



Model pupil

Earning top marks for over a decade, Walters & Cohen takes its expertise to Scotland and ponders new government baseline designs, writes *Rory Olcayto*
Photography by *Dennis Gilbert/VIEW*

There are few people in the school-making business who know as much about how to do it well as Michál Cohen.

Cohen has been at the forefront of the schools design debate since 2003 when Walters & Cohen, the practice she runs with Cindy Walters, was appointed to design primary school exemplars by Tony Blair's Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Four years later, Staffordshire County Council opened the doors of Redbrook Hayes, a one-form primary school designed by the north London practice and based

directly on its own exemplar.

In 2008 the firm's design for Cotham School, a Wave 4 BSF school in Bristol, was rated excellent by CABE, one of only two built schemes to be awarded top marks by the design watchdog.

And earlier this year East Dunbartonshire Council picked Walter & Cohen's design for Lairdland Primary School in Kirkintilloch after the firm was invited to propose exemplars by the Scottish Government-backed Scottish Futures Trust (*see overleaf*).

EFA prototypes

Yet, just as the Scottish government is taking school design more seriously after several years of neglect, the English procurement programme is being rewritten by the Tory-led coalition government. Which means the Education Funding Agency's (EFA) baseline prototypes, promoted as 30 per cent cheaper than BSF because they cut 'wasted space', are on Cohen's mind. 'If you change the rules, that's fine. It's really good to reassess. But don't say, it's so much cheaper and better; look what we've done,' she says, visibly annoyed.

Cohen argues that while it may be cheaper, that's only because you're no longer comparing like with like. 'They want to reduce the social spaces, the flexible teaching spaces, the glue that holds the school together... maybe it's the right thing. I don't know.'

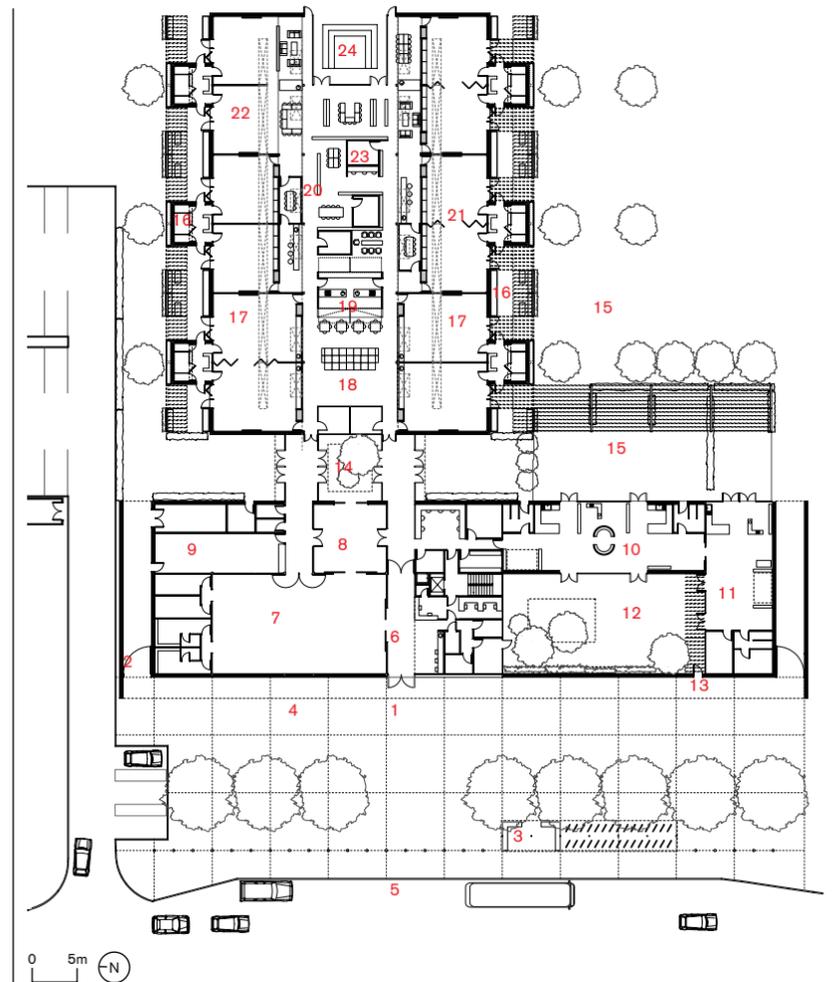
What's bugging Cohen is that under the previous guidance, there was an understanding among everyone involved that the programme had emerged from serious research. 'The science of things, the numbers of things. The requirements for acoustics, energy, accessibility – all of those things. We knew the guidance was coming from people who had analysed it thoroughly but what they're saying now is, that's all out the window.'

The DfES exemplars

Cohen's frustration is understandable

Exemplar primary school design

1. Entrance
2. Pupil entrance
3. Bus stop and cycle store
4. Public forecourt
5. Pupil drop-off
6. Foyer
7. Main hall
8. Small hall
9. Kitchen and servery
10. Reception years
11. Nursery
12. Protected nursery play
13. Separate nursery entrance
14. Outdoor courtyard
15. Outdoor teaching and play
16. Outdoor classroom
17. Classroom
18. 'Heart' of the school
19. Food area
20. Group rooms
21. Options to link classes
22. Open-plan options
23. Meeting spaces
24. Performance amphitheatre



because the feedback she gets from headteachers at schools she's designed – she keeps in touch with most – is usually positive. At Redbrook (*pictured overleaf*), where Walters & Cohen 'met with and engaged with every single pupil' as part of their design process, Cohen says the headteacher recently told her that 'we still haven't had a child in the naughty book' more than five years on. 'That's probably very little to do with the building's design,' Cohen adds, although it does have much to do with the feeling the kids have about the place. 'It's their building,' she says. 'They like being

Left Walters & Cohen's Jigsaw Day Nursery, Stockley Park

there every day. It belongs to them.'

Redbrook closely follows the exemplar model. It is based on what Cohen calls the 'heart', a flexible double-height teaching space, flanked by classrooms with external access and glazed internal walls. The heart also links to the main hall to create one large activity zone, and has a cooking kiosk that can be easily accessed by all pupils. Education secretary Michael Gove would probably call it 'wasted space'.

Yet the heart has proved to be a great success and has since been used in many of Cohen's other schools. >>



At Redbrook, however, Cohen now thinks it could have been bigger. And the entrance was too small. But placing the community library within the plan alongside the hall has proved doubters wrong and is busier now than ever. A heart for the community? 'Exactly.'

Walters & Cohen came up with the flexible model back in the 90s. 'In 1996 we were hired by Jigsaw Day Nursery to design a new-build at Stockley Park,' says Cohen. 'Our approach was to think, "what kind of school would we like our own children to go to?" And from that question arose an early version of the heart. 'It was an idea that captured people's imagination.' And it was an idea that helped them beat 55 other practices to become one of eight architects selected to design exemplars for the DfES. 'We wanted a secondary school

exemplar project,' she adds, but as BSF projects were put under pressure, 'we knew we got the better deal'.

Room for improvement

Despite its success, Cohen says the exemplar can be improved. Deciding whether to give some classroom area over to the heart, for example; 'We constantly go back to schools to see how they are working. We didn't fully understand how important it was to have transparency between the classrooms and the heart. And how you arrange the toilets and cloakrooms – that's something schools really want ownership over.'

Arranging the accommodation over two floors also appeals to Cohen. The two-form entry Hylands Primary School in Romford uses this model. 'It's really nice to see

Above left At Redbrook Hayes Primary in Staffordshire, classrooms are arranged around a central 'heart' of the school
Above right Lairdland Primary School in Kirkintilloch
Right Flexibility of learning spaces at Lairdland

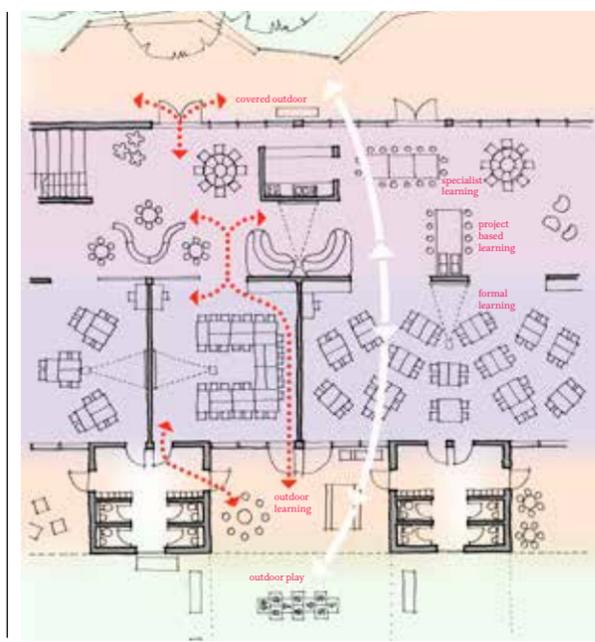


the older pupils move upstairs. It's less space hungry, too; you can do more with the site,' she says.

Cohen accepts that the now-abandoned guidelines and procedures had to change. Often it led to perverse decisions. Like when its CABA-excellent Sarah Bunnell School for Girls lost out to a rival bidder because the architects' team fell down on IT. And Cotham School, the one that got built: 'The rigour of the concept wasn't carried through to the detail. We didn't persuade the whole team to buy in. We need to learn how to ensure that doesn't happen again.'

Regardless of these difficulties, it's no surprise so many architects think the EFA prototypes are a step backwards. The pedagogic framework informing the last wave of school design was based on the belief that

pupils teaching other pupils, practice by doing exercises and discussion groups were more effective than lectures, reading lessons and audio visual teaching. This belief is centred on the learning pyramid, a model developed by an American 'learning solutions' firm in the 50s and popular among British educators in recent years. In terms of architectural form, shared flexible large-scale volumes enable these more space-hungry methods, whereas Gove's focus on rote learning clearly informs the maximum stacking, tight wall-to-floor ratios and off-site modular model the EFA is looking for. 'I'm really not sure it's been looked at closely enough,' Cohen says. 'Maybe they should just build one out first and watch how it works. Do we really need to build 40 or more in one go?' ■



Scottish Futures Trust

The Curriculum for Excellence

The Scottish government's Curriculum for Excellence, introduced in August 2010, is picking up speed. 'When we first met with Grant Robertson of the Scottish Futures Trust (SFT), it wasn't 'here's an area schedule'. It was 'here's our curriculum; what do we need to do?' The SFT appointed Walters & Cohen 'because we were tried-and-tested alongside Reiach and Hall because they weren't in school design. But that was the point; they wanted to see what would emerge. And we'd worked with East Dunbartonshire Council on a reference scheme in Kirkintilloch. We were thrilled when the local authority chose to build out our proposal.' Cohen is even more thrilled at the freedom she's been given. 'We had access to anyone we needed: planner, the highways, anyone. We had four engagement workshops with whomever we wanted. The SFT arranged everything, and this is what came out of it,' she says, handing me a hefty document compiled over eight weeks of vigorous research and community consultation. The best ideas will be implemented for Lairdland Primary on a great site overlooking the Forth and Clyde Canal.

One idea means a change of heart. Literally. The flexible learning space in Kirkintilloch is now a broad strip that fills out the space between classrooms and the waterfront's glazed facade. 'It's a layered approach, not a heart. It's an outward-looking building. It's site-specific but also responds to the Curriculum for Excellence.' And the architect will have construction costs of £2,350 per square metre to make it happen. The bottom line? 'The space per pupil in Scotland is around 6.2m². Under the EFA in England it's more like five. It made me think,' says Cohen, the beginning of a laugh breaking through, 'shall we move there?'