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Designing for autism

Christopher Beaver guides us through the process of designing autism-friendly schools

I recently went to Denmark to talk to some educators there about a school they were planning for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). It is not often that architects from the UK are asked to advise the Danes, as they are usually the ones setting the standards. They were keen to ask the question: "What are the things we should design for that will make this school different to any other school?" They were conscious of the fact that their selection process (much like ours in the UK) is likely to land them with an architect who has no knowledge of autism and no experience of designing for special needs. With this in mind, I would like to discuss a few points that seem to me central to getting somewhere near to an autism-friendly result.

Your architect and your brief

It helps to have an architect who knows the ropes but, as there are few who have been there before, this is unlikely. Matters are not made any better by the fact that the professionals are likely to be appointed by the contractor, and traditionally contractors are not experts on special needs.

The next most pressing matter is the brief, not just a schedule of rooms and areas but all the technical considerations that need to be included to ensure a high degree of cost certainty. This should also include the features that will go to making the building autism-friendly, so should really be written by somebody who has a knowledge of designing for (ASD). This is where a RIBA client design advisor can come in; if your appointed architect is not experienced in this field then a client design advisor who is can bring significant benefits to the project by contributing to the brief at the right

time. It is no good having this input after the building has been designed; it must be part of the development of the brief and the design. The Department for Children, Schools and Families' (DCSF's) paper BB102 sets out the areas of design specific to SEN in general, but this should complement the experience of the designer, not replace it.

Nothing is more satisfying than seeing your building re-invented by those for whom it has been designed

Proxemics

One of the first things to consider is that pupils with ASD generally need more space to move around in. It can be seriously disturbing to them if they are in a space with a lot of others with little space around themselves, rather like being in a packed underground

train. The dilemma here is that the space standards and cost allowances do not recognise this, so architects have to be particularly skilful in their space allocation to make sure that the planning of the school prioritizes this need. This is particularly important in circulation areas. If pupils can move freely in an enjoyable, well-lit space, their sense of freedom and well-being will be immediately apparent.

I have noticed how children who are comfortable in a space will invent other uses for it, such as playing particular games or reading stories in small groups. It is a sure sign that they are happy in the space and want to go on enjoying it. Nothing is more satisfying than seeing your building re-invented by those for whom it has been designed.

A clear geography

Schools are usually big places with lots of different rooms for a variety of activities, such as classrooms, assembly spaces, quiet rooms, hydrotherapy pools, sensory rooms, staff offices and meeting rooms. However, what



Nursery at Kennedy Leigh Centre, Hendon



Curvilinear wall at Sunfield residential school, Kidderminster

Curved walls are much enjoyed by many with ASD

designed to create a space that is warm, friendly, well lit and well ventilated. There are times when pupils with ASD will want to be alone, so a circulation space that incorporates a quiet corner or two will be of great

pupils with ASD need is a simple and easily understood route for getting from A to B. Long corridors with changes of direction, changes in level and confusing signs all add up to a "place from hell" in the mind of an autistic child and cause endless frustration and confusion which can result in difficult or challenging behaviour.

Wayfinding (layout and landmarks) addresses the issue of how pupils orientate themselves and find their way around their school. What is needed is a simple and clearly understood geography with room to move around, calm and non-stimulating colours, unfussy and non-reflective finishes all

benefit. These need only be small seating areas fitting into recesses. Curved walls are much enjoyed by many with ASD; they create a sense of informality and have an organic feel, in contrast to the hard lines of the traditional rectilinear approach.

Classroom design

The size of classrooms for pupils with ASD is difficult to determine because it can depend so much on where the pupil is on the spectrum. Low functioning pupils may well need a higher teacher to pupil ratio and this could well mean that you have only two or three pupils in a classroom. Each school's pupil intake

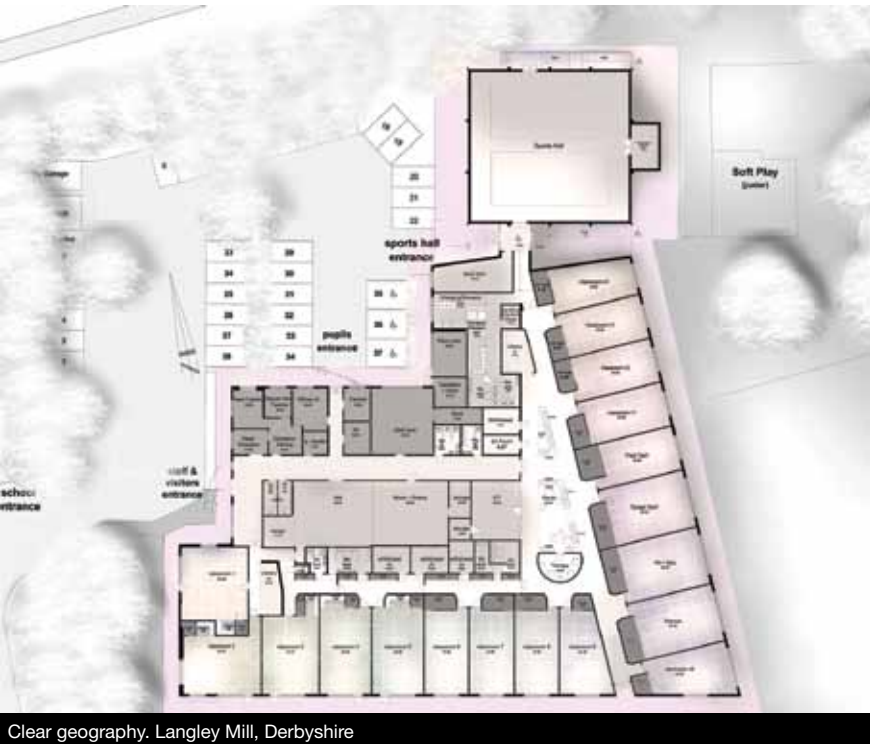
will vary from year to year so it is difficult to anticipate how many low functioning pupils you will have in a given year. One solution might be to have classrooms that are divisible by folding partitions or doors. However, it can be expensive to achieve good acoustic separation between classrooms, and it is also questionable just how successful that acoustic separation is in practise. The other solution is to have a variety of classroom sizes so that one or two are suitable for smaller groups of low functioning pupils.

I am a strong advocate of good natural lighting and ventilation in classrooms. A single window at one end of the classroom will only ventilate the first three or four meters, whereas a high level window on the opposite wall will give good through ventilation. High level windows will also improve natural light penetration into the classroom. However, bright light and glare should be avoided; a highly successful, though expensive, solution is to have adjustable horizontal blinds in the cavity between the two glass layers. These can be remotely controlled.

Another factor that most schools will have to face is that some pupils will be incontinent. In such a situation, the pupil will need a change of clothes and may need to have a shower before being returned to the classroom. It is no good having the nearest shower room some 20 meters away so that the pupil suffers the indignity of being taken past other pupils, staff and visitors. The ideal is a shower and WC facility adjacent to the classroom (perhaps shared between two classrooms) where instant access is available with minimum fuss and indignity.

Quiet rooms

A pupil that is displaying difficult or challenging behaviour can be a highly disruptive presence in the classroom and needs a space near at hand for a period of calming down. Locating a



Clear geography. Langley Mill, Derbyshire



New build at Sunfield School, Kidderminster

number of quiet rooms near classrooms can be of great benefit when it comes to dealing with this kind of problem. Alternatively, there can be quiet areas designated within the classroom itself, but these may not be as effective as they are not generally spaces with any sound separation; it is usually the sound of an upset and frustrated pupil that is so disturbing to others.

The little things

While space here doesn't permit an in depth examination of all aspects of designing for pupils with ASD, it is important to pay attention to the detail of school design. Ask any headteacher with

experience of autism-friendly buildings and they will doubtless come up with a catalogue of things in the school that are wrong or simply don't work as they should: door handles that come off leaving a pupil locked in a classroom, sharp corners on which pupils can self harm, lights, switches and thermostats that are fixed in locations ideal for tampering, fences and handrails that offer climbing opportunities – the list is seemingly endless.

Conclusion

Utilising an effective client design advisor at an early stage of the design process should make a real difference

to the quality of schools designed for children with ASD and, in the long run, produce cost benefits as a result of getting it right first time and not having to spend unnecessary money on maintenance. It is, however, essential that the advisor knows something about designing for ASD and understands the issues involved.

The heart of the brief cannot be written down. It has to come from an understanding of the autistic mind. The over-riding considerations must be how to create learning environments that are comforting and give a sense of security, how to provide a feeling of space and include places for being alone and for socialising, and how to ensure an easily understood geography with no threatening or over-stimulating features. This understanding can only come with time and patient observation of how children and teachers interact. **SEN**



Circulation space at Sunfield residential school, Kidderminster

Further information

Christopher Beaver is a partner in GA Architects:
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