

Improving Children's Lives Through Design

The last year and a half has been a rollercoaster for everyone – but some of the most damaging social and psychological effects have been felt by children. Universal challenges like social distancing, masks and lockdown hit particularly hard for younger people who are still developing, learning social skills and a sense of identity that will benefit them in later life. And this is quite aside from the impact of losing out on in-person classes: we've not only seen children's education impacted in general, but the loss of a stable classroom space has exacerbated inequalities between pupils of different backgrounds in an alarming way.

So what is the picture now that social distancing – at least in the UK – seems to be finally coming to an end?

The simple answer is that we still don't know. ADP has spent much of the last year ruminating on the effects of the pandemic, and exploring new ways to design that can respond to it. But the truth is that it will be some time before we can fully understand the pandemic's impact on children in particular – not least because they still have some growing up to do.

One thing that seems clear is that children have always relied on schools for more than academic learning. These additional benefits include (as a very high-level snapshot):

- + Mental health and wellbeing
- + Social skills, interactions and people skills
- + Physical health
- + A safe space (when home doesn't provide this)

That last point is a key reminder that vulnerable children have suffered more than most from the pandemic. As we move into what will hopefully be a post-pandemic world, there are plenty of lessons to take with us that will help us to support every child – and particularly those who are most vulnerable – regardless of the circumstances.

As it happens, ADP carried out our own research into

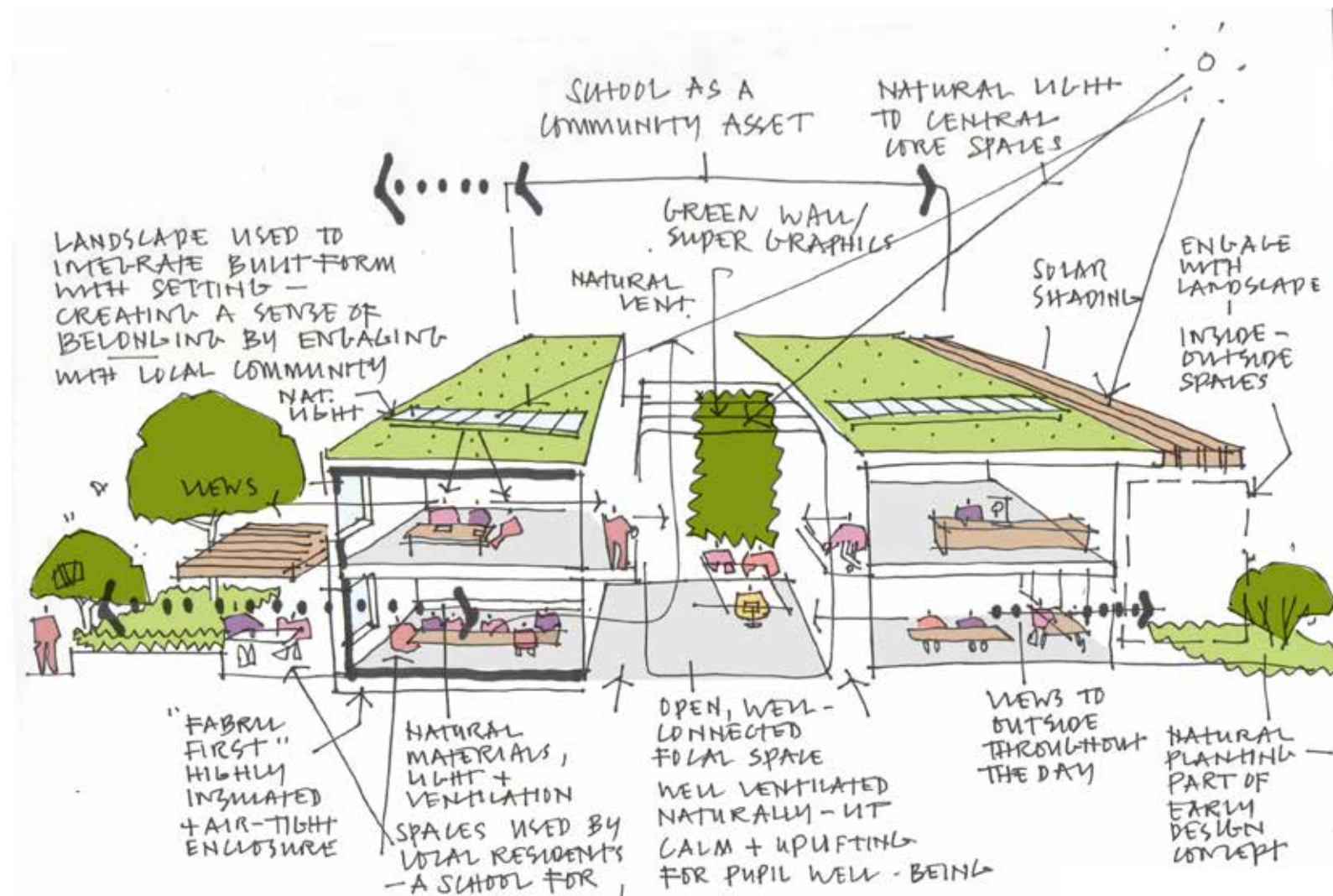
designing for wellbeing just before the pandemic hit, focusing particularly on the education sector. This highlighted five key areas where architects can have a significant impact on children's wellbeing at school:

- + Connections to nature
- + Community links
- + Inclusive learning
- + Agility and flexibility
- + Internal environment

Once we'd identified these key impact areas, the next step was creating a robust tool for measuring them. Our SBE (Sustainability, Engagement & Belonging) Toolkit is that tool: a comprehensive set of questions which examine the decisions we make as designers, not for how much they

cost or how functional they are – we have enough tools for that already – but for how they affect our health, our moods, our ecosystems. The goal is to make sure that every building we design addresses the crucial needs of the people who use it, as well as the project's more obvious goal.

What does this mean for schools? For one thing, it recognises that they are more than simply a place where children are taught. Schools with a positive and varied learning environment, where inspirational interiors connect to imaginative outdoor spaces, can do so much more than this. They can create a sense of belonging for all students – a welcoming place where they can engage and feel safe.



CLAIRE MANTLE
Director of Schools

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They can act as beating hearts for their communities, connecting people across traditional boundaries of class, race and culture. And they can protect and enhance the environment, increasing biodiversity and keeping carbon emissions low.

It's the small steps we take as designers that help to create this bigger picture. By breaking down real, tangible benefits into individual decisions, we can ensure that every building we design sets the scene for an environment that benefits everyone, so that it can play its own small part in building a more inclusive, joyful world. Below are some examples of what this means in the context of a school.

Sustainability: Resource-efficient, low-impact buildings that rejuvenate the natural environment

Designing sustainable schools doesn't simply mean paying attention to energy efficiency. It means paying attention to the materials, orientation and structure of a building. And it means designing for the people (and other life) inside (and

outside) the building too: supporting local wildlife with green corridors, considering air quality and noise, and encouraging active travel plans with safe, accessible routes.

Engagement: Forming connections through community, place and identity

This is all about that slippery concept of "community". Schools act as a community in themselves – but they're also a focal point for the wider communities they serve. Offering a parent or family room where parents can meet and relax can help recognise this, providing passive or active support. By creating flexible, easily segregable spaces, schools can also allow community groups to benefit from their facilities in a secure way.

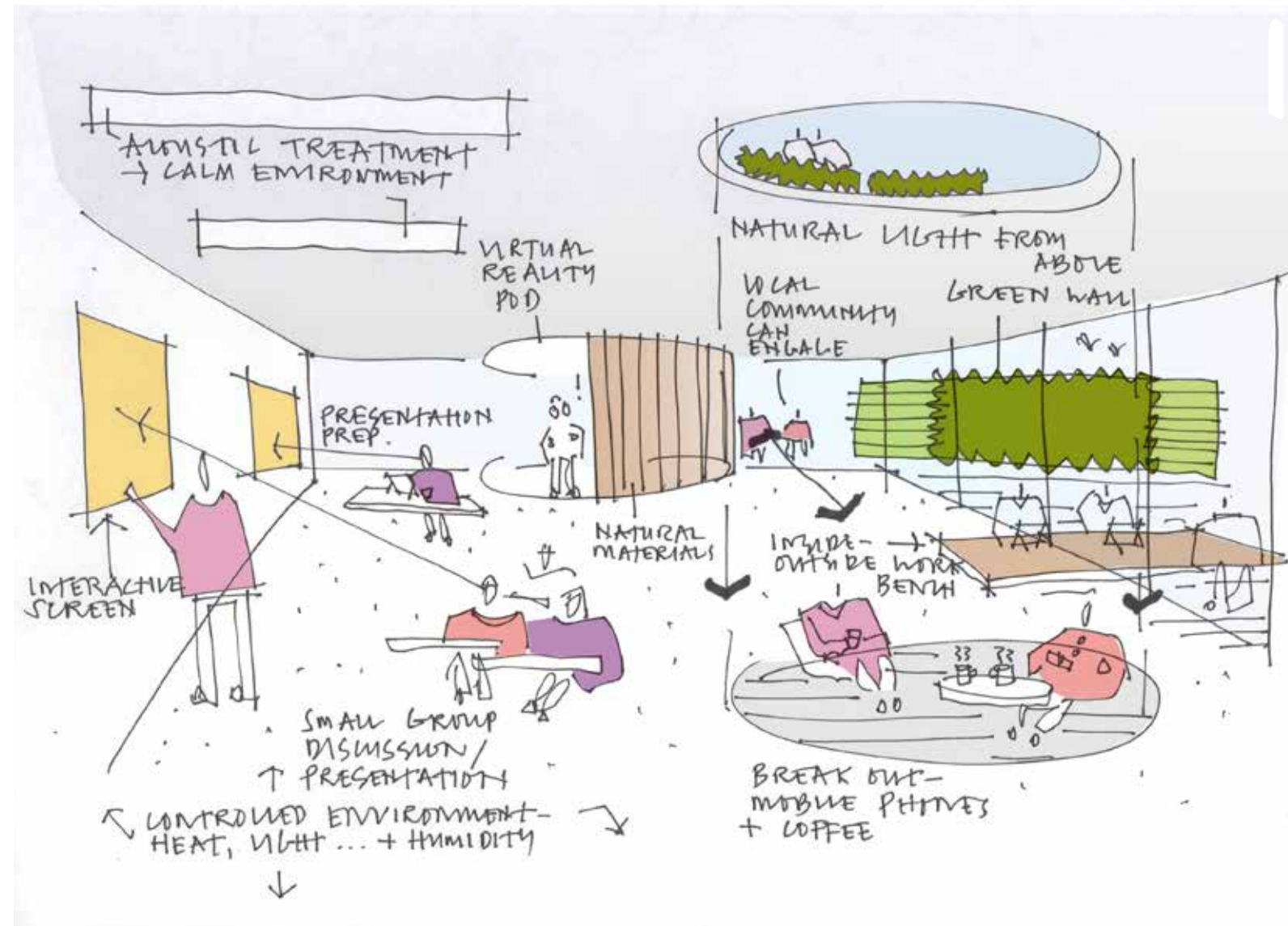
Belonging: Forging the personal and enhancing the everyday with healthy, nurturing environments

This links to our earlier point about schools providing far more than academic learning. Both physical and mental health are key parts of this: environments should feel both safe and supportive, and as designers we carefully consider issues such as passive supervision, safeguarding, and the specific challenge of balancing security and privacy when designing toilets. When it comes to physical health, formal sports facilities are only part of the picture, and health and fitness can be designed into every part of a school. This can include bright, tactile stairs and wayfinding, outdoor learning spaces such as amphitheatres and open-air "classrooms", and opportunities for play – but it's also

important to remember the children who need time to sit and be quiet, providing benches and reflection spaces where they can do this.

The School of the Future

What is a school for? What can it achieve, and what should we expect from it? The school of the future can answer these questions in a different way – and there's no good reason that it shouldn't. We need to be bold in demanding more from our schools, and expecting them to address the whole child. It's only by considering the sorts of issues we've highlighted above – and taking the right design decisions as a result – that we can provide future generations with the support they need to grow and flourish.



CLAIRE MANTLE
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