

Claiming events of school (re)design: materialising the promise of *Building Schools for the Future*

Preface

Figure 1. A school corridor in the English East Midlands, January 2007.

Keywords: narrow, cluttered, angles, notice-boards, primary colours, wood and plasterboard, smells of detergent



Source: authors

Figure 2. The ‘same’ school corridor, September 2008.

Keywords: spacious, decluttered, curvilinear, modern artworks, tastefully-muted colour-tones, fibreglass and steel, smells of fresh paint



Source: authors

1. Introduction

“We want to achieve a step-change in the quality of school buildings for every secondary pupil. We want to move from ‘patch and mend’ to ‘rebuild and renew’ ... [A]bove all, we want to create an environment in which to achieve education transformation and innovation” (DfES¹ 2004a: 22).

During the last decade, the UK Government has instituted three major, overlapping ‘flagship’ programmes of school (re)development.

- *Academy Schools* (2002-present). A programme intended to “challenge the culture of educational under-attainment ... in areas of disadvantage” by replacing schools “facing challenging circumstances” with an ‘Academy’ (DfES 2007a: unpaginated). Academies are established by sponsors (typically corporate, business, faith or voluntary groups) working in partnership with central Government and Local Authorities.
- *Building Schools for the Future* (BSF) (2004-present). A much-heralded strategy to refurbish or rebuild all 3,500 secondary schools in England “to a modern standard over the next 10 to 15 years” (DfES 2004b: 8), by investing around £2.2 billion per annum in school buildings, estates and infrastructure (DfES 2004a: 2).
- *Primary Capital Programme* (PCP) (2008-present). A strategy “to ensure that primary² schools and primary-age special schools are well equipped for the 21st Century... [via projects] to rebuild, remodel or refurbish at least 50 per cent of schools” by 2020 (DfES 2006: 7) afforded by investment of around £500 million per annum (DfES 2007b).

Our focus in this paper is the second, largest, and best-publicised of these programmes: BSF. Suffice it to say that BSF was/is discursively invested with transformative promise in light of the UK government’s stated commitment to young people. More literally, BSF invested school (re)building projects with the *promise* of achieving this ‘step-change’.

This paper is about the formation and real material work that these promises do, through the proposed material transformations of school spaces, and particularly open spaces (corridors, atria, halls) outside the classroom. These kinds of transformation –

¹ DfES: Department for Education and Skills, the UK government department charged with policy-making regarding education at all levels, and for broader policy-making for young people. DfES was replaced by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) in June 2007.

² In UK nomenclature, ‘primary’ education typically refers to the education of 3-11-year-olds.

these architectural ‘events’, as we term them, following Jacobs (2006) – might be read as undramatic. After all, many of these spaces are ‘merely’ corridors; these are spaces *passed-through* in the rush to be elsewhere. But, as we demonstrate, in the context of the larger, national policy event in whose context they are being constituted, they promise to do much more than this. That policy event – ‘Building Schools for the Future’³ (or BSF) – plans the refurbishment of every secondary school in England by 2020. As part of BSF it is anticipated that spaces such as corridors, atria and halls contribute to the wholesale rejuvenation of England’s secondary school building stock. Simply put, better-designed and –functioning open spaces are part of an impulse for *getting the details right, this time*, as the quotation beginning this introduction intimates.

During 2007-09, the authors worked on a research project⁴ charting the progress of a range of school (re)design and refurbishment projects in this context. Over twelve months, a range of qualitative methods (critical content analysis of policy documentation, participant observation, interviews with school-users and stakeholders in the design process) were deployed to chronicle the unfolding of different (re)design projects in ten diverse schools in the English Midlands. We deployed a critical reading of key UK government documents about BSF (principally the eponymous *Building Schools for the Future* consultation document, published by DfES in 2003). This reading was undertaken alongside an analysis (and unique collation) of the dense, complex regulations governing UK school buildings, and interview material from headteachers, teachers, parents and pupils⁵.

³In UK nomenclature, ‘secondary’ education typically refers to the education of 11-18-year-olds.

⁴For details of the project, see this paper’s acknowledgements.

⁵All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subject to coding and content analysis via the qualitative analysis software *NVivo*.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 3 provides more detail about BSF and the promises it makes on behalf of both architectural practice and contemporary (English) childhoods. In section 4, we pause to consider how *getting the details right, this time*, is a central component of the promise of BSF to enact a radical break from the pasts of English schooling – both architectural and pedagogical. In section 5, we focus upon examples from two of our case study schools: one which is about to undergo significant refurbishment; the other which moved site and was rebuilt in 2008. We highlight how the promise of BSF has been taken up in the design of interior open spaces that are intended to be functional (for instance, anticipating pupil flow) and/or visible and inspirational (for instance, attracting wider community involvement in school life). But first, we situate our analysis within geographies of architecture and childhood.

2. The *event* of building schools for the future: architecture and childhood

School open spaces are worthy of attention given a tendency for many accounts of ‘school’ to say little about the materialities of school buildings. Historians of education have latterly critiqued a problematic, longstanding silence within their field regarding everyday, material contexts of particular school buildings and spaces: observing, for instance, that “historians have made almost no attempt to reconstruct the classroom, the culture of the classroom, the social relations of the classroom” (Silver 1992: 105; also Grosvenor 1999). Thus, Burke and Grosvenor’s (2008) historical charting of the relationship between school design and educational philosophy/practice is instructive and timely. Crucially, they remind us that the kinds of conjoined, material-and-ideological imperatives underpinning BSF are far from new. It is our contention that BSF mirrors recurring critiques (since the 1920s) of extant school building stock. BSF is the latest in a long line of building ‘events’

proscribing the future of England's schools – from the opening of Board Schools in 1870s London to the promises of post-1945 education reform (Burke and Grosvenor, 2008). But the nature, scale and scope of BSF marks an event of a quite different register from earlier school-building programmes. A range of policy interventions relating to education in the UK have created an imperative, and a dense array of regulatory, fiscal and structural interventions, for the (re)design of *each* of the 3,500 secondary schools in England.

The dense, organisational and materially-inflected tone of BSF – entailed in moving from 'patch and mend' to 'rebuild and renew' (DfES 2004a: 22) – also highlights a related, broader problematic. That is, a tendency, latterly noted by geographers of architecture (Lees 2001, Gieryn 2002, Jacobs 2006, Kraftl and Adey 2008), for Social Scientists to overlook the materialities of built spaces (Gieryn, 2002). In particular, buildings like schools are not simple containers or blank canvases for meaning: they do not simply stabilise the ideals or discourses that we hang upon them (Jenkins, 2002). Indeed, even when seemingly completed, buildings involve constant, material *work* (as much as inhabitation) for discourses invested in them – such as 'childhood' or 'education' – to retain their meaning (Kraftl, 2006).

Thus, for example, Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel (2006: p.609) call for Social Scientists "to enlarge... the cast of actors (both human and non-human) that... come together" in the constitution of particular building/design projects via complex, contingent processes, relations and events. In one sense, individual buildings take place relationally: they are held together via multiple relations between actors such as pipes, cables, architects, residents and policy-makers (Jacobs, 2006). Those relations allow a material form to stake a claim on time and place – as a 'building', or, specifically, a

‘school’; they also allow particular claims to be made on behalf of discourses and practices like ‘architecture’ and ‘education’. This process of staking out a claim – the taking-place of a building or parts thereof – is one way in which buildings can be conceived as events (Jacobs, 2006).

Significantly, in another sense, the rise of an architectural form (such as the BSF school) and its appearance in different places at the same historical juncture – might also be conceived as an event.

“The residential highrise has been variously drawn up into a range of indisputably big stories and organizational *events*: utopian visions for living, stellar architectural careers like that of Le Corbusier, bureaucratic machineries of mass housing provision, national projects of modernization, the claims of critical social sciences and spectacular instances of failure, as well as popular and academic imaginaries about globalization” (Jacobs, 2006: 3-4; our emphasis)

For, as Jacobs has it here, sets of technologies, practices and materials (architectural achievements like the residential highrise or school) are dispersed around, and make claims upon, selected places – in the case of BSF, on the landscapes of English schooling. Hence the BSF school can be viewed as a national architectural event, ‘drawn up’, in Jacob’s words, into discourses around Britain’s economic and social ‘needs’ in the twenty-first century. A little like the residential highrise, we submit the refurbishment of school open spaces (as in figures 1-2) as examples of the sorts of material transformation which are consequently scheduled to take place in every school in the UK over the next fifteen years. As such, we might understand the changing morphology of this corridor (along with many others) as one microgeographical, architectural event within and constitutive of a major, ongoing

social-political-architectural event (BSF) – a major event whose parameters and imperatives we set out in the next section⁶.

Finally, the kinds of silences regarding school buildings can be understood as one example of a *typically implicit* Social Scientific apprehension of interactions between children, young people and everyday built spaces (see Kraftl, Horton and Tucker 2007). We suggest that the built fabric of a school – even relatively modest, relatively humdrums examples thereof – should be understood as a literal, material manifestation of contemporary normative social-political constructs, like ‘childhood’, ‘education’, ‘schooling’. While critiques of Western social constructs of ‘childhood’, and the axiomatic presence of education therein, have been legion over the last two decades (James and Prout 1997, Wyness 2000, James and James 2004), it has latterly been argued that such critiques have often neglected to chronicle “exactly how ideas about childhood... are contested, constructed and articulated, and how they come to matter, through site-specific practices, at and with built forms” (Kraftl 2006: 488; also Gagen 2004, Gallacher 2005).

Moreover, where Social Scientists have attended to such site-specific practices with/in buildings, they have tended to do so via a particular reading of Foucauldian governmentality and panopticism, foregrounding the (often dramatic, iconically-powerful) disciplining technics of particular institutional buildings. This kind of enquiry has produced important insights regarding geographies in/of educational spaces (see Ploszajska 1996, Fielding 2000, Pike 2008). However, we contend there

⁶ For these ostensibly methodological reasons, we prefer Jacobs’ (specifically architectural) conception of the ‘event’ to other theorisations of the event currently being mapped out by human geographers (Dewsbury 2006; Bassett 2008). Moreover, the sweeping, widespread, purportedly radical nature of BSF is a policy event operating at a knowingly brutal scale and speed – a scale and speed that is dischordant with kinds of the unpredictable, self-founded, contingent and eventual sites of alterity inspired by Deleuze and Badiou (Marston et al. 2005).

are more kinds of story to be told about the materialities of contemporary school spaces. For example, in this paper we will contend that the changing form of school open spaces is constituted by specific macropolitical, state-sponsored intervention (inextricably refracting, contemporary ideals regarding education and childhood) as enacted via a manifold, processual geography of local interrelations, moments, disputes, regulations and materialities.

3. Constructing *promise*

BSF initially became palpable in the form of a succession of glossy policy documents and media briefings coordinated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2003-04. These discourses were characterised by poignant critique of the status quo and the promise of major future funding for nationwide redevelopment of secondary schools.

Significantly, BSF was anticipated by broader contemporary social-political concerns regarding the well-being of young people. Briefly: contemporary neo-liberal governments have gradually withdrawn the state-sponsored resources available to young people (Mizen, 2003). Hence, individual children and families become charged with absolute responsibility for their lives – for lifting themselves out of poverty (Ruddick, 2003), for internalising normative moralities regarding anti-social behaviour (Cobb, 2007) and for accumulating the necessary capital to provide for their own futures (Katz, 2008). Meanwhile, seeming ‘youth first’ policies are underpinned by a ‘social investment’ approach that, rather than deal with *present* welfare issues via state-funded provision, locates investment in ‘being ready for the future’ (Lister, 2006). In other words, the UK government’s commitment to spending on education is an investment strategy for the future, not a benevolent act on the behalf

of today's children, placing a considerable burden upon the ability of today's generation of children to fulfil this promise:

“Through investment in human capital and the equipping of young workers with the qualifications and skills that they are held to need, New Labour [UK government party] hopes to reconcile the quest for competitive [i.e. global] efficiency and economic progress with their commitment to social justice” (Mizen, 2003: 455)

Many of these concerns were directly concretised in subsequent UK policy reforms for young people, such as the *Children Act 2004* (DfES 2004c) which called for substantial renewal of publicly-funded provision for younger people, and *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury 2003). Such documents served to promise substantial improvements to address these anxieties. *BSF* was explicitly instituted as a ‘flagship’ intervention in the above context (and should be read in the light of the critiques aired above). Thus, the (re)development of school buildings is positioned as fundamental for the UK government's youth focus:

“[e]ducation is the Government's top priority. We have an ambitious reform programme to raise educational standards. And we believe that school buildings have a crucial part to play” (DfES 2003: 1).

Several motifs recurred in the central Government policy documents which largely constituted the ‘launch’ of *BSF*. First, *BSF* was explicitly located as a major, historical Event, equivalent (and superior) to earlier reforms of the UK educational infrastructure. For example:

“[In the nineteenth century] the Victorians bequeathed a visible inheritance of their commitment to education. It is now time – indeed, the time is long overdue – for us to start the systematic renewal of all schools, so that our legacy to future generations is at least as great” (DfES 2003: 5).

“This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for each locality not only to renovate its secondary schools, but also to reform and redesign the pattern of secondary education” (DfES 2003: 10).

As such, the ‘launch’ of BSF entailed the discursive construction of particular temporalities: the (implicit) problems of the past; the *urgency* of change (‘long overdue’); the imperative to leave a ‘legacy’. Moreover, by harking back to an historical era which is often imagined as a kind of ‘golden age’ (see Roderick and Stephens 1981, Birch 2007) of modern educational reform in the UK, these founding documents constituted BSF as plainly Historic (with a capital ‘H’).

Second, the documents which ‘launched’ BSF left no doubt that the programme would be transformative, at a massive scale.

“At the heart of [BSF] is a desire not only to rebuild and renew individual secondary schools, but also to... reform and redesign the pattern of education... for decades to come. It is an opportunity to think differently about all aspects of the process of developing and delivering new schools” (DfES 2004a: 30).

Manifestly, then, school buildings (or parts thereof) were invested with the potential ‘to achieve educational transformation and innovation’.

Moreover, third, BSF was invested with the potential to be *multiply* efficacious. That is, the renewal of school buildings would also, simultaneously, address contemporary societal ills other than education – such as ‘deprivation’, ‘under-achievement’ or ‘anti-social’ behaviour:

“Authorities and schools will be able to make visionary changes... as well as investing in modernisations and renewal, so that all schools can play their part in the delivery of higher educational standards in the future. We shall also be able to increase our attack on the deprivation and under-achievement that has particular blighted our schools” (DfES 2003: 7).

In this context, it is salient to remember an earlier pledge made by the UK government on behalf of both children and education:

“...the success of our children at school is crucial to the economic health and social cohesion of the country as well as to their own life chances and personal fulfilment” (DfES, 2001: 1; cited in Mizen, 2003: 461)

BSF ('central' to educational reform in England) can therefore be understood as imbuing the materiality of school buildings with the capacity to address societal anxieties about young people both within, and far beyond, the classroom. Meanwhile, the anxieties articulated herein refract contemporary normative (policy) assumptions about 'ideal' school pupils, children and young people and their positioning as the harbingers of a more productive, competitive, harmonious national future (Mizen, 2003).

Finally, the founding documents of BSF are characterised by an intense – perhaps poignant – kind of futurity and *promise*. Repeatedly, BSF policy documents appeal to a futuristic concept of '21st-century schooling' and the 'legacy' (DfES 2003: 5) that will remain. Appropriating Anderson's terms (2005), we might understand promise as *infrastructural* to the BSF programme. That is, the promise of BSF is fundamental to the structure of what BSF actually *is*. For it is our observation that, at all stages and in whatever contexts (national, regional, local), the launch and progress of BSF have been characterised by the staging of events in relation to, or in the pursuit of, some kind of affecting, future-orientated promise.

Importantly, inasmuch as we recognise that BSF is primarily a programme for educational reform, we want to specify the above observation by claiming that it is in the explicitly *architectural* promise of the scheme that the UK government have most fully articulated their ambition for educational future. A major lynch pin for BSF is the claim that, *this time*, the nation's outmoded and unfit school-building stock will experience wholesale renewal. The impulse for renewal (and critique of the past) is not new. Yet unlike those previous waves BSF resolutely commands that *every*

secondary school be rebuilt: whereas, in the 1960s, for example, only 30% of schools were actually renovated (Burke and Grosvenor, 2008). There is hence a feeling that, finally, the promise of so many previous schemes for school building renewal will be fulfilled; and that, logically, the devil is in getting the detail right, this time.

Certainly, as a result of the historical layering of subsequent educational policies since 1870 (there have been over fifty, not listed here, which are indirectly or directly evoked by BSF policy documents) and design quality indicators and health and safety regulations, it can be easily argued that English school buildings are densely-regulated architectural achievements. Significantly, the kinds of details listed above are not simply framed as socio-material components for a technically sound, functioning school (compare Jacobs 2006). Rather, the DfES' resultant guidance – notably *'Transforming Schools: an inspirational guide to remodelling secondary schools'* (2004d) – both summarises and then re-packages those specific, architectural guidelines within the discursive claims made by BSF policy for school buildings, principally as a set of self-propheying 'inspirational' examples. Most tellingly, the *inspirational guide* provides a loose description of what the twenty-first century school might look like, should the details all fall into place. It articulates eight key words, summarised below:

“Identity [...] consistency [...] conservation [...] regeneration [...] involvement [...] sustainability [...] space [...] time” (from DfES, 2004d: 7)

Hence, the DfES re-writes the symbolic and affective impact of these kinds of architectural achievement via eight key words. 'Identity' should, for instance, “give a successful school character and gravitas”; 'regeneration' ensures that “schools can form a key element in the regeneration of the larger local area [...] offering a more welcoming link to the local community”; whilst 'space' promises at the very least

“increased area or volume” but also the improved relevance of school buildings for the demands of contemporary educational curricula (all DfES, 2004d: 7).

So, ideally, the successful implementation of dense, cross-cutting arrays of material and regulatory technologies would result in schools which have a sense of identity, which take a key role in community regeneration, and which offer flexible, appropriate learning spaces. These eight key words create a kind of mood board for anticipating the symbolic and affective regimes whose successful implementation would make for the ideal twenty-first century school, whilst remaining open and elusive enough that they can be negotiated and (re)claimed at a local level by architects, teachers, private-finance partners and – ideally – pupils.

In practice, this relationship between national policy and individual school buildings has taken the form of overwhelmingly complex, overlapping – and, again, eventual – networks of decision-making, procurement processes, materials, stakeholders, and so forth. We want to argue in the remainder of the paper that the DfES’ discourses – in their lofty promises for school buildings, education and young people; in *getting the details right, this time*, via dense regulatory frameworks; in re-articulating those frameworks via eight inspiring, symbolic-and-affective key words – are taken up by individual schools in particular ways. We turn now to some of the interior open spaces whose rejuvenation is promised by BSF.

4. Constructing schools for the future: anticipating change, materialising promise

In the remainder of this paper, we re-present empirical material from research in two schools in the English Midlands which were undergoing (re)design and/or refurbishment within the contexts outlined above. We refer to these schools pseudonymously, as follows.

School A: A large comprehensive secondary school [for 11-18 year-olds), with around 1300 pupils, serving an estate defined as ‘disadvantaged’ within a (post-)industrial town. The current school buildings were predominantly constructed during the 1960s and are undergoing almost totally reconstruction and refurbishment; an arts/performance space will be central to the new design.

School B: A small secondary school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties; constructed during the 1970s in a town location. The school’s buildings were totally reconstructed on a rural site 10 miles from the original school. The refurbishment was completed during the course of our project.

We foreground three characteristics of these projects. First, we highlight the ways in which users of the two schools anticipated the forthcoming redevelopment of ‘their’ school spaces as key events in the school’s life and an important opportunity therein. We suggest that this anticipation was imbued with the logics, claims and vocabulary inherent in the policy contexts previously outlined. Second, we illustrate how these latter hopes were often linked to particular key spaces within the school’s redesign: so-called ‘flagship’ spaces. Third, we illustrate how more modest ‘spaces passed-through’ (e.g. corridors and atria) were simultaneously invested with the potential to improve the banal, everyday workings of each school, and indeed schooling in general.

i). Anticipating change

For users of all of the case study schools in which we worked, a context of imminent change to school buildings provided an opportunity, lens and vocabulary with which to ‘notice’ problems with/in hitherto taken-for-granted school spaces. At Schools A and B, practically anybody with knowledge of each school could catalogue diverse deficiencies inherent in the buildings’ fabric. Aspects of school buildings were understood as central to multiple failings of the school to date.

Thus, for pupils and their parents, ‘their’ school’s materiality was centrally problematic in terms of the microgeographical immediacies of everyday experiences (e.g. toilets, echoes, poor soundproofing, dimness):

“The building could be better... A lot of people... [have] said they want bigger classrooms and better toilets” (Pupil, School A)

“I don’t like [name of room] because it’s too big and it’s empty as well – it’s quite echoey in there” (Pupil, School B)

“[The ‘old’ buildings are] just not suitable for children – [they’re] very old, depressing, very small classes, all the [pupils] can hear what is happening in the corridor... or the next room. [My son] doesn’t like the small places – he feels trapped in” (Parent, School B)

“[My son] has headaches... in the old buildings because it is too dark” (Parent, School B)

Meanwhile, for teachers and support staff, ‘their’ school’s materiality was articulated as problematic in terms of the logistics of facilitating teaching/learning in situ (e.g. with respect to site or room layout):

“The way the school is laid out is a challenge... We have three blocks... and you have to dash between one and the other. You are constantly concerned that you are leaving a class slightly earlier or arriving slightly later...” (Teacher, School A)

“Teaching Information Technology (IT) in [name of room] is a challenge [because]...it’s not really an IT room, it’s something that was created, because when the school was built IT didn’t exist. [The room] used to be a PE changing room. It wasn’t purpose built, so we had to compromise – the changing room was long and thin, it didn’t have much external lighting” (Teacher, School B)

Meanwhile, for headteachers, ‘their’ school’s materiality was articulated as problematically symptomatic of broader challenges occasioned by the building’s history and current educational imperatives.

“The building was built more than 30 years ago as an open plan school for about 40 children. I have a number of problems with that. One is that when you are working with young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties [EBD], who are easily distracted it is not a good idea to have an open plan setting [...] sometimes you question safety because of the lack of space when a child needs to walk away from a situation. The other issue is the size of the school, the noise transfers around the school and it’s not easy for a young person to have a problem

on their own without everyone else to find out. Another problem is that this building is for 40 pupils and we currently accommodate 50, along with an increase in staff since the 1970s as teaching of EBD children has changed [...] so far too many people [are] using a little space and that causes difficulties” (Headteacher, School B)

“Well it’s a complicated set of reasons for rebuilding the school, but primarily the school was built in the 1960s and although it looks cosmetically in quite good order, structurally there are problems. There are problems with the width of corridors, with electricity supply – all of the mains supply to the school really need renewing, and that’s a massive job and that’s a job that will uncover all sorts of other problems because it was built in the 1960s there was a lot of asbestos in the school...” (Headteacher, School A)

The noticing of problems such as these prompted considerable anticipation regarding the future redevelopment of these school spaces. At Schools A and B, for example this anticipation was articulated in terms of modern-ness, brightness, ‘pride’, ‘being part of’ something, ‘watching it grow’, ‘raising the game’ – often making claims for the school’s new, or renewed, identity.

“The new school will be] modern, open, *bright*... [My son] will like it more it more. It will be very open and airy – there will be high ceilings and lots of light. [My son] likes nice things that are new and fresh. It will give him a sense of pride” (Parent, School B)

“It is exciting to think I am part of something – the fact that we are going to have more opportunities... and the facilities to be able to broaden the curriculum” (Teacher, School B)

“I think our students deserve 21st century facilities, if they get these 21st century facilities – I think they will raise their game and respond to it positively” (Headteacher, School A)

It was our observation that this kind of anticipation and promise came to be especially attached to two particular facets of school design: on one hand, the design and anticipation of ‘flagship’ sites within the (identity of the) new school; on the other hand, the planning of spaces-passed-through, such as corridors. The following subsections consider each of these types of spaces in turn.

ii) ‘Flagship’ spaces

Characteristically, all of the school design/development projects we observed featured at least one central, principally ornamental, design ‘showpiece’. For example, plans for the developed School B prominently featured: (i) a decorative garden feature involving patterned railway sleepers forming a gateway into the school; (ii) a plinth in the school’s hallway incorporating a flat-screen television displaying details of pupils’ activities. The notion of a ‘flagship’ space is embedded in the policy context outlined in sections 1-3 of this paper. For example, a range of BSF documents draw on photographs of ‘exemplar schools’ to highlight some ways in which ‘inspirational’ BSF schools might develop. These photographs are characterised by a common theme: the visual impact created by exemplar schools is overwhelmingly manifest within striking ‘set-piece’ design features, typically located in interior open spaces such as atria, hallways, entrances, corridors (e.g. DfES, 2004d: pages 9; 10; 14; 16; 17; 18⁷). Deliberation over such spaces exemplifies the representational and performative stratagem of BSF as well as the efforts of the schools to make-visible their buildings to wider publics. Certain flagship spaces are generative of much excitement and angst, as they come to stand for the school’s progress, its position in the community, or simply the ‘success’ of their redevelopment.

In School A, a new arts/performance space was central to the proposed redevelopment. This planned space was a source of considerable pride and anticipatory excitement amongst those working at the school: figured as a ‘beautiful’, inspirational space which, in providing a ‘wow factor’ would epitomise the school’s transformation:

⁷ Readers interested in viewing these photographs can access the pdf of this publication free-of-charge, at <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DfES+1140%2F2004&>.

“[The arts/performance space] will give us a ‘wow’ factor for the school”
(Headteacher, School A)

“It’s going to be beautiful, just *beautiful!*” (Teacher, School A)

This notion of the ‘wow factor’ recurred in talk about the proposed space, along with several other narratives: the space was modelled on the cavernous volumes created in ‘flagship’ public buildings; it would bring in as much *natural* light as possible; above all, the space would be *inspirational*.

“It was important to look at the aesthetic and the *beauty* of the building... [the new arts/performance space] is modelled on the natural light and space created by the British Library, so you have high ceilings and everything is light. It is almost a religious experience. [The architects have] created this dance studio with a frosted glass, where you see abstract shapes, and that is sort of what I was saying – something inspirational. [...] That’s what I think the architects have tried hard to do to capture this, to have something unique” (Teacher, School A)

Whilst ‘inspirational’ is difficult to articulate, it appears to capture the imaginative and emotional charge the space could produce. Under BSF, the building itself provides a means to excite and inspire pupils. And yet, whilst the dance studio – like many of BSF’s other flagship spaces – was conceived through a much more extroverted sense of place. The dance studio was proposed by the architects as a form that people passing by on foot or in their cars would see and see-within. Imagining the scenario of drivers passing the building at night, the interior lights of the building illuminate the flagship space and the silhouettes of those practising dance inside, perhaps pupils, or perhaps members of the public using the space in after hours (thus encouraging other local community members to use the school). This visibility *projects* the school outwardly:

“[The new arts/performance space will] add weight... from a status point of view... It will be an attractive thing for parents... it will give us a bit of prestige and improve our position in the town... [Without this redevelopment] we would have slid to the bottom of the pile” (Headteacher, School A)

As such, the new space served as an extroverted projection of the school's future aspirations: to be 'prestigious', well-'positioned' in town, 'welcoming' for pupils and the wider community, and – again – '21st-century' and 'inspirational'. Indeed, both of our case study areas contained pockets of urban deprivation (including the community surrounding School A). As such, local councils and local media saw the 'coming' of a new school as a point of articulation for urban regeneration, in particular in the light of concurrent investment in the residential and service infrastructure of such communities. Thus, the import of schools as 'flagship' spaces represented *both* the aspirations of schools as they attempted to (re)position themselves in the context of more competitive statutory school provision, *and* a wider tendency to position such high-profile buildings at the heart of regeneration processes.

Even prior to its construction, the proposed arts/performance space served as a focal point – a key, momentary event – for both reimagining the school itself *and* for imagining the event of its re-design: in the gathering of anticipation about the school's redevelopment through webcam broadcasts and in philosophy classes around 'change', for example.

"What we are planning is a webcam... which will look down on the building site and I want to take a photograph at the same time everyday and put the whole thing together as a shot of how the whole thing is. I have seen it done before...it's fantastic! I also want to put it on the plasma screen [in the current school's entrance hall]" (Headteacher, School A)

"[The new arts/performance space is] already an inspiration for the curriculum because it's about *imagine, explore* – getting [pupils to] imagine the perfect school, exploring the possibilities – it does lend itself to all sorts of projects on the curriculum. We've talked about the metaphor of new building, re-birth and community. It lends itself quite well to philosophy lessons... with the notion of *change*" (Teacher, School A, our emphases)

Although 'flagship' spaces such as School A's arts/performance space were typically cause for especial pride, optimism and promise, this pride did not always go

uncontested. Indeed, ‘flagship’ spaces are often ‘flashpoints’ for broader debates about future aspirations and directions. For example, the much-vaunted arts/performance space detailed above has been at the heart of a succession of disputes about the ‘appropriateness’ of the proposals for their community context. In other contexts (council/community meetings, local media reports) the ‘inspirational’ designs for School A have been critiqued as ‘ugly’, ‘inappropriate’ and ‘unwanted’. These kinds of complex, *in situ* negotiations are, perhaps, most visible in relation to headline-grabbing ‘flagship’ aspects of design. However, as we outline in the following section, the promise of school redevelopment is also manifest and materialised in terms of much more ‘mundane’, everyday aspects of schooling, in contexts such as school corridors and other spaces passed-through.

iii). spaces passed-through

The passage of pupils through spaces such as corridors is often taken to be emblematic of the manner in which (a) school functions; circulation being a problematic object in terms of pupil discipline, behaviour and learning (Burke and Grosvenor, 2008).⁸ We want to argue that, away from the higher profile excitement of ‘flagship’ spaces, and in addition to well-worn concerns about discipline/surveillance, spaces passed-through have become key loci for the materialisation of BSF’s claims for English school buildings. That is, improvements to such spaces are invested with the potential to improve the everyday *workings* of a given school and thus – through the simultaneous, collective improvement of such spaces – contemporary schooling in general. Hence, *getting the details right, this time*, is an especially important motif for the remodelling of school corridors and other interior open spaces passed-through.

⁸ In the context of ‘productive’ spaces and organisations, circulations have tended to be ideologically harnessed as a sign for efficiency and order (Foucault 2007)

The circulation of students, staff and visitors around a school in an ‘orderly’ fashion repeatedly emerged as a central problematic in discussions about school buildings and estates. For:

“[o]f course, corridors are our major problem” (Teacher, School B)

“Corridors are places where people push and shove – if you can [use design] keep that to a minimum, then people would be happy” (Teacher, School A)

Repeatedly, school staff and pupils raised a litany of anxieties about corridor spaces: they are particularly marginal spaces wherein disorderly activities run rife away from the discipline of the classroom; they are tightly-confined; the risk of ‘pushing and shoving’ is ever-present; they frequently constitute dingy ‘bottlenecks’ to efficient and ‘orderly’ pupil mobility.

If the ‘flagship’ spaces of the preceding section represented a powerful, emotive dream of how school could be, then the everyday tramp through corridors was positioned as an ongoing, begrudged ‘nightmare’ of day-to-day school life. The capacity to remodel corridor spaces through the design process was therefore seen by many teachers as an opportunity to fundamentally and affirmatively transform the everyday running and experience of school. Again, therefore, significant promise was attached to even the most quotidian aspects of a school’s materiality which would, it was claimed, fundamentally improve educational experiences in general.

For example, at Schools A and B, significant attention was paid to the *details* of corridor spaces and flows. Two characteristics recurred in the approaches taken to corridors in each of the schools in which we worked. First, school redevelopment was seen as an opportunity to update the materiality of corridors, with relatively small material changes (more illumination, ‘passive’ supervision, double doors) understood as affording significant, positive changes to pupils’ behaviour.

“In the new building [corridors] will be more illuminated, and not really corridors, but rather galleries. And at staircases and shorter spaces there will be indirect – passive – supervision” (teacher, School A)

“There will be a series of double doors... [so] if a young person comes out of class and starts to run around, then they can be isolated...” (teacher, School B)

Second, problems of corridor spaces – and the regulatory functions sketched above – were taken to require innovative, technological solutions. Hence, for example, the implementation of CCTV and digital door lock systems at many of the schools in which we worked. It was hoped that such technologies would succeed where previous decades-worth of regulation had failed and constitute a ‘major advantage’ in improving a school’s behaviour and, more significantly, collective ‘ethos’. At School B, for instance:

“[We developed] a brand new swipe card system – what it enables us to do is that if you come and visit the school, and you needed to see rooms 3, 4 and 5, we could give you a card that was programmed for rooms 3,4 and 5. [...] The good thing about it is that the sensors are buried in the wall, and I don’t have to get a card out [...]. [In the event of disruptive behaviour] what I don’t want to be doing is holding the children with one hand and trying to find my keys with another, then trying to get the lock open...so it’s a major advantage and helps us to *keep each other safe*” (Headteacher, School B, our emphasis)

Continuing in the vein of this technological determinist fix, several school developments with which we worked turned to software simulations to model potential circulation flows in order to anticipate potential problems and solutions in the school’s redesign. For example, at School A:

“One of the most exciting bits of [the school redevelopment] so far is... we had a guy who showed computer programme of movement around the school – unbelievable!! Apparently it was developed following the King’s Cross Fire. Part of the disaster was that people couldn’t get out quick enough, so software was developed that modelled ‘People Traffic’. They have used it for all kinds of stuff, like making stadiums, and now it’s been transformed into school designs – it’s fantastic. It’s run in real time, you run it at the changeover point – maybe at 8.40, when kids are coming into school, going to assembly. The first time we ran it, we spotted a problem.... What was happening was that on one corridor, was a bottleneck because there were too many students coming down some stairs and needed to use that corridor. The architects said they

would put another entrance there and widen that corridor and it worked”
(Headteacher, School A)

Thus, the simulation allowed the architect and head teacher to anticipate the use of the building before it was built. As an anticipatory technique of visualising and predicting mobility, the simulation allowed its users to diagnose problems immediately. Thus, the use of anticipatory modelling programmes was layered upon the many regulations that already govern the material constitution of school corridors (Box 1). Crucially, whilst these kinds of moments remain unheralded in the outward-facing claims and representations a school makes for itself (in distinction to dance halls, for instance), the introduction of modelling technologies was, for this Headteacher at least, a key, exciting, evental moment in the anticipation of ‘their’ new school.

5. Conclusions

At the time of writing, BSF had begun attracting increasing criticism from a number of directions. Architects whom we interviewed were concerned that the sheer speed of school builds (as little as 20 months from procurement to completion) were effectively squeezing out room for ‘good design’ and any meaningful, engaged processes of participation by teachers or pupils. Elsewhere, critics have argued that the BSF procurement process – which devolves decision-making and financing to local educational partnerships and public-private partnerships – is ‘intense, expensive and time-consuming’ (Vaughan, 2008: unpaginated). Meanwhile, in February 2009, increasing attention was being drawn to the possibility that the programme might run vastly over time and budget (BBC News, 2009).

It may well be, then, that the infrastructural promises set out in BSF policy documents will be disappointed, at least in terms of BSF’s successful taking-place as a *national* Event. It is still too early to conclude anything firmer. But whether ‘disappointment’,

‘excitement’ or ‘inspiration’ result this paper has demonstrated that BSF articulates a political, organisational, and particularly *architectural* Event. More specifically, this paper has demonstrated how these Events have been constituted through the operation of a range of metaphorical and literal spatial scalar processes that proceed through the evental nature of the programme. BSF articulates a range of spatial scales that are telescoped through one another, often explicitly linking the achievement of tiny regulatory, material *details* of simulated pupils and micro-spatial volumes, to the ambitious, perhaps arrogant achievements of global economic competitiveness, social justice and community regeneration.

The paper has demonstrated that the material taking place of the geographies of English secondary school education, via BSF, is a climactic event in terms of the claims being made for contemporary British (and, it must be said, other, neo-liberal) childhoods (Ruddick, 2003). BSF can in many ways be considered a (perhaps *the*) zenith of those claims, the socio-technical ‘fix’ for the anxieties and hopes made thus far British childhoods since the Labour Government came into power in 1997. The complex, dense, yet high-profile nature of BSF also raises critical debates about the material and discursive *geographies* of education and especially the ways in which the many events of school (re)design make particular claims upon childhood and architecture. The event of BSF reminds us that the highly politicised geographies of education are *also* points of articulation for equally complex tensions about whether and how contemporary childhoods (and a generation of children) and contemporary architects (and a generation of buildings) can bear the burden of the multiple, hopeful, yet weighty promises being made on their behalf by society in general, and BSF in particular.

Particular spaces within schools are located at the interface of these cross-cutting discourses and scales. Interior open spaces like atria and corridors are being required both to signify the local incarnation of BSF promise (creating identity, inspiration, and uniqueness) whilst also fulfilling a range of functional-performative roles (flow, flexibility, safety, control). Moreover, in themselves, discussion about flagship spaces and the use of anticipatory modelling technologies represent ‘events’ – key moments at which the claims about and for individual schools are negotiated (compare Gieryn, 2002) and at which the overwhelming sense of opportunity promised by BSF is enlivened at individual schools.

The paper thus contributes to burgeoning geographies of architecture by both fleshing out and enumerating the kinds of events and claims made on behalf of (school) buildings (Jacobs, 2006), and by attending to the ways in which users such as pupils, teachers and parents mounted their own critiques about the everyday spaces of the schools they inhabited (compare Lees, 2001; Kraftl, 2006). Significantly, BSF allows just enough flexibility that the programme is not merely a key event for UK Government policy-makers. Rather, as our case studies begin to illustrate, BSF opens up a critical moment – albeit fraught with tensions, dense regulations and financial and temporal constraints – at which schools can articulate and anticipate their *own* claims for ‘their’ schools buildings. It remains for further study to understand how and whether these claims can produce more ‘successful’ school buildings and satisfactory educational experiences than those constructed in the past – let alone school buildings that can fulfil even a small number of the promises made by the Event of BSF.

Acknowledgements

Award number

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