New fiction in the library
Fiction

"NOW THE NEW LEARNING HUB PHYSICALLY EMBODIES THIS: YOU SEE INTO THE LIBRARY AS YOU MOVE AROUND THE BUILDING, AND IT LITERALLY PLACES LEARNING AT THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL."

A SCHOOL WITH LEARNING AT ITS HEART

Michàl Cohen is a founding director of the award-winning Walters & Cohen Architects. Here, she shares the story of North London Collegiate School and its bold, contemporary, multi-purpose learning hub.

North London Collegiate School (NLCS) is a high-achieving academic all-through school in North London. In 2017 NLCS asked us to help with their junior school accommodation, specifically their ICT and music facilities, which were undersized. The school is located in a conservation area on Metropolitan Open Land and with listed buildings, so the extent to which we could build in open space on the site was very limited.

The NLCS Junior School had eight classrooms arranged around a courtyard, plus a hall, science lab, small ICT space, library and an art space shared with the younger pupils. Music is a popular subject, with every Junior School pupil studying at least one instrument. As a result of the learning hub project described below, the existing library has now been repurposed as the music space.

A new learning hub

Through discussions with the client, we concluded that the central courtyard was underused, since the school has beautiful grounds that pupils were using for outdoor recreation. We therefore suggested repurposing the courtyard by moving the library and two IT spaces into that area, placing those resources into the middle of the school where they could be easily accessed by the surrounding classrooms.

To fit everything in, we designed this as a two-storey space, with one of the IT spaces up on the first floor, overlooking the double-volume library. The linking of the library resources with the computer resources is a sign of the times.

Whereas the upstairs IT space is a separate, self-contained room with wired-in computers, the ground floor IT space functions differently. Working closely with the client, the decision was made to separate this off from the main library space using a large, sliding glazed door. This could be easily opened or closed, depending on how the school wants to use the space throughout the day.

It can work as an IT space, with a large interactive screen on the wall and laptops that are tidied away after the lesson; as an additional classroom for teaching any subject; or as a seamless extension to the library. It can also serve as an active space for teaching, learning or recreation, with the furniture moved aside; or it can be used as a gathering space for the hall, extending our brief by providing the foyer that the school lacked previously.

"THE MOBILE BOOKCASES, TABLES AND SEATING CAN QUICKLY BE MOVED TO OPEN UP THE SPACE, MAKING IT VERY FLEXIBLE FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF ACTIVITIES AND LESSONS."

A flexible and light-filled space

The walls of the library are lined with books, alcove seats and places for presentations. The mobile bookcases, tables and seating can quickly be moved to open up the space, making it very flexible for different types of activities and lessons.

There is no daylight available at ground floor level because of the surrounding corridors and the hall, so we have provided clerestory windows on three sides, flooding the space with natural light.

The additional lighting for the library is suspended in the space and can be adapted if the school wants to change from the current spotlights to striplights in future.

The original layout had windows looking onto the courtyard from the corridors and hall, and we have kept those so that as you move around the school you can always see the library and the learning that is happening right in the middle of the school.

The double-volume space is new for the Junior School, which was previously a single-storey building. However, this part of the site has pitched roofs and the additional storey is only just taller than these.

We know from many years designing and building school projects that wooden floors are a popular choice. They feel good for younger pupils to sit on, they can be cleaned properly, and they create a warm and inviting space. At NLCS we extended the timber by using it on the walls as well, for the bookshelves and for the perforated panels that provide acoustic absorption.

For an academic school like NLCS, the love of learning is central to the ethos. Now the new learning hub physically embodies this: you see into the library as you move around the building, and it literally places learning at the heart of the school. ■