

Search

## Never stop learning: Springwell Academy

8 August 2016 | By Philip Watson

---

### **Designing a series of schools for young people with social, emotional and mental health issues has been a chance to carry out indepth post occupancy evaluation**

Like many designers, my first instinct is to think about the experience of the people who will use the spaces I help shape. Before I set pen to paper, I try to understand specifically what people need both practically and emotionally. There are too many examples of award winning buildings that insufficiently support the activities, health, and wellbeing of the people who inhabit them. Buildings need to look good and make us *feel* good.

Recently we were lucky enough to secure a commission to design three new special needs schools for a major council – specifically for young people with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues. This building type clearly brings with it particular challenges. These young people need environments that are especially adapted to their needs; that nurtures and empowers them and supports their rehabilitation. In this type of school getting the emotional response to the environment right is fundamental.

In the past, specialist provisions for young people with “challenging behaviour” meant little more than removing them from their community and placing them in a segregated, often poorly re-purposed, building. With the numbers of young people in the UK with SEMH issues on the rise, the cost to the child, their family, and the wider community and society can be catastrophic without meaningful intervention.

In this context, the design of learning environments around physical and emotional need is more vital than ever. Crucially, we need to learn from experience of what works and doesn't work for this group of people.

---

### **The design of learning environments around physical and emotional need is more vital than ever. Crucially, we need to learn from experience of what works and doesn't work for this group of people**

---

In developing the brief for the three SEMH schools, we supported the council who had reviewed current best-practice and selected Springwell Academy, an award winning SEMH school in Barnsley as their exemplar. The ambition was to take end user feedback on this school to make future SEMH schools in the council's city even more outstanding and responsive to what this particular cohort need.

#### **An exemplar in user-centric design**

To create a design responsive to user needs, we undertook intensive engagement with Springwell's stakeholders. Our architects were prepared to be led by their vision, even when some of their ideas ran contrary to how we typically designed schools. To make sure we provided the best student experience, several 'day in the life' scenarios were tested, including arrival to the school environment to create a feeling of 'home' and familiarity, which Springwell felt their students needed. Some of the conversations were difficult – was that really the best layout or was it just what they were used to? How could this be better? We tried to understand the activities that staff and pupils were undertaking and build the brief from there. We wanted to get to the 'emotional brief' and we kept coming back to the theme of feeling at home.

This sense of home is reflected in Springwell school's layout, which is organised into three 'homebases'. These social spaces, where pupils and staff eat and familiarise, become places where students want to be, and for some at Springwell represent the familial setting absent from their own home lives.

Based on these engagement sessions, Springwell was designed to be a reassuring, calm and nurturing place. A key feature of this is its environmental design – good air quality, even temperatures and excellent levels of daylight all combine to help avoid behavioural issues that might occur when students experience physical discomfort. S shaped classrooms were also created with areas for focused learning and informal areas for small group and one-to-one sessions – a design that supports a more personalised approach for each student, and helps teachers prevent behavioural issues from escalating.

#### **Lessons learned from post-occupancy evaluation**

An independent post occupancy evaluation (POE) found that overall Springwell was delivering what it set out to do – providing a nurturing, safe environment for young people with SEMH issues to flourish. The Homebases in particular seen as very successful ways of engendering a nurturing environment. Immersion space for kinaesthetic learning activities were also seen as very positive. However, there were several key lessons learned that we were able to extract for future SEMH provision.

First, Springwell uses a ventilation strategy controlled automatically by a building management system. While a sophisticated environmental design, the lack of direct occupant control can frustrate users and the mechanical actuators cause disturbing noises. To address this, we've simplified the environmental strategy in the new schools to be a more passive mechanical solution with opening windows for occupant comfort.

The POE also generated a lot of debate about the innovative S shaped classrooms. Some staff felt that it provided places for pupils to hide, others liked the way that the classroom could be easily divided for different activities. To adopt this for future SEMH schools, we've kept the primary S shape, and added a mixture of more rectangular shaped spaces for older students.

End users also felt there were insufficient small group spaces and one-to-one areas at Springwell. In the new schools, these will be increased and immersion spaces added to each of the Key Stage areas. While this means there is an area 'trade off' between classroom and small group/one to one space, it was seen as a positive step forward, based on actual end user feedback.

Finally, teachers felt that Springwell's courtyards were underutilised. The courtyard design at the future SEMH schools will make them more of an amenity or a 'cooling-off' space. They will be larger and become a more active school resource, encouraging small group learning activities.

### **Taking design learning full circle**

Too often, designers do not learn from their past work. With the new SEMH schools we were able to take the excellent model that is Springwell and study its performance in-use in intimate detail. We learnt what worked and what didn't and we were then able to develop a design for the new schools that the Authority and school operators have confidence will work for them and support the rehabilitation of their pupils.

When these projects are constructed and occupied we will revisit once more and evaluate their success through the eyes of those who use them and the cycle of our perpetual learning will continue. This is how it should always be – we should never stop learning.

***Philip Watson, design director, Atkins***

#### Related Articles

[Government's £2bn schools programme hits more delays](#)  
29 July 2016

---

[Schools programme rocked by £178m cost hike](#)  
8 July 2016

---

[Town and gown](#)  
6 January 2016

---

[Northern powerhouse: Using our brains](#)  
5 August 2015

---

Have your say

Sign in to make a comment on this story.

[Sign In](#)

---

[Email](#)

---

[Twitter](#)

---

[Facebook](#)

---