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Editors' Preamble: Ty Goddard is Director of the British Council for School Environments. In late 2008, Ty came to Australia for some months contributing his expertise to the Smart Green Schools’ team but also visiting schools and speaking with educators and designers. In this interview, Ty brings an outsider’s perspective on school design in Australia and talks about some of the similarities and contrasts between initiatives in the UK and Europe.

Interview: July 28, 2009

TG: Ty Goddard, Director, British Council for Schools Environments

Let’s begin by asking you why you came to Australia for some months?

TG: I came a couple of times for other purposes and saw some Wollongong Schools and some in Melbourne and also spoke to some state government people working in the area of school design. I was particularly interested in the visioning and some of the preparation work that was going into the thinking about building new schools. I was then invited to speak at the Australian Council of Education Facility Planners International, CEFPI, event in June 2008 which further pricked my interest in the sense that there was some amazing thinking going on. Then I got this wonderful invitation to join the Smart Green Schools, SGS, group for five months to learn a lot and contribute something and generally find out how deep and broad the thinking was.

A note in passing—Mao apparently once said you can get too far ahead of your peers. SGS gave me an opportunity to engage with innovative practitioners including teachers, students, architect and academics.

What did you learn in Australia and were there surprises?

TG: I learnt a great deal. The Smart Green School involvement gave me an insight into academic workings which were far removed from ‘ivory tower’ thinking. The research was trying to empower school communities themselves to step back and think how to make schools more sustainable, it was giving them, literally, the monitoring tools to do that job and it was also working with school communities around pedagogy first, so it was attempting to negotiate, co-create or co-design with school communities. But it kept a keen eye on what was happening and what should happen in terms of teaching and learning. The team spent time with school communities. I remember visiting one school for a day with you as part of the Smart Green Schools team. We all spent a day listening while the teachers worked with consultant academics to rethink the curriculum approach in that school. Obviously, when you begin that process of finding out what teachers want to teach and what learners want to learn, you want to find out whether these curriculum changes have an impact on space and so you have to look at how the spaces might be changed as well.
TAKE 8 What did you observe more broadly as happening in Australia around school design?

TG That was interesting. In terms of the conversations I was able to have I realised there were a lot of similar challenges. School estates or the fabric of the schools had been under-invested for years. There was a sense that people were very much attempting to think through what 21st-century teaching and learning should look like and this was then an opportunity for a new look at schools and schooling. There was a sense of joy that government was finally investing in schools, and this had parallels with what had happened in the UK from 1998 onwards with the slightly older new Labour government and Australia with a newer new Labor government and both had decided, very wisely to invest in schools and schooling. The challenges were the same in both countries. Parallels were compelling and meant that we had to have a common language between teachers, engineers, builders, policy makers etc to work in unison to the benefit of teachers and learners. It means we have to work much better together at creating new teaching spaces for teachers and students. It is not about creating architectural icons and follies but about harnessing the fantastic capabilities in each country to be at the service of teachers and learners.

TAKE 8 One of the concerns here about the enormous influx of funds through the BER is that it is more about getting builders working rather than getting the best possible outcome for schools. Designs have to be shovel-ready quickly. What has it been like in the UK?

TG One of the great opportunities in Australia was the cross-country ‘roadshow’ across Australia with Kenn Fisher and we touched a number of Australian cities at the time of the BER announcement. It was increasingly apparent that there was a concern of the participants that this welcome money, this fantastic overdue investment might primarily facilitate templates or standardised cookie-cutter approaches for schools without sensitivity to site, or the purpose of the educators. This would not be optimal for the individual nature of the school communities. It has been shown over time that the crucial success factors in school design are educated clients who know what they are doing and know the range of options possible; the time for designers and clients to spend with each other; and the testing of options as well as the engagement of those real consumers, and I mean by that the teachers and the learners. An imposed standardised school design may not fit the curriculum approach for a particular school and will not be owned by or understood by the clients. If I were to sound a humble note of warning, it is that partial standardisation is possible, but not full standardisation, as communities want to respond to their particular environments and also want a sustainable approach.

TAKE 8 We are not yet sure whether BER will be a lost opportunity or a great outcome—only time will tell.

TG Australian newspapers wrote about the issues being raised by teacher unions around not engaging teachers and students in a meaningful way—lack of engagement will result in poorer outcomes. It is clear that if you don’t involve teachers and pupils in meaningful ways you lose an important opportunity. For example Kenn and I spoke on ABC local radio with a bureaucrat who was responsible for rolling out BER in South Australia. He did not once mention teaching, learning or education in a half-hour interview with us and him. You can be shovel-ready very speedily but thinking is precious. That thinking about space and how to use it is a key factor. Clearly the rewards are much better when design is collaborative and engaging with teachers and students.

TAKE 8 The Wooranna Park project with Mary Featherston was an extensive consultative approach over four years, but can we actually continue this approach across all of our school redevelopments?

TG As we become more fluent in engaging in a common language which we can share, it is likely that we may be able to shorten the engagement process. Some policy makers worry that consultation is time wasting, expectation raising and delaying and costly, but in fact if it is done well it can only help the process. What I learnt about Wooranna was that leadership and engagement of staff is crucial. It was almost breathtaking what could be done in an ‘old shell’—it is flexible and almost an oasis in some respects. There was little about the building itself that was architecturally exciting. Everything I saw inside, in observing the school, seemed to be purposeful.
The furniture, fittings and equipment became really important to how the school could function. Increasingly, we will see good quality furniture and equipment will be more and more important.

Another fantastic example was Bethany—completely age appropriate with homely spaces in the early years with more independent learning later, spaces ideally suited to group learning, spaces that had been thought through. Space was integral to that leadership’s vision, and it included furniture and equipment. The pace of change in terms of learning technology is dazzling, for example from PC to laptop to handheld. More mobile seems to be the way—it would be crazy to see rows and rows of students using handhelds. It is about the alignment. I welcome the profound approach in system wide change in the Catholic Education Office which was uplifting.

TAKE 8 Furniture seems to be left to the last minute and is rushed. Might one say that the furniture and fittings are as important if not more important than the building?

TG The catalogues of furniture available often stifle what is going on in schools. Some of the most successful spaces in the UK are looking at ‘New Line Learning’ office furniture as a model for their own requirements. I am thinking about a particular school in Kent which uses furniture which is very different to the catalogues normally used. In successful schools in Denmark the furniture is often customised with the teachers so it becomes more appropriate. We are on that journey in UK and you are also on that way in Australia. It is not only ergonomics, but you can also flip and change very quickly in an environment if you have agile furniture. We are beginning to see more and more suppliers looking at this approach.

TAKE 8 Is there professional development where teachers can be exposed to these approaches?

TG We have just been doing a Great Schools Inquiry across the UK and have been taking evidence about learning, curriculum, pedagogy and teaching—how young people learn in the 21st century. We need teacher training that looks at this 21st-century-approach in the use of display in the schools. There is Kenn’s phrase about the vocabulary and understanding of the ‘pedagogy of space’, for example, Reggio which has space as the third teacher.

TAKE 8 In Australia we don’t have the equivalent body as the British Council for School Environments—although we do have CEFPI but this group doesn’t engage as much with the professional professional development of teachers.

TG There is a willingness to change but less opportunity to be exposed to alternatives. We are a 400-strong association of suppliers, schools and counties. We are trying to get a common language across all of these stakeholders. We have done quite a number of study tours across Europe and also the UK—Australia is a bit too far at this stage, but it might happen. The more we skill up the client the better the outcomes we will get when they work with designers.
The British Council for School Environments, BCSE, November event will be a World Learning Environments Conference and will be held at Moseley. Moseley is the most recent and effective centre for learning—these new centres of learning are trying to create a different way of delivery not only for curriculum but also for education and learning for students. Through events and publications we try to publicise alternative ways of learning and teaching.

TAKE 8 Moseley sounds like it is more than just a school, but is also for a community.

TG Most of us understand schools because we all went there but many of us carry a massive amount of emotional baggage about what a school looks like—we seem to want to create ‘new old schools’. My admiration for Moseley is about the vision to really deliver a first-class education for the new age of students into the future. It is about the bravery of political leadership—it is easy to recreate misty visions of the past versus recreating schooling and learning which is more relevant to the 21st century. It is not about throwing out everything from the past, but asking whether they are equipped for the challenges of the future. Can they take the richness of that community and take that school in its journey but also use that public building for its community as a positive addition where some of those facilities can be shared on the weekends rather than being locked away? There are other schools in Birmingham and Manchester which are looking at building, delivering and learning in different ways.

TAKE 8 Are there any particularly interesting schools which you have seen connecting into the community?

TG Extended schools are a major improvement—it is part of a core offer in the way schools are being procured. Not all of the billions of pounds is meant for complete new builds. About half is meant for refurbishment and remodelling. Again the skills and thinking need to be shared—we recently held a conference on this in Nottingham. It is particularly important for sustainability. It is important to reuse and re-engineer existing schools to ensure we can adapt to the 21st Century. Our BCSE school ‘makeovers’ involved getting the right people together to rethink existing schools—we have been able to adapt Victorian era schools with high ceilings by using small mezzanines for small group work, more air and light, people creating ‘home bases’ or schools within schools in these separate buildings. We are looking at schools of the late 1800s and re-engineering these for the 21st century.

TAKE 8 What are some of the trends you are noticing in the UK school environments?

TG Some of the new trends in the UK which clearly came up on the recent BCSE award winners are a drive towards sustainable schools that can ‘act’ and be turned inside...
out so that pupils and others can see that the workings of the use and operations of the building can be learning itself. This includes a real drive towards personalized learning—teaching and learning that is appropriate to that person. There is an interest in ‘human-scale’ education—big is not necessarily best—schools within schools. Similarly, there should be spaces that enable teachers to be able to do their jobs—schools as workplaces. Staffrooms where teachers can relax, places where they can mark assignments. This includes spaces for meetings of a wide range of sizes and uses including multi-media presentations. You have to talk seriously and properly about engaging sustainably—you have to create schools WITH people and not FOR people.

TAKE 8 Have the changes been led by government, educators or designers?

TG A really good question, they are often not led by educators but most often led by designers. We do need to engage a sense of partnership and striving for mutual aid. I don’t think that change will come from one individual agent but a range of people working together.

TAKE 8 Even if the leadership team is proactive in the design process there is still shock by teachers around personalised learning, team-based teaching etc.

TG We need to get our message in the faculties of education. We think that there is a high level of understanding by practitioners, but the faculties and teachers colleges are still teaching a 20th-century model.

TAKE 8 In Australia, it is probably correct to say that the spaces for informal learning are not as well-funded as the core teaching spaces. Is there an emphasis on informal learning in the UK?

TG I think we need to take a whole campus approach to space, not just the buildings. Students want spaces similar to adults to relax and play and eat. There has to be a link between quality food and quality dining spaces—you can’t funnel them through in 30 minutes in a factory model rather than as a dining experience. It is about the management and leadership of space and getting it all aligned. It does take time to change cultures, but we can’t afford to stay where we are. It is not about classrooms versus open-plan. It is about spaces that young people deserve, and it is about spaces for the 21st century not the 19th century. We are not throwing everything out—we are keeping what is good and attempting to provide spaces which can support media-rich learning. We have to protect and nurture as well.

TAKE 8 There is an increasingly interest in Year 9 as a pivotal moment in a student’s education. Many private schools and some government schools are trying to give students different experiences when they reach Year 9. Some students go to wilderness camps or a city camp to experience a different form of education. For example, Wangarratta High School in Victoria has a separate campus for their Year 9 students located in the township. The department in Victoria has funded three rural residential leadership schools for successful students to live and learn for one term. Certainly this is common for private schools in Australia. You may remember Prince Charles attending Geelong Grammar’s Timbertop campus over forty years ago. Is this attention to Year 9 something Australia has taken from the UK?

TG I don’t know whether it is out of the UK, but there is a sense of age-appropriate learning. In the transition from primary to secondary, the dip in attainment is quite incredible. We go from fantastic intimate understandable environments and we thrust them into almost ‘brutalised’ environments with packs of books. We looked at home bases for year 7 and how you engage with students as they grow. Experiential learning and engaged learning seems to be growing, with sport becoming important eg ‘playing for success’ where there are 150 learning centres in sports clubs. Geelong Grammar and Timbertop are more immersive for a term, whereas the emerging models seem to be shorter term. Pastoral care and off-site experience has always been an important part of the private school experience. It is critical to understand how to nurture wellbeing in the school environment. Let’s face it we have looked at this for years in the office workplace, and in our homes, why can’t we do this in our schools?
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