

DANECOURT COMMUNITY SCHOOL GILLINGHAM

PROJECT INFO

Gross internal floor area:
693 sqm

Building cost:
£790,000.00
(£1,139 / sqm)

Total construction cost
(including preliminaries
and external works):
£900,000.00
(£1,370 / sqm)

Note:
Playground was
commissioned and
installed by the school
as a separate contract
and is excluded from the
building cost total.

Programme:
Phase 1 start:
5 June 2006
Phase 1 completion:
29 January 2007
Phase 2 completion:
10 August 2007

About Danecourt School

Danecourt Community School in Gillingham, Kent has approximately 112 places for pupils aged between 2 and 11 with moderate and complex learning difficulties. Many pupils have other or additional learning difficulties such as severe learning, speech or communication difficulties. A growing number of pupils have autistic spectrum disorders. Danecourt is the only special school catering for primary age pupils with moderate and complex learning difficulties in the Medway unitary authority and the majority of pupils have to travel from across the Medway towns. Unlike non-SEN (special educational

needs) schools most of the pupils at Danecourt School are collected by minibus to and from the school each day – entry in and out of the school is a much more managed process than the parent pick up and drop-off routine of other schools.

Foundations and key stage classrooms were housed in modular classrooms, which, by 2004, were at the end of their useful life; Medway Council commissioned Clay Architecture Ltd to design a new foundation and Key Stage 1 wing with a hall, soft room and staff room facilities. After a lengthy feasibility study and value engineering process, work began on site on the 5th June 2006 > 30





PROJECT TEAM

Client:
Medway Council
Children's Services
through Medway Council
Design and Surveying
Team

Architect:
Clay Architecture Ltd.

Main Contractor:
BW May and Son Ltd.

Quantity Surveyor:
Huntley Cartwright

Structural Engineer:
Alan Baxter Partnership

Service Engineer:
Medway Council Design
and Surveying Team
(Electrical Services)
and the Walker Mower
Partnership
(Mechanical Services)

Planning Supervisor:
Medway Council Design
and Surveying Team

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and was completed and handed over on the 10th August 2007, with the official opening on the 12th October 2007.

Danecourt School pupils and staff are the happiest and friendliest bunch of people we've worked with on a school job, which is a testament to the hard work and dedication the Headteacher, John Somers and his staff have put into creating a great school environment.

Design Statement

Recent primary school projects by the practice fall into two broad groups: there are projects involving refurbishment and a



number of small, modest but strategic extensions to existing school buildings – these projects require a number of different design responses, each one specific and unique to brief, site, location, and even to different locations on the same site. Then there are the new build school projects, which – although located on different sites, all start with variations of the same generic brief produced by the DCfS. We have, with the new build school projects, tried to set up a dialogue or laboratory for the exploration and testing of common themes and ideas between the projects, as a way of building up a knowledge base on school projects within the practice.

Danecourt School belongs to the latter category, it is one of four overlapping new build school projects worked on over a period of 3 years, and the only one to be built – but it holds the germ of key ideas that have taken root in each project which then diverged in the process of design development.

The central idea is to work and develop on classroom archetypes as the starting point for generating the design of each primary school.

Primary schools differ significantly from secondary schools in that they are subject to

ABOUT CLAY ARCHITECTURE

Clay Architecture was set-up by husband and wife team and Architectural Association graduates Camilla Prizeman and Kasan Goh in 2000 when they took over the George Clay Partnership, a well-respected 95-year-old north Kent architectural practice.

Prizeman and Goh were attracted by the start-up opportunities for a young architectural practice in the heart of the Thames Gateway regeneration area – an enterprise that had some parallels to their experience of working on South East Asia in the mid-nineties.

The core of their current work stems from Kent: since start-up Clays have a handful of built projects and built work-in-progress including a gymnastic community activity centre in Faversham; a new wing to a special needs primary school in Gillingham, extensions to a newly amalgamated community primary school in Rainham; and the Sevenoaks Kaleidoscope project.

In the pipeline are Sure Starts, School, and a number of residential developments including a block of flats in Sevenoaks.

significantly less churn between teaching periods; a primary school pupil spends most of their time during an academic year in one classroom, and this classroom is often considered the primary school teacher's domain, a space in his or her 'ownership', into which the teacher received his or her charges. Each year, the classroom is the main space in which a class of pupils and their teacher will exchange knowledge, play, interact, and socialise – it therefore follows that the quality of air, light and space in this one room or environment is of the utmost consequence.

In selecting archetypes to develop, we looked at different examples of classrooms and how they worked: the school at Marl-Drewer, Wesphalia by Hans Scharoun; Herman Hertzberger's Montessori school in Delft; local authority SEAC system builds from the 60s and 70s; a post-war school building on which we had carried out a survey and a feasibility study for refurbishment – the unpromising exterior of which belied a wonderfully light and airy interior, in which the generous ceilings and clerestory windows created the impression of spaciousness in rooms that turned out to be much smaller in plan than a standard modern classroom.

For Danecourt School we settled on a building section which is a textbook example on how to provide natural light and passive stack ventilation through high level clerestory windows over the central corridor to a double-banked single-storey building – a split gable-roof with a vertical band of windows between the steeper and shallower roof

slopes. Rather than elaborate on this simple but elegant archetypal diagram, all detail was pared down and simplified to emphasise and increase the legibility of the diagram-ness of the section – we wanted a section that was as direct as a child's drawing of a house – this aesthetic was then applied throughout the buildings, as much a budget necessity as an ambition to create spaces that are clear and easy to understand, navigate and use – way-finding and avoiding disorientation being an important element in the design of SEN spaces.

Because the new foundation and KS1 wing was to occupy part of the site vacated by the existing modular classroom block, the building was laid out in order to facilitate construction in two phases – phase one involved the completion of the new classrooms followed by the decanting of existing classrooms into the new accommodation, and the demolition of the existing modular classroom block to make way for the second phase of building works. ■

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