

In June 2004 the DfES published *Schools for the Future: Exemplar Designs, Concepts and Ideas*. The publication is meant as a guide for local authorities, a starting point to get councils and school staff thinking about their requirements and to help them explain their thoughts and ambitions to architects

Turning A Vision Into Reality

by Michál Cohen of Walters and Cohen



The Exemplar Design

Walters and Cohen was asked to design an Exemplar primary school for a non-specific suburban site. During the four-month design period we were privileged to be exposed to some of the leading educational thinkers in the UK, a unique and valuable experience. We investigated successful school models in Scandinavia, Italy and the US and talked and consulted with pupils and staff at our 'partner school' – assigned to us in the absence of a real client to provide us with a school community to consult as our design emerged – and with other expert bodies assigned to us by the DfES. The design process involved a great deal of drawing work, testing and challenging our ideas and preconceptions.

Given the suburban nature of our Exemplar site, our design is essentially single storey, which is ideal for primary school children. The whole building has been designed to allow full accessibility for disabled users, pupils, teachers and visitors.

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The school is designed around three main elements: the community zone, an administration block (which also houses a nursery and reception class), and the main teaching wing and heart of the school. The central space, the heart of the school, is key to the philosophy and flexibility of the design. This generous, dynamic space can be tailored to the individual needs of any school and is a space where almost any school activity can take place. It is here that the school can really create its own identity. It provides a flexible area for the library and for small-group rooms and specialist stores, but it can also be used for performances and film viewings, as an exhibition space, for creative activities and wet play, and as a café and social hub of the school.

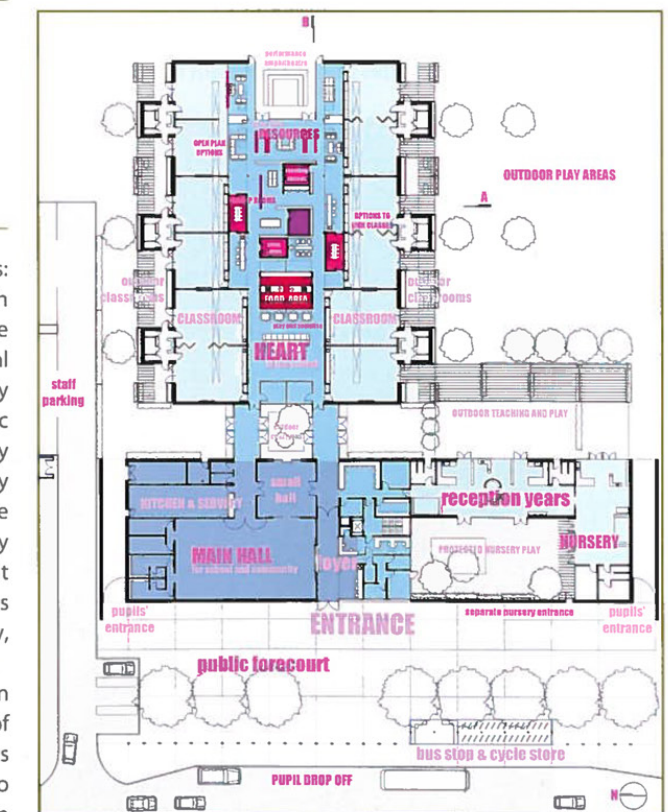
The classroom layout is very flexible: arranged in rows on either side of the heart space, any number of classrooms can be linked together, like the carriages of a train. Their volume can expand and contract into the heart of the school. All classrooms are rectilinear in shape so they are easy to furnish and supervise. They

have high ceilings so as to be airy and bright, and each pair of classrooms opens out onto an external classroom for outside teaching.

Given that the majority of bullying in schools occurs in the toilets, we have sought to minimise the risk by providing each pair of classrooms with a smaller shared toilet pod, accessed directly from the classroom or via the playground during break time.

Where possible, circulation has been incorporated into the heart of the school, so moving around the building becomes part of the learning experience.

Wonderful staff work and social spaces have been included in the design, and community use is encouraged by the inclusion of a community forecourt, an internet café and easy access to multi-functioning areas such as the main school hall. The structure of the building – a steel frame – means that none of the walls is load bearing and so partitions can be moved to change the size of teaching areas or adapt them for other uses. This creates a flexible and adaptable building that can be modified to meet curriculum needs over time.



Exemplar Layout

Transposing principles into reality

Following the publication of *Schools for the Future*, we were contacted by local authorities regarding new primary schools in Stafford and Wakefield. We were delighted to have the opportunity to put our knowledge into practice, working with a real client and site – both of which are key design drivers for our practice – and tailoring the various elements of our Exemplar design to meet their aspirations. Both clients wanted some elements of community access, which our flexible design is able to accommodate.

Redbrook Hayes School in Stafford is a one-form-entry school, with a nursery and community library. We were able to incorporate many of the ideas of the Exemplar, including the large forecourt that welcomes people and reinforces this as a community building. The hall and the new branch library are shared facilities situated to the front of the building; access can be arranged so that library users can access certain areas of the school and pupils can go straight from their school into the library.

Outdoor classrooms, toilet arrangements and the heart of the school have been modified from the Exemplar to suit this site and the client's requirements.



The heart is adjacent to the hall and is a 26 x 12m central space acting as a circulation area between classrooms and, more importantly, offering a range of spaces and activity areas, making it the focus of the school. It is essentially open-plan but broken up into modules by devices including a wet space, cooking kiosk, social areas and ICT, library and group-learning spaces.

Cobblers Lane School is 1.5FE and includes a behavioural unit. However, the principles of its design are very similar to the Exemplar. Cobblers Lane School is now out to tender and Redbrook Hayes School is on site. We have also designed five primary schools for a PFI bid for Norfolk County Council and have made a two-storey model around the same 'heart-led' design.

Lessons to learn

One element to come out of our research for the Exemplar is the hierarchy of spaces, so that the heart of the school is a shared learning environment, directly accessed from all classrooms. All classrooms benefit from an outdoor element. Modular framed buildings allow flexibility and adaptability and this has been worked up successfully in our designs for the school buildings that are now on site.

Another key challenge has been the coordination of the services, in particular the natural ventilation to all parts of the school, and making sure that this is affordable and meets the legislation for environmental sustainability that has come into force since our work on the Exemplar.

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I believe that in the future, schools in the UK might embrace the European model, which promotes awareness and consideration of others as well as being a great environment to teach and learn in. Not all local authorities will want to explore the opportunities that this type of design could lead to, e.g. class bases that open onto the heart, but our designs to date are flexible enough that this can still happen should the schools wish to adapt.

We have found consultation to be a most important and inspiring part of the process when designing a school. Engaging with the staff and pupils from the



outset and being flexible and responsive to their ideas and requirements is paramount in order for a project as sensitive and important as an educational establishment to be a success.

I fully acknowledge that good teaching will happen whatever the physical circumstances of the classroom. However, I also passionately believe that our school designs support this. The consultation and design process can promote ideas in terms of how teaching can be delivered. Clients need to allow time for this debate to happen before settling their brief; this debate will engender excitement and ownership in those who are invited to participate, encouraging community use in a safe and secure way.

Michál Cohen is a founder of Walters and Cohen. The practice won its first commission for an education building in 1996 and has since undertaken projects in the independent and state sectors.

Michál has been responsible for many of the practice's education projects, including eight primary schools, three children's centres, six nurseries and our DfES Exemplar primary school under the Schools for the Future initiative.

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