



Out of the woods

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects' RIBA Award-winning primary school extension has brought the children out – in every respect

Words: Jan-Carlos Kucharek Photographs: Beccy Lane

Every now and again, you come across a building that's notable as much for its ability to get the best of what surrounds it as it is for the spaces that it creates of itself. A new primary school extension by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, built in the village of Mellor just outside Stockport, is a textbook example of this rare type.

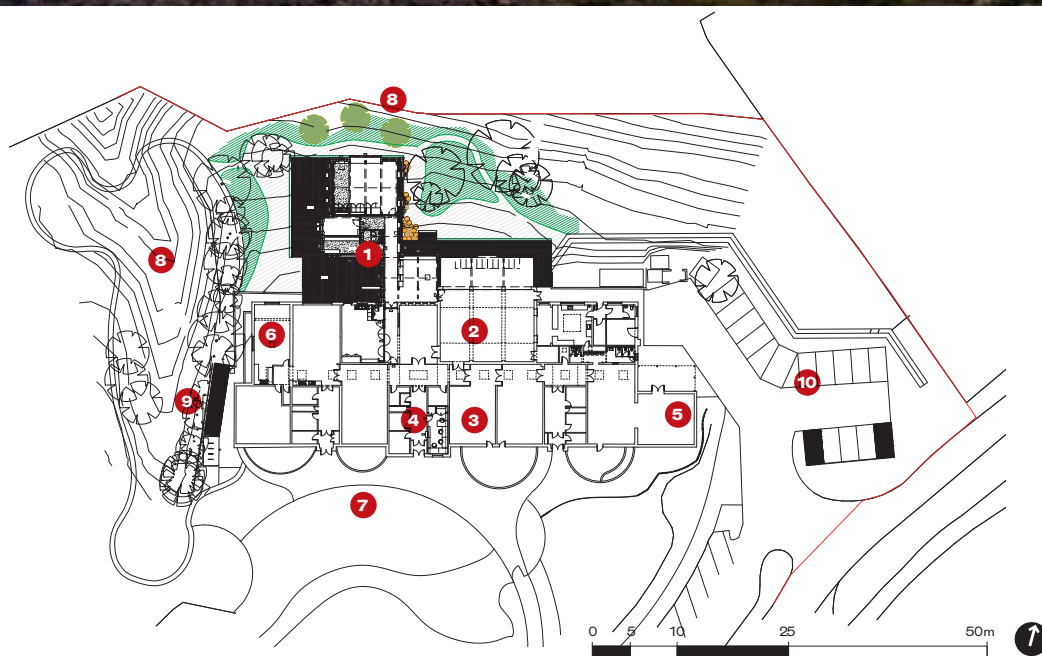
The 1881 building at the far end of Mellor had long been deemed not fit for purpose. In 1995 a new school was built on a patch of green belt at the other end of the village but it came with provisos. Due to objections by some locals, the new school was only allowed to build to the same area footprint as the former, re-interpreted as a row of five south-facing open plan classrooms connected by a cen-

tral corridor to the hall, admin and service spaces to the north. Designed for the same cohort of 100 kids, it was already straining at the seams with 154 when new headmaster Jim Nicholson arrived with big ideas in 2007. He set about getting funding to extend the school on either side with a new classroom and nursery extension, winning 'final' permission on the green belt site in 2011.

But this wasn't a long-term solution; Nicholson realised that the school could only remain viable if he could raise pupil numbers from 22 to 30 per class to secure the extra £3000/year/pupil funding. The local council understood the thriving school's need but was in no position to provide finance; so, not without contention, Mellor became the area's

first primary with Academy status – ironically not because it was failing but due to the fact that the school was just too successful.

Part of that success could be Nicholson's establishment of Mellor as a 'forest school'; meaning kids are encouraged to don their wellies and learn, for some of the time at least, stomping around in the landscape around them. Given the historical site sensitivity, his Eureka moment was when he realised the ethos could be used as leverage to secure planning for an sustainable extension built with reclaimed materials, for his 'treehouse in the woods'. Searching in 2012 for a designer, the governors came across Sarah Wigglesworth Architects' Sandal Magna School in Wakefield and saw its aspirations



Above The Mellor School extension looking east. Internal spaces expand onto outdoor terraces which in turn reach out to the landscape beyond.

- 1 New block with terraces
- 2 Extended main hall
- 3 Existing south-facing classrooms
- 4 Reconfigured entrance/ admin
- 5 Nursery block
- 6 Staff room
- 7 Playground
- 8 Green belt scrubland
- 9 New bike sheds
- 10 Parking

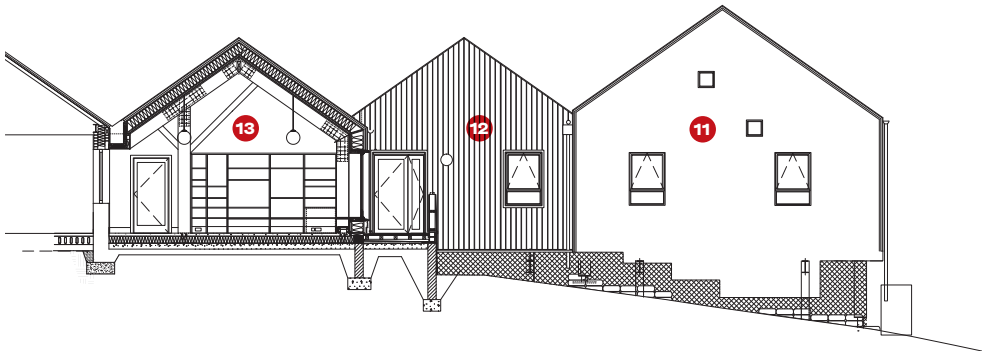
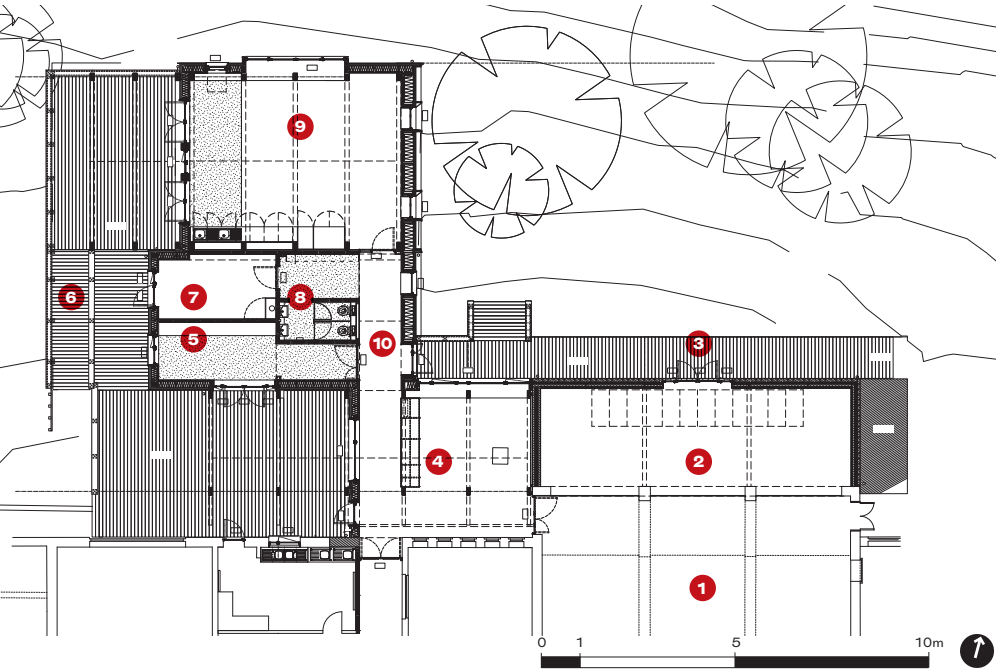


Left Pupils were consulted on the habitat wall design and it was built by them, their parents and the staff.
Right The classroom extends into the landscape for al fresco learning.



as very much in line with their own. This was confirmed after a chat and the practice's subsequent appointment. The feasibility study they produced resulted in the critical Academies Maintenance Fund grant that enabled Mellor's sustainable extension to win planning; protectively overlooking the wooded scrubland that falls away to a small brook, where kids can learn to count pebbles, build a fire or simply splash about.

Modest in proportion to the existing footprint, the 226m², £0.7 million, glulam timber framed, pitched roof extension is really no more than a single classroom for year six, plus a small extension to the school hall, library, one-to-one teaching room, welly store and exterior terrace area. But the way in which it modifies the relationship of the building to its landscape and affects the internal circulation is significant. Sat on its timber platform, it projects north into the landscape; with a large partly-covered terrace allowing outdoor play at tree level and in all weathers. Large glass windows and doors create connections between the new internal spaces and outside; the hall, the central space of the school, now has a new, wide



- 1 Existing main hall
- 2 New hall extension
- 3 North terrace
- 4 New library
- 5 Welly store
- 6 West terrace
- 7 One-to-one study rooms
- 8 WCs
- 9 New classroom
- 10 Corridor access to classroom
- 11 Habitat wall position
- 12 Cedar cladding
- 13 Library block



Left Exterior terraces are partly covered to allow outdoor learning whatever the weather.

Below left Classroom windows effect a direct relationship with the immediate landscape.

Below right The welly store is so popular it sometimes doubles as a classroom.

Credits

Architect **Sarah Wigglesworth Architects**
Client **Mellor Primary School, nr Stockport**
Main contractor **MPS Construction**
Structural engineer **Rhodes and Partners**
Cost consultant **Wilkinson Cowan**

Suppliers

Brick **Staffordshire Golden Dragfaced by Weinerberger**
Glazing **The Standard Patent Glazing Co & Alitherm by Smart Systems**
Cladding **Vincent Timber**
Roofing **Wood shingles, Vincent Timber**
Edgemere roof tiles, Marley Eternit
Doors **Alitherm Plus aluminium doors by Smart Systems**
Internal joinery **Romiley Joinery**

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access balcony, extending its full length and giving wonderful views onto the landscape and Wigglesworth's piece de resistance, the Habitat Wall.

Creating this sizeable straw bale wall, on the east side of the extension, was an exercise in user engagement. Project architect Eleanor Brough did workshops with the kids to ask them to draw what they wanted to fill its external compartments with; and when the time came, off they trotted with their bow saws and loppers into the woods to fetch twigs and branches to do just that. With their parents getting involved at weekend build events, there are also coloured jars, hanging clay pots and logs – even bird boxes built by Gary the caretaker. They've run mesh at foundation strut level for climbing plants and, since the architect last visited,



creation has begun along the hall balcony of a landscaped grassed amphitheatre built from tyres donated by a parent and pure school elbow grease. Parents are responsible too for the new paths back to the parking area; and one dad, who's a contractor, even donated a route the couple of hundred metres or so back to the nearby sports club – a planning condition that would have proved crippling-ly expensive for the school. The insects have been busy builders too: the habitat's wall is gradually becoming a vivarium; Nicholson's trying to source micro cameras so the kids can watch a live feed of them moving in.

Internally, meanwhile, pupils have been getting used to their own home. Interestingly, previous congestion in the corridors has eased off now they can get to the classroom from the main hall and library space;

sometimes they don't even use that, but run outside round the terrace and enter the classroom from there. Perhaps it's the calming smell of the cedar shingles, but once they're in it seems there are positive outcomes in terms of pupil engagement and concentration. You could put that down to the acoustic absorbancy of the naturally specified internal wall linings, or the cut in distractions in this more sequestered, isolated space away from the bustle of the linear classrooms. Or maybe it's the connection to nature that the space engenders. But whatever the reason, the welly store is regularly commandeered by the music teacher for impromptu class songs.

So yes, the extension makes the most of not just the place but the people too. For it was in the physical act of reorganising the existing spaces and building the new block that Mellor School achieved something else – as invisible as the extension is from the school's entrance. It's the more intangible yet cohesive and enduring social benefits that the process won for the whole community; wrought by this school next to the woods, from a vision that fuelled the funding, the funding that built the walls, and the guy who paved the road, to the wall made of bales, put up by the parents, which was finished by the children who learn in the house they all built. ●