

# Designing with Children

## Falmouth School

Architects at Urban Salon, working within the Sorrell Foundation's *Joinedupdesignforschools* initiative, began developing plans for a refurbished block at Falmouth school in 2005. From the start, school students in years 9 and 10 acted as clients for the project. An existing design and technology building was due for refurbishment and the pupils were keen to replace it with a more efficient and environmentally sound building and to provide an attractive, fit for purpose workspace within an eye-catching school building which everyone could be proud of.

Pupils at the school responded to a school notice asking for volunteers interested in engaging in a design project. The students, from years 9 and 10, aged 12 to 15 at the start of the project, then signed up to what would work out to be a monthly morning meeting over much of the design period. Because of the length of the project, some of the students left school in 2006 and new 'pupil-clients' came in; there was a working group of about 15-20 children at any one time.

### Motivation

Throughout, the architects and pupils had the support of teachers, council contacts, contractors and subcontractors who were all clear that they would be working with a client group of young people – to be treated in much the same way as an adult client group and with a similar set of design processes, negotiations and decisions to face. Project architect Alex Mowat's personal motivation for including children was to engender a sense of ownership of the building in the belief that this would have an impact upon how the building was later used and looked after; he also recognised that the building would have been a very different (and therefore unsuitable) place without the young people's deep engagement in the design process. This fell in line with The Sorrell Foundation's aim that: *'Joinedupdesignforschools gives pupils the role of clients for a design project at their school. They work in teams to create a brief for their*

### What

School – Design Technology Building

### Where

Falmouth, Cornwall, United Kingdom  
Falmouth, United Kingdom

### Age

12-16

### Group Size

20

### Project Stage

Brief, Construction, Design Development, Technical Design

### Children's Roles

Clients, Expert Consultants

### Timescale

2005-2008

### Partners

Alex Mowat (Architect)  
Cornwall County Council (Funder)  
Creative Youth Network (Funder)  
Department for Children, Schools and Families (Funder)  
Cowlin Construction (Balfour Beatty) (Contractor)  
Technicker (Engineer)  
Momentum (Construction Design and Management)  
Falmouth School Pupils (Participants)

*designers or architects and engage in a process that leads to innovative design concepts for schools and new life skills for pupils'.*

## Children's involvement

At the start of the brief-building process, the children, with facilitation from school staff only, created a play entitled 'a day in the life of a dusty old design and technology block', which they used to explain to the architects and teachers details of the building's existing use and their ideas for the next stages of design. Early on, Urban Salon Architects and the Sorrell Foundation took the children on a memorable day out to London to view precedent architecture.

As the architects began to draw up ideas and respond to the children's thoughts and requests, they encouraged students to think broadly and imaginatively yet think carefully about final decision-making according to proportions of budgets available and allocated. The young people's engagement in authentic client roles meant that the monthly meetings would sometimes include contractors, council members and other adults. At each meeting, time was strictly allocated to listening and then to responding, with young people's rejoinders always being taken seriously. Urban Salon focussed on the use of models, due to greater ease of understanding, rather than design plans as a means of communicating design options. Overall, the interactions between young people and adults were heralded as a success because of the ways in which the children reacted and thought: *'They were better than most client groups that we had, I'd say, because they were better at listening to each other...they were very good at balancing the aspirational and practical'* (Alex Mowat).

The children were frequently inhabiting their researcher-roles, even at times beyond workshop and meeting session with the architects so that they would come in to meetings very well prepared and engaged in all the details. Alex Mowat states of the children: *'And any thoughts we had of it being a case of coaxing them through the process were soon dispelled. They were extremely knowledgeable; they researched what they didn't know and they would be quick to spot potential problems in the design'*.

At construction stages, the children made site visits to construction areas when school finished and although there was a considerable educational aspect to this, from the school's point of view, the architects' intention was to enable the children to engage in full client responsibilities. They went into the construction environment with great enthusiasm, curiosity and with refreshing interest in all contractors' roles heedless of 'hierarchies' on the worksite. They sometimes took a protective and supervisory standpoint over elements of the school environment they valued; as one boy said to a contractor: *'make sure your concrete lorry doesn't hurt our tree'*.

## Outputs and outcomes

The children's desire for sustainable products resulted in timber frame construction, over steel and concrete options. The pupils' interest in Cornish identity urged them to choose black, yellow and white as the key colours for the building and these ideas were directly translated into the build. Concerns about there being areas where bullies might lurk, gave rise to Gorse planting around the building to eradicate hiding areas. Whilst a difficult decision had to be made by the children to initially omit a wind turbine in favour of finishing off existing building work, the children themselves boldly and successfully pursued local residents' approval and raised funds for a wind turbine to be fitted at a later date. A key outcome for

the project overall was the fast build, which remaining project students could view and use the next term – the whole new design and technology block was completed over the summer holidays. For the architects, the children and the school, a number of building awards including one from RIBA was a great achievement at the end of a hugely educational, practical and collaborative process.

## Resources

Architecture Today. Urban Salon: Design studio, Falmouth School, Devon  
<http://www.architecturetoday.co.uk/?p=1756> (accessed 9 May 2013).

Joinedupdesignforschools <http://www.thesorrellfoundation.com/joinedupdesignforschools.php>  
(accessed 9 May 2013).

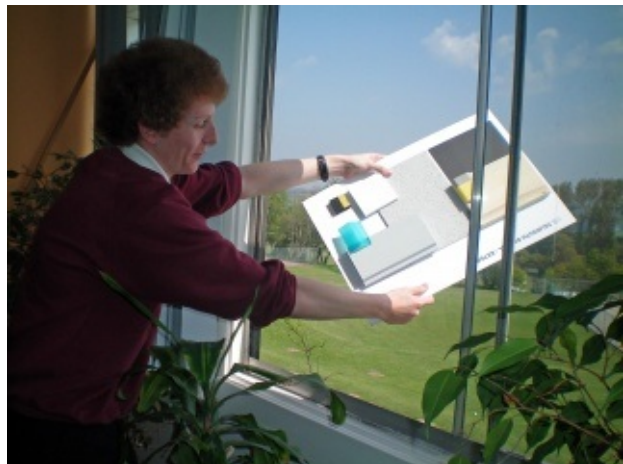
Jones, W. (2008) 'Falmouth School – Sustainable Child's Play'  
<http://www.klhuk.com/media/4628/falmouthbuilding.pdf> (accessed 9 May 2013).

Personal communication with Alex Mowat (1 May 2013).

Urban Salon Architects. School-Design Studio, Falmouth. Cornwall County Council  
[http://www.urbansalonarchitects.com/content.php?page\\_id=782&s=2](http://www.urbansalonarchitects.com/content.php?page_id=782&s=2) (accessed 9 May 2013).



*Courtesy: Gareth Gardner; Urban Salon*



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