

BUILDINGS: PIE ARCHITECTURE

The shuttering imprint on new entrance pavilions echoes the ribbed pre-cast concrete of the existing facade.



A lesson in adding and subtracting

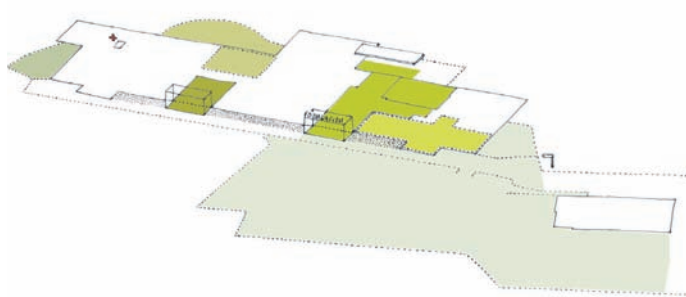
Pie Architecture's individual reworking of a 1970s primary school in north London is notable for its careful attention to the needs of the classroom, and the way in which it appeals to pupils. **Oliver Wainwright** reports

Pictures by David Grandorge

Primary schools are intriguing places. They are Lilliputian worlds unto themselves, with floors of balsa building blocks and walls of glitter and sticky-backed plastic. They are lairs of sensory overload, where every surface is transformed into an educational tool – carpets embroidered with times tables and cupboards inscribed with alphabets. They are stage sets for a free-form model of learning, which floats with short attention span from mat, to sandpit, to play-kitchen.

And yet, architecturally, most primary schools show no concession to the fact that children are no longer taught at rows of desks, reciting their three Rs. They are usually dumb, ill-fitting backdrops to the creative chaos of learning, centrally procured flat packs of public-sector clunkiness. With free schools soon to be set up in the local converted chippy, such standards of appropriateness are only going to get worse.

How refreshing, then, to visit a school that has been carefully adapted to the specific needs of what goes on between its walls, executed with neither patronising playschool whimsy, nor the blunt hand of the local authority. At St Joseph's Primary School in Highgate, north London, newly



The project comprises a series of strategic interventions around the existing building.

formed Pie Architecture has performed subtle acts of surgery to give an aging 1970s block a whole new lease of life.

The brief was to relocate the nursery school within the existing main building, requiring a new entrance and classroom extensions; the refurbishment of existing teaching spaces; and the provision of external play areas.

The architect's response follows a careful strategy of subtraction

Pie's interventions have the fun of a doll's house, scaled up to the size of a four-year-old

and addition, with a remarkably sympathetic approach to the "as found" condition.

"It's not a bad elevation, if you stand back and squint a bit," says Pie co-director Michael Corr, referring to the existing post-war block – the kind most parents would describe as a concrete shoe box. But he has a point. There is a dignified toughness to its bush-hammered facade and poised balance in its fenestration. But the only reason you would notice this is because of the two new blocks that protrude at ground level – both of the same language and yet completely other.

Like a detail from one of the existing ribbed pre-cast concrete panels, blown up and redeployed at twice the scale, the entrance blocks sport a vertical shuttering pattern from Douglas fir formwork, the

imprint of three different board widths. There is something alluringly model-like about the finish, as though a corrugated cardboard maquette has been painstakingly scaled up, its surface meticulously replicated.

Once within, any sense of Thomas Demand flimsiness falls away, as the monolithic substance of these little pavilions becomes clear. Poured in one go – with the advice of concrete guru David Bennett – the double-skin walls are over 400mm thick and finished with rare precision. Generously proportioned steel Crittall windows fill the exposed, seamless reveals, consciously placed at child height, with sills deep enough to perch on. Inside, the concrete has a smooth matt finish, lined with a boot-store bench and coat pegs in birch ply. In their quiet monumentality, canted roofline and immaculate finish, these little entrances are diminutive cousins to Valerio Olgiati's school in Paspels.

Outside, a washed concrete ground of coarse Thames shingle aggregate runs between the pavilions, with the rugged material also used to create a bench and matching water butts fed from a concealed gutter above. The timber shuttering has been used to construct another piece of meandering furniture – at once fence,





PROJECT TEAM Architect Pie Architecture, **Client** St Joseph's RC Primary School, **Structural engineer** HRW Engineers, **Services engineer** Mendick Waring, **Quantity surveyor** Appleyard and Trew, **Main contractor** JSP Building Services



The entrance pavilions are lined with ply, boot-store benches.



Above: Steel Crittall windows fill the exposed reveals.



Left: Multipurpose furniture islands populate the interior.

planters and seating — that extends across the playground, painted a pale lilac. There is an attention to detail in the scale and composition of these separate pieces that brings a sense of restrained grandeur to the entrance sequence and betrays much thought as to how these in-between spaces will be used, before, during and after school.

Inside, a sea of pea-green lino extends from the new foundation entrance through into the open-plan common space, where partition walls have been removed to create one large multi-use area. A kitchen, with recycled yoghurt pot worktop, and Sundeala-clad cupboards run along the edges of the space, while custom-designed foldaway tables are arranged in the centre — transformed into a “present-wrapping station” at the time of visiting.

A mysterious totem stands a little further on, an island object of bench, cubbyhole and tower in one, hollowed out on one side and lined with inky black acrylic, capped with a frieze of Shaker-style pegs. Depicted here in its pristine blankness, it has already become an elaborate grotto, smothered with drapes, and dressed with glittery bunting — like the nest of some kleptomaniac magpie. Complete for only two weeks, the surfaces are already

encrusted with signs of habitation. Pupils have taken ownership of the new spaces to such an extent that when Corr visited recently, one of them stopped him: “Who are you?” they challenged. “This is our place.”

Further one-off furniture pieces, combining book shelves, seating and cosy, felt-lined dens, continue around the corner, while sand and water trays, raised on stilts to child height, stand at another wall, all designed in active consultation with the children, who built mock-ups of these elements from timber blocks. Through a set of folding concertina doors, the nursery room sports a little stage, complete with miniature stage door, the pupils’ new favourite toy.

At the rear of the building, an outdoor space has been floored with Astroturf, and a slender, steel-

framed canopy erected for outdoor classes in summer. Another small stage steps up in one corner, while the undercroft of an existing metal stair has been turned into a mirror-lined hideaway. In their language of folding flaps, secret doorways and hidden dens, Pie’s interventions have the fun of a doll’s house, scaled up to the size of a four-year-old.

And they are all the more compelling for what they replace. Only two years ago, the school was subject to a £2 million refurbishment, remodelled in the office vernacular of cellular walled classrooms and suspended ceilings, separated by vast empty corridors the size of rooms. “There was so much wasted space before,” one teacher told me. “But now we use it all.”

Pie’s work was built over the summer holidays, to a tight nine-week programme, for £250,000 — after initial tenders of more than £400,000 — and completely transforms the foundation school, bringing new functionality with a knowing wit. The first project of this nascent practice, it shows a loving attention to detail, from the craft of joinery to the finish of concrete, combined with a strategic intelligence about how the place could work. Of the need for thoughtful architects in the education sector, it provides convincing evidence.



The bespoke sandpit and water tray are raised to child height.