

Inspiring Design : Early Years

DSDHA for Paradise Park Children's Centre, Islington



Designed by DSDHA and set in an inner city park, **Paradise Park Children's Centre** is a new type of public building, creating a radical learning environment for children and adults at the heart of the local community. Its most striking feature is an innovative vertical garden or "green wall" that runs the full length of the building, creating an extraordinary visual amenity and linking the building to the park.

The building is a hybrid with a strong environmental agenda. It combines a nursery

with high quality community facilities including a community café, Sure Start services, and a base for Islington Play Association.

The nursery and crèche are central to the building and the design is finely tuned to the educational needs of children and their place in the community. The nursery is a generous open volume filled with natural daylight, encouraging flexibility of use and a sense of wellbeing. Smaller, more intimate spaces and service spaces are incorporated within this larger volume behind a vibrantly coloured "landscape wall" with a clerestory.

A folding acoustic wall, concealed when open, allows flexible subdivision of the volume into two smaller spaces, while the kitchen is designed with high and low sinks, allowing creative play associated with cooking as well as conventional "wet play". A series of windows at low level provide a multiple aspect to the room, enabling children to look out both onto the public life of the street and into the directly accessible secure outdoor play areas.

In addition to nursery provision, the building offers opportunities for continuing learning, with adult classes covering IT, parenting skills, and cooking. Facilities have been carefully designed to maximise use by the community at all times. For example, the nursery garden is a dual-use amenity, open to the general public outside nursery hours and at weekends. The project was designed to be a catalyst for the regeneration of the park and the neighbourhood as a whole and the building has become a local icon and has radically shifted the perception of the park from a dangerous and underused area to an enormously popular public space.

The planted wall and brown roof provide a fascinating natural environment and habitat that children and adults are able to observe close-up, watching plant and insect life as it develops and changes over the seasons. They have become a learning tool for all and will be used as a basis for educational programmes in the community.

The budget was limited, but this did not compromise the sustainable vision of the building. The team worked together to refine the method of construction to its most efficient, without compromising key features, using a range of cost-effective materials and incorporating them in a way that makes them appear luxurious. The innovative environmental features of the building also result in low maintenance costs for the client.

The team worked closely to deliver the vertical planting system, the biggest ever on a public building in the UK. Using a new system developed specifically for the face of the building, recycled rainwater collected in a harvest tank irrigates the 7,000 plants that grow in special panels held off the face of the building. Brown roofs are covered in recycled builders' rubble, providing wildlife habitats and increased biodiversity.

The community café has revitalised a previously under-used public space, operated by a new start-up social enterprise enabled by Sure Start. It also acts as the main access point into the building, including a reception for the Sure Start facilities, which enables young children, their parents and other members of the community to meet each other and access vital services and educational opportunities in a reassuring environment.

According to feedback from users, the building is filled with natural light and the views across the park make it a joy to use, enhancing the local environment and becoming a local landmark.



Highly Commended :

Architype Ltd
Brookhill Sure Start & Community Centre

DSDHA
William Bellamy Children's Centre

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