both sides of its entire length. Each classroom has its own children's toilets, kitchen area, generous range of storage and integrated ICT. Doors lead out to run-in run-out play areas from each classroom. As the classroom block has a relatively deep plan, rooflights have been introduced.

Evaluation

This is a small one-form entry school with 26 nursery children. On a cost per pupil basis, a much larger school would have been far more economical to build and to maintain. In addition some aspects of the design are expensive, for example high-quality external lighting, which is difficult for the school to replace when it is damaged.



A full-time project manager with some construction and design experience to manage the interface between users and the construction team would have been appreciated by the school. It is worth noting that there was no CABE enabling support available for this project.

However, based on informal feedback from staff and parents, the new school has succeeded beyond all expectations. The headteacher presents a commonly held perspective when she states that 'some children simply cried with joy [when the school opened], stroking the wooden floor in the hall, and screeching with pleasure when they went into the toilets, such was the architectural quality compared to the old school'. Another member of staff commented on how much happier staff and children were since they moved into the new building: 'It has certainly improved SATS results and attendance levels are much better, they seem to enjoy being here; it is a wonderful place to be'.

The majority of comments have been overwhelmingly positive, not just because it is an elegant, stylish building, but also because it works in its own educational and social terms. An open door policy was apparent and the head explained that a group of elderly people enjoying lunch in the main hall were grandparents of children attending.

The domestic scale and the sense of space and light create a calm highly functional environment, both inside and out. Evidence that the community's feelings are equally warm comes with the news that there has been no graffiti or vandalism in the year or so since it first opened despite the fact that only low fences protect the grounds during evenings and weekends. Now that children are settled and secure, they are, according to the headteacher, more engaged and interested in their education. They want to do well both inside and outside the school premises and this is a direct effect of this superb new building.

Key design features to look out for

- The school and library can operate independently and have different opening hours, but also work together so that pupils are able to access the library from the school.
- Two linear classroom blocks orientated east to west and a third higher central block in between. There is one courtyard for each classroom.
- Vibrant atmosphere full of light and activity due to the domestic scale and the sense of space and light.

Link and downloads

- School's website: <http://www.redbrookhayes.staffs.sch.uk/>
- Architects: <http://www.waltersandcohen.com/>

Contact for further information

Project name

Redbrook Hayes Community Primary School

Address

Talbot Road, Brereton, Rugeley, Staffordshire WS15 1AU

Architect

Walters and Cohen

Structural engineer

Adams Kara Taylor

Services engineer

Max Fordham LLP

Landscape architect

Staffordshire County Council

Acoustic engineer

Max Fordham LLP

Quantity surveyor

Holbrow Brookes and Partners

Client

Staffordshire County Council
John Giacomelli, Julie Nash

Consultants/contractor involved

Moss Construction

Project type

New build

Project location

West Midlands

Gross internal floor area

1,416 m²

No of pupil places (FTE)

One-form entry plus reception and nursery

Contract value

£3.05m

Procurement type

Traditional – JCT IFC98 contract

Construction period

December 2005 – December 2006