

COMMENT

Knowledge is power

Teachers know schools best and their input can be vital during a redesign. Pellings partner Nicolas Maari argues for the benefits of encouraging teachers to have a say in the design of UK schools

The soaring demand for school places throughout the UK and the cut-backs in public expenditure have created a dilemma for government policy makers – whether to impose prescriptive design rules or allow teachers to have a say in how schools are laid out.

As architects, we firmly believe that in designing schools we should work closely with teaching staff to understand their teaching methods and to create as near an ideal teaching environment as possible.

We have to take into account the scarcity of affordable land and the budgets that local education authorities are able to allocate to the provision of additional facilities, whether remodelling and expanding existing or creating new build schools.

Teacher-led design can improve efficiency because teachers often understand the space usage better than the design consultants

Teachers know what works and understand how to operate, which helps form the characteristics that make a school unique and enables successful education. A failure to have input from teachers during a school redesign can risk eroding these benefits to the detriment of both pupils and staff. However, this needs to be balanced against the Education Funding Agency's need to have flexible space to deliver a range of teaching styles.

Standardised designs

The Education Funding Agency's baseline design for schools guidance was introduced in 2014 to promote standardised design specifications across a range of educational facilities and providing guidelines on how the schools can be delivered within restricted cost and area allowances.

Although well intentioned, the guidance encourages rigid design, is unsuited to complicated school refurbishment projects, and often leaves little room to incorporate the individual school's approach or teaching methods. The guidance focuses on cost, rather than involving teachers in the design process.

But teacher-led design can improve efficiency because teachers often understand the space usage better than the design consultants. For example, with the advent of multiple meal sittings, teachers can provide intelligence that helps designers to create more



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Goat Lees Primary School, Willow Dene School



Teachers know what works...which helps make a school unique

Nicolas Maari

efficient dining spaces. Teachers are often imaginative and can creatively plan the teaching day around the flexible use of space and effective pupil circulation.

While Building Bulletin 103 (BB103) had been praised for being a significant improvement on its predecessor BB99, because it allowed the overall space allocation to be used more flexibly, the recent launch of the Schedule of Accommodation has to some extent reversed that by prescribing specific floor plate sizes to pupil numbers. For example, for a two-form entry school the area should not exceed a total of 2,072 m².

In some respects standardisation of design makes clear what can be delivered within constrained budgets, but at the same time it allows little input from teaching staff who know best. This is particularly concerning with the larger academies and free school

trusts where teacher input would be invaluable before they are rolled out nationally.

Positive approach

Where there has been a more positive approach to teacher input has been with the recently launched BB104 for special schools and special educational needs which has replaced BB102.

It gives various design ranges depending on the extent of the need in terms of behaviour and health of the pupils. For this reason the Department of Education gives more flexibility for teacher input into the design. Some schools may have more teaching areas while some will have more main hall, dining and ancillary spaces.

A further consideration in the years to come will be the maintenance during the building life-cycle of schools that have been designed in BIM and that will require input from schools maintenance and facilities management teams.

At Pellings, we believe that while some aspects of standardisation are positive in driving efficiencies and sharing out constrained budgets the 'default' approach must surely focus on input from a teacher-led design body and a thorough investigation of curriculum needs together with a creative approach to compromise. ■

Nicolas Maari BA(Hons) Dip (Arch) RIBA ARB has recently joined Pellings as a Partner, bringing with him over 10 years' experience in delivering a wide range of expansion, refurbishment and new build schools. Nicolas comes from Arcadis where he was the lead Design Manager for the Education Funding Agency Free school and Priority Building Schools Programme projects

EDUCATION

Pupils create 'lab of the future'

A futuristic science classroom was designed by Year 11 students from Birmingham as part of a nationwide competition.

Four pupils at the King Edwards VI Camp Hill School for Girls developed a mixed-science lab combining the features of a working classroom and laboratory in a single space.

The girls, who were awarded £20,000 worth of science lab furniture on top of the option to realise their dream lab, invented horseshoe-shaped desks arranged so that each student would face the teacher.

Interior company Innova Design Solutions, who sponsored the contest, translated the designs into a flexible layout with desks organised in a semi-circle, a practical lab in the middle and the teacher wall at the front.

The company also installed gas taps and electric outlets towards the edge of each bench. Sinks were located at the perimeter with deep work benches for practical lessons.

