

# On the last page of the A-Z,

Dagenham sprawls carelessly around the edges of London, Essex and the Thames Gateway. A deprived and divided town made up of roundabouts, petrol stations and abandoned car manufacturing plants, over the past ten years millions of pounds have been channelled into raising standards of education in this area.

It's the day that Tony Blair announces his

WILLIAM BELLAMY CHILDREN'S CENTRE, DAGENHAM, ESSEX.  
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Previous page: The west facade of the two-storey centre, with aluminium strips and irregular windows.  
Below: The south-facing classrooms with the canopy lit up at night.

Right: One of the classrooms backing onto an individual garden.  
Bottom right: The polyurethane panels of the canopy have fluorescent lights behind printed animal motifs.

resignation that we visit the town's latest education initiative – a striking new Sure Start children's centre, a support service for young parents and pre-school children, designed by London-based architecture practice DSDHA. The seeds of this building were sewn almost exactly a decade ago when Blair came to power. Deborah Saunt, director of the practice, recalls her elation as a young architect the morning after he was elected. "We thought, could it be true? Public buildings in Britain? At last?"

It was true, and here in Dagenham the crisply cut, matt aluminium facade of the William Bellamy Children's Centre is somehow reminiscent of Blair's first term in office – optimistic, image conscious, promising social change from roots-up local initiatives.

Established by Saunt and David Hill in 1998, DSDHA has been intimately involved in making New Labour's education initiatives real. The William Bellamy centre is the practice's fourth Sure Start project. Here, it has engaged the help of graphic artist Oliver Klimpel to add some fun and dynamism to the building. The

slick aluminium shell, recalling the area's Ford heritage, is tempered by Klimpel's red and yellow pattern of animal silhouettes on some of the ground-floor walls.

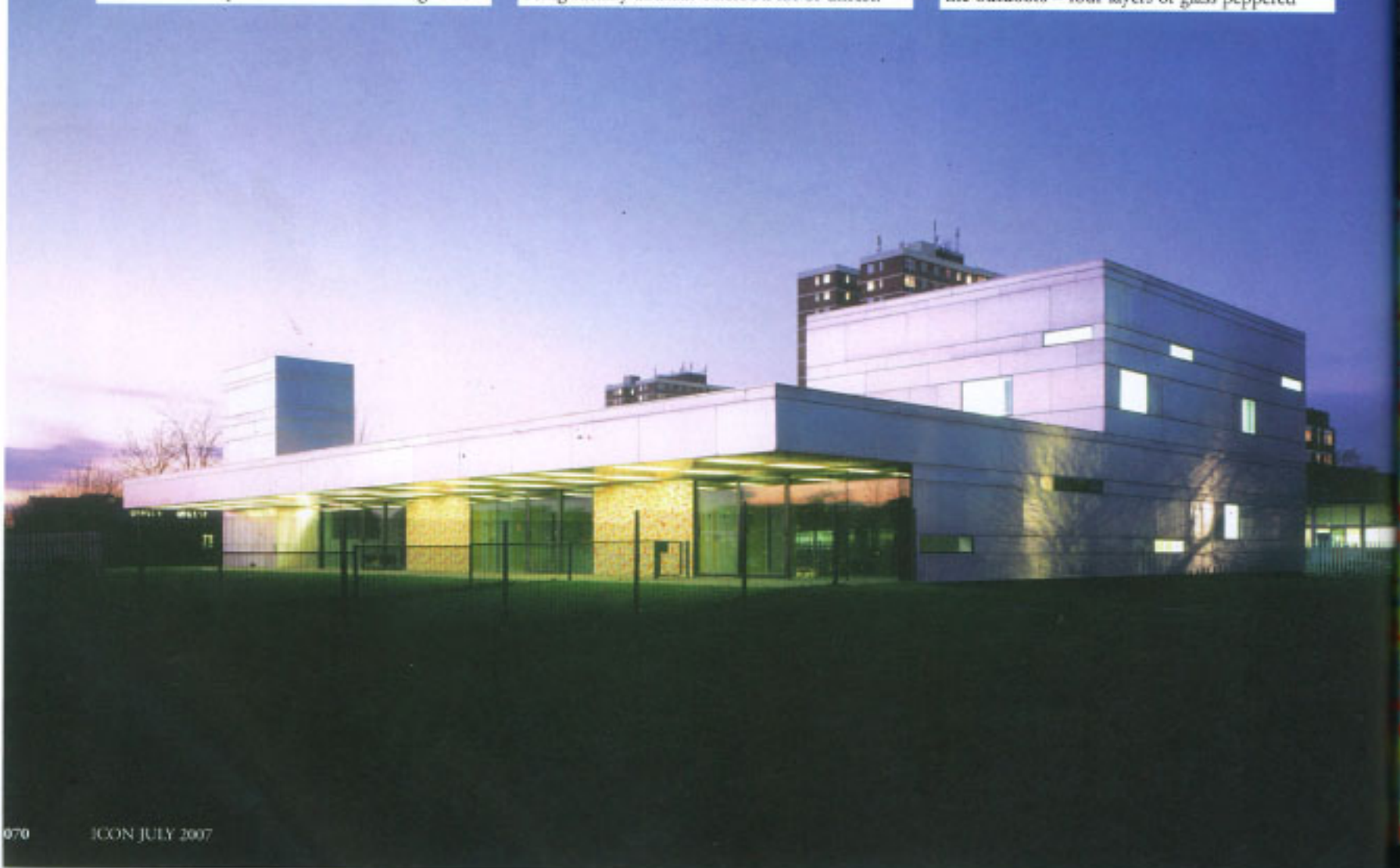
The facade composition, with its varying windows and horizontal bands, is designed to eliminate any sense of scale; it is only two storeys tall but gives the impression of something much bigger and stronger than its brick neighbours – on one side a junior school, on the other an infants'. Clear polyurethane panels glow beneath the deep canopies that mark the centre out against its landscape.

As we walk from the car park towards the entrance we pass a scrawny-looking kid traipsing behind his mother on his way next door. Saunt whispers stories about the kind of parents that take their kids to these local schools. "I've heard mothers swearing their heads off at kids, f-ing this, f-ing that. I've seen four women with pushchairs shouting at another mum because she was wearing a hijab – she was just walking her kids to school and being racially abused. There's a lot of unrest."

We pause beneath the generous overhanging eaves of the roof, whose underside is printed in Klimpel's medley of urban and woodland animals – foxes, rats, rabbits, snakes – extending like a canopy of autumn leaves. It's not just for the children – Dagenham doesn't have a maternity ward, so the centre provides valuable support for new parents. This calm space where parents can linger and socialise is an effort to encourage interaction and dispel the kind of tension Saunt has witnessed in the area.

However, from afar the building presents a rather adult, cool and severe exterior. **This doesn't look like a school, and that's because it's trying very hard to project more than that – to be a shiny symbol of investment in the community.**

Inside, the centre is formal, rectilinear and generously spaced – clerestories link rooms and wide doors lead onto individual, suburban-style gardens and outdoor spaces. The interior is largely designed around views of and access to the outdoors – four layers of glass peppered





with the now familiar icons of local wildlife divide the entrance foyer from the garden spaces behind. Each age group – from the nursery to the infant classrooms – has its own private garden space, and a further small tarmac courtyard acts as a kind of pathway for access but has been left un-programmed. It looks a little bare when we visit.

Outside is a grassy south-facing garden littered with hoops swinging from tree to tree, benches and sandpits. We stand looking at the curious toys, such as the hippopotamus-shaped bin, and find ourselves looking through the huge glass doors at a teacher reading out the mid-morning story to a room of toddlers.

As we walk up the stairs, glimpses of trees can be caught through the child-height windows and light floods in from above. Everything about the centre feels clear, clean and open, but I wonder what would be left if the walls printed with animals were painted over in three years' time. The graphic elements create a surface interest, but there seems something unambitious about this interior. ✎







is not quantifiable in charts or assessments. The teachers at junior school can already tell which kids came through Sure Start programmes because some of the others can't even put their own coats on.

The playfulness of DSDHA's earlier Sure Start initiative, the John Perry children's centre not far from here, came from the tension of a small site, a restricted budget and an enlightened client who encouraged the architects to build concrete playground furniture and giant blackboards. Corridors are covered in cork, and the interior design is more inventive than at William Bellamy. But perhaps such comparisons are secondary. The Sure Start system is flourishing up and down the country, and centre manager Jeannie Terry – who before the scheme ran similar classes for young mums and children in church halls – says, “What we are doing here comes when these kids are 15 and 16 and they're not unemployed and not single parents.” Saunt was surprised to find that the staff at the school weren't as enthusiastic as they might

be about the centre. Their cynicism comes as no surprise – other government initiatives such as city academies have divided teachers, communities and architects who would rather see investment into holistic infrastructure change – prioritising teaching standards over buildings. “Investing in a building is a political statement, whereas investing in someone's pay structure over the next 15 years doesn't have the same resonance,” observes Saunt, but she maintains her belief that the building itself contributes much to the children's aspirations. The William Bellamy centre's sharp shape cuts a distinctive figure in the otherwise low and empty skyline and certainly suggests high levels of investment to anyone passing through. But regardless of the polished facade and graphic patterns, it is clearly the social function of the building that matters. When the aluminium starts to lose its sheen and the colours fade, the building will continue to improve the lives of children and parents in the area – it won't just be another old, new school. †