

## BUILDING ■ Lessons in more: Llowarch Llowarch in west London

*The remodelled South Acton Children's Centre is tough on the outside, but rich and subtle within, finds David Grandorge.*

There are tough areas in most parts of London. South Acton is no exception, but it's improving. Walking up to the site of Llowarch Llowarch's Children's Centre from the unmanned train station, one passes through a housing estate of system-built towers and slab blocks of a type that we're all familiar with. Architects can be understandably defensive about the products of a former generation, but it's difficult to be so here. Some of it has made way for a new generation of housing, the language of which is banally populist, but one senses from conversations with local residents that, in its own way, it works.

The Children's Centre is sited in the middle of this estate. The project, which connects two existing buildings – Heathfield Nursery School and Hanbury Nursery Centre – came about from a government initiative to combine childcare and early years learning with family support services and education provided by the now familiar Sure Start programme. The existing low-rise buildings, one from the 1960s, the other a

decade older, are typical of the construction norms of the time. Llowarch Llowarch has linked them, negotiating a 1.7 metre change in level between them, and making a rich, complex ensemble.

The most prominent part of this intervention, a training room, presents itself to the street as a tough but elegant blue brick box. The material and form are an appropriate choice, signalling a kind of 'tough love'. They acknowledge the brutal context, but exhibit a refinement in their detailing and composition that would not be out of place in more exalted surroundings. The box is punctured on its south side with a large window that reveals occupation within, an advert for learning. Also on this face, the brick box is cantilevered over a long shallow opening behind which the Sure Start administration is housed. To the east side a recessed clerestory window tops off the structure and provides a subtle, diffused light within.

An automatic sliding glass door in a white stucco screen marks the main entrance.

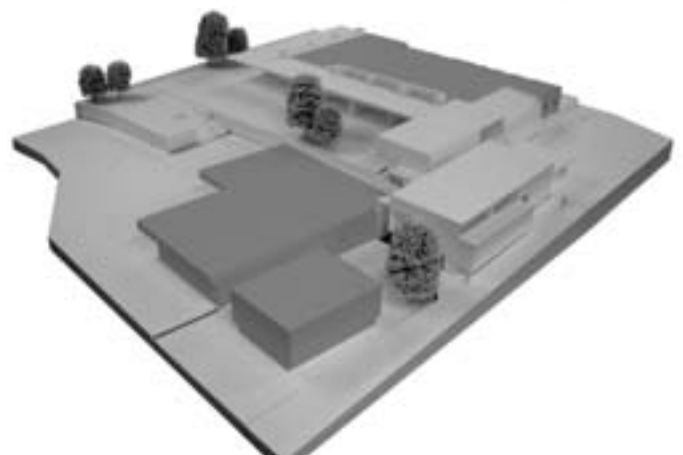




**Above** View from the foyer into the outdoor play area. Glazed facades maximise daylight penetration into the classrooms. Large circular rooflights have also been cut into the rear of the existing classrooms to bring daylight deep into the plan (photo: David Grandorge).

**Plans** Gpind and lower ground floors: 1 Foyer, 2 training room, 3 new classroom extensions, 4 outdoor play area, 5 existing Hanbury nursery, 6 existing Heathfield nursery, 7 existing prefabricated buildings, used by Sure Start as office space. **Below** Dark areas in the model show existing buildings. Llowarch Llowarch's additions are in light grey.

**Facing page** Above: the foyer; a lift and stairs descend 1.7 metres to existing Heathfield nursery (photos: left DG, right Sue Barr). Below: main entrance (photo: DG).







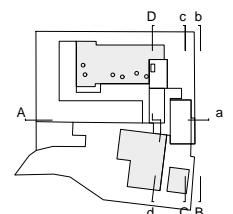
It allows views through to the landscaped outdoor play spaces beyond, surprising given the overall impression of solidity from the street. Crossing the threshold, one enters a foyer that mediates between the different privacy requirements of the nursery school and the more publicly accessible spaces. Generous in proportion, it is clearly the hub of the building – a space for informal interaction. It is also architecturally astute: a datum of just above two metres runs through the interior to the training room beyond. This datum, set at a height that can be touched by most adults, not only emphasizes a domestic scale in an institutional building, but also acknowledges the sectional nature of the sloping site.

This central part of the scheme was the second part of a phased development, the first of which was to remodel and refurbish the nursery to the north. Existing play spaces are extended outwards by about four metres, picking up on the grid of the existing building. The use of sliding screens along the length of this extension allows for



**Above** At the corner the roof oversails to provide a covered play area. Its separation from the existing building at this point allows for daylight to be brought into the deepest part of the plan through polycarbonate rooflights.

A low level window overlooking the covered play area is positioned to suit children (photo: SB).  
**Sections** From top: A-a, B-b, C-c, D-d. Ground level drops by 1.7 metres across the site.





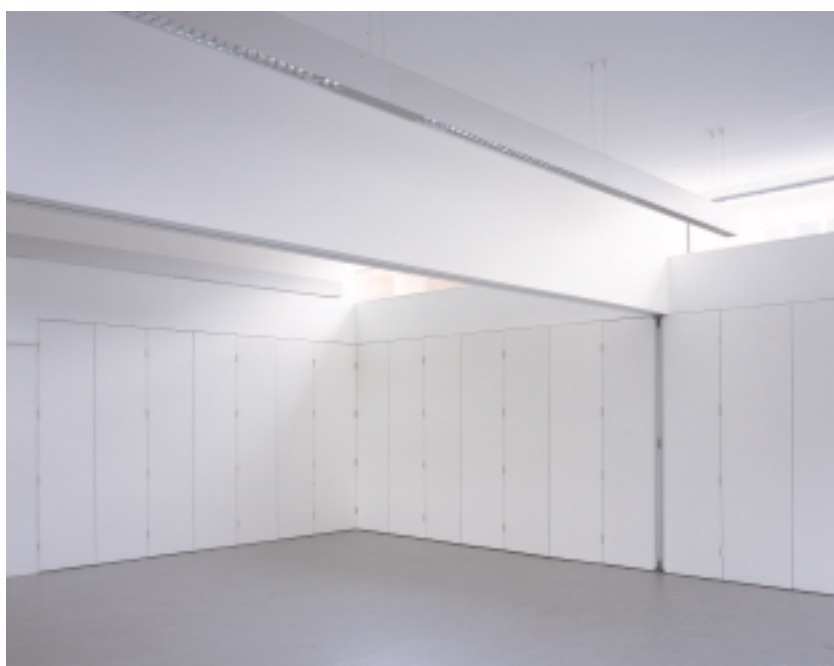
a flexible arrangement that can function as a long open space or distinct rooms. A fully glazed screen to the outside provides for generous levels of daylight. This is augmented by new circular roof openings that enable light to penetrate the depth of the plan and allow for passive cross ventilation.

A cantilevered canopy of steel with Douglas Fir infill wraps around the perimeter of these classrooms, protecting them



from solar gain and unifying the two phases of the project. The cantilever keeps the edge of the building column free, allowing children to run unimpeded from inside to outside.

This type of project is a godsend to young architectural practices denied the privilege of designing schools but still keen to contribute to the public realm. Like many others, I have doubts about what might be



achieved by new buildings in these circumstances, but I'm glad these endeavours exist. There is no definitive cure to the social malaise caused by a fractured society, but one must retain a degree of hope. There is a chance that these 'small acts', particularly if they are as successful as this scheme by Llowarch Llowarch, will provide the children of inner city London with early experiences of learning and playing akin to those enjoyed by their contemporaries elsewhere.

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**Top** The blue engineering brick box housing Sure Start facilities is the most prominent element of the ensemble when viewed from the street. It acts as the buffer between the street and the interior, where softer yet durable materials such as Douglas Fir are used (photo: DG).

**Above** Deep, light-filled reveals to clerestory glazing provide well-balanced daylight to training room (photo: DG).

**Bottom** Flexible classroom spaces face the outdoor play area. The centre accommodates a number of children with autism and other special care requirements. Interior finishes and colours were selected to suit the specific learning needs of these children (photo: Paul Smooty).





Uowarch Uowarch writes: South Acton Children's Centre is one of the first designated Children's Centres. Our involvement in the project began in 2002 when we were asked to carry out a relatively modest study for the site of two existing buildings – Heathfield Nursery School and Hanbury Nursery Centre.

The two institutions had recently merged to become an Early Excellence Centre and the study examined how the buildings might connect to form an integrated premises for childcare and adult support services. Over a period of ten months our brief increased in scope in parallel with funding successfully raised by the client, and the formation of a partnership with Sure Start to increase the range of services that the new centre will provide.

While the design was conceived as a unity, construction was phased in order to minimise the period that Hanbury nursery would remain closed and ensure that Heathfield was kept open for the duration of the project. Phase one works extended the existing playrooms and reorganized existing spaces within Hanbury. This provided 24 new full-time equivalent childcare

places for babies and toddlers up to three years old, new spaces for the Nurture Group which includes children with autism, new spaces for speech and language therapy (I-Can) and increased space for the existing special care unit.

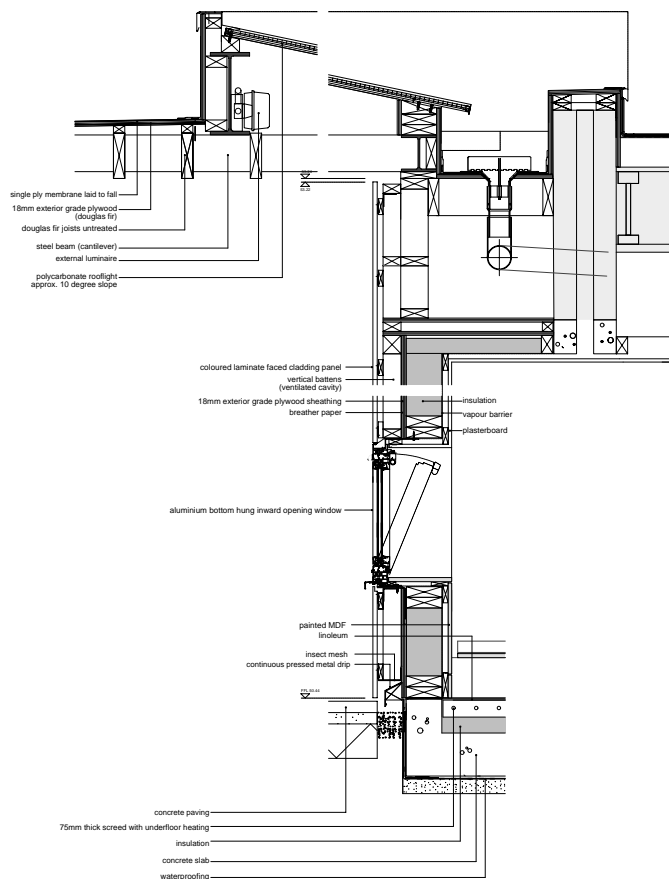
Phase two forms a new link between the two existing buildings and extends the centre's community provision, involving a range of links with parents, training in computers for other local institutions as well as loan systems for toys and books, an on-site counselling service, and spaces for Sure Start administration.

The project anticipates a point at the end of the Sure Start programme when the offices can be vacated and used to house activities currently based in temporary prefabricated accommodation, which could then be dismantled, adding to green space on the site.

An important aspect of the project was the development of the interior of the site and its relationship to adjacent spaces.

**Above** View from the west of the steel and timber canopy wrapping around the classrooms (photo: DG).

**Detail** Part section through covered play area.





The extensions to Hanbury are perceived as belonging to the outdoor play area to which all playrooms have direct access. The fully glazed facade reinforces the relationship between inside and outside and the focus on an active landscape, which in terms of the curriculum has equal weight to the interior. A canopy wraps around the interior perimeter of the building unifying the exterior spaces.

In phase two, the main accommodation has been placed against the boundary, creating a protective 'buffer' to the street and providing enclosure to the external play area. The outer volume provides space for meetings and counselling and a training room for groups of up to fifty which can also be subdivided for smaller groups.

The plan is organised around served and servant spaces, the latter housing the support functions to the main volumes of the foyer and teaching space. Governed by a datum, lower-ceilinged areas act as thresholds between the main internal volumes. They also provide transparency within the building and establish visual connections from its perimeter at the street edge through to the interior of the site – contrasting with the solid appearance of the building from the street.

Loosely defined spaces allow the centre to provide for a multitude of functions and different users and encourages a relaxed and informal atmosphere for social interaction, an important underlying aspect of the mixed programme.

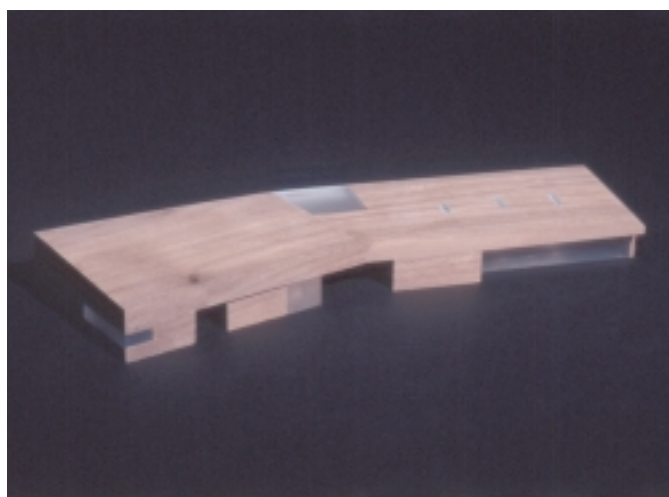
**Right** The outdoor play area in use. Exposed timbers in the canopy are intended to increase the sense of inter-visibility attaching to the enclosed play area (photos: Ullowarch Ullowarch).

#### Project team

Architect: Ullowarch Ullowarch; design team: Andrew Ullowarch, Nicola Ullowarch, Madeleine Dignam, Eva Sieber, Peter Kirkness; qp: Davis Langdon; structural engineer: Michael Baigent Orla Kelly; services engineer Paul Bestick Associates; contractor: J McGinley; client: Ealing Early Years Childcare Services, Ealing Education Property Services, Head of Hanbury Nursery Centre, Sure Start South Acton and Acton Vale.

#### Selected subcontractors and suppliers

Bricks: Ketley Blue Engineering Brick; render: Stootherm Mineral Systems; roof: Fatra; windows: Technal; rooflights: Brett Martin; flooring: ForboNairn Marmoleum; Heckmondwick Supacord carpet; automatic doors: Dorma; moveable partitions: Hall Partitions; ironmongery: Dorplan, Halele; interior lighting: Weaver & Ducre, Thom, Thorlux; joinery: Shelbourne Joinery; suspended ceilings: SAS System 150 access panel system; sanitaryware: Twyford; Amitage Shanks; cubicles: Amwell Laminates; steel: Crawford Engineering Services; groundwork: Barrett Plant and Concrete; paving: Charcor; landscaping: Effective Learning Environments, Vickery Leitch, LMD.



We consider SACC to be part of a family of three projects developed at the same time. The other two, both childcare facilities with a Sure Start component and both on sites in Brent, north London, Both exhibit similar concerns with the relationship of the building to external space. The first is an extension to a 1930s nursery school, designed to provide 57 additional childcare places, both full daycare and 'wrap-around' care outside normal hours.

The form of the building adapts to the constraints of a tight, triangular site to fulfil a number of objectives which include maximising natural daylight and ventilation and the provision of safe, protected external play. This is done by placing the largest volume of accommodation in the centre of the triangular site, creating two 'open rooms' of differing character composed as part of the built volume. Fully glazed screens with hinged and sliding doors lead

onto the external play areas either side of the play spaces. Treating the ground plane as a continuous surface establishes an active landscape in which the interior and exterior are equal.

The layout of the second project on the edge of Roundwood Park responds to its setting by following a line of mature lime trees on the northern boundary of the site. The building's cranked form implies enclosure but is simultaneously open to the expanse of

parkland to the south. A 20-place creche and Sure Start offices are physically separate but contained within a single structure which responds to the diverse conditions around the site. By manipulating the roof plane, the building increases in scale towards the street, and reduces in scale over the creche and towards the park.

**Above** Childcare facilities in Brent. Left, nursery school extension; right, Roundwood Park creche (photos: DG).