



# Can we have our lessons outside?



GEMMA TIPTON

When some of the country's top architects were matched with students and set the task of designing spaces for learning, they had remarkably similar ideas of what would be fun

**E**VEN THOUGH I left school 25 years ago I vividly remember how trapped I once felt in the classroom – and we weren't even in one of those Victorian places with the windows so high up you could see no more than the sky.

The moment the sun came out, someone would stick up their hand and ask if we could go outside. Perhaps this is why a striking number of the projects in *A Space for Learning*, an exhibition organised by the **Irish Architecture Foundation (IAF)**, focus on the outdoors. There are remarkable gardens, an amphitheatre and a huge dome that turns one school into something like the Eden Project in Cornwall.

*A Space for Learning* started life when the foundation invited established architects and young graduates to work with transition-year students to come up with different ways of looking at schools. At the beginning of this year 120 architects were paired with 1,500 students in 90 schools across the country.

The results of their work have been published in a new book and 10 of the projects appear in the exhibition in the gallery at the National College of Art & Design, in Dublin.

Both book and exhibition are teeming with ideas. Athlone Community College, for example, turns prefabricated buildings into "Enviro-fab" ones. Its self-sufficient prefabs run on solar and wind power, which can be connected or separated as needed.

At Dundalk Grammar School prefabs become "post-fab" learning bubbles. They are "irresistible architecture" in the words of Ryan Hamill and Eoin McElroy of Idir Architecture. Thomas Campbell, a student at the school, adds: "I thought architecture was just about construction. I never realised it could be so creative and about different ideas."

These sentiments were shared across the project. In the book, Michelle McCarthy of Scoil Phobail Bhéara in Castletown Bere, Co Cork, writes: "When I was told that our class was taking part in an architecture project I thought, Oh, great, maths... But in fact it was the total opposite. It was one of the most enjoyable projects I had taken part in."

At Mercy College in Coolock, Dublin, the students worked with graduate architects Faela Guiden, Helen Kelly and Laura O'Brien.

Student Nayla Abdulla says that, until she took part in the project, "architecture had

always been about putting down a bunch of bricks together to fabricate some sort of establishment".

Another student, Christina O'llwill, adds that "before the project I thought architecture was a load of boring businessmen turning up to work, sitting alone at a table and spending the day drawing. Now I think architecture can change the way we live and work".

What the students and their architect mentors have come up with throughout *A Space for Learning* reveals an unsurprising emphasis on the informal areas of the school: the places of recreation, gathering and play.

At St Declan's College in Cabra, the students, in conversation with the architects Natalie Walsh and Eibhlín O'Connor, "talked about how they preferred to go home at lunch because it's better than standing in a car park".

At East Glendalough School, in Wicklow, and St Joseph's CBS in Fairview and St Mary's Holy Faith in Killester, both in Dublin, the students all focused on creating shared multipurpose spaces to bring everyone together at points throughout the day.

Perhaps what is more surprising is that this is in line with current thinking in international educational practice. Some experimental schools in Iceland have been designed around open spaces. Classrooms are glassed in, and the children learn the value of mentoring, responsibility and thinking outside the confines of a linear lesson plan.

In Ireland, Department of Education policy dictates that contracts can be awarded only to architects who have previously designed a school or completed projects of a particular size. This means a great deal of new thinking is excluded. School design in Ireland is governed by a rigid and rigorous set of structures for the actual classrooms.

This leaves any room for innovation "in the in-between spaces, in how they're brought together", says Maria Donoghue, one of the *A Space for Learning* architects.

"Students experience schools in the spaces where they interact with their peers. It's not so much about the classroom itself."

Whether or not we are aware of it, architecture exerts an influence on how we feel, how we act, even how we are able to move from place to place. In a school it can change the experience from being taught to learning.

Federico Scoponi, an Italian architect who worked with Sandford Park School in Ranelagh, in Dublin, asked the students what they had learned from the project.

He was delighted with the response of one student who said: "The psychology of architecture and how spaces affect your life and environment."

Scoponi writes in the book: "A 16-year-old boy who understands that the built environment and architecture have their own psychology, which affects our everyday life, is the first step towards a sustainable architecture."

And the dream of learning outside? It is

actually an echo of the views of Margaret McMillan, the pioneering early-20th-century educator, who said: "Everything that can be taught outdoors cannot be taught indoors."

*A Space for Learning* is published by the **Irish Architecture Foundation** (architecture foundation.ie, €12 including p&p). The exhibition is at the NCAD Gallery, 100 Thomas St, Dublin 8, until January 29th, then touring nationwide. A public lecture on the project takes place next Thursday, 6.30-8pm, at the Harry Clark Lecture Theatre, NCAD (€5)

## Schools on show The 10 and their partners

- St Patrick's College, Cavan, with NJBA Architects + Urban Designers
- Castletroy College, Limerick, with Donoghue Corbett Architects
- Dundalk Grammar School, Louth, with Idir Architecture
- St Mary's Secondary School, Mallow, with Chora Design Studio
- Scoil Phobail Bhéara, Castletown Bere, with Magee Creedon Kearns
- St Angela's College, Cork, with O'Donnell + Tuomey
- St Paul's College, Raheny, with Robert Bourke Architects
- St Dominic's Secondary School, Ballyfermot, with Greenan Red Architects
- Mercy College, Coolock, with Helen Kelly, Laura O'Brien and Faela Guiden
- Sandford Park School, Ranelagh, with Federico Scoponi

## Other winning ideas

- **St Brendan's Community School, Birr** Groundbreaking architecture by Peter and Mary Doyle won a gold medal from the Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland (RIAI) in the 1980s. It was praised by the jury for its "refreshing absence of meaningless device or reference". An addition this year includes a purpose-built special-needs-education room and sensory garden.
- **Eurocampus, Dublin** Award-winning French secondary school by A2 architects, in the grounds of St Killian's German School in Clonskeagh. Colours echo the national flags, and a wide ramp draws students in.
- **Cherry Orchard School, Dublin** O'Donnell + Tuomey designs good schools. Its multidominational school in Ranelagh is an RIAI gold-medal winner. Cherry Orchard is special, too, for Janet Mullarney's brilliant artworks, which hang from ceilings and lurk in corridors.
- **Gaelscoil Lios na nÓg, Dublin** This building in Ranelagh, which was extended by A&D Wejchert Architects, is where Pádraig Pearse founded his first school. The artist Aileen Barry has worked with the children to create magical mechanical and animated clocks to mark out the school day.
- **Loreto Community School, Milford** Grafton Architects won World Building of the Year for its Luigi Bocconi University, in Milan, but its school in Co Donegal also demonstrates some of its thinking about how space can be made for living and learning.



**Mercy College Coolock's Living Room, where the school's interior courtyard was transformed into a space to eat, gather, learn and work. The planting and new structures were designed by students working with Helen Kelly, Faeta Gulden and Laura O'Brien. Photograph: Alice Clancy**



**Working on a model of the learning space at St Paul's College, Raheny**