

'Instead of just modelling in Lego we made the facade from it'

Anthony Hoete, director of What Architecture, on how children, staff and toy building bricks were involved in the design of a Church of England school in Hillingdon

Interview Will Hunter

The London Borough of Hillingdon approached you to do the Cowley St Laurence project after seeing your Rooftop Nursery in Hackney — how did that first education project inform your approach?

It won an RIBA award in 2007, and from that we'd met John Sorrell from the Sorrell Foundation (see *Big Client*, page 13), who's very keen on involving the users in the design process. For Hillingdon I wondered how we could do that with primary school children, and also how we could involve the staff and the locals. We decided not to use drawing as everybody thinks "Wow architects are really good at drawing" and nobody feels they can get involved in the conversation. Instead we took Lego bricks, because everybody can use them.

How did this move the design forward?

Basically the project unites a former Church of England school and a state school. We made the two existing from the Lego — not to scale — and then we asked everybody to model different ideas. The first conversation was quite simple: do we do a standalone building or a link building? Through modelling we arrived at the latter, then somebody said, "It would be nice if rather than it being a barrier it becomes a gate". We then thought, "Instead of just modelling the building's massing in Lego, why don't we actually make the facade from it?"

A bold move — how did you explore the implications of this?

We adopted the spirit of the government's Every Child Matters policy, so rather than producing a single image, we decided to give each child an A2 size panel in the facade, to be made from 1,000 Lego bricks. In total we're using 1.5 million of them. We had a series of 20 workshops; classes were already named after a colour, so we gave each the single colour of its name.

Was there any resistance from the client?

The client bought into the idea as a whole, but there were specific elements they weren't happy with. The children started to draw lots of smiling

people but, as it's a Church of England school, we were told these weren't allowed because they looked "satanic" hence why all the mouths are level. Pursuing the religious theme, we asked the children to reimagine Jesus for the modern world — would he be black? Or a woman? But this soon ran into problems so in the end we asked them to reinvent themselves.

How did this turn into the main facade?

We took all the images and simply arranged them as panels. Initially the colours were used as a sort of mapping of the classes, but the client didn't like the rainbow effect, so we then converted all the images to black and white. In later workshops we asked the children to make one of their designs just in relief. We ended up using this technique to incorporate writing on the facade of the school's core values.

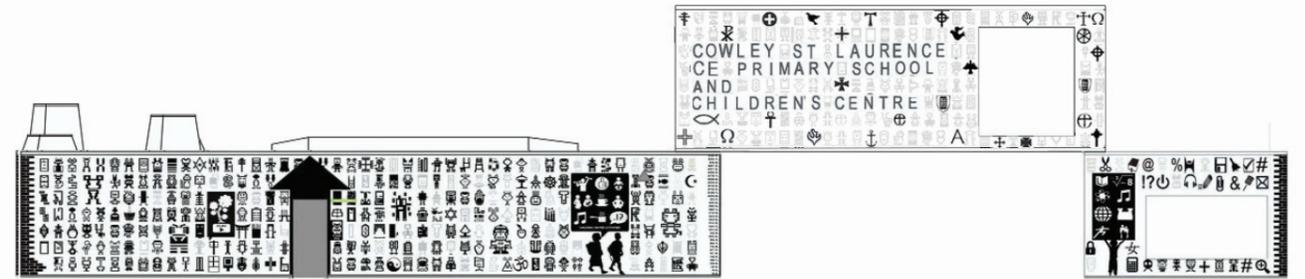
What technical issue were there?

The bricks needed an intumescent coating that needs to be redone every seven to 10 years, so the facade had to be demountable. It's built as a continuous strip from various panels. It's screwed to the wall behind, which we've picked out with a single yellow brick so they can be found again. The project completed last month, but when they take it down in a decade's time, they could rebuild it differently, so it's open to reworking for different generations.

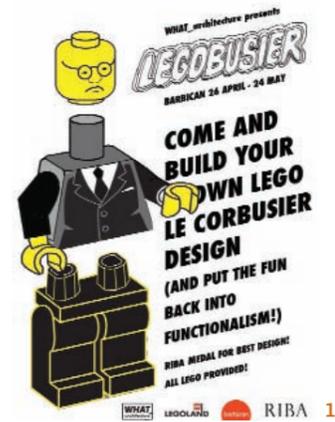
How has this fed into other projects?

We became involved in the Le Corbusier season organised by the Barbican and the RIBA last year. We said to them that with Corb, it would be great if you could engage the audience. We made a side exhibition, Legobusier, where visitors could start to understand the architect through making. From that we've been asked by London Borough of Camden to teach architecture at secondary schools.

We're currently tendering for InnerSpace, a school where we're removing the leaky roof and creating a "Best Value Ronchamp" — heavily sponsored Velux-Deluxe — to bring light into the top-floor art studios.



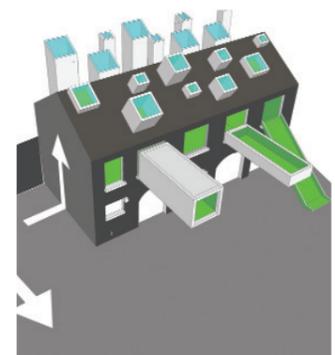
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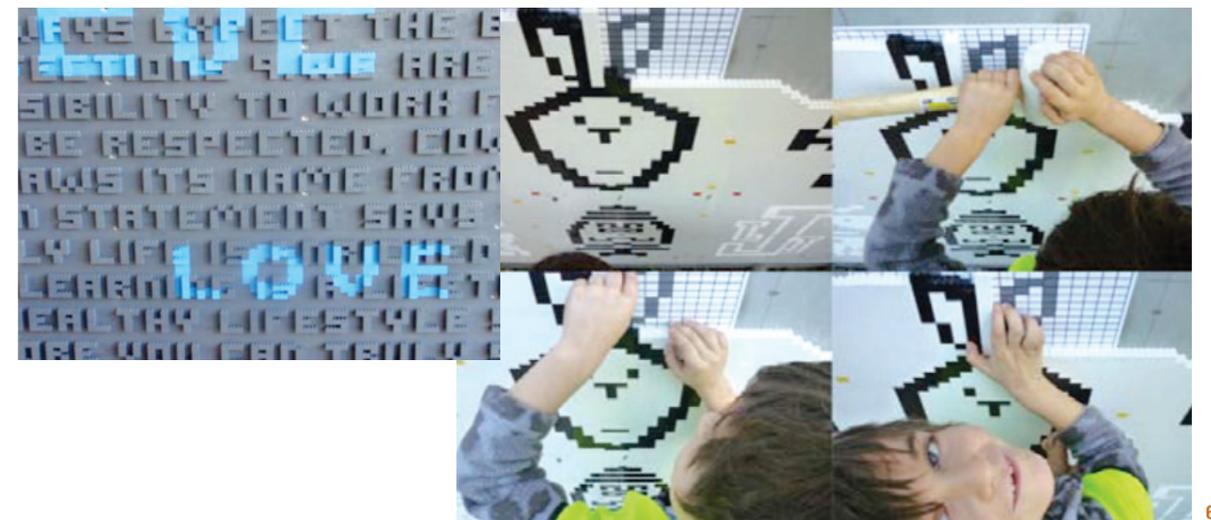


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1 Legobusier flyer. 2 & 3 What Architecture used Lego blocks to engage primary school pupils in design. 4 "Best Value Ronchamp" proposed a Velux-Deluxe roof.



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5 Elevation of Cowley St Laurence. 6 The facade was built out of Lego by the school's pupils. 7 Workshop using coloured bricks. 8 The school disliked the "rainbow effect".