

*School design is changing to accommodate new ideas about effective learning, the way young people socialise and the way they use IT. As she reflects on the key design features that have made Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College such a successful new build, **Elly Tobin** identifies four key aspects of modern secondary school design – safety, learning spaces, social spaces and aesthetics – that deserve special attention.*

It seems obvious to say that because campus design influences so many aspects of life in a school it is important to get it right. However, as so many factors can deflect the design process from this self-evident truism, it's worth repeating. New builds must have a presence that raises the esteem of all the stakeholders involved in the project. In the best designs the building successfully draws the students in so that the environment affects not only behaviour but all aspects of learning and socialisation. Naturally the academics, the quality of teaching and learning and the teachers and support staff you hire is of paramount importance to the success of any institution but the design of the building can also be core to the success and atmosphere within. So how can we improve the user interface with the buildings we create? There are several aspects of a new building that are worth considering: safety, aesthetics, learning spaces and social spaces.

1. Safety: access and entry



Compliance will drive many of the safety features of a new build, but at the start of a project don't overlook one of the most important safety considerations where regulations may be silent – the number of entrances to a site. Quite simply, the fewer entrances there are, the better. The building



needs to be secure and at the same time welcoming and inclusive. In this day and age of heightened security, creating a building with just one entrance makes the control of who enters much easier while at the same time helping to keep security costs down. Not only can systems be put in place to record those who enter but security staff and administrators will know who is in the building at any one time. With a secure single entrance the building itself becomes the safe haven of learning that you want it to be, while the need for large prohibitive fences and walls is also diminished.

2. Learning spaces: zoning, flexibility and integrated IT

Zoning subject areas in secondary schools means teachers move less around the building and are able to create discreet areas that promote and encourage their subject. Such areas encourage resource pooling, informal communication and should have a direct relationship with the various student breakout areas. Though grade level clusters are usual in primary schools, the value of subject clusters is often overlooked in secondary education. Students in a dissected subject timetable need to feel



they are in a History lesson or an English lesson and surrounded by aspects of that subject. Fully integrated IT in the classrooms and the associated social spaces encourages students to be purposefully engaged in their learning. Flexibility of space is always preferable as usage may change over time and needs differ from group to group. A hall that can become a dance studio, a conference venue or performance space with movable or retractable seating is preferable to a fixed - seat auditorium, which restricts use to lectures or performance.

3. Social spaces: building in variety



It is important to create a student - centred orientation to the learning environment. Students find their own places to work and providing a range of alternatives study areas is an essential element of modern secondary campus design.

Incorporating different types of learning environment, from informal internet café and breakout areas to the formal learning spaces of classrooms and labs facilitates personal learning and matches all learning styles. The integration of study areas, classrooms and social spaces contribute to the overall effect of a genuine learning community. Areas need to be created with clearly defined functional boundaries but with the flexibility to be utilised in a number of ways to suit the needs of students and staff.

Social spaces that are overlooked by offices and teachers' workrooms facilitate passive supervision, enabling students to be supervised unobtrusively while also providing instant access to teachers for additional support. These areas create opportunities for extra - curricular activities as well as break out areas for staff to incorporate group work and project activities into their teaching, so that students can take control and ownership of their learning and progress.



Teachers at Joseph Chamberlain have found that the social spaces have a real influence in defining the appropriate behaviour of the students.

4. Aesthetics



Creating a harmonious and peaceful environment is also achieved when space is generous and when a building is flooded with natural daylight. Lines of vision that connect to greenery and water provide young people, even in the inner cities, with a direct link to nature. Curved lines in corridors and



furnishings soften the visual aspects of the college as does a pastel colour palette, while carpets dampen the sound making the building acoustically pleasing. In my experience getting the aesthetics of the building right definitely contributes to and develops a sense of responsibility for its care among all the users.

Once you have the building right the next thing to do is populate it with eager young learners. That's when it really comes to life.

Elly Tobin, Principal, Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College, Birmingham, UK