

# The making of Burntwood

Buildings  
Clients



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Region: [London](#)

Burntwood School in Tooting, London, has been called exemplary for the way it handled its rebuild. What was its route to winning the Stirling Prize?

Initiated as part of the Labour government's Building Schools for the Future programme, 2015's Stirling Prize winner Burntwood School is a nearly whole school rebuilding programme to replace the existing 1950s suite of buildings, retaining only the swimming pool and hall. The new buildings are designed by AHMM to accommodate a similar number of pupils (1800) but be prepared for the coming primary school bulge. Principal Helen Dorfman, deputy principal Howard Jackson and Ruth Butler, the RIBA Client Adviser, speak about their experiences on the project, reactions to the Building Schools for the Future programme, and give news of the next architectural move.



Bridge over the entrance to the separate sixth form block. · Credit: Timothy Soar

**Howard Jackson:** Building Schools for the Future (BSF) was a Labour government scheme to replace all of the secondary school stock. When it was Wandsworth Borough Council's turn it coincided with a change of government. In the end, only two schools in the area were funded by the Coalition government – us and Southfields School down the road. The first issue was the relationship between the government, Wandsworth Council which is the formal client and us – the school. Then there was a competition between three construction firms who all brought their own architect. Early on we were certain we wanted the builder that had AHMM as its architect.



The new dining hall and performing arts centre. · Credit: Timothy Soar

### **As the school was not the client, how did it ensure that the team it wanted was selected?**

**Helen Dorfman:** I made sure that the school sat on all the different committees making the decisions apart from legal and finance, so I was a member of the final team that decided within a very arcane scoring system who should win.

### **Is that unusual?**

**HD:** The fact that the council allowed us such a prominent involvement is. There is a whole spectrum: we know of schools with varying degrees of involvement down to none whatsoever, which was the model they used in Birmingham. Although we were technically not the client but the inducer, we were allowed by the local authority to effectively be the client, which was good.

### **What was your role Ruth?**

**Ruth Butler:** I was appointed by Wandsworth Borough Council as the RIBA client adviser in 2008. I had a strategic input over a couple of years which finished with the appointment of the contractor and AHMM at Burntwood. I was appointed to work, at the time, with the 17 schools due to be refitted or rebuilt. My role was about getting the curriculum model right for each and agreeing with the

council which would get bigger or smaller, where the specialisms lay, where special education needs hubs would be.

### **What was your experience of BSF?**

**RB:** It was a standard but complicated process but the only way money was divvied up. As it was such a big programme, it needed checks and balances, so there was a lot of bureaucracy to guarantee value for money. Happily by the time Burntwood got its architect, it had become a much more straightforward relationship where the client could speak to the architect designing its building. Before that there would have been a lot of competitive dialogue with a range of architects across a range of contractors.



View through the entranceway down the main school strip. · Credit: Timothy Soar

### **What was your brief?**

**HD:** We wanted simple, elegant lines and rectangles. We didn't want fuss. The landscaping was important to set the buildings off, though that had to be simple as well. Wherever you are in the building we wanted people to be able to see out. At the beginning of the process we spent a lot of time thinking about which subjects should be together to make sense for the curriculum.

**RB:** The driving clarity of the plan was what interested me because once you have that, you have the ability to spend some money on it. If you are spending a

lot of cash on phasing and complexity that you don't need in the final iteration then you are always up against it. There were times when the school had to fight quite hard for what was acceptable and not.

**HD:** Ruth was essential in those meetings because she was on our side pointing out that what the other architects had come up with was not delightful, joyous and simple enough.

### **What extras were you looking for?**

**HD:** When I was appointed in 2002, Howard and I spent time talking about what we thought would be good for the young people and have a future. We wanted the place to be really buzzy and busy, not just in school hours, but during evenings, weekends and holidays. We wanted flexibility to accommodate changes that we couldn't even imagine, like the way the structure of the building can be ripped out and changed. We had very simple undiscussables like young people deserve to have the best provision and the community deserves to access that provision.

### **Did you have any precedents?**

**HD:** We wanted simple modern buildings that would be of their time but have a timeless quality. We visited a lot of schools, and they reinforced what we didn't want: huge monoliths where young people and staff go in and they stay inside all day; redevelopments that were compromised because they fitted new buildings around existing ones. In the end we had to pay for a few things out of a separate budget – such as the Studio Myerscough graphics, furniture in the second phase buildings and coloured entrance tiles because they were not considered affordable. Fortunately in the run up to project, we worked with the governors to get a fairly substantial amount of additional money to pay for extra things.

### **Where did the school go while it was being rebuilt?**

**HD:** We spent a lot of time on phasing and scheduling because we didn't want to waste money on temporary buildings. We started off with the science and sports buildings but we had five years of being in old buildings and moving to new buildings. We worked with the contractor and the architect to decide the phasing.

**RB:** Of the three competing teams, AHMM found the simplest and most elegant solution to the phasing.

**HD:** One thing that helped was that we invested a lot of time in telling the staff what would happen. Even the staff who had to move twice didn't complain. They could see the benefits coming.

### **Who was responsible within the school for the project?**

**HD:** There was a core senior team of five people. At the start we made this kind of blood pact to see the whole thing through no matter how long it took, and it did in fact take almost eight years. The process depended quite heavily on the

strength of that group of five having commitment because it worked under strength in numbers. Even though technically the goal was to keep things to an absolute minimum, which is perfectly correct, we couldn't help wanting to get the best for the school. We are actually still all working together.

### **What about the existing hall?**

**HD:** The building is beautiful, but it was a challenge to include it. It had to look complementary rather than left behind by mistake.

**RB:** It was originally designed by Leslie Martin as part of the LCC so it is a bit of a gem. Burntwood had an unusual client with a good bedding of architectural understanding and knowledge of a good thing when they see it.

### **Would you say that is unusual?**

**RB:** Yes, Helen and her management team were very engaged so it made everybody's life quite easy. It wasn't just me banging on about architectural quality to the council, the school was talking about it, AHMM was talking about it – it wasn't going to get pushed to the bottom of the pile.

### **When it gets ignored, what gets to the forefront? Is it worse now there is no obligation to have an RIBA client adviser?**

**RB:** Cost is quite often at the top of the list, but in those days the client adviser made sure that design quality had a voice. Plenty of architects who work on schools are very competent and highly regarded, but it is not quite the same now there is no requirement.

### **From the school's perspective, how would not having a client adviser affect the process?**

**HD:** Ruth was really helpful, as was the Cabe process. Not many headteachers and their teams have the background or interest we had, and why should they? People need good professional guidance. Ruth's input was particularly good because while we were very clear about what we wanted, Ruth was able to critique and explain why some of the other schemes didn't fit with her professional language.

### **What other advice did the school need?**

**HD:** We also separately involved two architects whom I had worked with at my previous school. I trusted their judgement. We used them to triangulate some things and later, once Ruth's role had finished, we used them to examine all the technical documentation we ended up taking on. We had a room full of the stuff.

**RB:** I would have done this for Wandsworth had the process carried on in the usual way. It is one of the traditional roles of the client adviser and is necessary as buildings can get technical. There is no reason for the client to know the ins

and out of these technical issues when you can employ someone.

### **How did you get the staff, pupils and community on board?**

**HD:** There was some wider community consultation where feedback was taken on board. We also did things with the staff to raise their interest in architecture and design by visiting exhibitions. But we only involved staff in some ways – not in the overarching vision and layout, but rather in how they would like curriculum areas to flow, the kit, furniture and resources. Young people were particularly interested in the toilets, library, new uniform and logo. We had workshops to take account of people's views.

### **Any particular problems on the project?**

**RB:** I'm sure there is room for improvement, but Burntwood is an exemplar of how the process should work.

**HD:** Things that happened along the way are to do with the uncontrollables. For example, we had seven project managers in five years. It meant as a core of five people who had been there from the beginning, we were the only ones who held all the historical information about what was going on.

**HJ:** It had that feeling of having to start all over again and remember what it was what you had to explain to the previous person and re-explain it to the next one.

**RB:** It was a long process. One can understand why, but when I think about it now, if the school had started with its choice of architect outside the BSF, it would have been a lot faster and it would have got there a lot sooner.

### **What's next?**

**HD:** We have an old ice house in our playing fields that used to belong to Springfields Mental Hospital. It is listed and it goes down about four metres. We have had it all excavated. We have had Historic England, the borough and our own architect look at it. We also have an ice house restoration specialist. We have someone who can do all the work, the bricks, iron gates, he is just waiting for us to instruct him to get on with it.

### **So the architecture projects never end?**

**HD:** Well, this might be mine and Howard's swansong.