

EARLY LEARNING

A competition-winning neighbourhood nursery in Bury, Lancashire, has grown into a more broadly based facility thanks to the tenacity of the client and sensitive response of architect DSDHA

By Barrie Evans. Photographs by Martine Hamilton Knight

It is all a bit complicated but a mesh of recent government programmes is changing the face of early years childcare.

The Sure Start programme is intended as a piece of government joined-up thinking, in this case principally between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to 'deliver the best start in life for every child by bringing together early education, childcare and health and family support'. More than 500 local programmes are planned to be operational by 2004.

Somewhat joined to this are two other DfES programmes: the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (NNI); and Early Excellence Centres (EEC). Together with Sure Start, they are intended to provide more than 1,000 new facilities for pre-school children by the end of 2004. In particular, the NNI is focused on affordable childcare in the most socially disadvantaged areas of the country, with plans announced in 2001 to deliver 45,000 new childcare places by 2004 for the under-fives.

The EEC programme, set up in 1997, focuses on integrating early education, care and family support, and, particularly relevant to this project, is looking to make use of several neighbourhood nurseries in creating some of its centres, focused on training and the dissemination of best practice in an area. A good thing and also another pot of money to tap.

This project began as a NNI, with the DfES looking to stimulate new thinking in nurseries by organising a design competition with CABE. Three live projects were chosen: in Sheffield, won jointly by Panter Hudspith and Walters & Cohen; in Bexley, by Birds Portchmouth Russum; and in Bury, by DSDHA.

The Bury scheme was for the refurbishment and extension of the Hoyle Nursery School, now the Hoyle Early Years Centre. When the competition began, Hoyle had already been shifting for some time from straight nursery care for three to five year olds to include a borough-wide role focusing on children with special educational needs: learning difficulties; speech and communication difficulties; and autism. Its staff numbers

had grown in response but not its floorspace.

The competition also provided the opportunity to seek funding to expand by offering 10 places for under twos and their parents.

Hoyle's friendly but tenacious head, Clare Barker, had been active in talking to the various semi-detached (or semi-joined-up) parts of government to expand the brief and seek greater funding. What began as a nursery competition scheme with a budget of £300,000 has become both a neighbourhood nursery and a designated EEC, with a budget approaching £700,000. (It is still a tight budget, just with more to accommodate.)

While the winning scheme aimed to link and reorganise the two existing 1975 brick buildings on the site – a nursery space and parents' centre – what has emerged is much nearer to a rebuilding (abetted by a some freelance demolition by local youths), though the final result does take much the same footprint as the competition scheme.

Other key aspects of the design to remain from the competition include creating a new street frontage, raising the roof 800mm

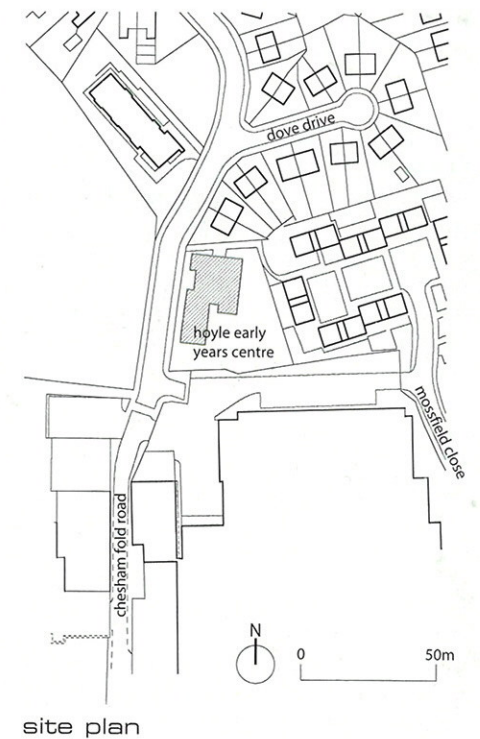
above the existing walls with clerestory windows, so enlivening the spaces with daylight and giving the whole a coherence, and centring the building around a small courtyard garden (though the removable roof went for cost reasons, leaving an open court).

Fitting a building to its social, as well as physical, context is an important part of a project for DSDHA's directors Deborah Saunt and David Hills. Hoyle is located in an area of housing and industrial sheds only 200m from the M66 – indeed the poorest part of Hoyle's catchment lies beyond the motorway, a housing area without play spaces or shops. DSDHA undertook its own demographic research, exploring the extent of the area's high unemployment and low earnings, despite its proximity to more-prosperous Manchester, its health problems (Hoyle provides health screening among its services), and unearthed other statistics, such as that this is an area of 'high ITV viewing'. This enigmatic fact was interpreted by Barker as a measure of homes with no books or culture of literacy. In the existing buildings, the

entrance area had been organised with settees and books in a bid to counter this view.

It appears that DSDHA's informed and empathetic approach, recognising the existing positives like the settees and discussing with the client how to build on them – rather than the approach of telling the client they have problems that the architect can solve – attracted the client to the architect (Barker was on the competition judging panel, along with Nicholas Serota, Richard Rogers, early-years expert Margy Whalley and Sunand Prasad.)

With the client so influential and committed, there was no great risk that this project would be seen by the local community as the government hitting them with cash then running. And the services it provides are clearly needed. Even so, setting the tone was an important part of the design, particularly the approach, which needed to reconcile welcome with the security of children, parents and staff. The immediate locale has by now lost most traces of the older stone vernacular, though there is one derelict stone house nearby and



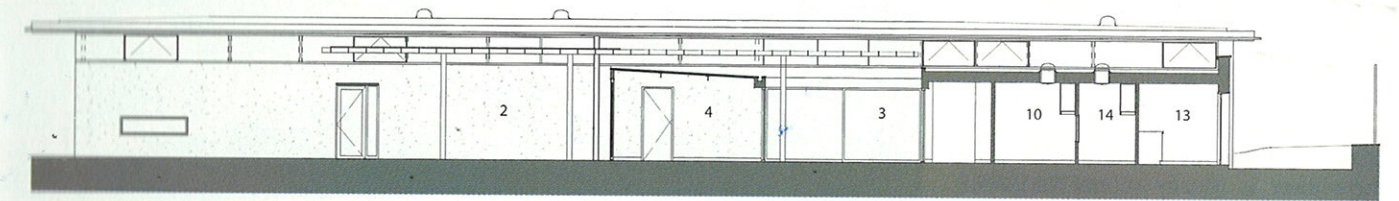
Reception area, large enough to be a teaching space; small courtyard to right. Previous page: illuminated canopy for play and outdoor functions



Baby (0-2 years) room at the south end of the building, with child-height window onto garden to the east



New wet area at the north end of the 3-5 years room. Light fittings are recessed into ceilings, leaving only tubes projecting

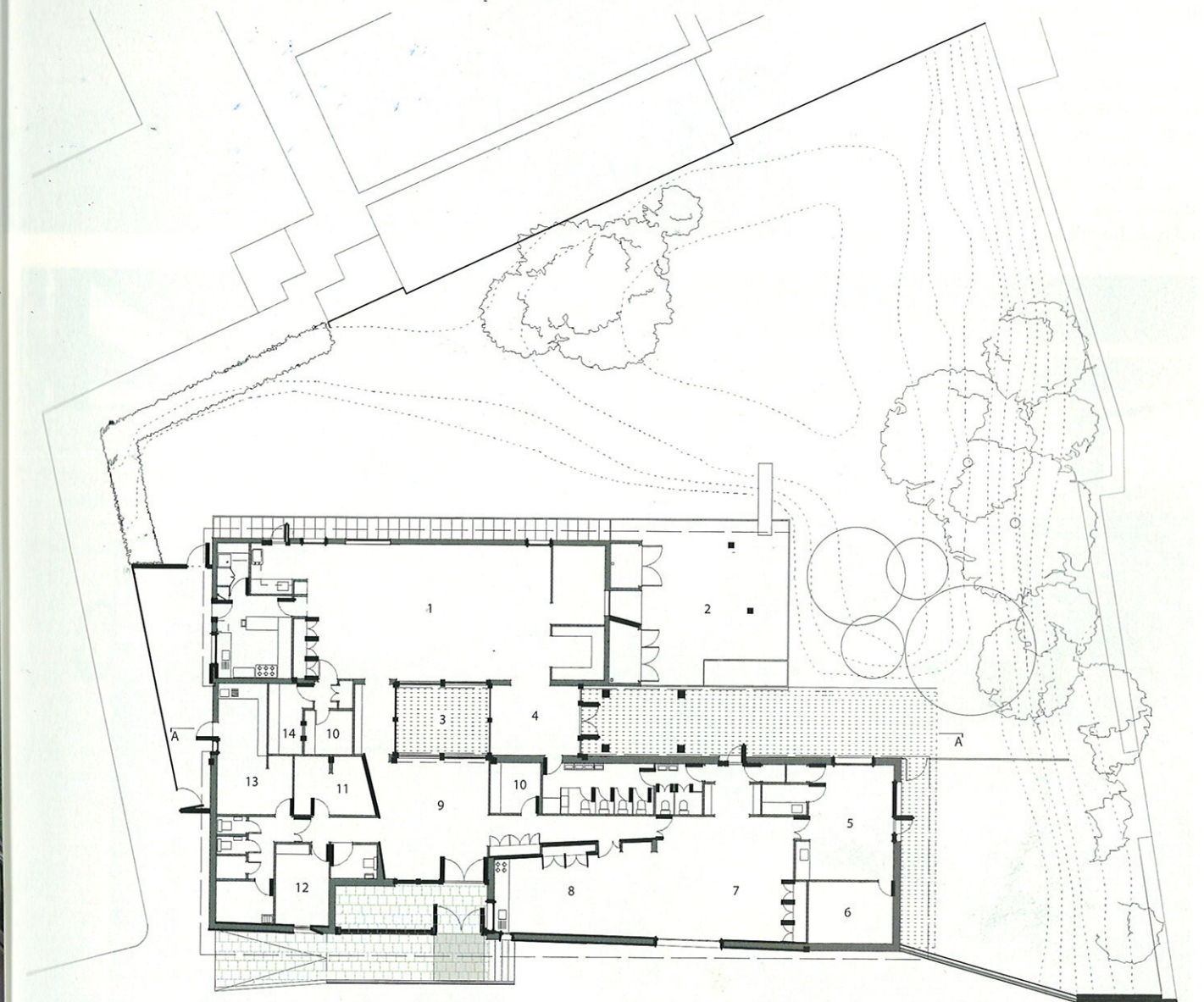


section aa

0 10m

KEY

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 3-5 years room | 9 reception hall |
| 2 covered play area | 10 withdrawal room |
| 3 courtyard | 11 reception |
| 4 library | 12 head teacher's office |
| 5 baby room | 13 staff room |
| 6 baby sleep | 14 sen (special education needs) room |
| 7 2-3 years room | |
| 8 parents' room | |



ground floor plan

0 10m

the site had its own stone wall that DSDHA hoped to reuse for the front wall. In practice, stone had to be brought to site to create a textured, though solid-looking, face and to draw the eye away from the necessary security fencing on either side. To the north of the front, where there is equally substantial-looking render, this has been faced in rectangular galvanised mesh for growing plants and inhibiting graffiti.

This is a sophisticated looking building, not the Wendy house writ large of some nursery schools that eschews a primary-colour palette both outside and in. Partly this is about the particular needs of the children, especially the autistic, for a calming, structured environment, but it is also the architect's view that the building is not so much an extension of home as one of a child's first civic buildings. It has messages about the quality people should expect from a caring society, and even some small educational role in developing design literacy.

The entrance could have been somewhat forbidding, with the buggy store set between the external mesh gates and glass front doors (to save internal usable area), requiring these gates to be kept closed. To date the glass doors have allowed enough supervision from the front desk for the gates to be left open during the day. Once inside, everything apparently relaxes, though staff vigilance is still required.



COST SUMMARY

Data based on final account, for gross internal area

	Cost per m ² (£)	Percentage of total
SUBSTRUCTURE	110	6.5
SUPERSTRUCTURE		
Frame	151	9.0
Roof	193	11.5
Rooflights	20	1.2
External walls	95	5.6
Windows	90	5.3
External doors	59	3.5
Internal walls and partitions	66	3.9
Internal doors	39	2.3
Group element total	713	42.3
INTERNAL FINISHES		
Wall finishes	24	1.4
Floor finishes	56	3.3
Ceiling finishes	32	1.9
Group element total	110	6.5
FITTINGS AND FURNITURE	73	4.3
SERVICES		
Sanitary appliances	22	1.3
Disposal installations	12	0.7
Water installations	22	1.3
Space heating and air treatment	98	5.8
Electrical services	93	5.5
Protective installations	49	2.9
Builders' work in connection	7	0.4
Group element total	303	18.0
EXTERNAL WORKS	198	11.8
PRELIMINARIES AND INSURANCE	178	10.6
TOTAL	1,685	100

Cost data provided by Andrew Tindale-Paul, Stockdale

CREDITS

TENDER DATE	Co; rooflights
December 2002	Monodraught
START ON SITE DATE	(Suncatcher);
January 2003	stonemason Darren
CONTRACT DURATION	Jarrot; render Sto;
40 weeks	windows, external doors
GROSS INTERNAL FLOOR AREA	Technical; window/door
410m ²	subcontractor
FORM OF CONTRACT	Securefront Systems;
IFC/2 stage tender	pinboard Sundae;
TOTAL COST	sliding/folding partition
£690,000	Hufcor; cork linoleum
CLIENTS	Forbo Nairn; floor
Bury Education Services,	subcontractor AD Cragg &
Hoyle Nursery School	Son; structural glass
ARCHITECT	library roof TA Anders &
DSDHA; Deborah Saunt,	Co; ironmongery Allgood,
David Hills, Claire	Stanley; ironmongery
McDonald, Brent	supply Cookson
Crittenden, Fred Collin	Hardware Suppliers;
QUANTITY SURVEYOR	leather door pulls Hilmar
Stockdale	Products; sanitaryware
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER	Armitage Shanks,
Price & Myers	Twyford, Franke;
SERVICES ENGINEER	plumbing, heating
Atelier Ten	subcontractor Harrison
MAIN CONTRACTOR	Smith Batley; electrical
McGoff and Byrne	John Dawson Electrical;
SUBCONTRACTORS AND SUPPLIERS	cctv Advance Security
Roofing, roof canopy	Systems; fencing, gates
subcontractor Metspec	Bekaert Security Fencing;
Roofing Services; roof	fence/gate subcontractor
canopy Twinfix; steel	Fare Fence; hard
framing F Ainscough &	landscape Nova Sport
	(Soft Pour); Astroturf,
	Marshall's Paving

WEBLINKS

Bury Education Services	Atelier Ten
www.bury.gov.uk	www.atelierten.com
DSDHA	McGoff and Byrne
www.dsdha.co.uk	www.mcgoftandbyrne.co.uk
Price & Myers	
www.pricemyers.com	



Room for 3-5s with calm colour palette, organised to provide educational structure. Courtyard to right. Above: balancing security and welcome

Clerestory windows and the central courtyard connect with the outside, while at eye level, of adult or child, the feel is more of a protective wall than of openings; an appropriate balance of transparency and enclosure. There is a window from the parents' area to the outside to reduce the chances of them feeling trapped in this 'institution'.

Where partitions meet the clerestory glazing, small Soane-inspired mirrors create apparent continuity of glazing. The floating ceiling plane is largely uncluttered, with most of the acoustic work done by the carpet.

From the entrance area you can see through the all-glazed central court and the three-fives playroom beyond to the surrounding garden. (This line of vision deliberately follows the route of an earlier path across the site.) The entrance area itself has been kept as large as possible by pinching circulation elsewhere and is frequently used as a class space.

The plan alone cannot quite communicate how hard the spaces have to work in this world of many small individuals, nor the ingenuity of staff in making this happen. One of the WCs may double as a withdrawal room. On a tight corridor wall outside the head's office, a waist-high mirror is used for one-to-one speech therapy, the teacher kneeling behind the child as they face the mirror.

In principle the organisation of this 410m² building is straightforward. The building's front faces west. To the north of the entrance is staff space. To its south is the two-threes playroom and next to it, through a folding partition, the parent/training room. These two areas combine for other uses, such as the

Christmas play and general parent meetings. Farthest south is the baby area.

To the east, the three-fives playroom occupies much the same area it did before but with better-equipped support spaces around it, better daylighting and views, and a route out through the new library/reading area to improved outdoor play spaces. A neat touch is that the large outdoor canopy (which DSDHA would have liked to have cantilevered) is translucent – corrugated polycarbonate above, flat below – and that the soffit can be illuminated for evening use. Overall, the straightforward plan zoning provides some flexibility for coping with the changes in educational agenda that flow continually from government.

This building is an excellent resource for the community, the result of the client's vision, the architect's sensitive response and the opportunity of a competition. What is worrying is the somewhat haphazard trajectory of the project. Did the go-ahead after the competition need to be delayed a year, with the DfES urging people to work at risk? More importantly, why did the client have to drive government towards a joined-up project? It has the joined-up theories but not, apparently, the delivery mechanisms that should unite its various early years programmes. Not quite a model project.

At least the architect has been well served by its immediate client, Clare Barker; the truism that you cannot have a good building without a good client is demonstrated once more. So much so that DSDHA is putting Barker forward for a RIBA client's award.

Wall of stone rubble and steel mesh screens

In plan the nursery is a single-storey pavilion with rooms set around a courtyard. The virtually flat roof has a 1.2m deep overhanging eaves with clerestory windows below, so that it appears to float over the walls.

The long facade which faces the street is designed to provide a secure barrier while giving controlled visual access at the entrance foyer, where a screen of galvanised steel mesh gives glimpses of courtyard and playground. To one side of the entrance the wall is made of coursed stone rubble, with low-level deep-set windows and a clerestory above.

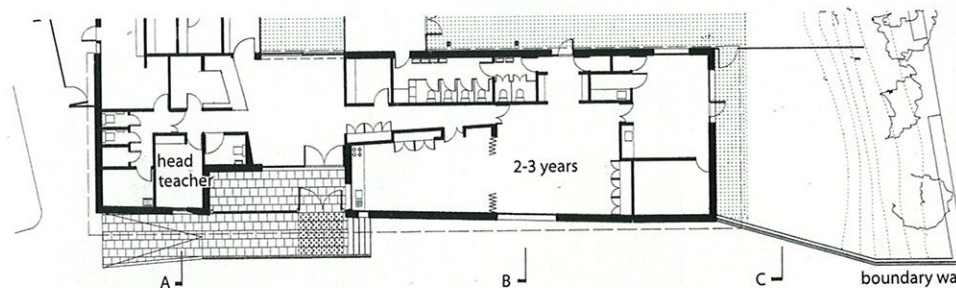
The stone wall extends beyond the building at a lower height, topped with a similar galvanised steel mesh screen, to become a boundary wall to the garden.

To the other side of the entrance, the wall is finished with acrylic render on blockwork overlaid with a steel mesh screen. A deep set-back below the eaves takes the place of a clerestory.

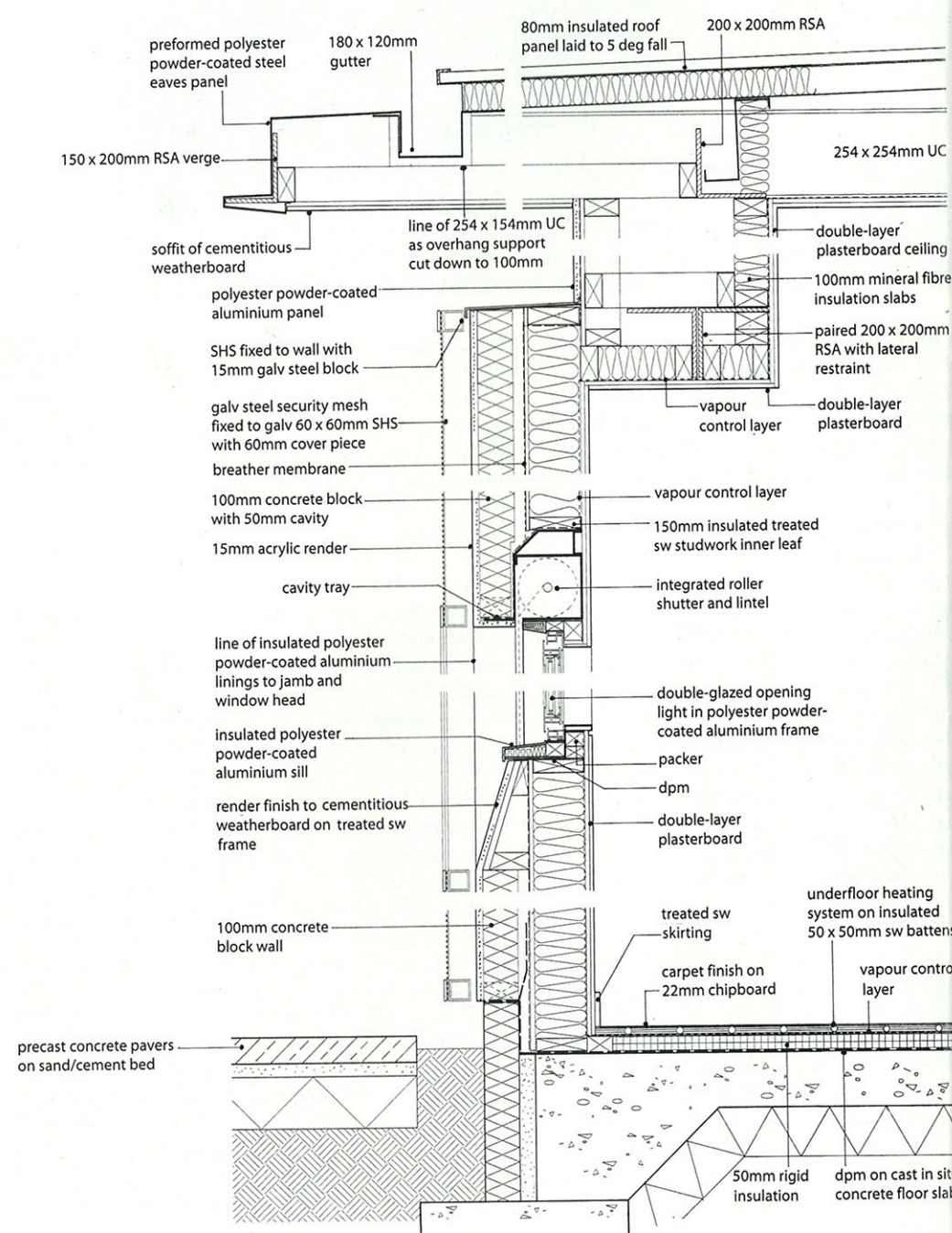
The steel frame structure supports a roof of insulated metal panels. The inner leaf to each wall is of treated timber studwork filled with insulation, with a breather membrane to the sheathing and a vapour control layer behind a double layer of plasterboard. The coursed rubble outer leaf was built to a closely specified mock-up to achieve sharp horizontal lines and a very flat frontage.

The windows were refined to minimise the amount of visible framing and are fitted with integrated lintels/roller shutters. The clerestory windows are set at the front of the façade – to avoid the possibility of use as a foothold – and the building is additionally protected from vandals on the roof by the deep overhanging eaves.

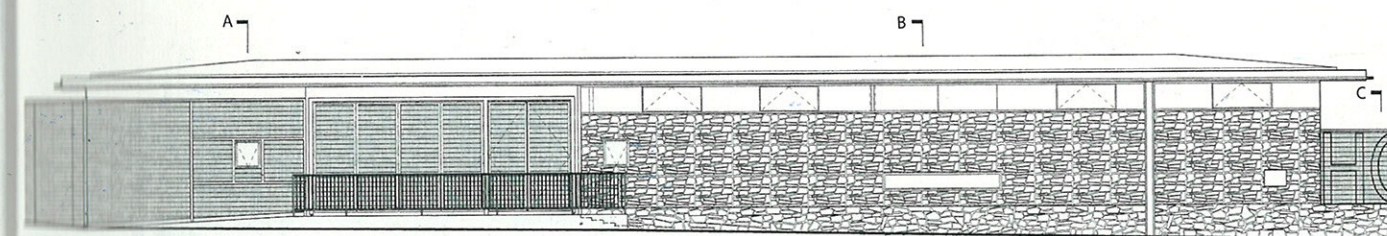
Susan Dawson



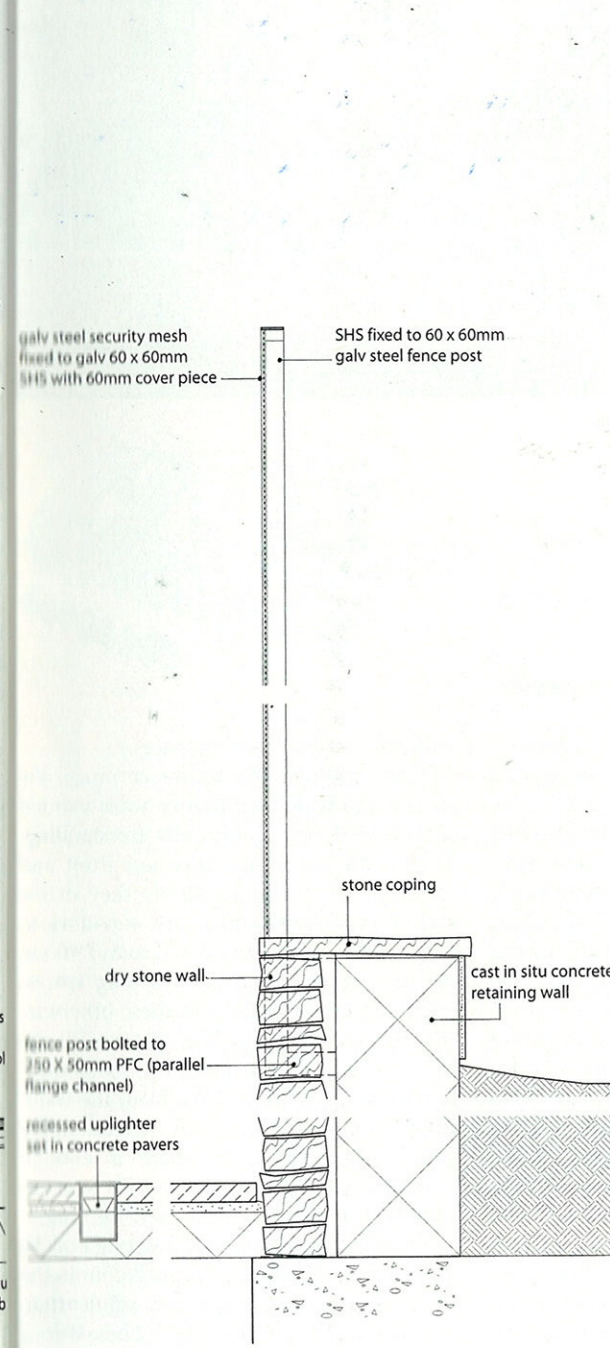
KEY PART PLAN



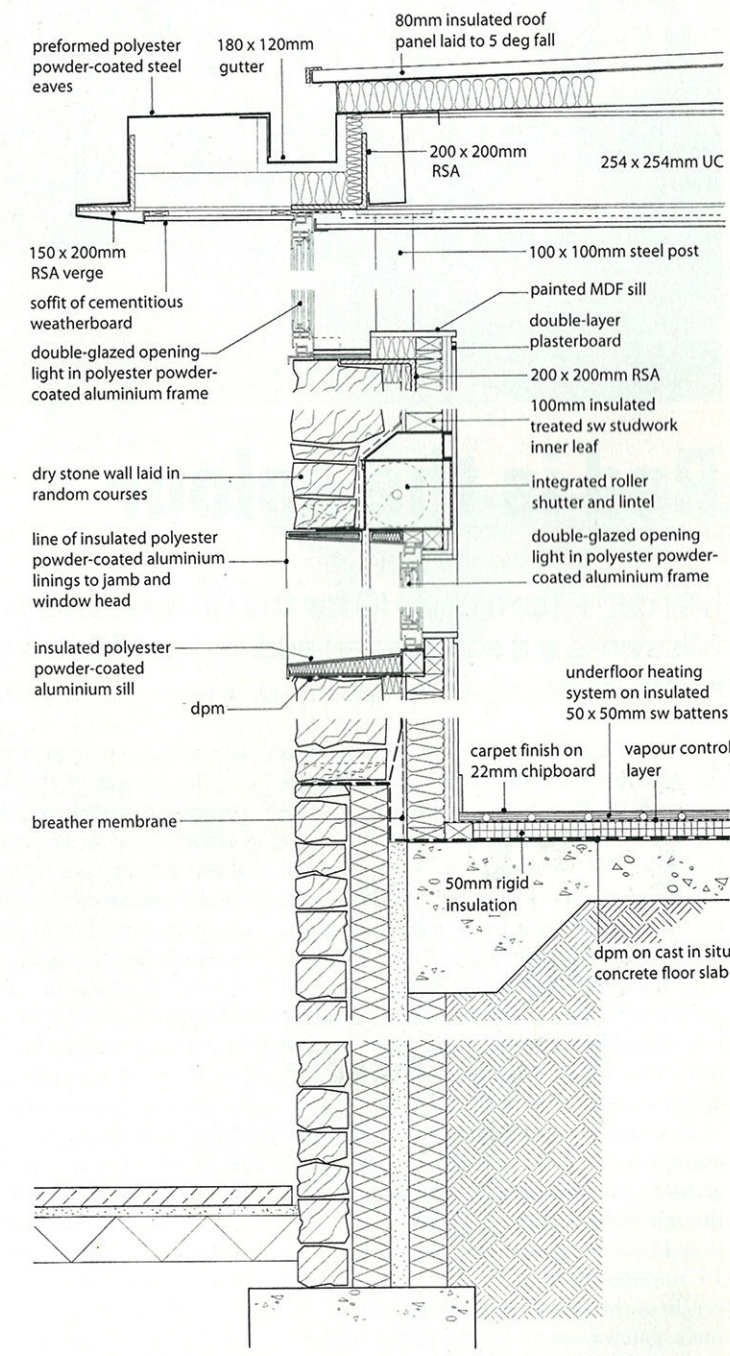
DETAIL SECTION A



KEY STREET ELEVATION



DETAIL SECTION C



DETAIL SECTION B