

# Understanding Our Designs

## *Through POE*

### Understanding What Matters: The Importance of POEs

How can we design better buildings? It starts with looking backwards, at what we've already designed. Only by understanding our completed buildings – how they function, feel and perform for the people who use them – can we work with our clients on new briefs which learn from previous successes and mistakes, continuously improving our delivery.

With this in mind, we challenged the schools team to complete a post-occupancy evaluation (POE) every month in 2020. The plan was to visit schools we'd designed, evaluate them, and review how our performance as a practice fits into the wider context of the industry and sector. Unfortunately, like many best-laid plans in 2020 this one fell victim to Covid.

As restrictions have wound down, we're now looking to the future as we plan more POEs and collate the feedback and data we've received so far. It's important to improve not only the way we carry out POEs – the "How" – but the questions we're hoping to answer with them – the "What".

### How We Measure

In the schools team, we go back to schools we've designed in the last five years and listen to the users – the head teachers, the staff, the children – tell us about the things that really matter to them. This means having conversations which are structured but open, and led by



## Swan School - POE January 2022 - Award Winning : Oxford Preservation

users' perspectives on the school environment. We let the users take us on a tour to see the reality of their day.

The POE should focus not only on the building itself, but on its surroundings. Both indoor and outdoor environments are important, and we consider both as part of our review.

### What We Measure

#### How happy is the occupant?

By speaking to teachers, students and facilities managers, we evaluate the finished design against the Design Drivers set out during the briefing stage. This allows us to identify successes, as well as possible improvements for the future.

#### Does the building support wellbeing?

Wellbeing should be a key element of the brief and plans for any school, and should be supported with an evidence-based approach. Nuffield Health's report "Improving wellbeing in schools" summarises: "Evidence suggests that the physical and mental wellbeing of our children and young people is deteriorating. There is also

growing concern for the mental health and wellbeing of teaching staff. Schools clearly have a critical role to play in addressing these issues."

Research in this area shows that healthy social and emotional development in childhood and adolescence is linked to better educational outcomes. And the quality of our environments directly affects our wellbeing – so by putting this element at the heart of our designs, we can support children to be happier, healthier, and better educated. POEs can test our success here, while also demonstrating what a difference high-quality design can make for the wellbeing of staff and students.

#### Does the school perform well in terms of energy?

Sustainability underpins everything we do, so as part of every POE we work with the wider team to evaluate the energy performance of the building. Monitoring energy performance means that we can ensure users are comfortable when inside the building, while also reducing the school's carbon emissions and running costs.

This feeds into a wider goal for the practice: to understand how our services can contribute in the face of a worldwide climate change and biodiversity crisis.

ADP has signed up to Architects Declare, committing us to designing more sustainable buildings. Monitoring the carbon footprints of our schools is essential to meeting this goal.

#### Does the school provide value for money?

Despite living in a relatively prosperous country, we face some significant funding challenges when designing schools. With school funding streams and an emphasis on "value for money" (where the emphasis is often on the money rather than the value), it's more important than ever that we evidence every decision we make as designers, and use our knowledge and experience to convince decision-makers of the benefits inherent in good design. School design isn't a short-term financial question: a well-designed school can make a difference to children, staff and communities in ways that continue to provide "returns" – social, financial and environmental – for many generations.

**Ultimately, POEs are about exactly this: measuring the real value we provide as architects, and maximising it to create more joy in the world around us.**



CLAIRE MANTLE  
EDUCATION DIRECTOR



TOM WHITE  
IMPACT & COMMS EXEC