



partnerships for schools
building schools for the future

Creating a transformational school is always challenging, but doing so for a special educational needs school arguably extends and expands those challenges. The Michael Tippett School in Lambeth, in the words of The Guardian, “offer(s) its students the dignity and respect they deserve.”

This case study will consider some of the key aspects of the design process for The Michael Tippett School and explain how these features have created an award-winning school.

Key project information

School: The Michael Tippett School
Date opened: February 2009
No. of students: 64 pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. The school will eventually take 80 pupils aged between 11 and 18.
Project cost: £8.5m
Designers: Marks Barfield
Local authority: Lambeth
BSF Wave: Wave 2

Designing for special educational needs students: The Michael Tippett School

Project description

The Michael Tippett School is the first new build Building Schools for the Future (BSF) school in London. Designed by the architects of the London Eye, Marks Barfield, The Michael Tippett School brought together two smaller special schools from Kennington and Norwood on a single site. Specifically developed for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties, the school will eventually take 80 pupils aged between 11 and 18. It opened just 21 months after its design was commissioned and only nine months after work started on site.

At the inaugural Excellence in BSF Awards 2008, Michael Tippett won the award for Best Design for a New School, and was also awarded the overall 'Grand Prix' by the judges.

This case study focuses on the importance of designing especially for students with special educational needs. Three key design features are

considered, namely visibility, navigation and flexibility. A number of top tips are also highlighted, such as the importance of working with the school staff and paying attention to the smallest details.

Design features

1. Visibility

The classrooms at Michael Tippett are designed to be airy and light, which makes a very welcome change to the old school buildings where classrooms were low and restrictive. Each classroom opens up into an open space surrounded by huge windows, which give clear views into the community park.

Visibility is the main idea here, and not just for the benefit of the students - the building has been cleverly designed so staff can see what's going on: “The previous school was full of nooks and crannies which was a nightmare to supervise,” headteacher Jan Stogdon says.

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People can also look in - "We wanted the school to be prominent," says Stogdon. "Many students like uttering shrieks and wails, and if they are hidden behind a school wall, passers-by wonder what's going on."

2. Navigation

The building is easy to navigate, which is especially important for SEN students. Doors are colour-coded so students can differentiate between toilets, classrooms and staff rooms.

The Michael Tippett School is a two-storey building. This might not seem the obvious choice for an SEN school, but the decision was tactical: "We want students to become adapted to real adult life and look after themselves without high-tech remote control devices." (Stogdon) Indeed, Students are encouraged to use staircases rather than lifts, even though it's tougher for some.

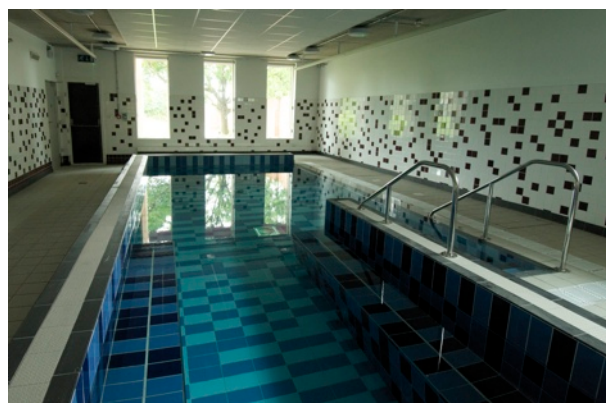


3. Flexibility

Flexibility was a major requirement of the school because, as Stogdon notes: "We can never predict what sort of students we'll be getting from year to

year and what their particular needs will be." To provide this the external walls and internal partitions have been disengaged from the structural frame so that they can be relatively easily changed in the future to suit the school's changing needs and pupil intake.

The designers had to work to a strict area allowance based on the Building Bulletin, but by analysing the school's requirements closely it became apparent that a Library/IT space was not required as a separate closed area, so Marks Barfield were able to create instead a double storey, flexible space which has become the social hub of the school.



4. Community integration

The Michael Tippett School is an extended school and has been designed in such a way that is possible to secure parts of the school and open up facilities to the wider community. This way the whole community can benefit from the school.

What they say about The Michael Tippett School

"Walk into the double height lobby entrance of the new Michael Tippett school, and a wall of glass immediately beckons you, moth-like, to a light, spacious park on the other side. You almost drift past the reception desk in your hurry to get there." **Building Magazine**

"We did it together. The input that students and staff have had throughout the design and construction process has helped our children understand the transition to a different site. We have all been amazed by how quickly the students have settled in to their new surroundings and how excited they are by the new facilities on offer." **Jan Stogdon, Headteacher**

"The building cries out 'Come and join us!'" **Parent of pupil at school**

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“These children used to be pushed to the back, but now, because they are special, they have been given everything for their needs. And I think it’s marvellous.” **Pupil’s mother**

“The classrooms are beautiful spaces, with high ceilings and light flooding in from both sides. They are roomy places where anything can happen.... Marks Barfield has shown us that, given the opportunity, they can reinvent an old idea with such panache that it rockets into the 21st century.” **Architecture Today**

“It’ll provide facilities for pupils with complex needs who, for the first time in their lives, will be taught in an environment designed for them.” **Tim Byles, Chairman of PfS on his favourite building of 2008 for BD Yearbook**

“This building has a sense of light and optimism. The teachers think [the building] is great. It makes it easier for them to do their jobs, and, for the pupils, it has an impact on their sense of well-being.” **Rt Hon Ed Balls MP Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families**

Top Tips

- **Think about your target audience:**

Every aspect of The Michael Tippett School has been designed for the specific needs of the students, with features including a sensory room, a large garden, hydrotherapy pool, wheelchair-accessible classrooms, wide corridors, a kitchen to help students develop basic cooking skills, a music/drama studio, a community hall for sports and social activities and a therapeutic colour strategy.

- **Don’t be afraid to try different options:**

Twenty-one option studies were carried out, testing both the brief and the site. This process enabled Marks Barfield to achieve a scheme which took maximum advantage of the tight site, whilst fulfilling the school’s requirements.

- **Work with the staff:**

The designers of the school worked extremely closely with the school staff and their input, as end-users, was invaluable in shaping the brief. Visits were made together with the teachers to similar schools to gain a full understanding of their aspirations and to broaden their idea of what was possible. This was in addition to the considerable time spent in the existing schools observing how a typical day worked. The school’s staff were keen to avoid a clinical environment, and encouraged the designers to design the school in as ‘normal’ a manner as possible.

The ethos of the school is to help its pupils prepare themselves for the world they will encounter outside, rather than to shield and protect them. The existing school had a strong visual link with its residential surroundings which the staff were keen to maintain in the new neighbourhood. Therefore the school has been designed in an open, transparent manner, engaging with its surroundings and creating a prominent presence on Milkwood Road which reflects its personality and ethos.

Who was involved

Client: London Borough of Lambeth

Architect: Marks Barfield

Project management and construction

administration: Faithful+Gould

SEN Consultant: Liz Fraser, LCE Archimed Architect

Structural engineer: Gifford

Services engineers: Gifford and Pinnacle

Quantity surveyor: Dobson White Boulcott

Project manager: Precept

Landscape architect: Edward Hutchison Landscape Architects

Design-and-build contractor: Apollo Education

Pool Specialist: S&P

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Key contact

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Further information

PfS schools directory page on The Michael Tippett School:

www.partnershipsforschools.org.uk/programme/schools/M/school_MichaelTippett_Lambeth.jsp

Excellence in BSF Awards press release:

www.partnershipsforschools.org.uk/media/press/pr_2008-11-27-bsf_awards.jsp

Information on The Michael Tippett School on the Lambeth BSF website:

www.lambeth.gov.uk/Services/EducationLearning/BSF/BSFSchools/BSFMichaelTippett.htm