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Case Study

Social spaces in the learning environment



Introduction and Context

Within the past decade, following the Scottish Futures Trust's 'Schools for the Future' programme, the education sector in Scotland has witnessed a building boom with inspirational spaces appearing the length and breadth of the country. These new schools, both primary and secondary, are being designed to respond to the Curriculum for Excellence, providing spaces that cater to both formal and informal learning, to group work and to individual study, to social activities and to sporting endeavours and for many schools, responding to the particular demands of the local communities in which they are based. Additionally, many older schools are being refurbished by local authorities to bring the accommodation up to modern standards; working within existing building footprints can place constraints on what can be achieved, especially with listed buildings, but also allows opportunities for creative re-use of space.

Schools have moved from 'classrooms, corridors and a gym hall' to true 'learning landscapes' that support the pupils on their learner journeys whilst also providing a pleasant environment for their staff and visitors.

The Curriculum for Excellence has four key purposes, best summarised as 'helping children and young people' to be:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors

Different spaces within schools have to respond to these purposes in their own particular way, and as is apparent from walking through many of the new schools, the challenge is to make spaces fulfil more than one function (and for 'all-through' campuses, to make these multi-function spaces cater to a wide age range).

The emphasis on school design is not solely on creating spaces that will enable academic excellence, but on creating spaces that will help to develop the individuals' skills as a whole, taking learning out of the classroom and

also providing the right mix of spaces within a school for children and young adults to socialise. Schools also need to prepare pupils for the outside world, and the design of social spaces within schools can help with this transition through facilitating social communication.

A fundamental question that is perhaps beyond the scope of this document is 'when is a space just a social space?'. For some educators, 'every space within a school is a learning space', while others define social spaces as 'the internal and external areas within the school buildings and grounds where students go to when they are not in the classroom'. There is clearly an opportunity for confusion.

In this document we showcase inspirational, non-classroom spaces that cater more to the social side of school life, presenting the large, communal spaces within award-winning new build schools, examples of a sympathetic treatment of a historic school building as well as some spaces that bring the outdoors indoors.

Research

From early years provision through to secondary schools, the importance of [social interaction in the development of children and young adult's](#) is well-understood [1]. 'Social connectedness' can have a range of academic benefits with [social spaces facilitating learning](#), supporting the notion that while every space is a learning space, non-classroom spaces help with the formation of community and identity [2]. Social spaces are just one of [many different types of spaces in schools](#) that support different aspects of the Curriculum for Excellence [3], and while this type of space can bring people together, it can also reinforce a [tribal mentality](#). The ownership and control of spaces (including social spaces) by pupils can result in bullying if relevant support is not provided [4]. In some of the case studies presented here, different age groups in secondary schools have been allocated or have commandeered their own spaces on campus. In this respect, new schools are not that much different from the old.

“Cleverly considered interior settings can accommodate many different functions across the day. Boundaries between what is a social space and what is a learning space; between what is a library and what is a community cafe, can blend and blur offering a great deal of flexibility in use across the day for many activities and users.”

Architecture and Design Scotland

Wellbeing is fundamental to learning and good design of school environments plays a [significant role in the experience of wellbeing](#) [5]; [good school design shows pupils that they are being listened to](#) [6]. More social spaces, where pupils can gather and interact, [‘where young people can feel relaxed to be themselves’](#) [6] are vitally important for developing social and emotional skills; however, the physical spaces are only part of the solution. [Students need support to navigate such spaces](#) and make the entire school an environment that is safe, positive, and conducive to learning [7]. However, [a study of pupils’](#) perceptions of their schools, including different social spaces, shows that ‘secondary school students are not one homogenous group’ [8]. When students’ [perceptions of their school environment](#) are more positive, behaviours are generally better and students’ engagement with the school is more likely; these are related to key educational outcomes [8].

Schools are now more of [a learning landscape](#) [9], containing a mixture of [timetabled and non-timetabled spaces](#). The above study [8] listed key themes raised by pupils when discussing social spaces, including ‘choice of meeting spaces’ and identified that ‘good quality social spaces should be varied or flexible enough to facilitate different activities such as relaxing alone, having privacy to be with your friends etc.’ Excluding space given over to teaching or sporting activities, unless dedicated social spaces are provided (e.g. common rooms) pupils are sometimes only left with the café / dining spaces and the building circulation, the latter often being fitted out with soft-seating areas (though even these areas are often managed by the schools as classroom breakout areas and not social spaces per se). It could even be argued that less-formal spaces such as libraries fall under the category of learning spaces and are typically managed accordingly. In their 2009 report on the [impact of new school buildings](#) [10], Audit Scotland reported that ‘pupils complain of lack of space in ... social spaces’.

The growing importance of circulation as social space is evidenced by the number of ‘Hellerup’ seating / stairs in the new Scottish schools. These allow for ‘visual connectivity and ease of circulation within the school, as well as providing [a casual social space for students and staff](#)’ [11]; [they also](#)

[function as lecture seats](#) [12]. Circulation space as social space is not the only option however, with this document presenting several instances where existing space has been transformed (e.g. Murrayburn Primary) to introduce opportunities for more social activities. The heart of many new schools is the central social / dining space, where furniture is often brought out from storage for lunchtimes in order to increase the flexibility of the space and increase utilisation. The multi-function nature of these ‘large cohort’ spaces [‘involves a rethink on space management and facilities management issues’](#) [9]. Two models are presented in this document: a dedicated dining space (e.g. West Calder High School) and a flexible, multi-use space (e.g. Dalbeattie Learning Campus). The appropriateness of each model will be school-dependent. It is clear that in general there is a need for more post occupancy studies and wider research on the impact of these large social spaces in new school buildings.

Principles

In an effort to increase the utilisation of space within schools, it is not uncommon for spaces to fulfil multiple-functions, and just as spaces often merge into one another, activities taking place in these spaces don’t always fall within strict boundaries.

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[Visualising Change - Space Strategies Learning Note](#)

While formal learning still predominantly takes place in a classroom environment (whether that be fully-enclosed or semi-enclosed), learning and teaching in break-out spaces is increasingly being facilitated by flexible learning environments. ‘Every space is a learning space’ is a common phrase in school design.

That being said, there is still a requirement for spaces that support the **social aspect of school life**, particularly during those times of the day that are not timetabled (and this becomes more important for senior secondary pupils who may have more free time but who are still expected to be on school premises). Perhaps the only difference between a true social space and a social learning space is the purpose of the activities in the space or whether the activity is timetabled. However, even when there are no timetabled activities, such is the availability of information, via mobile technology (phones or laptops) and Wi-Fi, and the nature and importance of peer-to-peer **interaction**, the boundary between socialising and learning is very malleable. This is more apparent in secondary schools where most, if not all, pupils have access to a smartphone.

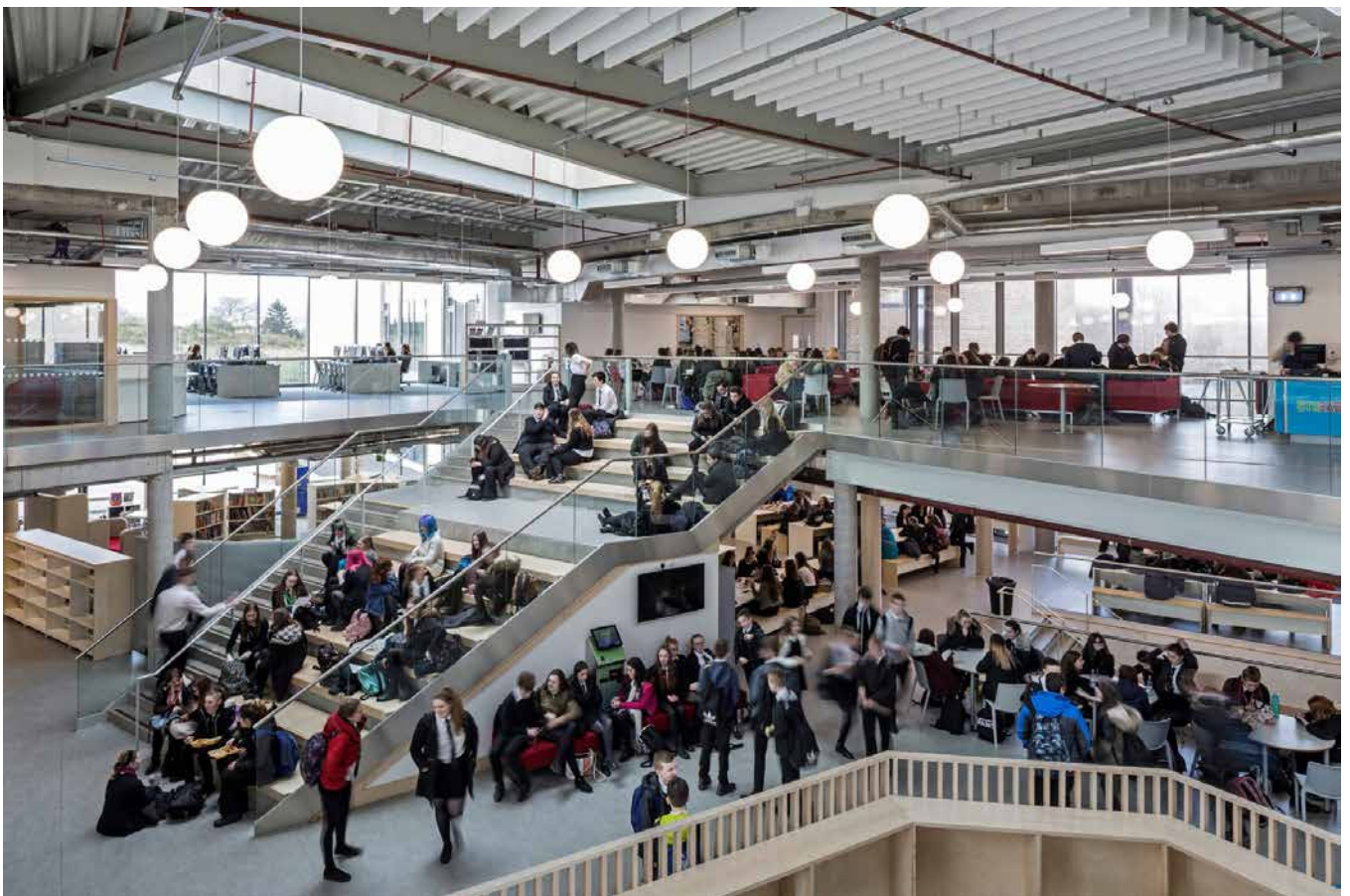
The potential to **customise** spaces in school buildings for short periods and to take ownership is important. Within reason furniture should be able to be easily moved around to accommodate rapid changes in group sizes and ad hoc gatherings. The ability to reduce the scale of a larger space by creating an environment that is more appropriate for a small group is important. Micro-environments, either through furniture or **semi-enclosed** spaces, introduce a more human scale. Too big feels impersonal, too small feels cramped. However, the balance between privacy and openness exposes the dichotomy between the pupil experience and the management of spaces, the challenge between being able to express yourself freely among your peers and the responsibility for ensuring that **behaviour** is appropriate for a school environment. As schools become more open and spaces become more flexible, the **management** of spaces becomes more important.

Social spaces within a school need to be **durable**. Designers need to look past day one and specify products that will allow the space to look presentable and still function as intended for significantly longer (all within a finite budget). Ease of cleaning and maintenance of fixtures and finishes is important.

Pupils of all ages be they young children or young adults need to blow off steam and enjoy social spaces; this will undoubtedly result in the generation of **noise**. While self-policing is important, the layout and design of social spaces is important also. One of the key attributes of a social space is that it should be located such that activities in that space do not disturb others. The increased role of acousticians in new school projects, where the degree of open plan is far greater than in traditional schools, is key and interior designers need to specify fixtures and finishes that can go some way to mitigating the impact of noise. Having social spaces distributed throughout a school increases the opportunity for **zoning** the school, having some spaces that are quieter than others.

Schools now offer **variety** in terms of formal learning spaces (classrooms, IT suites etc.) this needs to be replicated in social spaces, and there needs to be awareness of how the individual spaces cater to pupils with different needs; colour and graphics are vitally important. Designing spaces that are **inclusive** and respond to neurodiversity will be appropriate for all pupils. Complexity of design can add interest in social spaces, but this also has the opportunity to distract and confuse and the layering of spaces, within a central atrium (for example), raises questions over ease of **accessibility**.

Finally, social spaces need to be **inspirational** and offer pupils the opportunity to express themselves and learn valuable social skills. Involving pupils in the design (including graphics) and in the development of protocols as to how the spaces will be used is important for ownership of the spaces. Social spaces need to engender a sense of pride at being in **their** school and can be used to showcase the achievements of the school and its position within the wider community.



‘Terraces of activity’, Garnock Community Campus.

Example 1: Boroughmuir High School, Edinburgh

Date of opening:	February 2018
School roll:	c.1260
Type:	Secondary
Awards:	Building of the Year and Large Project Award, Edinburgh Architectural Association Awards (2018) Regional Award, Royal Institute of British Architects (2018) Award for Education/Health and Wellbeing, Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (2018)

Overview

Situated on a heavily sloping site that is bordered on two sides by roads and on another side by a canal, the award-winning new high school is more condensed than contemporary new build schools. Containing the usual mix of formal and informal educational spaces as well as innovative spaces such as a rooftop multi-use games area, the five-storey building is wrapped around a central three-storey atrium space that for the first time in the schools' history allows all the pupils to take part in an assembly. The connection with the outdoors is important also; from the connection to the canal-side to the outdoor learning spaces accessed directly from the atrium.

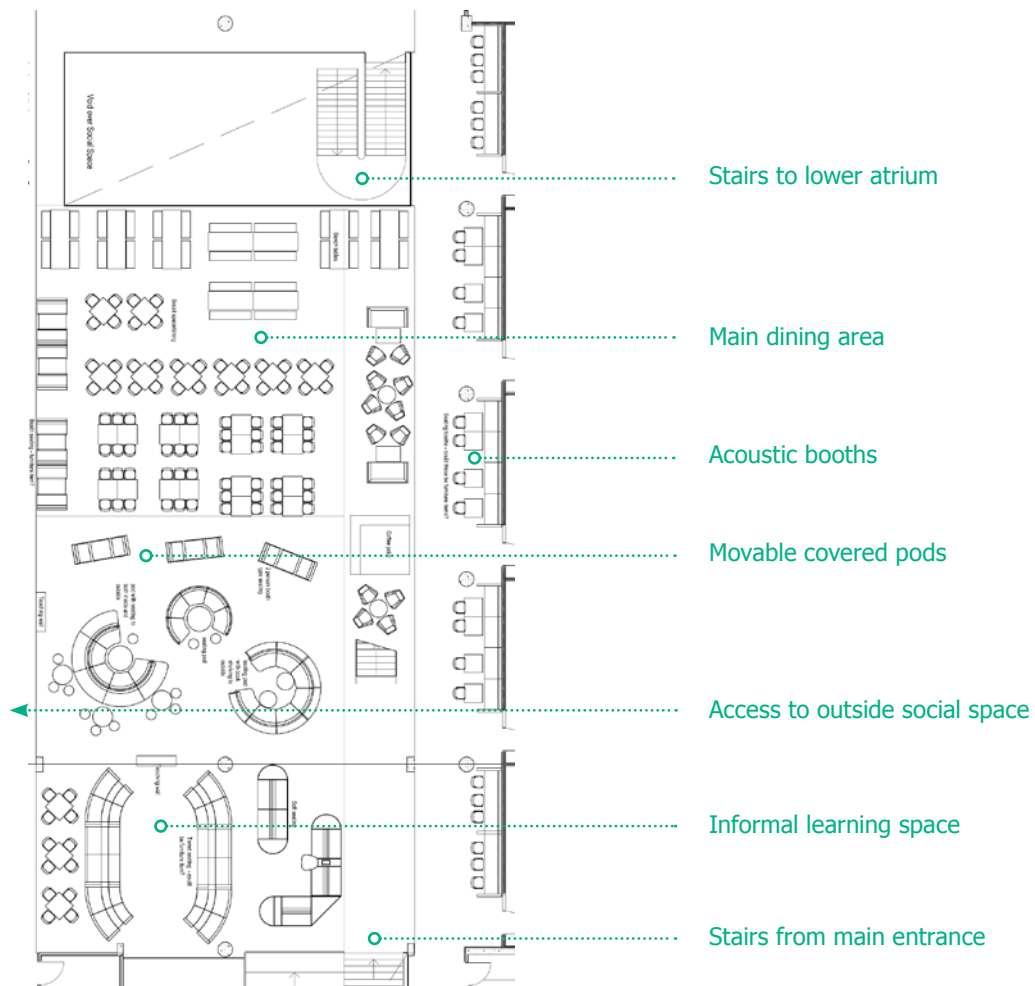
pupils for socialising (especially the movable, covered pods). The only complaint voiced to date regarding the main atrium is that the space is not big enough (with an increasing school roll destined to put even more pressure on this space). The outdoor social spaces have not proved to be as popular as imagined; it is hoped that this can be rectified through changing the rather cumbersome furniture and 'pruning back' the greenery / landscaping. The lower atrium has proved to be very popular with those pupils bringing their lunch back from nearby shops. Originally quite an empty, under-utilised part of the campus, it is now a busy spot with new seating and tables added following the move in.

Experience

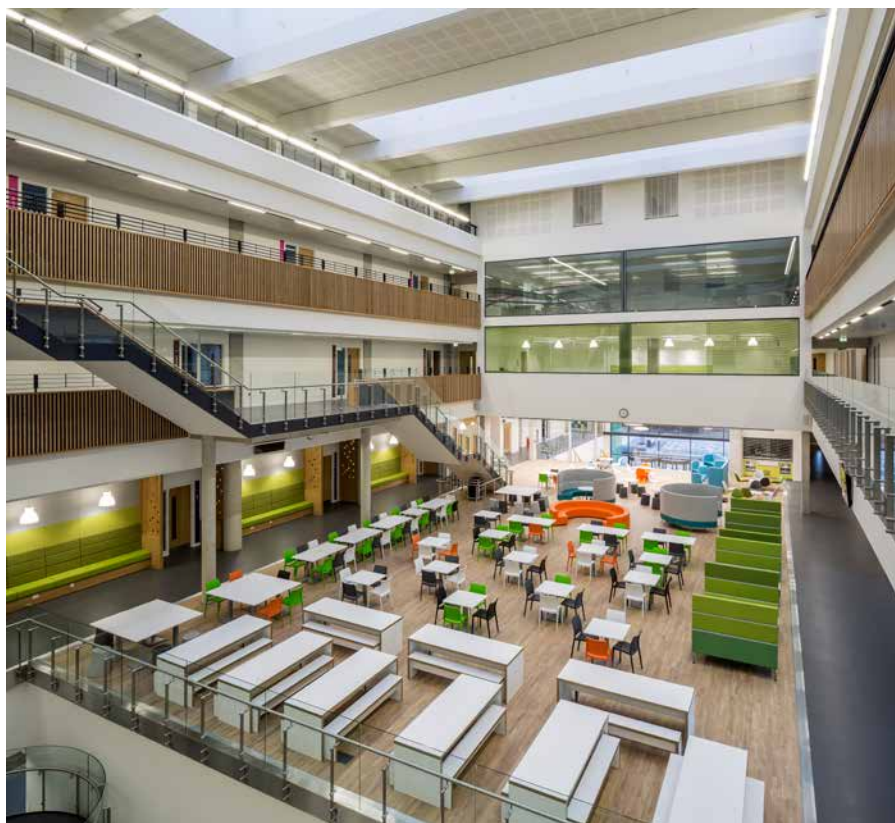
From the main entrance, a wide stairway takes you up to the building 'hub' on the first floor, the multi-function social space. The entrance to the space contains furniture settings that promote small group learning and socialising, while when configured for dining, the different furniture solutions allow groups of different sizes to gather. Situated under the stairs to upper levels, bench seating with acoustic panels offer a (slightly) quieter setting. A large, south-west facing covered outdoor area complete with mature planting and integrated seating can be accessed from the atrium. Dotted throughout the school are break-out spaces close to the formal classrooms and due to the sloping nature of the site, an additional entrance on the ground floor has a large atrium / communal space with a coffee point and break-out seating.

Reaction

The reaction from pupils to the new social spaces within Boroughmuir High School has been very positive. Pupils feel very much at home customising the spaces within the main atrium area, reconfiguring the furniture to accommodate groups of different sizes. The social area at the top of the main stairs is heavily used by English and Modern Languages for informal learning but is also very popular with senior



Layout plan of the Central Atrium.



The Central Atrium - the main social space in the school.

Example 2: Garnock Community Campus, Glengarnock

Date of opening:	August 2017
School roll:	Primary (c.160), Secondary (c.970)
Type:	Nursery, Primary and Secondary

Overview

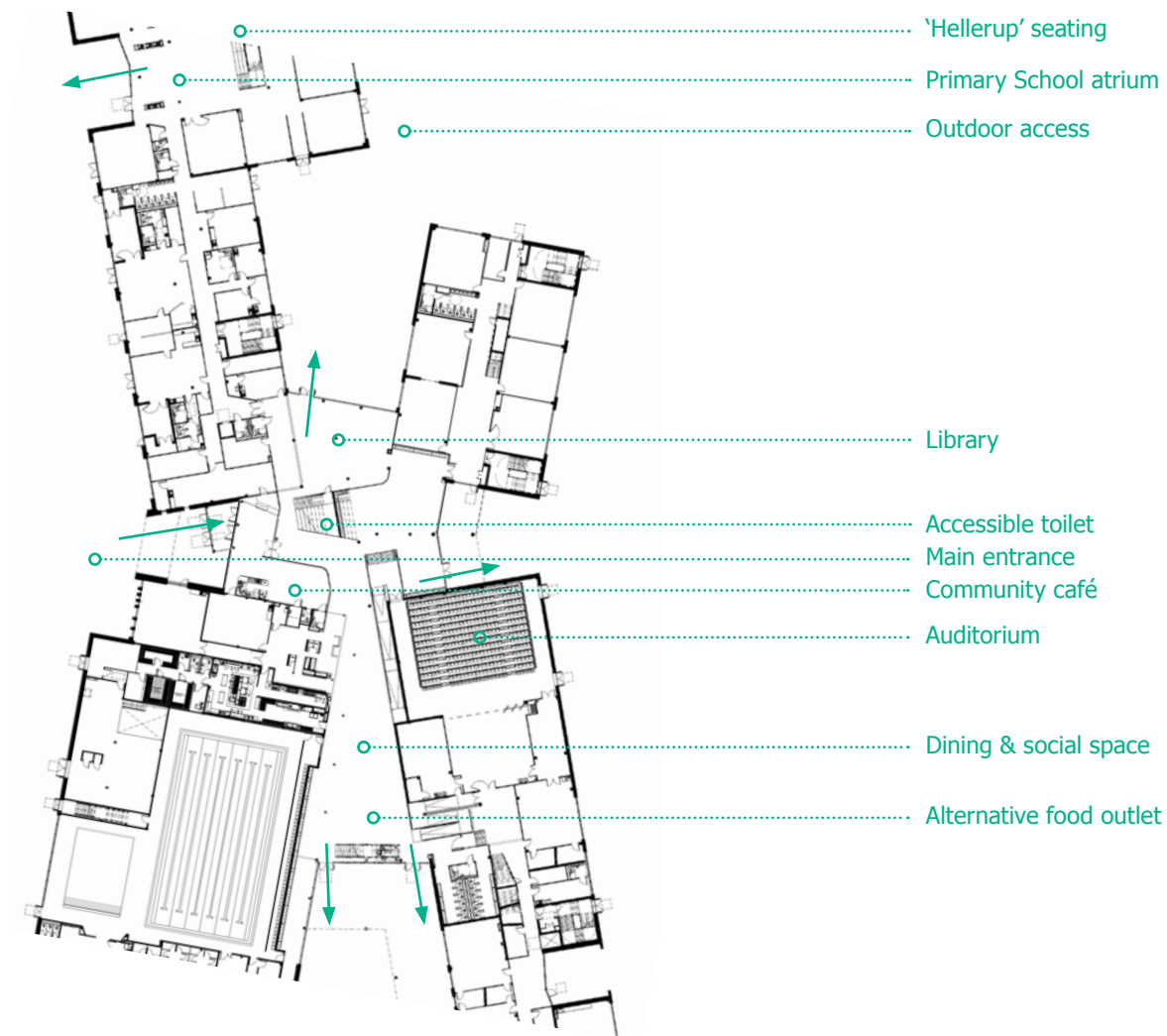
This two-storey 'all through' learning campus on a green-field site has space for Early Years, Primary and Secondary schools and replaces existing schools within the area. Sightlines throughout the building are important and the open nature of the shared interior spaces are designed to enable pupils to see the different stages of the learner journey. The building also contains modern sports and leisure facilities that are shared with the community out of school hours.

Experience

The central, shared space is the heart of the campus and is intended to have the feel of a 'town square', offering plentiful space for socialising and informal learning, providing a variety of catering options and allowing views to nature in all directions. With a large fixed auditorium and community café co-located in the building, it allows the school to play a central role in the life of the local community. 6th years are granted access to this community café at all times, with 4th and 5th years having the same privileges during study leave periods. Having everyone enter via the same door further reinforces the 'one community' aspect of the campus, with members of the community restricted from accessing the main school areas during the day. The layered nature of the central atrium spaces, with break-out spaces on 'galleries' overlooking each other provides a stimulating internal landscape with 'terraces of activity'. Lunch and break times are staggered thus this central social space never feels overcrowded. The primary school has its own mini-atrium which allows pupils to socialise within their own space. The addition of loose and flexible furniture in the circulation spaces throughout the campus adds more choice to the social / informal learning spaces.

Reaction

Having the separate auditorium space means that the central social space doesn't have to fulfil multiple functions; the dining furniture is always in place, even during breaks. This has led to students intermingling, with up to 500-600 children using the different central spaces during breaks (the school 'wings' are off limits outside of teaching time). The 6th floor students are the only secondary school pupils who have a designated space (an informal area at the top of the 'Hellerup' seating). Having all students share this space has led to behaviours being moderated (with noise not being an issue) but also means that everyone is on show. When incidents occur (as they inevitably do in secondary schools), there is no hiding place and this is managed by having staff patrol the central space during breaks. The dedicated social space within the primary school areas is well-liked and used for a range of social learning activities as well as for a breakfast club and after-school activities. The community access to the auditorium and the sports facilities has not been without its problems. Having the public pass through the shared, central space to reach their destination has been challenging for both school and the community.



Garnock Community Campus, ground floor detail.



The mini-atrium within the Primary School.

Example 3: West Calder High School, West Calder

Date of opening:	August 2018
School roll:	c.800
Type:	Secondary
Awards:	Shortlisted Pupil/Student Experience, Education Buildings Scotland (2018) Shortlisted RIAS Awards (2019)

Overview

The high school is 'a unique response to a unique site' with its form echoing the surrounding West Lothian landscape. Designed with the community in mind (access to sports facilities is via a separate entrance) it is at its heart a truly innovative school building containing formal teaching spaces alongside semi-enclosed flexible learning spaces and inspiring break-out / social spaces dotted throughout the three storeys, often on half levels and of differing scales. Within the deep plan building there are necessarily some internal spaces, but generous glass walls provide views out of (and in to) these spaces and into communal spaces where natural or borrowed light abounds; visual connectivity throughout the building is very important.

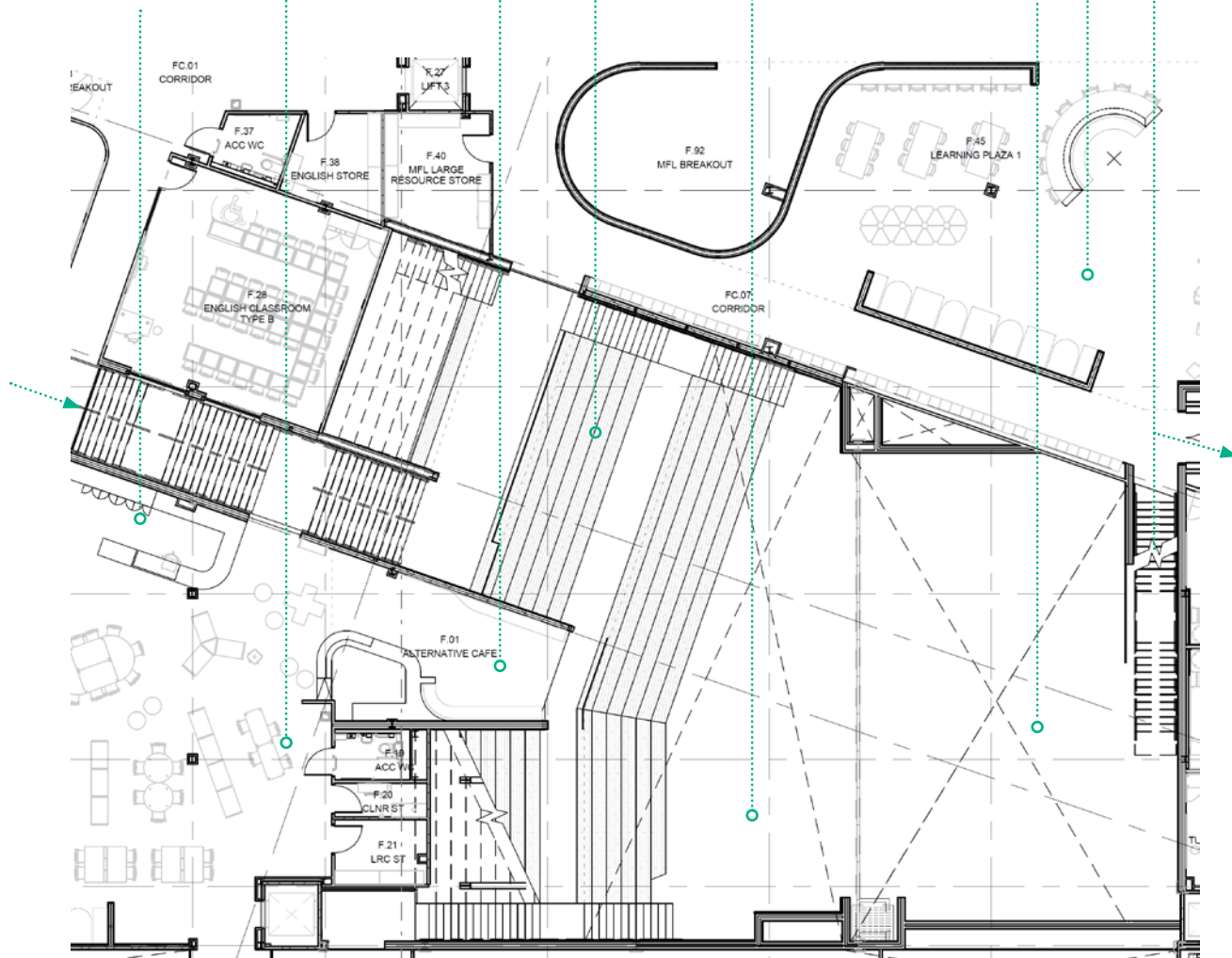
Experience

Some informal meeting booths sit opposite the main school reception, belying the scale of the spaces that greet you at the top of the main stairs; the experience is akin to entering a sports stadium or a concert venue. The vast, central social hub space contains the separate main dining area as well as the school assembly area and the dance / drama studio which acts as the stage. An early decision that there was no need for all-school assemblies allowed for a smaller amphitheatre space, with the saved space given back to more social learning spaces. A secondary café for senior pupils sits behind the 'Hellerup' seating in the arena. A combination of loose furniture and semi-enclosed spaces ('snugs') act as social spaces as well as informal learning spaces; this mix is seen as being important for giving pupils choice in the type of spaces they can access. For ease of management, different year groups are provided with their own allocated space on the campus. The use of colour and bold graphics (Albert Einstein and Rosalind Franklin look down on the learning plaza outside the Science classrooms) help to soften and individualise the large open plan spaces.

Reaction

The school has now been open for more than a year and the response from staff and pupils has been overwhelmingly positive. A major reason behind this success was the work carried out by the school in preparing everyone for the new school, including the creation of pilot spaces as part of the Inspiring Learning Spaces programme. The Learning Plazas are being used by staff from different subject areas, resulting in greater interaction between staff themselves and presenting opportunities for more collaborative working. Despite being far more open than the previous school, the combination of acoustic considerations and the pupils' own sense of noise control makes the central space seem a lot quieter than one might suspect. The amphitheatre / arena has become the 'go to' place for pupils during break times, while the 'snugs' are very popular with senior pupils, especially around exam time. The passive supervision by staff of the social spaces combined with the very open nature of the spaces themselves has reportedly led to a reduction in incidents of bullying. The central social spaces, as well as catering to school events, are also being used by senior pupils for charity events within the community.

To dining space
 'Learning Plaza'
 Break-out space
 Dance Studio
 Amphitheatre'
 'Hellerup' seating
 Café
 Library
 Main entrance



Layout plan of first floor.



'Learning Plaza', 'Arena' and pupil dining space.

Example 4: Waid Community Campus, Anstruther

Date of opening:	July 2017
School roll:	c.680
Type:	Secondary
Awards:	Project of the Year, Education Buildings Scotland (2018)

Overview

Designed to replace the Victorian-era Waid Academy buildings, the new three-storey school sits within the new Community Campus alongside the Primary School and the Sports Centre. While the old school offered nothing by way of social spaces, the new school places the social aspect of the learning experience at the physical heart of the building. The community aspect of the school is also very much to the fore; a council reception desk greets you at the public entrance with a community café, library, enterprise space and flexible community space all contained on the ground floor. A town hall / conference suite as well as a Police Scotland office complete the community hub that wraps around the atrium and sits 'before' the school security line.

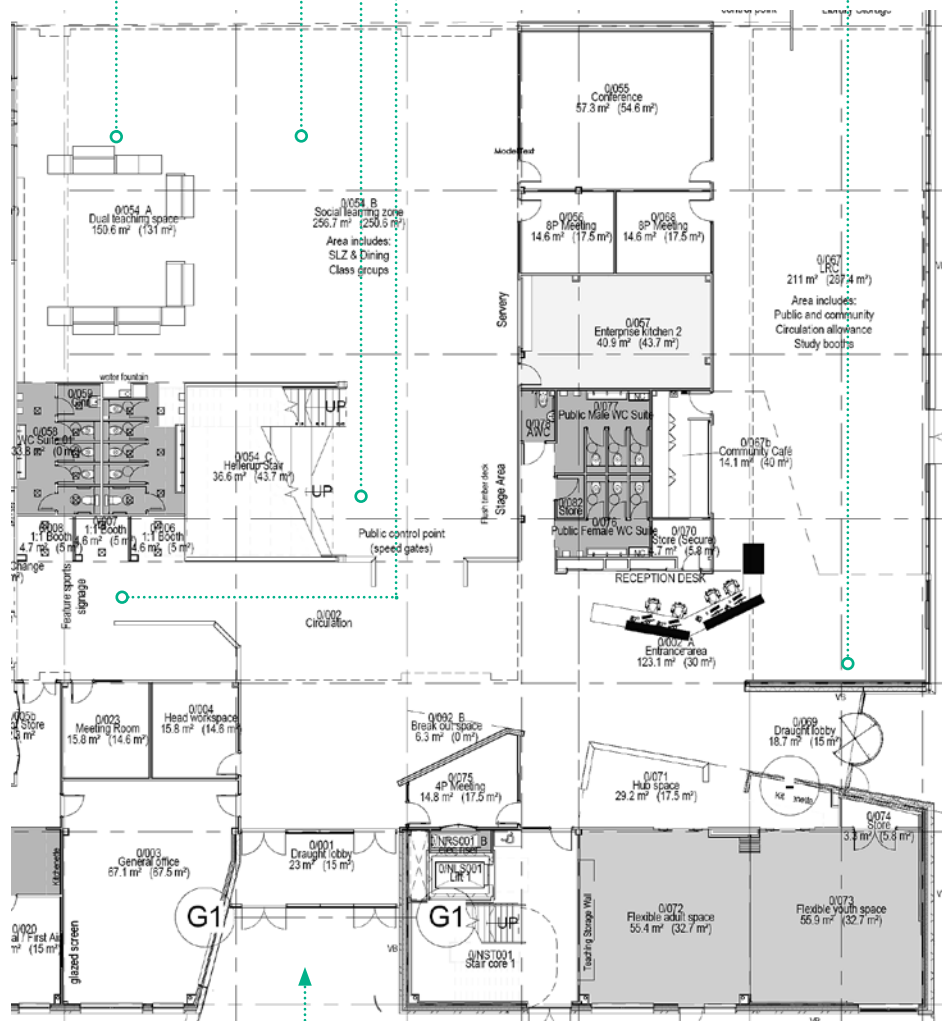
Experience

The large central atrium space with 'Hellerup' seating acts as the main social space for unstructured social time, i.e. lunch-time and breaks, comprising the main dining space and a flexible teaching space. The separate male and female toilets on the ground floor are directly accessed from the atrium and are located under the 'Hellerup' seating area. On the first floor the circulation route, including the open space of the Innovation Bridge, overlook the atrium and provide generous break-out spaces that support social learning with flexible furniture allowing for a degree of personalisation and ownership. On all floors views to the outside are complemented with views into the teaching spaces, giving all pupils a glimpse of, and a connection to, the different subjects in the curriculum. The auditorium is the final main social space, used by the school during the day and by the community after school hours. The link between school and community is implicit in the design of the building; where required there is a degree of separation that permits the two to co-exist.

Reaction

In the two years since the school has opened, increasingly pupils are socialising indoors with younger pupils, including those who never experienced the old Waid Academy, congregating on the atrium stairs; the older groups tend to inhabit different social spaces, with the library being a popular study space for the 6th year pupils. The community café in the library is open to 6th year pupils at all times and to other pupils when accompanied by an adult; the capacity for the café would not cope with access being granted to all pupils. This has led to the café being a popular spot in the town with family members regularly joining their children for lunch. Additionally, the conference area (located between the library and the school dining area) is used for a Pensioners' Lunch Club while a Parent & Toddler group regularly uses the community spaces on the ground floor. The overall vibrancy of the community café has both advantages and disadvantages; it reinforces the strong community aspect of the school but has required careful class timetabling so that the Innovation Bridge is sometimes only used to teach classes where there is less demand for quiet and concentration and more opportunities for groupwork and interaction.

Main school entrance



A large, multi-level atrium with a high ceiling, featuring a central staircase, a large open area with people, and a mezzanine level with a red wall. The space is characterized by its industrial aesthetic, with exposed steel beams and large windows allowing natural light to flood the interior. The central area is filled with people, suggesting a vibrant, active environment. The red wall on the mezzanine adds a bold, modern touch to the design.

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Example 5: Dalbeattie Learning Campus, Dalbeattie

Date of opening:	November 2017
School roll:	Primary (c.280), Secondary (c.370)
Type:	Nursery, Primary and Secondary

Overview

Dalbeattie Learning Campus provides upgraded and integrated educational facilities for the Dalbeattie area, amalgamating Dalbeattie High School with both the Dalbeattie Primary School and Nursery School onto one shared, multi-purpose site. This 'all through' learning campus provides both traditional and flexible learning spaces for all pupils as well as a wide-range of social spaces and also spaces designed for more vocational learning; it is the embodiment of the learner journey under one roof. While there is some separation between the primary and secondary school environments, the central, shared space and a common design approach results in a campus where the opportunity for younger pupils to experience their future learning environment on a daily basis is designed to ease the transition process.

Experience

The heart of the school is the multi-function space that is part dining hall (with split sittings) for the primary and secondary pupils, part assembly space, two opposing areas of fixed 'Hellerup' style seating and a section of movable bleacher seating. The drama box and drama studio complete the main elements of this shared space. As the pupil moves away from this light, airy central space, additional social / learning spaces are provided, ranging from built elements offering more seclusion ('pods') to areas that are more open. More social / learning spaces are formed by loose, modular furniture and are located adjacent to the classrooms in wide circulation routes. To reinforce the integrated nature of the campus, the design of these 'pods' is retained in both primary and secondary schools. Direct access to several outdoor covered social learning areas is possible from this central space. Timetabling is such that primary and secondary school pupils do not share the same space at the same time under normal circumstances.

Reaction

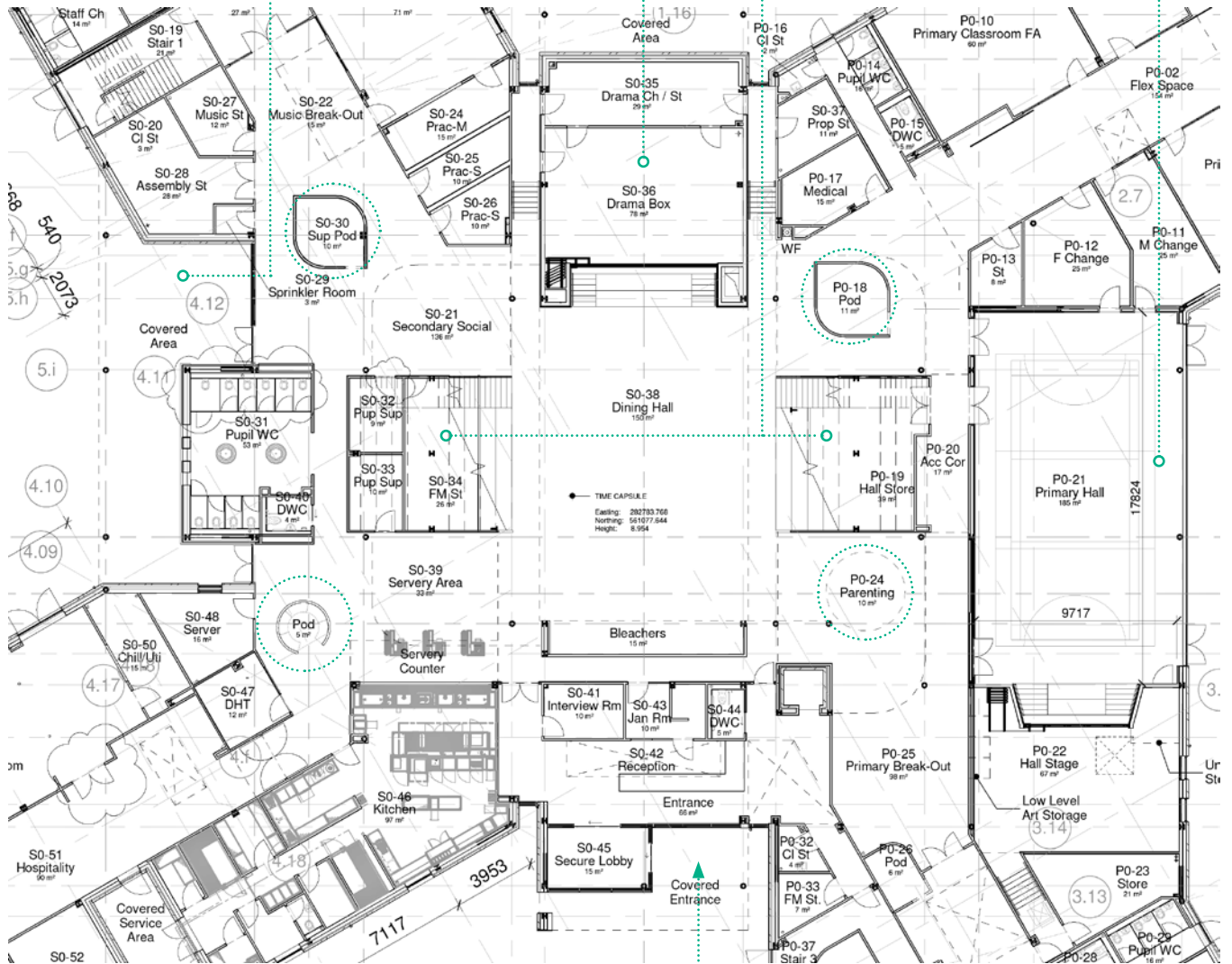
The number and range of social spaces within the campus allows for different groups of secondary age pupils to find their own 'territory'; this is no different to the behaviours in the old school. The response has been somewhat mixed with regard to the secondary school pupils – the openness of the shared central dining space has been a challenge for some students, who have commented on the lack of privacy and the wish for access to more spaces. For the more enclosed areas, such as the 'pods', the opposite is true and the response from staff is that these spaces have to be managed more and behaviour within the spaces monitored; eating and drinking is no longer allowed in these informal areas. This experience of introducing pods highlights the often opposing ideas of privacy and supervision. An obvious solution is to make the pods less enclosed, though their effectiveness as timetabled informal teaching spaces would potentially be compromised. For the primary pupils, break times are spent out of doors, with the soft-seating areas and 'pods' used only for informal learning activities. When the weather dictates that breaks need to be spent indoors, pupils' socialising is kept within their own classroom and monitored by staff.

Primary School

'Hellerup' seating

Drama suite

Secondary
School



Layout plan of ground floor social space.

Main school
entrance



The 'Hellerup' seating in the Heughan Hall.



One of the pods.

Example 6: Marr College, Troon

Date of opening:	Extension opened November 2017
School roll:	c.920
Type:	Secondary

Overview

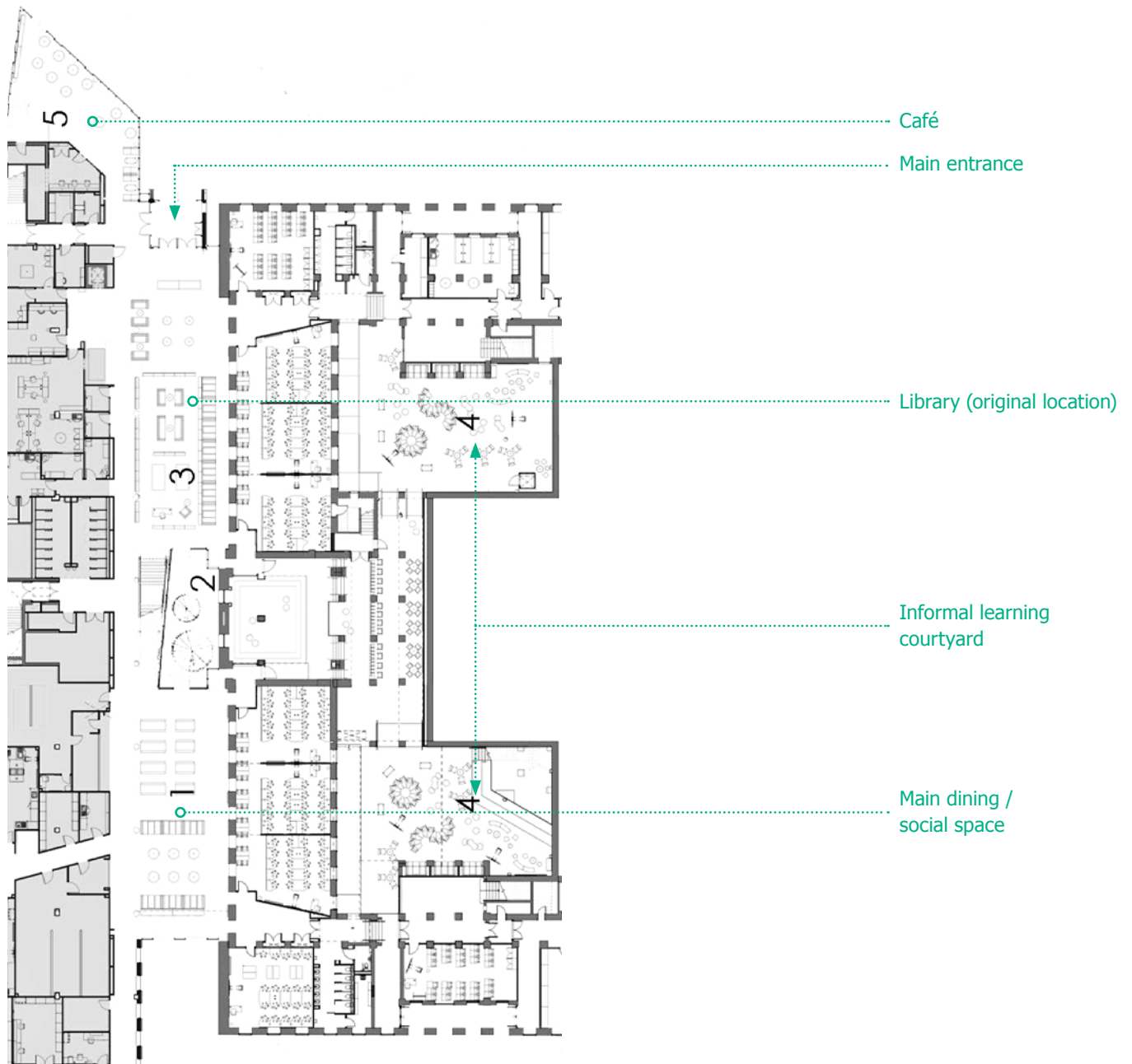
A new built technical wing and new sports / community building were added to the newly-refurbished existing 'B' listed school. Making better use of existing spaces in the main building was a key component of the project, including creating two three-storey learning plazas in the unused external courtyard areas by covering them with ETFE roofs, installing connection bridges to improve circulation and heating the spaces. The connection between the old and the new has a 'light touch interface' that has resulted in a new two-storey atrium space which was designed to contain the main entrance to the school as well as the library and the main dining area. The result of this new building and the covering of the courtyards is social learning spaces now being available to pupils where previously there were none.

Experience

The redevelopment of the main building has taken unused courtyard spaces and transformed them into valuable informal teaching spaces ('learning plazas') and has vastly increased the number of social spaces available to pupils with 'Hellerup' style seating was installed in one of the plazas. The abundance of light entering the atria and the views into the space from adjoining classrooms could make the learning plazas too open. This has been addressed by the inclusion of several, semi-enclosed spaces off these courtyard areas for small groups. The new dining area similarly increases the choice of spaces, with soft-seating booths giving pupils comfort and privacy.

Reaction

Pupils have very quickly staked their claim to different social spaces and the reaction to the school transformation has been very positive. The courtyard areas are very popular, especially with senior pupils, while the dining area is the favoured location for junior pupils (with bench tables proving to be more popular than the smaller round tables); the café area adjacent to the school entrance is popular with the middle school. In general pupils are spending more of their break time indoors. The behaviour of pupils within the courtyard areas was initially an issue, but this has improved recently and all spaces are supervised by staff during breaks. There are open plan learning spaces above the courtyards and the use of these spaces requires careful timetabling and management of activities in both spaces; the same holds for the new building where open plan classrooms sit above the café and dining spaces. An unused plant room in the basement of the old building had been transformed into a mini-amphitheatre space. Initially intended for the entire school, due to reports of graffiti it was changed into a senior school study space. The initial location of the library was felt by staff to be too open, and this space has been changed to a new study and social space with the library moving in to one of the learning plazas.



Layout plan of the ground floor showing the different social spaces.



One of the learning courtyards showing the different mix of informal learning and social spaces.

Example 7: Quarry Brae Primary School, Glasgow

Date of opening:	2010 (Treehouse opened 2018)
School roll:	c.220
Type:	Primary
Awards:	Inspiring Learning Space, Education Buildings Scotland (2018)

Overview

Quarry Brae Primary entered into competition as part of the Scottish Government's Inspiring Learning Spaces programme in 2017, with the submission being led by the pupils from the outset with minimal input from staff. The aim was to transform an unused part of the school ('The Street') from 'an inhibiting environment' into a space that will enhance the school and improve the pupil experience. All year groups contributed to the design, with the senior pupils getting involved in research. Ideas of what the space should look like and what its function should be were discussed by the whole school community; the decisions in the end were solely the pupils'. Representatives from each class subsequently took on the responsibility of taking forward the chosen design before the final concept was presented to senior Glasgow City Council staff.

Following the award of the funding to transform an unused part of the school campus into an inspiring space known as the 'Treehouse', the school's own project team (the 'Treehouse Crew') worked with the council's Architects and designers to translate their concept into reality.

Experience

Situated in a corner of the school playground behind roller mesh screens, the two storey Treehouse is a colourful mix of surfaces, stairs, platforms and overlooks with different areas for seating and hiding; it brings the outdoors indoors. Constructed mainly out of wood, there are two means of accessing the space. The ground floor is reached via either a ramp or two steps up on to a platform with two metal climbing frames. Off to the sides are hanging ropes and seats (with in built storage), while there is a crawl space underneath the stairs. Direct access onto the upper platform is via a door from the school corridor on the upper floor. Again, there are seats to one side and plenty of opportunities to look out over the lower platform and to the array of benches. While not completely open to the elements, the treehouse allows the pupils to play in the fresh air while still being under cover, contributing to a healthy, active lifestyle.

Reaction

The entire process has been overwhelmingly positive, from the pupils participating in the design, to working with the architects, to observing the works on site. This involvement in all stages has led to greater interest in the practical aspects of construction. Since the pupils have designed a bespoke space, they are free to use it as they wish, with more than enough space in the treehouse for different activities, whether that be running about, playing creatively or reading quietly. According to staff, since there is no 'adult template' on the design, it is more about fun than about learning. So positive has been the response that due to its popularity access to the Treehouse is managed (though not timetabled) and while staff supervise pupils when they are using the space, there have been no incidences of bad behaviours. Since the pupils have a sense of project ownership, and while they are excited to play in such an inspiring space, they are very respectful of what they created in an otherwise windswept corner of the campus. Prior to opening, the pupils themselves were clear that there should be rules governing behaviour in the Treehouse and this has contributed to such an inspirational space.



The wood and steel 'Treehouse' sits in a formerly unused corner of the building.

Example 8: John Paul II Primary School, Glasgow

Date of opening:	2006 (Nessie's Corner opened 2017)
School roll:	c.230
Type:	Primary

Overview

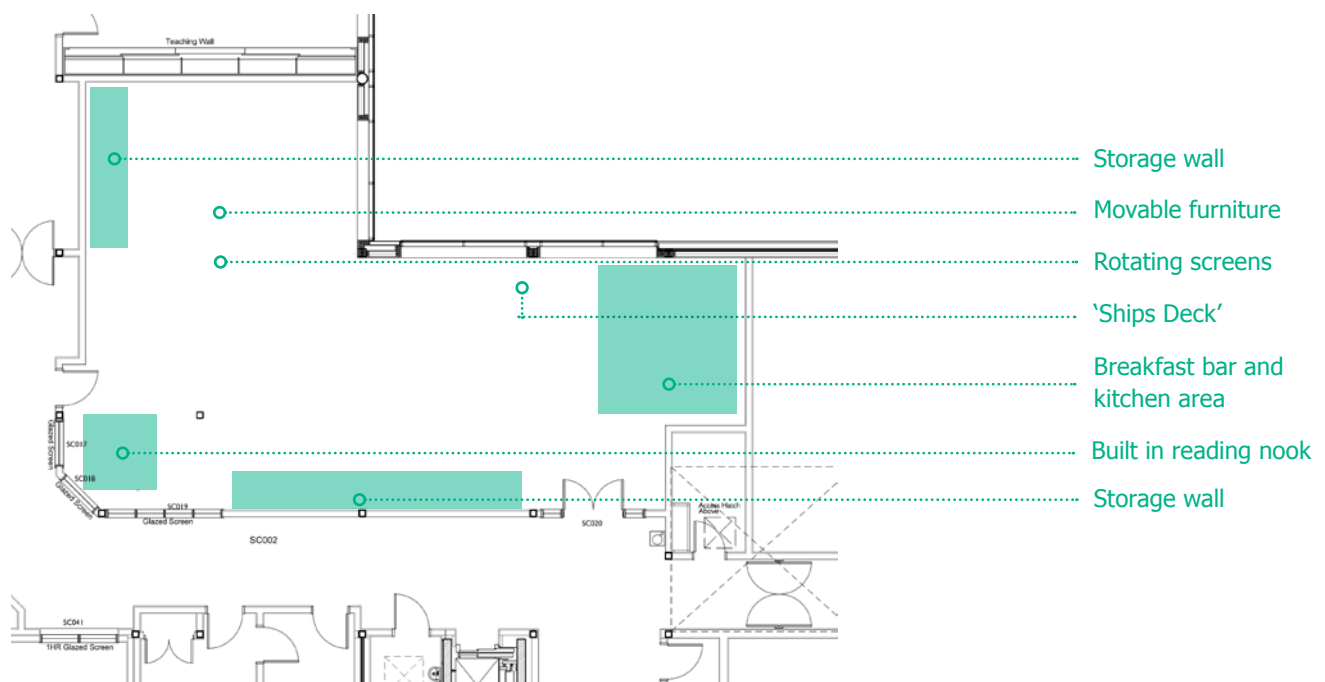
Due to the hard work of staff, pupils and parents, John Paul II Primary School in Castlemilk is gaining a positive reputation at odds with its location in one of Glasgow's most deprived postcodes. The driver for this positive exposure has been the transformation of a well-used but uninspiring IT suite into a vibrant, flexible and incredibly popular space that supports new learning pedagogies, but from a viewpoint of engagement between staff, pupils and parents, has also opened up numerous opportunities for strengthening the school community through the using the space for more social activities before, during and after school.

Experience

Designed by the pupils with a specifically Scottish theme, Nessie's Corner has the Loch Ness Monster as its central design theme with a large mural outside the space used as a backdrop to photographs showing all the different clubs and activities that take place. Even though the new space has only been open for a couple of years, it has already been modified to respond to new initiatives the school wishes to investigate in the future. At its core however is a flexible space that is split in two using rotating screens, separating off a smaller, more formal space with tables chairs and audio visual technology and a main space that has plentiful storage, a comfortable and secluded reading nook and a large built element designed to feel like the deck of a ship. Fresh air and natural light is available through a bank of windows looking out on to the playground. Loose furniture within the main space is minimal with plenty of floor spaces for groups to use as they wish. Primary colours and the Nessie motif on the floor help to create a vibrant social and learning space. The recent addition of a breakfast bar area with shelves is in response to new health and wellbeing groups such as the breakfast club as well as to classes offered to parents.

Reaction

One look at the school sign-in book tells a story of a space that is receiving interest from far and wide; recent visitors have travelled from Valencia, Spain (as part of a school e-twinning link) and Nuremburg, Germany to learn more about the success of Nessie's Corner. That is only part of the story, the real success has been with the increase in engagement with pupils and staff alike. The former are now setting and running their own clubs during lunchtimes while the latter are seeing the space as an extension of their own class and the re-location of IT from the dedicated suite into all the classrooms has embedded digital learning within the normal school day rather than as a special session. The increase in social activities involving parents and pupils (e.g. the sewing club) is vitally important for a geographical area where the level of engagement of parents in their children's education has historically been low.



Layout plan of Nessie's Corner.



Ship's bridge with the reading nook in the background.

Example 9: St Margaret's Primary School, Edinburgh

Date of opening:	1959 (refurbishment 2019)
School roll:	c.120
Type:	Primary

Overview

Now in its 60th year, the small Primary School in South Queensferry on the outskirts of Edinburgh has recently undergone a major refurbishment, extending the school from 5 to 7 classrooms. Pupils have been heavily involved in the 'Agile Spaces' project which involved researching new learning and teaching spaces and contributing to the redesign of the dated and somewhat uninspiring Primary 1-5 spaces in consultation with Edinburgh City Council's Learning Estate Planning and Interior Design teams. As well as contributing to the design of innovative learning spaces, the pupils also investigated the benefits of biophilic design in educational settings, including participating in research trips. Pupils came up with the ideas that ultimately led to the design team creating learning spaces along a theme of the transition from ocean to beach to land; the pupils were also involved in the design process for the central break-out social space that is available to all classes.

Experience

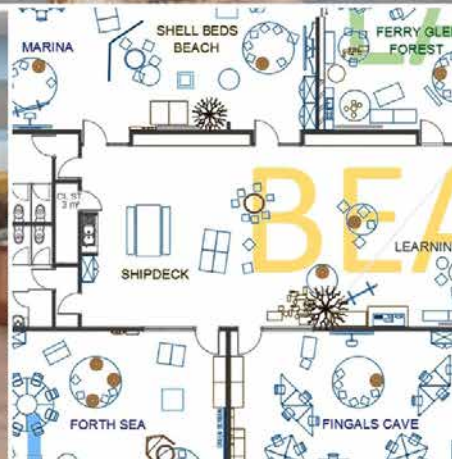
Incorporating very domestic touches, the social space in the centre of the classrooms is both very grown up in places with a more 'at home' style but also very playful. Wooden finishes are to the forefront on the floor and as part of the furniture with blues, greens and yellows of the sea and the land the dominant colour scheme. There is a nod to the South Queensferry locale with wall graphics of the three Forth crossing bridges. Furniture is for the most part movable, including the study pod, and is clustered into areas that will support both small groups of pupils while also having comfortable spots for pupils to read or play on their own. Since the space also functions as the main circulation route in to the classrooms with the school toilets adjacent, the built elements are located on the perimeter and all such nooks, while offering some seclusion, are not so enclosed as to prohibit passive supervision by staff.

Reaction

The redesign of the new active learning and teaching areas, with the widening of the door openings, creates a better connection with what was formerly only a circulation space and had become a bit of a dumping ground. The 'opening up' of the school has benefitted the teaching staff also, with more interaction and collaboration. For pupils with additional support needs (and increasingly for the entire pupil cohort), the new space allows for a 'soft start' to the school day, easing the transition from home to the classroom through considering the importance of wellbeing and happiness on learner engagement. Lessons learned from a pilot project and from extensive engagement with the pupils have resulted in a very successful series of settings within the different spaces.

While all pupils are expected to have their breaks outside, in periods of wet weather the range of activities provided for in the different micro-environments of the shared social space allows children from different classes to socialise together (e.g. paired reading across primary classes), with enough variety in the furniture settings to work for all children. The care and attention put in to the design and the choice of furniture has resulted in a very inclusive space, where types of play activities normally reserved for infants (e.g. block play) are available to older pupils.

As well as educating the pupils on how to use and respect the space, engagement with parents, getting them involved through workshops has also been beneficial to the success of the school project. Some parents initially reserved judgement on the somewhat non-traditional concepts and design but having seen the way the children have reacted, they too now see the space as being a positive for the school. Staff also feel that the new spaces respond better to the challenges of the Curriculum for Excellence. Still in the 'bedding in' phase, work is ongoing to upgrade the IT provision.



The social space 'in between ocean and land' with reference to the three bridges on the school's doorstep.

Example 10: Murrayburn Primary School, Edinburgh

Date of opening:	1939 (Imagination Playroom opened in 2017)
School roll:	c.375
Type:	Primary
Awards:	Highly Commended, Innovation in Delivering Value Shortlisted, Early Years and Inspiring Learning Space Categories Education Buildings Scotland Awards (2018) Highly Commended, Play Scotland Nancy Ovens Awards (2018)

Overview

Situated in south west Edinburgh, the Murrayburn Primary School site is now also home to an Early Years Campus with educational provision for children from age 3-12 years. As part of the school's own vision of improvement, Pupil Equity Funding was used in the transformation of a former school library into a playroom designed specifically to ease the transition from the Nursery class into Primary 1 and with a view to supporting pupils with additional learning and communication needs. Utilising the Council's own research into how the physical environment can aid child development and involving the latest design trends (such as biophilia), the space was ultimately designed through engaging with the very pupils for whom the space was intended for. Primary 6 pupils led the research and design process with input from staff, fellow pupils and parents. The completed social space, the Imagination Playroom, was designed to support 'active learning, curiosity, inquiry and creativity' and to also be a welcoming space for children with additional language needs.

Experience

With the pupils themselves playing a central role in the design, the space incorporates their wishes for nooks and crannies, wigwams, playhouses, toys and books; cupboards become reading dens when not used to store equipment. Much of the equipment in the space is a progression from that which would normally be found in a nursery setting, reinforcing the smooth transition between educational stages. One entire elevation is given over to windows, making the space feel bright and airy; health and wellbeing is at the heart of play in the environment and this is evident from the nature wall graphics, the wooden flooring and furniture and the splashes of green carpet to mimic grass. To make the most of the available space, furniture is movable and flexible, allowing the floor to be cleared for larger groups. The playroom is in constant use throughout the day, with Primary 1 pupils having guaranteed access to the playroom on a daily basis, and the older Primary 7 pupils acting as 'buddies' to the younger children. Using the same principles for designing spaces for pupils with additional needs has resulted in a space that works for all children.

Reaction

Comparing what was available to previous Primary 1 classes in terms of play opportunities, the playroom has had a very positive impact, with the space helping staff identify (through play) those pupils that might have more learning requirements. The combination of the new space and the support of staff 'have allowed a very responsive, exciting and innovative approach to learning in Primary 1.' The space is staffed by a dedicated Early Years Practitioner allowing the teachers to focus more 1-to-1 time on pupils. Through playing in the Imagination Playroom pupils have been instilled with a love of learning from their very introduction into Primary 1, ensuring that they are challenged, inspired and allowed to be creative. Staff have noticed that by the end of Primary 1 some pupils are already introducing more structure into the way they use the playroom. The Imagination Playroom shows what you can do with an old building and what impact this can have on rejuvenating the school community.

The success of the Imagination Playroom led to the redevelopment of another space within the school to create the Community Hub Learning Space. Again, introducing biophilia and similar muted colours into the interior design, the space has been created to encourage parents and carers to visit the school though primarily it is intended as a collaborative and social learning space.



Imagination Playroom: designed with nature in mind.

Now What?

This document is not intended to answer every question; it hopefully inspires and focuses ideas and allows an investigation into the art of the possible.

In any project involving change, communication and dialogue between partners and stakeholders is vitally important; allowing pupils themselves to have an input into how spaces are designed and subsequently managed is essential. No 'one size fits all' regarding any design; there will be school-specific constraints but also opportunities to borrow from inspirational precedents in Scotland and elsewhere. Understanding the diverse needs of the users will help inform any design solution. There is a growing understanding in design that if you cater for pupils with special requirements then you will cater for all pupils. Having a clear objective for what activities will take place in a given space is also key; a brief for a social space that lacks focus will potentially result in a space that tries to do too much and ends up failing to cover the basics.

Visiting projects such as those listed in this document will not only show what is possible, but also potentially suggest design solutions that might otherwise be dismissed. Seeing inspirational spaces helps to generate the all-important 'buy-in'. Speaking to those who have been through the process of new build or school transformation will allow experiences and lessons learned to be shared.

Above all, it is important to prepare people for the new environments. When staff, pupils and parents have an understanding of why the changes are required and have any fears or concerns addressed, the chance of success is increased, whether that be for a small, refurbished social space or an entire new school campus.

Summary of Key Points

From the different case studies presented, some common themes arise:

- providing different social spaces for different year groups responds to pupils' sense of hierarchy and territorialism.
- reducing unwanted pupil behaviours can be influenced by creating open social spaces in combination with staff passive supervision and pupil self-policing.
- locating social spaces adjacent to more open formal / informal teaching areas requires careful management and timetabling.
- integrating school and community social facilities within the same campus needs to consider how community access will impact upon normal school operations.
- increasing the flexibility of shared social spaces can drive up utilisation but can result in compromise.
- the design of indoor social spaces needs to be done in conjunction with outdoor spaces, particularly in secondary schools where pupils are increasingly spending more time indoors during break times.
- access and inclusion need to be at the heart of the design of all social spaces; catering to pupils with special requirements will lead to spaces that work for all pupils.
- engaging pupils at an early stage in the design of social spaces is essential; the creative journey is part of the wider learning process and can inspire pupils to take a greater interest in design in general.

Reading List

The following is by no means an exhaustive reading list but within these references are background to the topic of social spaces (and others) in both primary and secondary schools. Information regarding the design of school social spaces is often buried within more general reports.

[Building Excellence](#): Exploring the Implications of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) for School Buildings. How the school landscape needs to change to support all aspects of the CfE, including the blurring of the boundaries between social spaces and learning spaces.

[Creating Excellent Primary Schools](#) – a guide for clients (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, CABE, archives located on The National Archives is a wonderful resource for publications on various aspects of school design).

'Design for the Changing Educational Landscape – Space, Place and the Future of Learning', Andrew Harrison and Les Hutton, Routledge (2014).

'School Design Together', Pamela Woolner, Routledge (2015).

A report commissioned by hub East Central Scotland covering [all aspects of school design](#). This report discusses opportunities for transforming circulation space by introducing social elements within them, it also gives practical advice on building considerations.

[RIBA Better Spaces for Learning](#) – the report demonstrates how good design can help ensure that capital funding for schools stretches as far as possible and supports good outcomes for both teachers and pupils. - This report discusses the impact of social spaces on wellbeing.

The Scottish Futures Trust has reviewed the [Schools for the Future project](#), evaluating school performance against a set of metrics. Lessons learned are covered, with some of the key points concerning the provision of social spaces.

The Architecture & Design Scotland website is a valuable source of information on different aspects of school building design:

- [Learning from places for special educational needs](#) - lessons learned from the design of schools for pupils with Special Educational Needs have implications for mainstream education.
- [Schools estate examples 2016](#) - examples of new build schools from around Scotland introducing some key learning points.
- [Settings for learning: Taxonomy of Spaces](#) - a breakdown of the different types of spaces and their qualities and educational benefits.
- [Inspiring Learning Spaces Toolkit](#) - a toolkit that builds on lessons learnt from previous projects.

[Design principle 14](#) discusses the provision of 'resource-rich, well-defined activity pockets' that can aid 'social interaction'.

This case study was conducted by haa Design on behalf of Architecture and Design Scotland.

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