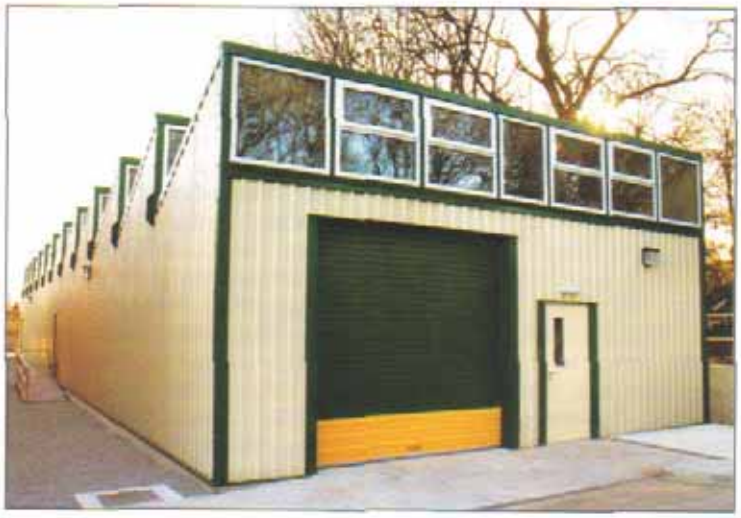
Improving teaching and learning by improving the buildings



Whichever way we look at it, "Building the School of the Future" is a magnificent vision.

Vast atriums with indoor trees and plants are interspersed with fountains and statues. Dedicated, deep-thinking students peer over high balconies while others stroll around with books under arms, intensely debating why, just as he had reached such fame and fortune as a poet, Shakespeare gave up on the form in order to focus on the more politically unstable world of theatre.

Outside, youngsters build Titan-bound rocket ships out of Lego while track and field athletes train on landfill sites transformed into state-of-the-art sports arenas thanks to the government's largesse. Teenage whiz kids illustrate the means to double the speed of a PC with a sketch on the back of an envelope. Schools teach pupils to become "bright by design."

And yet beneath these images lies a very awkward fact - that as yet we don't know much about how buildings affect learning. We do know that making the teaching room too hot or too cold slows down teaching and learning. And we know that direct sunlight itself can be a problem as it can reflect off screens and boards, and again raise the temperature. Blinds can help, but then again there is something about children and blinds that does not always mix.

So what buildings do we need? What materials should we use and what should we avoid? And how do we achieve maximum flexibility, dividing classrooms up into smaller units as and when needed?

The possibility that buildings themselves can influence teaching and learning arose with the report "Daylighting in Schools" which was first published in California some five years ago. It suggested that there was a significant correlation between how light was generated and the ways pupils performed in class. Quite amazingly the report found that in sky-lit, bright rooms learning rates were 27% faster than in comparable schools that used only fluorescent lighting.

The task of finding out why this is so, and what can be done about it, has been taken up by Laura Merton at Conport Structures – manufacturers of pre-fabricated buildings for educational use in over 40 countries.

As Laura Merton said, "For many years we have been supplying pre-fabricated buildings which are designed to flood the rooms with glare-free, natural light from above. Our Northlight Studios not only give glare-free, natural light, which makes work easier to undertake, they also give an open, airy ambiance that affects the quality of the student's work - and because we can supply them in a pre-fabricated form, construction times are much lower than for conventional buildings, as are costs."

Chelsea School of Art and Design and more recently the Arts Institute, Bournemouth have both adopted this style of building in the UK, and Conport Structures are now seeking schools and local authorities that are interested in erecting classrooms using this technique as part of the Schools of the Future campaign. In the absence of any other clear evidence as to what difference school buildings can make to behaviour and teaching and learning, schools are now turning to this radical approach to school architecture as the way of the future. They do now have at least one model on which to build.

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References:

Daylighting in Schools. Heschong Mahone Group, commissioned by the Californian Board of Energy Efficiency