

SCHOOLS ■ John Pardey/HKR in Bermondsey

*Dominic Cullinan
applauds the intelligent
expansion of a pioneering
1960s primary school.
Photos: James Morris.*



The grade-two listed 1960s Eveline Low school in Bermondsey, south London, has been reborn as the Phoenix Primary School following its expansion to two-form entry and the addition of a nursery. The innovative original building, designed by the Department of Education & Science Development Group, was cited as exemplary by the 1967 Plowden Report – Children and their Primary Schools – because ‘the whole environment (inside and out) was conceived as potential teaching space as opposed to a series of closed classrooms and non-teaching areas’.

Now better recognised than the Development Group are two of its members, David and Mary Medd, and Eveline Low Primary School is widely regarded as their masterpiece. The group’s remit was to devise a strategy for building thousands of new schools to meet growing demand, and to replace the outdated and decrepit stock. It was also charged with reducing costs on each new school by 30 per cent. Sound familiar?

To devise its plan the group looked carefully at how teachers and children used the (mostly Victorian) school buildings of the day. They recognised that learning spilled out of the classroom into the daylit corridors, allowing different group sizes and activities. Around this hands-on research the Medds developed a new approach to school design that centred on the natural curiosity of the child rather than on a teacher at the head of the classroom. They created a realm of different spaces that would foster a variety of interests and activities, using a palette of



Above The £7.2m project exploits spaces at the perimeter of the site, leaving the listed school untouched.
Opposite Playspaces, a key aspect of the original school, are retained; site plan showing new interventions.



re-entrant corners, split levels, timber screens jutting into rooms, small side rooms, built-in child-sized furniture and even purpose-made ironmongery. From today’s perspective, these things may seem counter-intuitive to the design of a generous, flexible school but at Eveline Low the effect is mesmerising, making a string of miniature palatial chambers for small-fingered activity. The whole is an integrated arcade of learning, seamlessly connected with the landscapes outside.

For all its beautiful and continuous stream-of-learning interior and its ready access to playgrounds, the school’s backside, with its face to the street, was a sprawl, the edge onto Marlborough Grove in particular almost non-existent. The team responsible for the school’s recent overhaul, led by John Pardey Architects and HKR, chose to exploit the non-spaces between the Medds’ bungalow buildings and the road for the new extensions, leaving the original generous playground areas intact.

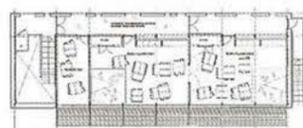
Cleverly using these found spaces, the additions distinguish the two entities of city and school with an intricate wall. Now you can be inside or outside the school rather than merely inside or outside its buildings. And the intriguing glimpses between the buildings are maintained by the use of wooden slats and undulations in the perimeter.

Upstairs in the new buildings, the widened corridors that look out to the street make enticing antechambers to classrooms that in turn overlook the playgrounds within. The alternating floor-to-ceiling windows and



coloured glass panels forming boxes, make the threshold created by the long wall deep and varied. Candy-like additions perforate the boundary, and the inviting effect makes me long to go back to school.

In Plowden's world this dream-like environment could come right up to the very walls of learning. In the morning the school would simply soak up the children and they would flow in and out. In today's security-



conscious world the point of entry has become critical. At the Phoenix School, the reception therefore becomes a space of grand arrival, complete with grand staircase. Now it's all demarcation and electric keys, and deep inside are found the classrooms individualised to match and define their precisely numbered cohorts.

The combination of building on the edge whilst providing the over-prescribed, cellular spaces required today has not quite made a new palace within the extension. There are five staircases and two lifts to serve only six classrooms on the first floor, and the flowing interconnectivity of learning spaces in the Medd school is hard to find. When two classrooms are found together they are at least compensated with a connecting door, but they're single-sided and feel insular. With the blinds often closed, the generous window-wall struggles to connect them back to the school as a whole.

David Medd's liberal outlook on school

Above Most new classrooms are set above ground; typical plans. Left The refurbished original classrooms provide resource spaces. Below Reception; former class space, now a reading area.



Right The new classrooms open to the landscaped play areas. Below Winter garden; new classroom space.

life was supported by his steely determination to get it right. He would speak directly to children, firing words at machine-gun speed. You could see them rise to the challenge, either by looking on in awe or jumping in to connect with him. For Medd, the ideal place for children was childhood itself, but this was necessarily a hard-won, choreographed and cared-for space needing constant attention to process.

Following the Medds' example, the Plowden Report recommended that architects work closely with teachers. In modern classrooms where large sums are spent on providing daylight to classrooms, we frequently find the blinds down and the lights turned on. Perhaps it's time once again to roll up our sleeves and, with Medd-like tenacity, tackle the vexed questions of buildings and learning directly with educators rather than just with ministries and large contractors.

Dominic Cullinan is director of SCABAL, whose recent work includes Dunraven Sports Hall in London, Walkers' headquarters in Grand Cayman, and the design advisor role for the UCL Academy (see p32).



John Pardey writes *Eveline Lowe was among the first 'open-plan' schools promoted in the Plowden Report. It provided spaces that were crowded and bustling, with bays for various activities, working surfaces for messy play and raised, carpeted 'quiet' areas. The focal point was a 'Kiva' – a small carpeted room with stepped seating on three sides and bunk beds for resting and reading, that derived from Pueblo Indian communal spaces the Medds had visited. The teaching areas, including circulation spaces, formed a continuous covered route, and were expressed as linked clusters of pitched-roof brick pavilions with verandas and gardens.*

Our project creates a two-form entry school for 420 pupils, plus a 50-place nursery. Optimising space and minimising the footprint was a priority, so we placed new buildings around the edge of the site to form a 'necklace' to complement the listed building. A large car park to the front provided space for a new 'grown-up' entrance and reception, which leads directly to the former main entrance via a new winter garden where parents can gather. Paired around the entrance, four new classrooms conceived as glazed 'boxes' are raised on stilts. Another glazed element on Marlborough Grove replaces a caretaker's

house and comes down to ground, above a low brick plinth, forming a new nursery. Four further classrooms occupy a space along Rolls Road, with two glazed classroom boxes above a boundary wall and two tucked in below.

The areas contained by the new accommodation provide a sense of place and contribute to the 'educational' landscape. By maintaining a complete separation from the existing building, the integrity of old and new is maintained.

Within the new buildings, rather ironically but in line with Building Bulletin 99, we returned to rectilinear, paired classrooms off a corridor (which provides a buffer to road noise, storage, and spaces for small groups). The facades, sealed on the road side, open up to the playground to allow controlled ventilation using roof-mounted cowls. With phase-change linings and underfloor heating, a comfortable environment is maintained throughout the year.

The existing buildings are generally used as resource spaces – specialist and communal – and so still offer the generosity of space envisaged by the Medds, while teaching takes place in the more conservative new classroom spaces that wrap the original buildings. Perhaps in another 40 years the uses will be reversed.



Bob Barton of Barton Engineers writes *The LCC Board School that predated the 1960s single-storey school on the site was destroyed by a V2 rocket, and parts of its foundations and basement remained. This left us with the problem of picking our way between basement walls, sewers and the listed buildings. Our solution was to use bored piles through holes created in the original basement slabs, to support a flat slab raft at ground level that was designed to tolerate a seemingly random pile layout.*

The superstructures of the new buildings are steel, with precast floors and timber joisted roofs. Several cantilevers allow the upper floors to jetty out over the boundary walls. We took advantage of the ground level concrete raft to build fixed bases to all of our new columns, creating inverted portals on which are sat the upper storey classrooms. The ground-floor columns act like a field of wheat, bending in unison to resist wind and stability forces, allowing thin necks at each column head to articulate the form. The 1960s buildings were generally in good condition, apart from some wet rot and minor damage to roof trusses, and required minimal structural renovation.

Project team
Architect: lead designer and contract administrator: John Pardey Architects, HKR Architects; team: John Pardey, Seamus Slattery (HKR), Hugh Richardson (JPA); consultant: Colin Stansfield Smith; client: London Borough of Southwark; structural engineer: Barton Engineers; m&e, fire, lighting, acoustics, Breeam: Hoare Lea; landscape: Grontmij; costs: EC Harris; transport consultant: RPS; CDM: Turner & Townsend; main contractor: Lengard.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Groundworks, in-situ concrete: Paragon Contractors; piling: JM Piling; steel frame: Newton Fabricators; m&e: Battledore; windows: Velfac; curtain wall: Sapa; rain-screen cladding: Reynobond; metalwork: Kingsway Stairs; timber doors: Leaderflush Shapland, Humphrey & Stretton; lifts: Stannah; furniture: FF&E Consulting; lighting: Zumtobel; single-ply roof: Samafil; sanitaryware: Armitage Shanks; flooring: Dalsouple (rubber), Christy Carpets.

