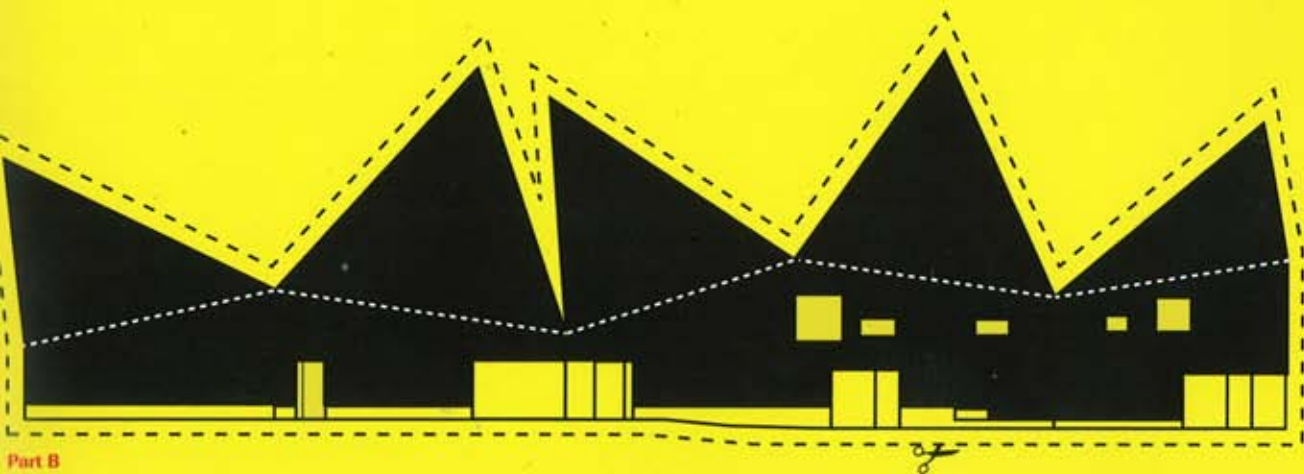




Part A



Part B

The learning issue:

Your cut-out-and-keep guide to education architecture

Sure touch

DSDHA's Sure Start children's and community centre on the outskirts of Colchester is a very adult – and very economical – building. By Grant Gibson. Photographs: Edmund Sumner/viv

Learning : sure start centre, colchester



Essex is a county of huge disparities. On one hand you have the urban tundra of the capital's overspill and on the other the kind of countryside that encouraged the BBC to locate six series of the wistful, Sunday evening show *Lovejoy* there. Arguably Colchester reflects these ambiguities more than any other town in the region. It has ruins dating from its days as the strategic hub of Roman Britain, an 11th century castle, the brutal University of Essex, and some deeply average post-war housing stock. Having grown up in the area I can testify that at night it becomes an unholy alliance of town, gown and garrison.

St Anne's is a ward on the outskirts, an 'in-between' place in architectural parlance. It feels neither urban nor suburban, but is a stretch of road that almost encourages you to put your foot on the accelerator as you leave the town centre behind. Perhaps this explains the enormous speed camera plonked outside DSDHA's new Sure Start building. 'That's

Client St Anne's Sure Start Community Centre
Architect DSDHA
Structural engineer Jane Wernick Associates
Services engineer Pearce & Associates
Quantity surveyor Faithful & Gould

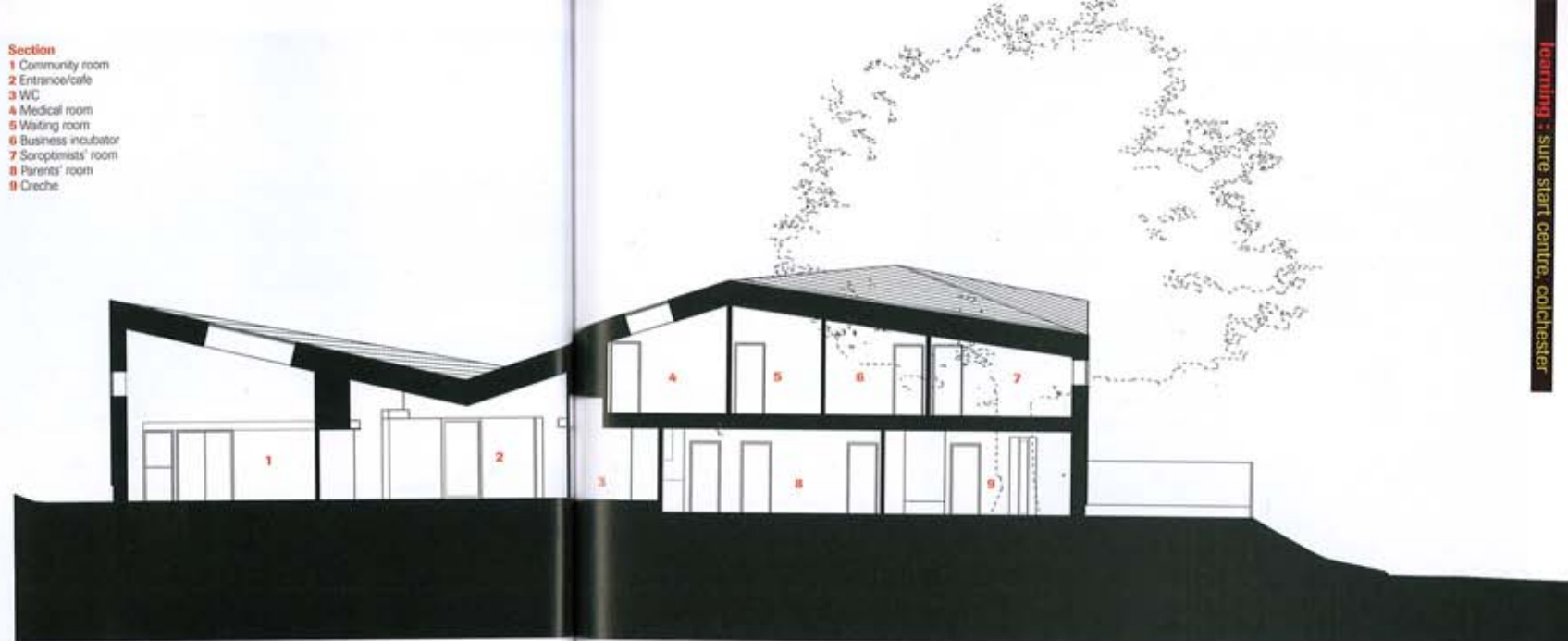
what this area was best known for until the centre,' jokes the practice's associate director Claire McDonald as our pulls up.

Sure Start is a government-funded scheme that aims to 'achieve better outcomes for children, parents and communities'. It does this by providing childcare facilities, training for parents, and even a space to develop local businesses. In Colchester it teamed up with the borough council and the local branch of the Soroptimists (an international organisation for professional women) to fund a building for a community that had felt increasingly marginalised both geographically and economically.

DSDHA won the job after an RIBA-organised competition that included an event involving local people. The shortlisted architects were all invited to set up stall in the old, slightly ramshackle community centre, and DSDHA's decision to provide plants for visitors to take away and 'plant their own ideas' obviously paid off.

The site is intriguing. It lies on one of two stretches of sloping heath, divided by the Harwich Road, that are supposed to act as the lungs of the surrounding housing estates. There are no paved routes linking the pair and over the years schoolchildren and adults alike have carved a makeshift path across the grass. 'That's sometimes quite exciting us,' says McDonald, 'because it usually means that, informally, people are creating their own opportunities - and desire lines are really ▶

- Section**
- 1 Community room
 - 2 Entrance/cafe
 - 3 WC
 - 4 Medical room
 - 5 Waiting room
 - 6 Business incubator
 - 7 Soroptimists' room
 - 8 Parents' room
 - 9 Creche



Facing the Harwich Road, the centre includes a small outdoor play area.



DSDHA has intermittently punctuated the Sure Start with windows, playing with notions of transparency and privacy.



The corridor that links the entrance to the creche follows the gradient of the heath outside.

important. But also it kind of gave us an idea of who the audience are. We were keen to create a gateway that helped to connect the green space, so that hopefully you improve the whole profile of the park itself.'

The result is fascinating. Low slung with a rendered lower section and a multi-angled roof whose timber cladding creeps down the walls, the effect is of an imposing yet subtle building. 'The idea was that if you're going to build on the park then respect what's there and celebrate it,' McDonald says. Certainly it pays some kind of homage to its stark but oddly beautiful context. The Thermowood baked timber cladding is a nod to the oak tree on the site, while its shape echoes the surrounding houses perched at different levels on the landscape. At a cost of £820,000 this isn't an expensive building, and on occasions it's easy to tell where the savings have been made. Initially, for example, the walls were going to be in concrete rather than render, while ancillary items such as a new gate, landscaping and the car park have been left for another day. 'It's a fairly tight budget,' McDonald admits, 'so we were trying to maximise the space and the quality of the building.'

Inside, the design toys with notions of transparency and privacy. Double doors at the entrance, which contains seating for a cafe and has a small kitchen attached, allow visitors to see straight through to the other side of the heath. That is an example of the former, but

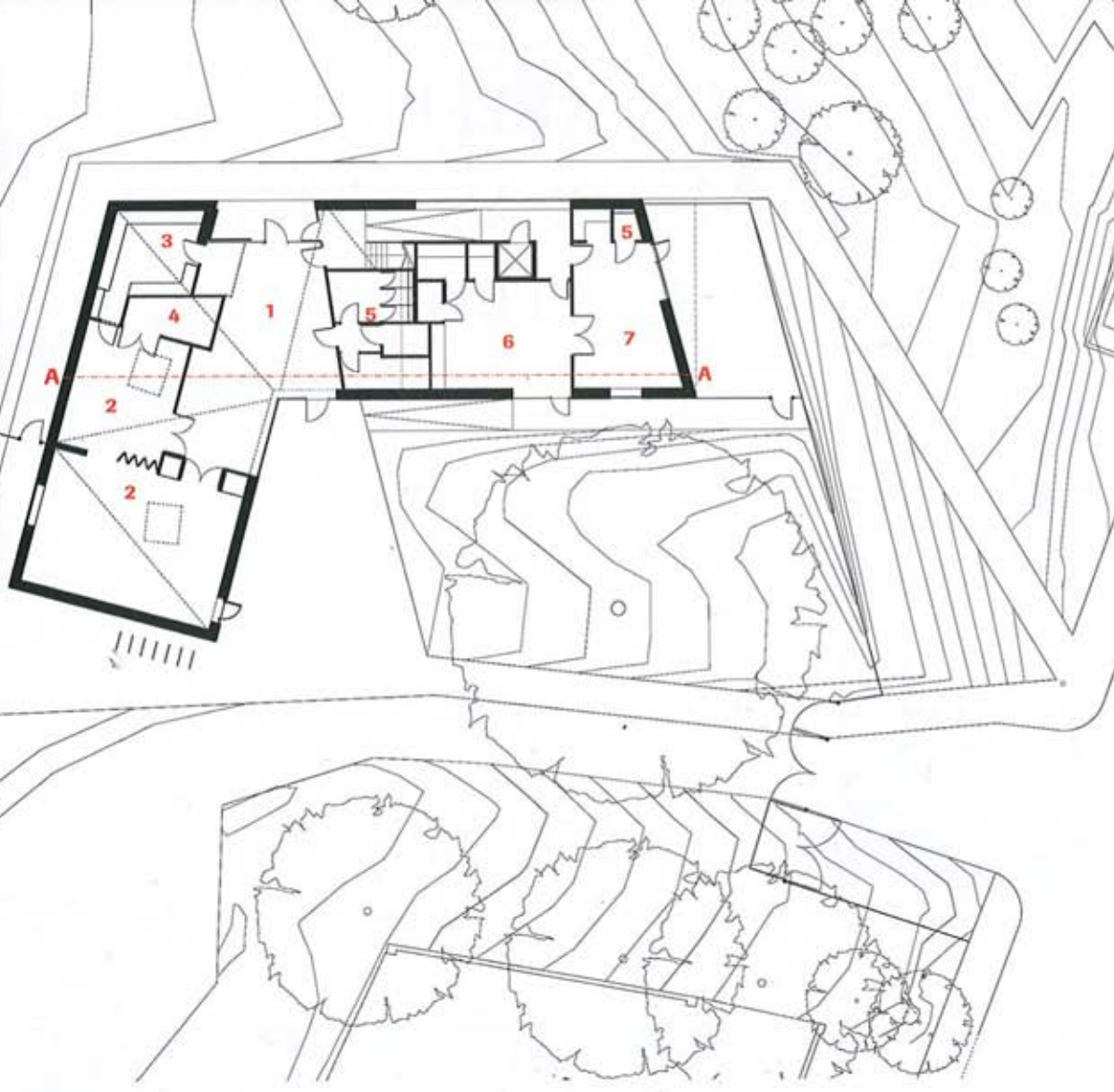
most spaces tend to the latter. Adjacent to the entrance is a double-height area that will be used for meetings, training and even local weddings. On a wet day, with a cold wind blowing across the exposed landscape, natural light still pours in through the picture frame window and a roof light – which, along with the uplighters, plays rather pleasingly with the angles of the ceiling – but this doesn't detract from the sense of intimacy and security.

Back through the entrance hall and down a corridor with a gentle slope that matches the gradient outside are the creche and parent training rooms. Again there are some nice touches, such as a window at knee height that allows the toddlers a view of the oak tree (and the squirrels that live there) and has, according to the staff, been a huge hit. There's also a partially covered outdoor play area.

Up the stairs, with its artfully lit handrail, are rooms for the staff and the Colchester ▶



Context was a highly important element in DSDHA's design.



Costs	
Total costs	£817,255
Area	438m ²
Costs/m ²	£1866
Breakdown	
Preliminaries	£119,060
Substructure	£82,258
Superstructure	£85,766
Roof	£56,080
Ext walls	£63,609
Ext glazing	£54,863
Int partitions	£41,631
Finishes/fittings	£49,783
M&E	£160,783
Ext works	£33,776
Contingency	£69,646

- Ground floor**
- 1 Entrance/cafe
 - 2 Community room
 - 3 Kitchen
 - 4 Store
 - 5 WC
 - 6 Family room
 - 7 Creche

► Soroptimists as well as a space that will be used as a small business incubator and a medical room. The entire centre has a neutral palette of mushroom white that at first glance appears to pay little heed to its main audience. 'We wanted to make it kind of cool, delightful and obviously functional,' argues the architect. 'A lot of people patronise children and think they want these kind of psychedelic spaces. To our mind calm spaces are really positive.'

The building's bravura feature, though, is the roof. As our cover image indicates, it was created by folding a series of triangles into position, like a piece of origami, and consists of five layers. The steel frame has a timber infill; on top of this is a plywood deck, followed by insulation and a waterproof membrane. To get the detailing of the cladding right, DSDHA created a series of one-to-one scale options of the

meeting points of the various planes before alighting on two possibilities – one with an edge trim which was more simple but not as elegant and the other where the edges tapered together. 'The difference was quite dramatic,' McDonald says. 'It was just thoroughly exciting compared with something that's much more mundane. It was kind of like the B&Q approach versus a tailor-made option.' Rainwater is carried down the guttering in the valleys into an internal pipe that can be accessed from a store room. The idea initially was to col-

lect it but, unfortunately, the budget didn't stretch that far.

Viewed across the heath as the light begins to fade, St Anne's Sure Start Centre is hugely elegant, offering glimpses through the glazing of people using the stairs. It may be primarily aimed at young children but this is a considered, adult piece of architecture. It even has echoes of the neighbouring post-war concrete and corrugated iron community centre. Both have roofs at the same height, punctuated with rooflights.

Perhaps what it does prove is how our expectations of architecture have changed. The old centre is a tough little building for what you suspect is a tough little community. Both client and architect hope that its younger, much more ambitious sibling could herald the start of a significant regeneration programme.

Pevsner believed that 'what is most impressive about Colchester, more impressive than any other town in England, is the continuity of its architectural interest. It began before the time of the Romans and lasted through to the 18th century'. Maybe St Anne's Sure Start is a sign that the town has rediscovered its taste for adventurous architecture. ■

Specifications Thermowood wall and roof cladding by Finnforest (enquiry no 500), roof by Sarnafil (501), windows and external doors by Technal (502), frameless Glasswall double glazing by Peak Aluminium (503), rooflights by Glazing Vision (504), ironmongery by Lloyd Worrall (505), movable wall system by Hall Partitions (506), carpet by Heckmondwike (507), vinyl flooring by Polyflor (508), soft play surface by Nova Sport (509). For more information on these products, visit www.riba-journal.co.uk/enquiries