

The building concept

High quality accommodation, designed for new ways of learning, now replaces worn-out, unsuitable environments, and older buildings have been fully refurbished, remodelled and extended. The result is the creation of three mini schools, Logic, Creative and Global, which are connected together around a dramatic landscaped courtyard that has become the focus for the whole school.

The design team worked closely with the school in re-working the design proposals, which are very much in tune with Kent County Council (KCC) and the school's vision of transformational learning. KCC provided a clear critique and the design team held a series of collaborative workshops and meetings with the stakeholders to develop the scheme. Our design concept seeks to break the mould of traditional school buildings and provide a modern, sustainable, flexible and adaptable new school. To achieve this we built on a clear conceptual structure for of three 'mini schools' and have developed this idea into a robust and highly successful working model. A key aspect of our design concept is using residual space to its full capacity. In our scheme,

traditional circulation areas have been replaced by 'connective tissue'-spaces which act as conduits so that staff and students can get from A to B - but can also be used for both teaching and social activities.

Reviewing the strategic master plan

Demolition of around 33 per cent of the existing building stock provided us with the opportunity to significantly improve the facilities and the image of the school. A key element of the demolition programme was the removal of the constraint of the existing art building which enabled the overall strategic master plan to be reviewed. The northern block, with its hard-to-maintain roofs and inefficient spatial organisation, has been replaced with a new build. The substandard gymnasium and changing rooms have also been demolished. In addition, most of the western facing front wing, with its restrictive spatial design, has been removed. This has created a more generous, well-landscaped setting for the entrance to the schools, as well as creating space to address existing access problems and to separate vehicular and pedestrian movements.

In the place of these structures is a quality, stimulating learning space, comprising of the three main mini schools for their respective curriculum areas - Logic, Creative and Global. The schools are simply organised around a generous, sunny, sheltered central plaza, which enjoys magnificent views out to the west and over the coastline beyond Whitstable. The landscaping has been developed to increase the opportunities for students to learn and socialise in a pleasant and exciting external environment.

The Logic School

The school's existing science and technology block is a relatively new building which has a strong architectural form. The new Logic Mini School has been formed from this building and its curved internal façade is highly effective as one side of the attractive courtyard. Internal modifications to the first floor plaza area are proposed following post completion works. These modifications will re-orientate the original learning arrangements, focusing the learning inwards towards the centre of the space rather than towards the perimeter.

The Creative School

The new Creative Mini School is housed within a 'learning barn' located towards the north of the central plaza, which is connected directly to the extensively refurbished sports hall, providing a physical link and connection between Sports and Creative. Here, as throughout the school, 'in-between' spaces or connective tissue are used to add significant value. In this instance the space enables students and staff to gather informally or formally on

the tiered seating, providing a space which would have traditionally been considered as just circulation to be used in a much more productive way.

The main visitor entrance is adjacent to the performance hall on the western end of the Creative School. The location of the performance hall enables the community to use this facility with ease while the double height entrance area provides excellent opportunities for The Community College Whitstable to display students' work. The hall is highly flexible and allows subdivision in a number of ways, enabling the school to reconfigure the space according to specific needs. Connected directly to the Creative School by two moveable walls, it is possible to configure the space as two large lecture/ performance spaces or as one large 300-person capacity theatre with retractable seating.

The Global School

Adding a new wing to an existing U-shaped building has formed the newly refurbished and extended Global School and created an internal courtyard. The provision of an external balcony above the existing first floor corridor provides an added dimension to this new landscape feature as well. The main administration areas are located inside this block. The accommodation within the Global School has been explored and refined to give it a stronger identity within the whole school.

Connective tissue

The Community College, Whitstable has reorganised its existing campus in line with cutting edge pedagogical developments. **Matt Hayes** explains.





A new, double-height dining hall provides the connectivity between the Global Mini School and the Logic Mini School opening directly onto the central plaza. The space is configured to promote informal learning, group work and presentations. Connectivity is again the key to its success, as with the performance hall in the Creative School these large open plan spaces, which are often only intermittently used, have been brought into the heart of the learning community as a readily accessible, flexible resource.

Another key feature of the proposal is the retention of the open area towards the west of the site enabling views both in and out of the site. The school identified a desire to provide a physical link between the Logic School and the Global School. Through a series of discussions we were able to demonstrate that by locating the central food area between the existing Logic and Global Schools, we would be able to provide physical links on both the ground and first floor.

An existing building, adjacent to the Global School,

houses community facilities such as the nursery and Vocational Centre and these facilities are all accessed from the public highway in the southwestern corner of the site. The nursery facility is located in the existing dining hall. An independent cardiovascular suite has also been provided by a private operator for use by students and staff during school hours and the community out of hours.

Design drivers

Our design for The Community College Whitstable has been developed, driven and created by the school's vision of a showpiece learning campus which is specifically developed to meet the requirements and opportunities available now and in the future for a new pedagogy of learning and teaching. The school requires a flexible environment to nurture its students within, and develop methods of learning and teaching and is no longer hampered by the constraints of their existing buildings with its long corridors and traditional cellular classrooms.

The spatial organisation of the school described above delivers a building form that meets the needs of The Community College Whitstable's key design drivers and delivers an innovative, adaptable learning environment.

There are essentially six key drivers that shaped our design solution for this school:

1. Nurturing autonomous and creative learners

The fundamental design driver for the project has been our understanding of the school's vision of how education should be delivered in this school now that technology has liberated the traditional model of the classroom. Our scheme delivers an environment that can foster the development of autonomous and creative students and the scheme is based on providing a physical environment, where this style of education can be provided effectively and safely.

The school had developed a coherent strategy by dividing the curriculum into the three learning schools mentioned above. Inside each school there is a flexible, ICT rich and stimulating physical environment, where the curriculum can be taught in a wide variety of ways. The school's aspiration was for an environment in which students can sometimes

be educated formally as in a traditional classroom, but have the freedom to study individually using ICT.

2. Identity reinforced by a clearly identifiable building

The Community College Whitstable's vision is of a school that is the first choice for parents and students throughout the community of Whitstable. This will be achieved not only by offering a challenging and well-resourced curriculum, working in partnership with the community, but also by providing a striking, high quality and clearly improved physical environment.

We have therefore sought to create a distinct local landmark on the horizon of Whitstable, set in a high quality external environment with a clear and safe arrival sequence. The buildings will be an advertisement for the educational experience within, another important driver of our design, the 'Beacon on the Hill'

3. Technology specialism fostered and celebrated

The school has achieved specialist Maths and Computing status and, together with its pioneering work in the vocational delivery to 14- to 16-year-olds in its Vocational Centre, is developing a strong technological curriculum to meet the needs of the local community and beyond.





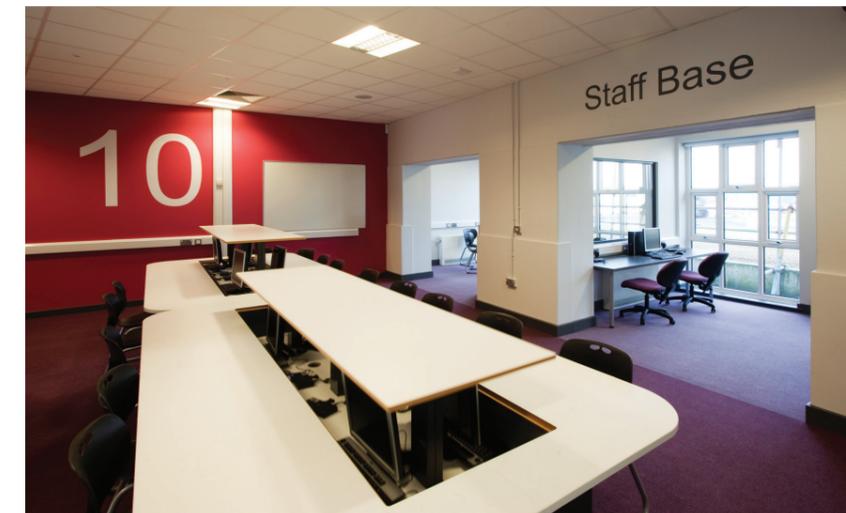
throughout and the curriculum remained unaffected.

Technically the most complex part of the project was the refurbishment of the Global School, the oldest part of the original school estate. To incorporate this legacy building the refurbishment works involved the complete removal of existing facades, upgrading of existing roofing elements and significant internal structural alterations. This process was further complicated by the limited access for surveying purposes during the bid stages of the project. This meant that solutions had to be adopted which enabled the new works to be constructed independently of the existing building.

Undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges across both the new build and the refurbished elements was the reduced floor to floor heights of the existing buildings. Typically in new buildings the floor to floor heights are in the region of 5 metres. In the Creative School we were limited to just 3.8 metres due to the existing first floor height of the Sports Hall. In the Global School the floor to floor heights were on average 3.3 metres. Our approach to this problem was different in each of the schools.

In the new build Creative School the services were designed to be exposed and in the majority of instances ceilings were not used. Instead careful coordination of the services along with the installation of suspended acoustic panelling creates a contemporary 'industrialised' aesthetic which is conducive to the teaching of the creative subjects such as art, music and drama.

However, in the Global School the nature of the curriculum which is predominantly humanities and languages does not lend itself to the aesthetic of exposed services and suspended elements. Here we designed a creative and imaginative solution based on a traditional suspended ceiling system. By visually linking the floor finishes with the ceiling finishes we have created desire lines which would otherwise not have been there. Focusing on the central courtyard space, ceiling grids and floor finishes respond to the potential of the outside classroom, leading the eye in sweeping curves through to the external spaces.



Our proposals were also driven by the school's wish to integrate and celebrate technology and to facilitate the future expansion of ICT in learning. Our proposals provide well-designed learning spaces, which integrate technology and can support the main curriculum of the school as well as the Coastal Vocational Centre.

4. An extended learning day for a wider community

The Community College Whitstable emphasises its links with the wider community and has encouraged the co-location of services for the town on its site. These include a nursery, the community support centre and the Vocational Centre. Another driver for the design has been to make these facilities, and any other school facilities that would be used by the wider community, in an appropriate position to foster their use. This develops the educational opportunities that they provide, without compromising the security and safety of the schools students.

5. Phasing to avoid disruption

A key factor in the design of the new facilities is our clear duty to the current students to minimise

the disruption during the building process and an important influence on our scheme has been to find a construction phasing strategy which minimises the disturbance to the curriculum under delivery.

6. Environmental awareness

We believe, as does the school, that we have a duty to the current children and future generations to deliver an environment that not only fosters environmental awareness, but demonstrates it too. Our design, therefore, has been based on achieving a high level of sustainability and low levels of maintenance.

We have taken the opportunity to enhance and provide habitats that reflect the local environment, increasing biodiversity and interest on the site as well as creating opportunities for learning through the design, building and maintenance of the school environment both for The Community College Whitstable and the wider community.

Difficulties encountered

Not surprisingly the key difficulty we encountered was the complex phasing arrangements required to enable the school to continue functioning throughout the construction phases.

Built in 2 main stages with 10 sub stages the overall construction period for the project was 28 months. During this time all school functions were maintained





In all of the refurbishment work our goal was to create spaces which were not perceived as the poor relation of the new build elements. The newly refurbished spaces create excitement and joy and the students and teachers feel they can take ownership of them and use in a variety of different ways.

Functionality of space

The furniture we specified has been specifically designed to aid the functionality of space and adapt to the demands of the modern teaching environment, the teaching demands of specific days and are also adaptable to suit a wide range of future learning options. The volumes anticipated in BSF programme have enabled the specific design of pieces, developed with Kent County Council, teachers and students providing a bespoke level of furniture normally reserved for the corporate world.

Most of the items featured below have been developed from a concept stage to meet the specific requirements of Kent BSF. Some are new and innovative products that provide their own benefits, environmentally and ergonomically, and assist in giving maximum flexibility to space. The open plan layouts at The Community College Whitstable mean that all the furniture and equipment is designed to support the ICT enabled environment and the 360-degree teaching environment.

The Kent chair

An adjustable chair for 11-year-olds to seniors, which offers maximum flexibility and is sustainable and recyclable. Its design keeps the amount of furniture set-up time to the minimum and importantly reduces the amount of abnormal bending required by teachers when interacting with students.

The mobile cave

Originally designed for the corporate market, the cave is ideal for educational environments and offers exceptional flexibility. A light weight mobile structure, it can be assembled within thirty minutes and instantly provides a private enclosed space, with the added benefit of a 'floor box' that provides lighting and power.

Tiered storage seating

This provides an auditorium feel to parts of the learning bases and an innovative, tiered seating system has been developed. Each unit seats eight students on two tiers and is designed with cable management, which allows students to connect their laptops to the Internet. Storage is accessed from the rear, and cupboard doors can also function as display surfaces. An upper panel at the top of the unit provides a backrest and also an effective screen/pinboard area.

Flip top table

A flip-top table with a unique mechanism and surface that can also be used as a table, whiteboard,

and projection screen and space partition. In the vertical position the 'screen/panel' is held in place by a hydraulic gas strut. The work surface of the tables rotates from horizontal to vertical enabling them to be moved to the side of rooms to maximise space when not in use.

Modular music practice room

This modular 'pod' can easily be moved down the hall or 'across town', which offers a clean attractive look with closure panels for seamless installation.

Media walls

Mobile media walls that have an interactive board with overhead short throw projector.

Power and data bollard

Mobile power and data bollards that can be plugged into floor boxes and support up to six laptops, which will eliminate trip hazards within the large flexible spaces proposed.

Completion

The project completed on 21 October 2010. The Community College Whitstable has a clear and exciting vision for its development, a vision which clearly embraces educational transformation and technological develops. We have listened carefully to the school in developing and refining our design and we look forward to the school using its new facilities to create an innovative and

successful learning environment which fosters the development of autonomous and lifetime learners and which achieves a transformational change in the educational attainment of its students.

Matt Hayes - Lee Evans Partnership Architects

Photographs courtesy of Robert Greshoff

Head Teacher, Helena Sullivan-Tighe:

"The Community College Whitstable now has the learning environment we set out to achieve in partnership with Gensler Architects and Lee Evans Partners over two years ago. We had a very clear vision for our school and worked hard as a team collectively to achieve our goal. Whitstable town now has a secondary school to be proud of which is delivering 21st Century learning to our local families in a modern and exciting environment. We will continue to develop our pedagogy to further inspire and motivate our students to become responsible global citizens. Working with our KCC SECTT member and the Lee Evans and Wilmot Dixon Teams has been an excellent experience for all involved. The professionalism of these teams and the strong leadership of the College's BSF Leader, Megan Thompson, has ensured there has been a smooth transition at each stage of the build. We very much look forward to the future at The Community College Whitstable."

