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Kristen McCluskie Photography

The homebase gardens include learning, social areas, passive and active play spaces

Schools within schools

When Ryder Architecture was given the opportunity to design a new build school, Denton Community College, the firm's extensive collaboration with teachers, pupils and stakeholders resulted in an exciting and challenging brief.

As part of the £300m Tameside MBC Building Schools for the Future programme, Denton Community College replaced the predecessor schools, Two Trees Sports College and Egerton Performing Arts College. It accommodates 1350 students aged 11-16 and includes a Key Stage 3 Learning Centre for 28 students.

Ryder consulted with staff from both the predecessor schools, facilitated student workshops and worked closely with a group from the Governing Body. These consultations established the desire for adaptable environments, defined the key relationships between departments and determined how the College and Key Stage 3 Learning Centre would be organised and how this would support community access.

This engagement process defined four key challenges:

- Schools within schools – the year group 'Homebase' concept
- 'Dining with Dignity' – the end of long queues and 'en masse' dining
- Showcasing specialisms – putting the college's two specialisms of sport and performing arts at the forefront of the new campus
- The visually restrictive site – countering the poor surrounding external environment

Says Suzanne Blair of Ryder: "Sometimes we challenged their views and sometimes had our ideas challenged in turn. Looking back, a massive positive was involving each

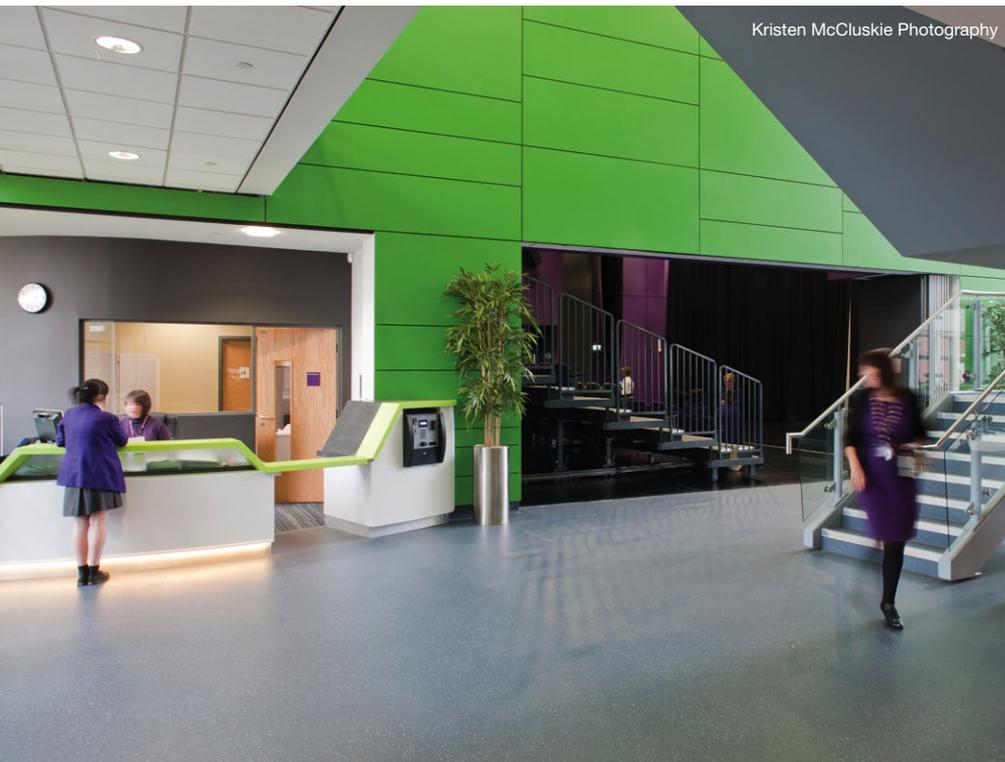
subject in the design of their department. For example, the Technology, Art and Design department is all open plan. The College were interested in a similar concept we had employed at Mortimer College in South Tyneside, which they had visited. Despite being a large and busy space, it works really well and has a great buzz about it."

Reaching homebase

Nick Condliffe, Denton's Headteacher, had been greatly impressed by the outcomes of the homebase system he had seen at the Hellerup School in Copenhagen: "As soon as you walked through the doors at Hellerup, the joy and enthusiasm for learning was evident."

He and his colleagues were keen to embrace the concept of using more open and flexible spaces to give the pupils a sense of safety, belonging and responsibility for their own learning. Each of the five year groups are based within their own homebase, which in turn are organised into three provinces; Inspire – Years 7 and 8; Aspire – Year 9 and Perform – Years 10 and 11.

Each province has its own servery and dedicated dining space which helps to cut down queues. Each homebase is a self-contained block with a glazed double-height space. Each has its own learning



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At the heart of the design is the Oasis, a large external space; a calm area of protected green at the core of the college

spaces, staff areas, toilets, social space and additional dining area. Students take ownership of their area, whilst teachers retain control through passive supervision.

The design of the homebase also breaks down the scale of the College to a reasonable and unimposing size, so students are comfortable, relaxed, and ready to learn. The homebases are linked by the learning boulevard, a mix of dining, breakout learning, ICT and an LRC, which enables informal teaching, display and social interaction opportunities. All passively supervised by staff areas which have large glazed screens overlooking the boulevard – something the students say makes them feel safer.

The homebase gardens include learning, social areas, passive and active play spaces; including half size basketball courts, space for ball games, seating areas beneath shady trees and boulevard-like pathways that link to the main entrances of the site. The Year 7 garden also includes elements of natural play.

Nick Condliffe is pleased with the results: “Students are now in the building from 7:30am until 5pm. They have quickly adapted and understand the flexible learning environments, and now take much more responsibility for their own learning. Latest attainment data is showing significant improvements in attainment and

expected progress.”

The College has two specialism subjects brought across from its predecessor schools: performing arts and sport. The performance hall is housed within a bright green box which projects out of the front elevation adjacent to the main entrance and

out into the central Oasis forming a backdrop to the external performance space. The multi-purpose sports hall is by the community entrance and faces out across the new sports pitches and multi-use games area. This makes the two specialisms the focal point of the new building, which, with its crisp two-storey masonry and white render facades and large section of glazed curtain walling with the green trespa box projecting through, was designed to create a strong identity for the school.

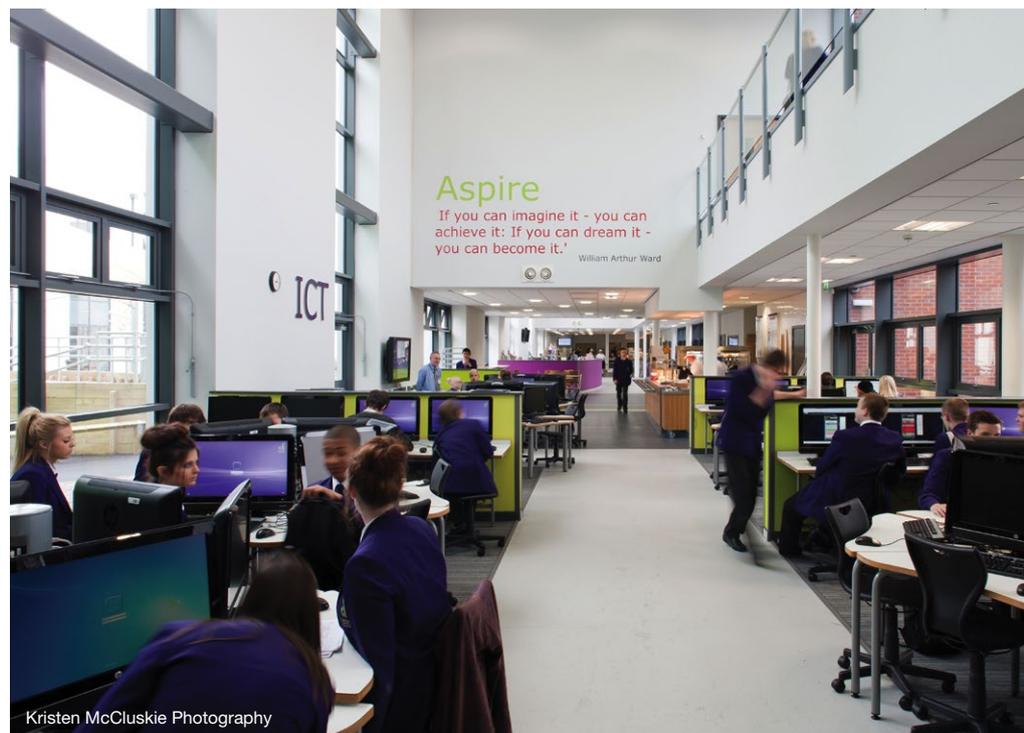
The performance and sports facilities, as well as other areas like the community cafe, meeting rooms, ICT and LRC that will be accessed by both the school and visitor communities, are easily controlled, either during or out of hours.

A green heart

At the heart of the design is the Oasis, a large external space; a calm area of protected green at the core of the college. This central garden space incorporates a covered outdoor performance area, lush gardens, a water feature and outdoor specialist learning zones. It provides an ‘Oasis of Calm’ and a positive external environment visible from all areas of the College.

All the key aspects of the school are located around the Oasis, which provides the orientation space for the college.

Explains Nick Condliffe: “We wanted an ▶



Kristen McCluskie Photography

The facilities, to be accessed by both the school and visitor communities, are easily controlled, either during or out of hours

Education



Kristen McCluskie Photography

Designed to enhance the provision inside the building, the landscape delivers inspired functionality in a natural setting

Oasis at the centre of the college to counter the poor surrounding external environment, but the external space within the Oasis has contributed significantly towards our improving educational standards.”

Another outcome of the consultation process was that the landscape design works with the building to create a strong sense of place and a total learning site, where the whole campus becomes an educational facility and is viewed as such by students, staff and visitors. Designed to enhance the provision inside the building, the landscape delivers inspired functionality in a natural setting. Specialist garden areas,

outdoor learning, seating for different group sizes, growing areas, and display spaces provide a truly attractive external environment.

Nick Condliffe comments: “With a broad mix of active and passive recreational and social spaces, we know the students will take ownership of the landscape and develop it to its full potential.”

The Oasis at the centre of the college was not the only green attribute designed into the new building; Denton achieved BREEAM Very Good.

Says Suzanne Blair of Ryder: “We were always aiming for BREEAM Very Good and

used several different methods to achieve it.”

The design has a combined heat and power system (CHP) which allows the college to generate its own electricity and heating, powered by plant oil.

Continues Suzanne: “We were able to site the building a sufficient distance from the boundaries to naturally ventilate the teaching spaces, where appropriate, without traffic noise causing issues with acoustics within the classrooms.”

In addition to using windcatchers in the ventilation strategy, the design also used various energy and water saving measures, such as low flow sanitary fittings, automatic light fittings and a building management system. Over 90% of the materials used in the building, both externally and internally, were ‘A’ rated.

Now that Denton Community College has been operational for two years, Nick Condliffe says the school is still having significant impact:

“When we recruit new staff, we see again and again that they are not only “blown away” (their words) by the design but more importantly how the students respond to it. The building is inspirational and has transformed students’ attitudes to school and learning. The message that we are hearing consistently now is that students feel very safe, understand the design, and have ownership of the building. Although some teenagers don’t actually admit it, they really do like their new school and have tremendous pride in it.”



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