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consultancy for the built environment

High Street Schools: schools as catalysts of sustainable communities: by Richard Saxon.

Britain is building or rebuilding all its thousands of primary and secondary schools to fit them for today's needs. Many new schools are being founded, especially in areas of population growth. The location and design of these schools is not however being considered as part of the drive to more sustainable communities. This article looks at what could and should be happening.

Schools are a community resource and should be at the heart of each community. They don't just educate our children but provide lifelong learning resources for all and facilities for social, sport and cultural activity year-round. They generate daily movement of children, parents and teachers which is a major factor in traffic congestion and emissions and in the safety and socialisation of children. A lot of the problems stem from the location of schools in relation to their catchments. Ideally children should be walking to primary school, not more than 10 minutes or 800 meters from home. Secondary school children should be safely cycling there. But schools often sprawl on peripheral fields, bought cheaply and not allowing for easy access on foot, by bike or by public transport. Movements to school don't reinforce the local economy and schools are less used round the clock and year as a result.

We now have an opportunity to reconsider the siting and design of our 3500 secondary and 8500 primary schools to be at the core of more sustainable communities, using less land and energy, generating fewer car trips, and being used for much more of the year. In London alone, London First estimates a need for 110 new foundations to meet growth, requiring site area equal to two and a half Regent's Parks if provided conventionally.

The alternative to conventional siting and two-storey design is the 'compact school', integrated with other uses on or close to the local centre. Primary schools can be on the ground floor of multi-story development, wrapped around the blank walls of retail developments or in up to six storey arrangements with

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play decks replacing playgrounds. Secondary schools can work on four to six storeys and provide an area's public library and indoor sports centre, be built above retailing and perhaps be linked to one of the new polyclinics. Using high value sites can be afforded with high density design and mixed use. Expansive former school sites have high disposal value for residential development. (see the box story on Hampden Gurney School)

High Street schools would be a powerful regenerator of communities, creating round-the-clock footfall which would support commercial and public uses and save everyone time by combining otherwise dispersed trips. They would provide children with an education for life, re-instating the educative walk to school and seeing the community as a whole. Busy streets are safe streets. Including crèche or day-nursery facilities at the school would help parents of very young children on their way to work by public transport.

What about play and sports space? This has driven the preference for edge-of-town sites but it must now be reconsidered as an overriding factor. Play decks have proven superior to open yards for primary school children, providing all-weather space and separating age groups (see box). Indoor sports halls and rooftop all-weather sports surfaces can be very effective and flexible. Bussing or walking children to sports fields is a better low-carbon choice than basing the whole school location on sports. Multi-storey schools are also great anti-obesity devices.

Low-carbon schools have a complementary energy need to housing, needing power, heat (and increasingly cooling) at different hours. Linked developments of school and homes can capitalise on this with combined systems. Indeed, one of the simplest mixed-use possibilities is to build homes above school space. This has already been done several times, providing flats (for teachers?) above classrooms. A notable example is at St Jude's and St Paul's school, London N1, by the Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association.

The case for re-thinking school location and design is overwhelming. It will be better environmentally, more socially useful and economically affordable to place schools at the heart of communities and dispose of peripheral sites.

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Box story. Hampden Gurney School.

This London Church of England primary school was able to innovate more easily than a state school. Based on a former bomb-site off Edgware Road in Marylebone, its two-storey, post-war buildings were worn out. Not wishing to move away from the centre of its catchment, the school looked for ways to stay put on a high value site. The solution was to build a six-level tower school on the corner, releasing most of the site for 58 flats as a commercial development. The school had to provide play decks at each classroom level rather than a playground and it took time to persuade the government to agree to this. The school also cost 20% more because of this, but the site was 'free'. The glass-enclosed play decks proved a great success, useful in all weathers and separating age groups so that there are fewer accidents or incidents and age-related play equipment is provided.

The nursery class is at street level with a multi-purpose hall below and four levels of teaching above. A rooftop 'science garden' under a striking canopy completes this design by Building Design Partnership (BDP), shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2002

The concept has been turned by BDP into an 'exemplar school', the 'Beehive', for the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The Devonshire School in Blackpool is the first completed user of the exemplar. Developer Ballymore is currently planning with BDP to provide a school in London Docklands which will form the lower six levels of a residential tower.

(Pictures from BDP: Sheri Besford: 020 7812 8008)

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