

Embracing accessibility

A vision to transform a neglected Victorian school building into an Adult Education Centre has embraced the concept of accessibility while at the same time ensuring a better future for the residents of South Kilburn, writes Andy Hardy of London Borough of Brent Building Control

South Kilburn lies between Kilburn Park and Queens Park tube stations north of Maida Vale. It's an area largely made up of social housing, typical of every housing phase from the early sixties onward. These estates meet fractured terraces of Victorian housing.

The area suffers from poor urban planning and is currently part of the New Deal for Communities programme to create and deliver an improved neighbourhood.

BACES Carlton Centre offers a variety of technical, creative academic and performance arts courses. A typical Victorian school



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building, it's one of the few older public buildings in the area and highly visible with its southern frontage on to Carlton Vale. While it provides accommodation well-suited to teaching – its original purpose – major refurbishment was needed to make it fit for the future. It also needed a change of image.

In an area of low townscape quality an innovative approach was required. The design had to appeal to the local community, expand the facility and provide an inspiring landmark for the area. In addition, with 500 people using the building on an average day, the non-teaching spaces also needed expansion. This required additional input from the design team and LB Brent Building Control.

Architects Chassay+Last and Trigram Partnership the structural engineers, came up with a design incorporating a highly insulated cafe extension with a grass/nature roof for visual amenity; a ground floor extension to the south; and a dramatic glazed conical enclosure to house the new lift.

The design aim for the lift structure was not only to provide accessibility but to symbolise this by creating an exhibition space and visual display within a lit transparent enclosure, creating curiosity and excitement about the centre. Visible from both north and south, the “cone” provides a beacon for the Carlton Centre and South Kilburn. Financial constraints meant that glass could not be used. Instead, polycarbonate – strong, lightweight and low-cost – provided an appropriate





material, used with technology developed for the Rotterdam Railway Station.

This involved precise geometry to allow the cutting and bending of the polycarbonate into large panels supported by steel flats to make the enclosure as transparent as possible. The use of an inflated tensile roof minimises stresses on the steel framework.

The detailed design was completed and thoroughly checked by London Borough of Brent Building Control.

Unable to achieve a manufacturing facility in the UK, the panels were fabricated

by VT Plastics in Rotterdam, tested by GE Plastics and then shipped to the UK for erection by Cannon Glass for Lakehouse Contracts, the main contractor. This process allowed the panels to be provided for less than the cost of buying raw sheet polycarbonate in the UK.

The twin-skinned tensile roof provided by Architen, inflated using a small pump, allowed two different fabrics to be used: an opaque white fabric on the underside with a coloured upper fabric. The white fabric also functions as a projection screen from a gobo projector to create a

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moon like object in the sky without causing light pollution. This provides students with a kinetic aspect to the gallery space created in the cone and acts as a beacon for the new centre.

The views from the cone are a welcome relief from the internalised general environment of the centre and include the green roof of the cafe extension. The green roof provides not just a garden perspective, but also fulfils environmental considerations; it holds water in heavy storms and reduces run-off to prevent surcharging of the drains, encourages biodiversity and helps cleanse the air of pollutants. The planting was prepared as a mat, cut like turf, transported to site and laid. A self-watering system has been incorporated to ensure its survival. This requires only a trickle feed of water for two hours a fortnight in dry periods as the planting has been selected to survive in arid conditions.

Programming of the works needed to allow continued provision of classes and facilities through the building period.

The project was the first completed building work in the South Kilburn area since the regeneration programme started and signals the potential for future change. It was also a finalist in the Best Access/Disability Regulations category of this year's LABC National Built in Quality Awards.

