Colerne Primary School (Text for Architect's Journal article by Peter Clegg)

Peter Clegg (left) with Rob Parsons (Head Teacher, right)

"It is all about listening to the Pupil Voice". These are the opening words of headteacher Rob Parsons when I begin to ask him about the buildings he has built over the last couple of years. And it is indeed the pupils who have been the real clients. Specifically the 7 and 8 year olds because they are the ones who will be at the school long enough to see a 3 year building project come to fruition. They are the ones that have helped to design the buildings, obtain the planning permissions, manage the process and as far as possible deal with the finances of projects that have been both challenging and rewarding for this small community focused primary school in Colerne outside Bath. It happens to be the local primary school for architect Piers Taylor and master carpenter Charley Brentnall. Both of them are used to projects involving school children. Mitchell Taylor won an RIBA award a couple of years ago for their Room 13 project for Hareclive Primary School in Bristol. Charley has been involved in many communal building projects including the Olivier Theatre at Bedales School, and most recently an extraordinary reciprocal frame structure for a school in Uganda. Together they have worked for many years with the weekend summer school "Studio in the Woods" that Taylor co-founded 5 years ago.

Not all primary schools have such useful neighbours but when they do it is extraordinary to see the creative energies that can be unleashed. The first project, a bike shelter funded partially by a green travel grant emerged from a design process organized by Mitchell Taylor where Key stage 2 students, working in groups of 6, designed a shelter , made models and powerpoint presentations and "pitched " to the whole school for their idea to be chosen. They talked about sourcing of materials, about ecological issues and cost planning. The winning design was developed with professional input from Taylor and Brentnall and the building process,- with some careful supervision,- also involved the pupils. It is exactly the same process that Taylor and Brentnall are now using with graduate AA students at Hooke Park.

That was a project which started out with a budget of £5000 and by scrounging some free timber from a local supplier and some free zinc for the roof managed to come in just over that.

The next project was a bit more serious. The budget was creatively assembled from a number of sources by a headteacher who knew how to get the best out of the financial systems that were operating a couple of years ago. The starting point was that the children had no kitchen and dining hall and everyone had to eat packed lunches. To quote Rob Parsons again "Every child should have the option of a hot midday meal". So the development of a kitchen and dining room was a essential but at the same time the school has been developing its own allotments and rearing its own chickens. Mitchell

Taylor managed to emerge through the necessary selection and tendering process and once again Charley Brentnall came on board to help with a collaborative design process and talk about how to build in timber. This time of course there was more at stake. It was the children who had to understand what a £240,000 overall budget meant. They had to understand the implications of £1000 per square meter. They were involved in difficult value engineering meetings when their initial ideas proved too expensive. It was they who presented personally to the planning committee who of course could not possibly refuse them, (- now there's a smart way to get an uncompromisingly modern building through committee in an AONB!)

This time a whole new range of issues was up for consideration. The children learned about the efficiency of underfloor heating, about solar orientation and the dangers of overheating. About what "superinsulation" actually means. And about constructing roof beams that started out as tied beams but ended up using elegant and simple plywood flitches. Again they made models and helped in the "barnraising" erection sequence. They learned that rooflights admit 3 times as much daylight as windows and are easier to control with electric motors. They learned that you didn't need a window for ventilation but that insulated flaps at the side of the building would do just as well and were better insulated (though lets all hope they don't warp!) And they learned that you can control acoustics by leaving gaps between the lining boards on the walls and the floors so as to expose the acoustic insulation behind (so lets hope there are enough gaps!) .

And I am sure they will appreciate the quality of light and ventilation and acoustics that results. They chose the bright red floor paint for the floor which soaks up the solar radiation, though it was Taylor who chose the duck egg blue to paint the exterior blockwork and provide a richer background colour to the larch boarding of both walls doors and shutters.

So Colerne School has a new dining hall, and a new function space that the village can use, but more importantly many of its children have experienced the process of building and the value of design. Their headteacher quotes the extraordinary statistic that 80% of the jobs that those children will eventually end up doing simply don't exist. So though vocational training is useful and academic training may help, the most important thing is that children learn to develop their own creativity and to exercise their imaginations and solve whatever problems life - or a substantial building project - may throw at them.

I am sure that the developments at Colerne school would be welcomed by the theorists of the coalition government. Here are parents working creatively to develop school buildings (localism at work in the Big Society). Here is a radical approach to curriculum delivery. But look at what really makes it work. Firstly a dedicated architect to get the best value out of a minimal budget (a role of the profession that Michael Gove doesn't seem to recognize) Secondly a headteacher who believes in a radically creative curriculum (unencumbered by the requirement to learn things like the chronology of kings and queens that he dreads the return of).

Finally neither of these projects would have been possible without the seed finance provided by previous government initiatives that made it possible for the ambitions to be raised. Sadly that no longer exists so Colerne School is looking elsewhere for its next project. They may chose to look radically at the energy supply systems for the school and see what the feed in tariff would generate. And the children have already made links with a village in Nepal which may be the location of their next building project: small amounts of money can go even further over there.

In the meantime lets hope that the government realizes that small amounts of finance can go a long way with the support of dedicated local architects, but most of all its necessary to harness the creativity of the children themselves.

Listen to the Voices Mr Gove.

Peter Clegg

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