

Culture
School

Pupils' ideas help Jan Kattein design their library



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No hammocks or unicorns included – but architect takes children's models and ideas on board in a design for Thornhill Primary School library financed by personal and group fundraising



Steps form both a stage and an informal seating area in the new school library at Thornhill Primary School in London's Islington, designed by Jan Kattein Architects. Credit: Jan Kattein Architects

When Jan Kattein Architects embarked on the design of a new school library for Thornhill Primary School in London's Islington, there was no shortage of ideas to draw on. All 400 children had created their own models of a 'dream library' out of cardboard, and were keen to share their designs.

'Children are really great to help shape a brief because they come up with ideas you don't,' says Jan Kattein, whose two children attend the school.

And while it's true that suggestions for hammocks, unicorns, glitter balls and ball pits didn't make it into the final design, plenty of their other ideas did, including the important principle that a library wasn't just somewhere to sit and read, but a place to listen and watch stories being performed. Another key lesson from the children was to provide different environments for reading – some solitary, some snuggly. These ideas, says Kattein, 'really got us going'.

The school had long had an ambition to create a library. Jan Kattein Architects won a competitive tender for the project, created in a former undercroft previously used for storage. The 95m² project had the added benefit of providing a newly active frontage to the playground it adjoins.

Informed by the models and co-design workshops, the design is an immersive, flexible space with wide steps where pupils can listen to a story being told, or sit and read themselves. Children can choose open or more private reading settings, with steps lead up to a mezzanine reading nook. Mobile book trolleys double as seating. Shelving lines the perimeter, with integral lighting.



Entrance panorama of the Thornhill Primary School library designed by Jan Kattein Architects in an undercroft formerly used for storage. Credit: Jan Kattein Architects

The £190,000 budget was challenging, and was only achieved through savings made by separating out the fit-out contract from the main works.

'We worked with the building and not against it, which is important with a tight budget. If you can integrate with the existing structure, you can make magic with very little money,' says Kattein.

The firm's approach was to improve the insulation and foundations, and then work closely with Hub Workshop on the CNC fabrication of the birch-faced ply fit-out. This gives a homely appearance that responded to the children's wish for a space that felt a bit like home.

Realising the £190,000 project has been an extraordinary achievement for the school, whose Thornhill Foundation fundraising arm heroically raised the money via an impressive combination of personal and group endeavour. A comedy night raised £43,000 alone; many parents donated the dinner money they would have paid if the dinners weren't free, and one parent raised over £3000 cycling the length of Britain. Pupils made a massive contribution, whether on fun runs or personal initiatives selling cupcakes or home made lemonade.

As a result of the co-design and funding, the library has a set of proud owners, with the children ready-made ambassadors for a project they helped create.

'Hundreds of people have participated in making that library project. The children really feel ownership of it,' says Kattein.

Region: London
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