

From Butler to Blunkett and Beyond – School Building in England and the Role of A&B Branch

By Andy Thompson
Deputy Head, Architects and Building Branch

In 1949 Architects and Building Branch was established in the English Ministry of Education. The Development Group, within the Branch, was one of the first truly multidisciplinary organisations charged with research, building theory, collaboration and experiment. For 50 years the Branch has seen governments come and go and the ministry itself renamed the Department of Education and Science, Education and currently Education and Employment. As political imperatives have changed the Branch has responded to the challenges. At the start of the 21st century “A&B Branch” is very different in size and scale to the organisation founded halfway through the 20th century. But apart from the name the underlying principle of A&B has remained the same; this is to bring together architects, educationalist and policy administrators, to “lay down general principles, guidance and advice combined with empirical investigation and experiment”(Saint)¹. Through both centralist and de-centralist administrations A&B has retained a role in national government helping to foster innovation in school design.

Early Influences

The 1944 Education Act (known as the Butler Act) seized on the mood of optimism in the country, a need to re-build and a quest for a more equitable society. It guaranteed free education for all in the secondary sector and included a proposal to raise the school leaving age to 15. The incoming labour government of 1945 took forward this act, initially creating 146 from 315 local authorities.

The new local authorities were large enough to sustain viable teams of building professionals but small enough to retain flexible and responsive ways of working. The massive building programme that was required was to be delivered through local authorities. Hertfordshire was one such authority trying to respond to the increase in pupils by erecting huts under the HORSAs programme (Hutting Operation for the Raising of the School Leaving Age). These buildings were designed during the war by the Ministry of Works and had little relevance to the needs of schools. The happy coincidence of young, brilliant practical and enthusiastic architects and a chief education officer with vision and commitment in Hertfordshire in 1945, laid the foundations of a future for quality, mass produced and fit-for-purpose schools in England. This team proceeded to design, not so much individual buildings (though they did that) as a way of building. Working with a manufacturer, a “kit of parts” was developed with maximum flexibility in components, materials and arrangement.

Establishing the Development Group

The Ministry of Education realised that the national demand for large numbers of quality school buildings could not be met by each authority experimenting and trying to develop their own programmes. Senior officials in the ministry were aware of the successes in Hertfordshire and set about getting acceptance of the idea of establishing a Development Group inside government, principally of building professionals. There was opposition by civil service unions hostile to specialists in government; also resistance by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and local authority associations, both wary of the idea of civil servants intervening in their own field of professional activity, and a notion of improper extension of central influence. The senior officials at the ministry were aware of this, “but they lived and worked within a philosophy of educational administration which was based on partnership – the partnership between central government, the local authorities and the teachers. In consideration of school building it was logical to extend this to other professionals, notably the architects. They understood the limitations of what could be done by ministerial order. If standards of school building were to be raised as a result of public intervention, such intervention would have to be indirect and discreet. It would have to be acceptable to the architects and the educators strictly on its merits”(Maclure).

¹ Saint, Andrew (1987). *Towards a Social Architecture – The Role of School Building in Post-War England*.

So before the first chief architect was appointed, the administrative head of the school buildings section in the ministry had to define and sell the philosophy behind the proposed Development Group. “He sought to gain acceptance of a Development Group which might seek the occasional commission from a local authority to act as the architect for a school or college project, in the same way as a private architect might. He explained that the Development Group would only be interested in occasional buildings which would give them the opportunity to investigate a particular problem and test particular solutions. They would not in any sense be in competition with other architects for business. They were only talking about a fairly small number of projects alongside a school building programme which would run to many hundreds of schools. And the object of the exercise would be to ensure that the ministry architects remained in close and practical contact with the real world of school design and construction, which was essential if their advice were to be valued and valuable” (Maclure).

In 1948 the then deputy county architect of Hertfordshire, Stirrat Johnson-Marshall, was appointed to become the joint head of Architects and Building Branch. He quickly established the Development Group. The essence of the group in his mind was that it should engage in activities which bridge the gap between architecture and educational administration. Its membership had to reflect this interdisciplinary idea. As well as the architects and quantity surveyors from local authorities and the Building Research Station, there was a senior HMI (His Majesty’s Inspector), when specific projects required it, policy administrators from within Architects and Building Branch.

The HMI was the communication link between the group and the inspectorate who, collectively, provided professional pedagogic advice to the Ministry of Education. Because the HMI was part of the team the link worked both ways; successive HMIs attached to the Branch were effective in getting the ideas of the Development Group across to the inspectorate and out into schools. But the success of the Branch was not just the formal consultative route through HMI. The architects, with local authority background, had their own networks of progressive teachers for another conduit along which innovative pedagogic ideas flowed. The fundamental creative tension from committed building and educational professionals, working in central government has been the hallmark of the Branch over the last 50 years.

Influencing School Building from the 1950s to the 1970s

The Development Group worked through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s largely in the same way. In 1957 it had been involved in devising no fewer than five building systems for secondary schools; between 1957 and 1966 eight consortia of local authorities were formed, drawing on the benefits of prefabrication and rationalised building to deliver the massive programme of new schools. By 1976, 58 local education authorities out of the 104 resulting from the reorganisation of 1974, were full members of consortia. Other bodies – different government departments, the Diocesan authorities and the universities – also became members.

Throughout this time, when consortia supplied almost half of the national school building programme the Development Group were also working, usually in association with LEAs on a range of development projects, each exploring an aspect of educational development or responding to government initiatives. From the start the Development Group was committed to the publication of a series of Building Bulletins, reporting on different facets of their work. These have been valued, and still are by all involved in school building. They were an essential output from the Development Group’s remit defined in a ministry circular of 1948:

“to investigate educational requirements, particularly in the light of any new developments in teaching technique to recommend how those requirements can best be met in terms of architecture and to keep under review in the light of experience on the ground the suggestions made by the ministry about the layout and construction of schools and other educational establishments;

by co-operation with manufacturers to influence any new techniques of building so that they may be able to answer adequately up-to-date educational requirements;

to study the latest scientific information in the light of the needs of educational building;

to make the results of their studies available to local educational authorities and any private architects concerned.

In general, the minister wishes to encourage more interchange of information about educational building with a view to greater efficiency and economy, and he hopes that authorities and others will consult freely with the Architects' Branch of the ministry about their ideas and problems."

A Changing Focus

The 1980's saw the greatest changes to structure and organisation of Architects and Building Branch. No stranger to reviews the one carried out by Sir George Mosely in 1986 considered a number of fundamental options which questioned whether there was a future for A&B. Mosely finally concluded that A&B Branch should continue, albeit in a significantly changed form. The "territorial" architects in A&B had hitherto operated in parallel acting as the "eyes and ears" mediating the work and ideas of the Development Group and dealing directly with local education authorities when new projects came up for preliminary approval. In the future, development work and "territorial" activity would be carried out by the same teams. The remit to scrutinise and agree individual LEA projects ceased. This coincided with a government determined to experiment with publicly funded alternatives to LEA maintained schools. City technology colleges (CTCs) and grant maintained schools encouraged structures that were intended to factor in private sector money and challenge and compete with local education authority provision. But through the rest of the 1980s and 1990s A&B Branch continued to take an active role in support and dissemination of organisational and educational initiatives. As architects to the local trust, A&B designed the City Technology College in Nottingham. Experiences in this provided a briefing guide for all 15 colleges (for 11 to 18 year olds) in the programme, designed by private architects with variable experience in school work. Publication of a Building Bulletin, "Education Design initiatives" in 1991 disseminated the experiences of design, planning and building procurement of the first six CTCs to a much wider audience.

Although strained, relationships with local authorities were not lost and A&B continued to work collaboratively on projects. The new Victoria infants schools in Sandwell and work on the substantial refurbishment of Lyng Hall secondary school in Coventry were particularly notable. At Sandwell the design was developed to offer a wide range of spaces to suit the latest developments in primary teaching and other current issues such as security, energy consumption and outdoor teaching. It also includes specialist and shared spaces for community use, and a nursery. Lyng Hall school involved A&B in scheme design to demonstrate effective rationalisation of a large secondary school accommodated in various buildings on a far-flung site arrangement. The new design involves some refurbishment and some new building around a courtyard.

Blenheim High School in Epsom, Surrey, was a new grant-maintained school for students aged 11 to 18. A&B worked with policy officials in DfEE and the governing body of the school to develop a design which followed recently published "Area Guidelines". The phased project worked closely to a series of Building Bulletins on specialist subject areas.

Most recently, A&B professionals have worked with Greenwich LEA and English Partnerships, to develop a brief for the Millennium School project near the Dome. Truly conceived as a school of the future, the project drew heavily on the wider perspective of A&B and our ability to access expert advice on education, planning and information technology.

While in recent years there have been fewer Building Bulletins describing complete development projects, A&B has produced a number of guidance documents covering specialist subject areas in schools. There is also guidance on security, environmental issues, sustainability, furniture and equipment, special educational needs, access for disabled and school grounds. All of this work retains the key characteristics of the original philosophy of the Branch. It is based upon research, drawing on architects and other building professionals, educationalists, HMI and policy officials. It does not prescribe ways in

which things should be done but offers a national framework within which there is still scope to innovate locally.

The Future

The most recent review of A&B Branch has recommended new ways of working that respond to the modernising agenda of the current government. But there is a clear and unequivocal endorsement to the continuing role of A&B Branch within central government. Instrumental to delivery of the government's capital strategy is for every local authority to establish comprehensive Asset Management Plans (AMP). Much of the existing school building stock requires replacement. This cannot be done all at once and so priorities need to identify which buildings can have their life extended by value for money refurbishment. Knowledge is required of the condition of the stock, whether there is sufficient provision to meet pupil numbers and how suitable it is for modern, efficient and effective teaching and learning. A&B Branch continues to lead in providing a framework and guidance for LEAs to put AMPs in place. It will have a role in appraising those plans and in communicating developments in government policy, where it impacts on school buildings. AMPs will be the vehicle through which capital money will be routed and form the basis on which government can evaluate the benefits that increased investment is having on raising educational standards. The way that A&B Branch building professionals will help deliver the policy development for the immediate future will still retain the elements of the original philosophy. A&B customers will be policy teams within the Department through whom HMI and educational consultants will provide expertise. A&B will develop partnerships in the private sector, outside the Department from which services can be purchased. They will supplement the skills of the building professionals and provide flexibilities to respond to peaks in workload. These partnerships and the continuing relationship with local authorities, local government, professional associations, professional governing bodies, universities and international groups will be the source of practical contact with the real world of school design and of professional refreshment.

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A&B school buildings Web site: www.dfes.gov.uk/schbldgs