

By Mark Dudek

In 1997 the incoming Labour government inherited a geriatric schools estate with a massive backlog of repairs, which meant that building new would be more economical than make do and mend. The new regime was determined to invest big-time, through a combination of public and private funding. Hundreds of new schools were built with high-quality architecture the priority. This initiative was Building Schools for the Future (BSF).

PFI procurement was adopted to spread the cost, usually across the 50 years of the building's life. However, there was a systemic problem of accountability: if a private contractor, interested only in the bottom line, promised to build 12 new schools for a given figure, how could you ensure that quality was broadly understood and delivered? The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment was established in 1999 to raise standards and make the tendering process more transparent, but the complexity and sheer scale of each schools bundle often defeated the quango's remit and resources.

Lively debate across the disciplines of education and architecture suggested that new schools architecture could actually transform the performance of its users. Whether the building was 'transformational' or not became one of the key ideas of the time, indicating that an innovative structure could in itself improve pupil attainment. During a brief golden summer it even seemed that architects were leading other disciplines in dictating a better pedagogy through their built work.

The problem was that, while it is obvious that a good environment benefits some students, it was not possible to prove the accountable value of architecture (as opposed to building) on the educative process. In education there were simply too many variables in play to authenticate the transformational claim. When the Conservative-led coalition came to power in 2010, it raged about profligacy, and BSF was immediately axed.

In 2011 the then education secretary, Michael Gove, stated that 'no one is here to make architects richer'. In the new age of austerity, architect-designed schools were an unnecessary luxury. Identifying architects as the fat cats merely illustrated how out of touch this career politician really was. He took a sideswipe at Labour peer Richard Rogers, whose inspiring if expensive designs for the Mossbourne Academy in east London appeared to be at least partly responsible for its transformation from what had been a failing school into what is now one of England's top performing inner-city schools.

In 2014, acting on the Department for Education's 2011 report *Review of Education Capital* (led by businessman Sebastian



1. (Opposite) Sandal Magna Community Academy, Wakefield, by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects
2. Michael Faraday Community School, London, by Alsop Sparch and Archial
3. Chelsea Academy, London, by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios

An example of one directive is that schools will be designed only in orthogonal forms

James), a set of standardised school building types was introduced to ensure 'value for money'. *Baseline Designs for Schools* is a document that will enable contractors to slash development processes and streamline construction budgets – but at what cost?

Henceforth all new school buildings will be based on a limited template, which is all very well for motorway hotels, but is it OK for schools? Handing over schools architecture to the engineers is misjudged. An example of one directive is that they will be designed only in orthogonal forms, 'with no curves or "faceted" curves' – a comment that in its knuckle-headed orthodoxy is almost beyond parody. Sebastian James was educated at Eton and at Magdalene College Oxford, (with David Cameron). Magdalene was built between 1492 and 1822 in Perpendicular Gothic, where curves and facets abound.

It is hard to believe that our rulers would have every new school look the same, rather like a low-grade industrial warehouse – 'bog-standard' to coin a phrase. Circulation routes should be narrow and merely viewed as corridors for travel to the next lesson; rooftop playgrounds should be embargoed; entrance canopies intended to signal threshold are prohibited. These and other petty rationalisations promise a mean, defensive type of architecture where corporate



expediency overrides human considerations. By making our environment more hostile, we become more hostile ourselves.

There is hope, however. Firstly, the stock of great schools architecture built up over the past 15 years is a testament to the power of good design – not just to improve efficiency but to raise self-esteem. The prime minister's only previous role, as a PR man, suggests that the architecture profession must raise its collective game and promote the value of good design in a more media-savvy form. If the politicians won't listen, then we need to go directly to the public with advertising campaigns, using social media and more traditional methods to get across the message that good design matters.

Secondly, politicians and their views of the world are transitory. Architecture lives on across the generations. *Baseline Designs for Schools* is so regressive that the process will be seen to fail. The schools simply won't function on a human level. Sadly we will have to wait for the first examples of these iconoclastic learning machines to be tested in use; then the worm will turn once more. For the moment, public sector schools architecture will be degraded or privatised, along with much else in the public realm.

Nevertheless, there is still plenty to play for. It is interesting to note that, according to the Department for Education, a significant

number of projects in the Priority Schools Building Programme have not been accepted by the main contractor PFI tenderers. There is simply no profit to take. Most schools sites are extremely complex, physically and socially. Only architects are trained to unpick the various strands of the tapestry and weave it into a meaningful amalgam of old and new.

We can anticipate other areas where schools can't do without innovation and clever lateral thinking. For example, the desperate need for new school places has only partially been addressed. Here there will be the need to add and extend existing primary school sites, economically and quickly, in key areas of need. In late 2013, the government provided local authorities with £800 million to directly fund 70,000 additional places, which had to be 'high quality'. These are perfect projects to give young innovative practices the chance to explore prefabricated technologies that work, environmentally and socially.

The private sector, providing 10 per cent of school places, increasingly recognises the commercial value of architecture. In a competitive market, good design is essential. This awareness is increasingly evident in the state sector, where low-grade, unmodernised schools are still much in evidence. The recent survey of 1,000 schools by school leaders' network The Key found that more than a third of heads felt their schools weren't fit for purpose. Its wider findings suggest there is a longer-term view to take: the idea that good design ultimately saves money. The architecture community needs to make this case more strongly.

Mark Dudek is an architect and author of a number of books on school design



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4. Evelyn Grace Academy, south London, by Zaha Hadid Architects
5. Stoke Newington School, London, by Jestic + Whiles

6. Ballifield Primary School, Sheffield, by Prue Chiles Architects
7. (Opposite) Westminster Academy, London, by Allford Hall Monaghan Morris

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