Breaking the mould

Christopher Beaver, architect, has been commissioned to design new residential accommodation for a school in the West Midlands which caters for children with autistic spectrum disorders, improving the quality of life for children there. His task has been how best to approach the design of a new house that breaks the mould of the institutional approach of dreary corridors leading to a row of boxes and confining rectilinear spaces...

We have spent many hours listening to staff at Sunfield School, Stourbridge, talking about their children, their behavioural characteristics and generally learning about autistic spectrum disorders.

What comes through loud and clear is that whilst there may be behavioural patterns, the way they are exhibited by the individual child can vary enormously.

One child will take a door off its hinges, another will vanish whilst another will stuff his clothes and toys down the lavatory. Talk to any carer and the ideal house from a management point of view will have easy to clean surfaces, robust finishes and everything as unbreakable as possible. It sounds like a brief for a prison!

The new house now under construction at Sunfield is planned as two groups of six bedrooms with its own communal rooms and ancillary spaces arranged around a central courtyard. The single bedrooms are designed for privacy with windows angled to avoid overlooking from outside whilst enjoying an open aspect; ceilings are steeply sloping with high level windows which can be opened for ventilation without offering an ‘escape route’.

The bedrooms open into a circulation area which can be used as a play space. This device banishes the conventional corridor by turning it into a useable space in its own right with access through double doors to the central courtyard.

Curving walls and sloping timber ceilings break the mould of the ‘box effect’ and provide some acoustic treatment to combat the effects of unfriendly surfaces and harsh reflective sounds. Heating is all underfloor.

We are currently working with Sunfield to develop a colour scheme that draws on their own research. Bright stimulating colours will be avoided in favour of more calming pastel shades and some ‘colour coding’ may be adopted to identify spaces by colour.

A late addition is the provision of two sensory studios, which are currently being developed. The lighting scheme has also been designed to consider the hypersensitivity of this group of complex children.

What about cost? This is always a question that has to be asked and there is no doubt that a tailor-made building does not come at an off-the-peg price. But if the cost has to be justified, the answer is that this building will be home to twelve children for fifty-two weeks of the year.

Why should their home environment at Sunfield be any different to that which they would enjoy at home?

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