

WORKS: DSDHA

Pastoral care

Pond Meadow special needs school near Guildford is the first phase of DSDHA's biggest commission yet. The external aspect makes free with the sense of scale while its attentive internal detailing is as much therapeutic as architectural, says **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Hélène Binet and Tim Soar



View of Pond Meadow from the adjoining secondary school.

Well, this certainly isn't how Britain is meant to work. Five years ago, I reviewed the John Perry nursery school in Dagenham, the most significant project that young practice DSDHA had completed to date. This little building stood head and shoulders above the vast swathe of educational projects then being constructed in the UK but, this being the country it is, one hardly imagined that the project's success would fast-track DSDHA to substantially larger commissions.

And yet within the year, Guildford Borough Council had put the practice on the framework from

which it selects architects for new school buildings. The good news came with one unexpected caveat — DSDHA's fee proposal was deemed uncompetitive for work budgeted under £10 million, so it would only be considered for projects valued in excess of that figure.

The council was true to its word. Three weeks later, DSDHA found itself in a competitive interview for the design of facilities for two institutions whose existing buildings were considered to have failed beyond repair: Christ's College, a secondary school; and Pond Meadow, a special educational needs school.

The plan was to bring the two schools together on the site

presently occupied by Christ's College alone, an undertaking that was budgeted on the basis of a £24.6 million contract value. This was a figure wildly in excess of anything DSDHA then had on its books and yet, pitched against a shortlist of considerably more experienced firms, it won.

If this was a brave decision on the council's part, it is one that looks set to be comprehensively vindicated. Next month, work completes on the secondary school, a building that already shows fantastic promise. With respect to Pond Meadow, we can be more emphatic: the school has been up and running since October, and it is a triumph.

In shadow, the brick is close to the colour of beetroot. With the sun on it, it is almost silver

The campus lies at the heart of what at first glance seems to be a generic pocket of suburbia, framed to the west by a railway line, to the east by a motorway and to the north by greenbelt. However, in the mature trees that line the neighbourhood's main app-

roach road, we encounter a clue to its history. Eighty years ago, all this was the estate of a large private house. The building was demolished in the 1930s, when the land was developed, but its tree-lined driveway was adopted as the spine of the new road network.

In the expectation that an economy of scale would result, the council originally envisaged the two schools occupying a single structure, but as the design work advanced, it became clear that the requirements of the two institutions were very different.

The reality is that Pond Meadow is as much a healthcare facility as an educational one. Its 92 pupils are challenged by con-

ditions ranging from mental disabilities such as autism and Down's syndrome to serious physical disabilities including sensory impairment and those that demand the use of a wheelchair. Their ages range from two to 19, so for many this building will form the setting for the larger part of their childhoods. Indeed, given the severity of some of their health issues, the likelihood is that not all the children will survive to graduation.

Having recognised the scale of the challenges faced by the students, DSDHA decided to accommodate the school in a very expansive single-storey structure. The three-storey Christ's College stands



PROJECT TEAM Architect DSDHA, Structural engineer Adams Kara Taylor, Services engineer Atelier Ten, Project manager Davis Langdon, Collaborative artist Martin Richman, Landscape consultant Townshend Landscape Architects, FF&E consultant BDP, Main contractor Wates Construction



to the south on the far side of a new, publicly accessible road which extends through the middle of the campus. Given that the site formerly represented a large out-of-bounds zone which local residents had to circumnavigate, the introduction of this route has radically reframed the relationship between it and the wider community.

Despite their differences in height, the two buildings are conceived very much as an ensemble. They share a powerfully compact massing and also a highly reduced material palette, the dominant component of which is a hard and dark-hued German brick. In this landscape of serpentine roads lined with diminutive 1930s

SECTION LOOKING NORTH



semis, they strike a very powerful presence. Set back from the main road and commanding a substantial area of open ground, they relate rather in the manner of a large country house and its outbuilding — an intimation perhaps

of the site's former occupation.

Pond Meadow's 3,600sq m gross internal area is accommodated in a bar-like volume which runs parallel to the main road. While its principal elevation extends for a daunting 114m,

DSDHA has mitigated the relentlessness inherent in that proposition by cranking the plan at two points along its length. The brick has a slight iridescence so the gesture is dramatised by the way that the differently angled surfaces

respond to the light: in shadow, they are close to the colour of beet-root; with the sun on them, they appear almost silver.

The informal treatment of the plan is overlaid by an equally relaxed sectional development.

The roof pitches up and down repeatedly along the building's length, transforming the two long facades into a series of rambling, skew-whiff gables. But in effect the structure remains very much a "Großform" in the manner of Hans Kollhoff's seminal Piraeus building — a single entity rather than an additive assembly of parts.

That impression is supported by two significant characteristics. The first is that the facades are presented as continuous, sheer surfaces. At 290mm x 50mm, the bricks are unusually long and thin, and they have been laid with a running bond which gives their coursing a dynamic, diagonal orientation. The fact that the cranks in ►

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The visitor entrance is cut into the principal elevation, exposing deep brick reveals.



The hydrotherapy pool is fitted with a steel hoist for lifting children in and out.



The cantilevered roof at the north end of the building.

plan are reconciled by brick specials rather than expansion joints ensures that the treatment carries through uninterrupted.

Equally key is the handling of the windows and glazed external doors. These are set flush to the outer face of the masonry, while their frames are powdercoated to a bronze which offers a minimal contrast to the colour of the brick.

The other quality that leads us to read the building as an unusually singular object is the very free

arrangement of the openings. The strategy frustrates any understanding of the plan as a series of repeated bays. Furthermore, it messes with our sense of the building's scale. At points the windows are stacked as many as three high, inviting us to read the walls as taller than they are. The doors, meanwhile, lead us in the opposite direction. We assume them to be of conventional size but in fact they are 2.5m high, hoodwinking us into a perception of the build-

ing that is smaller than the reality. As we track around the facades, these opposed effects compete for dominance, but the overall impression is of a wilful camouflaging of the building's internal configuration.

Having established this unified, crystalline form, the architect has proceeded to erode it. The main visitor entrance is associated with one of the plan cranks and is cut into the body of the building, exposing a deep brick reveal.

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However, it is at the far ends of the plan that the architectural language is pushed to its most heightened expression. Here, the classrooms open up to address the landscape, the interface being made by running canopies that cantilever 3.5m off the building's face. In reality, these are lightweight steel-framed appendages, their soffits faced in polycarbonate to allow light to filter down, but we read them as being very much of a piece with the building proper.

This is because their leading edges support a 1m height of brickwork, the top course of which accords with that of the adjacent parapet.

From a structural viewpoint, it is a wildly perverse gesture — achievable only through the fabrication of a series of lightweight concrete panels, precast against a permanent shuttering of cut bricks — but within the building's subtractive formal logic, it makes absolute sense.

The cranked plan divides the



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