



A Dagenham Wonderland

Shiny pixelated bricks, mirrored blocks, multi-height openings and sliding doors that give surprising views from all angles – DSDHA's John Perry Children's Centre would delight Alice, herself

by Sonia Soltani

IT'S OPENING DAY AT THE John Perry Children's Centre and the latest addition to the east London landscape seems to have already been adopted by the local community. Some children come out of the adjacent John Perry Primary School and start playing around the mirror blocks set in the courtyard. Others, on their way home, run over the green hill at the side of the building. The parents, here to collect their children, say they're enthusiastic about this £1.2m Sure Start facility designed by architect DSDHA.

The 475 m² centre is the fourth element of the John Perry educational quarter. As well as a secondary and primary school, which date from the 1950s, there is a nursery, also designed by DSDHA, and now the children's centre. This serves as a day centre for 50 children, a community centre for the grown-ups and a maternity health consultation facility.

Set in a deprived suburban area of monotonous terraced houses, the centre was intended by its client, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, to serve as a beacon for the community in an otherwise barren landscape.

Reflecting the area's industrial heritage, the architect has favoured materials such as bricks, aluminium and polycarbonate. The centre doesn't stand out too incongruously from the 1950s schools, but even so the pixelated bricks imported from the Netherlands lend it a silvery, magical quality.

Communication between the exterior and the interior relies on a clever use of openings which are placed at both children's and adults' level and enable all users to have a view onto the landscaped gardens and courtyard.

The architect's choice of cork, oak and other woods to furnish the

inside of the centre contributes to a warm and inspiring environment for children and parents alike.

Last week the whole John Perry scheme received an Excellence in Design award from the American Institute of Architects. The absence of graffiti from the building walls is a tribute to how the centre has won over the respect of young people in the area.

Project team
client **London Borough of Barking and Dagenham**
contractor **Lakehouse Contracts**
structural engineer **Price & Myers**
architect **DSDHA**



Main picture: The mirror blocks in the courtyard are artworks and toys for children

Above right: The landscape wall in cork acts as a navigational tool

Below right: The portal frame offers access to the children's gardens from the play area

Below: The polycarbonate walls light up at night when public events are held

