

On the design of school spaces and their uses...

NICKY MANBY first became involved with Pakeman Primary, a North London state primary school, as a reading volunteer after a career as a French and German teacher. The teaching and sharing of reading with children has been a significant part of her life and she believes that without good reading schools, children are held back in everything else they do. As Chair of Governors at Pakeman Primary, Nicky initiated a project to build a 'reading lodge' in the playground. She describes her ideal building as *having a tree growing up the centre of it, or at least a tree – filled courtyard* and says, *It's still a dream of mine – to lie in a tree spitting cheery pits below, while immersed in a book*. Here Nicky reflects on her own schooling in the USA, Switzerland and France and its influence on her work at Pakeman Primary.

What do you remember about your first school?

My first school was in Arlington, Virginia, for the school year 1962-63. I was in Kindergarten and wasn't expected to know my letters at all, but I'd always been curious about books and could already write my name and sort-of read; if it was a book which I'd had read to me before, I remembered the stories and soon found that I could match sounds and letters. I don't recall a Eureka moment, but I know I felt useful when I "read" to one of my twin siblings, who were only 17 months younger than I was. I don't remember much about the school except that we had to stand and pledge allegiance to the US flag every day, which I loved for some reason. In the afternoons, for reading and writing, I was taken along the corridor to spend some time in first grade, which felt very special. I think they treated me as a kind of mascot.

And then?

We moved to Switzerland in early 1964 and from February to June that year I went to the village school in Mies, just outside Geneva. The school is still there, though it's now municipal offices. It was an attractive, square, stone building, with red-slates on the roof, which had big, overhanging eaves.. Very long icicles hung from the gutters and a game we played was standing underneath them, catching drips on our tongue. It was incredibly old-fashioned. We wrote on slates and had little yellow sponges tied to our desk corners. I was hopeless: I didn't speak any French and declared I never would, so I spent quite a lot of time literally standing in the corner, forbidden to turn around and look at anyone. The playground was big and noisy, and there wasn't any separation of older and younger children – I remember being knocked over a few times. On several occasions I ran away from school and walked home.

That September, I started at the Geneva English School, a dark old villa which had definitely not been intended as a school. There were three floors and a cold, stone spiral staircase with bannisters you could get your head stuck between. I remember that there were no lights on the stairs, though that can't be true. I think there was only one girls' loo – at any rate, there was always a queue for it, and it was very smelly. Upstairs, on the landing, there was a book cupboard. I think it was locked – certainly there wasn't free access to it. Inside, there were lots of Enid Blyton books, as well as Nancy Drew mysteries. You were allowed one of the books from the cupboard when you finished an approved book, whatever they were. My friend Edna and I used to compete to read the most books, often finishing two a day. We were a terrific three-legged race team, too. Once we were sent out of a sewing class for giggling uncontrollably. We sat in the corridor on a window sill and read together – not a punishment at all! My sister and I were friends with two Danish sisters there, called Dorte and Trine. They had a shed in their garden which we called the Flowerpot Club. We had all sorts of rules and regulations and even a song!

Two years later, I moved to the new international primary school, the Lycée des Nations. This was a much happier place. My parents were very involved with the PTA and knew all the teachers socially, so I felt very relaxed and at home. Again, this was an old building which had been built as a villa near Lake Geneva. It had a big, long plot of land, with a fountain and gravel near the school building (I still have a piece of that gravel in my knee!). At the far end there was an old orchard, with long grass, where we made dens and daisy chains. There were also woods where we ran cross-country, but they were dark fir trees and I wasn't keen on the dusty shade. I remember teachers very much in evidence in the playground, teaching us skipping and clapping games. There were wide stone steps at the entrance and they were very warm to sit on in the sun (and sheltered in the rain).

The Head was young and dynamic with exciting ideas about mixed-age classes, so sometimes we were taught with our peers, sometimes we sat in circles – for one term I believe we were allowed to learn whatever took our fancy, though that was stopped when nobody "chose" to do Maths! We had a frieze around the top of one classroom which showed a timeline from dinosaurs to the present and I can recall the shock of discovering just how insignificant a time humans had been around for.



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I think I must just have been naturally competitive because a new friend, Christine, and I zoomed through every reading comprehension book until we had done them all. I don't remember any particular reward for that, but on Prize Day there were books given for achievement and effort and I amassed a collection of anthologies of fairy tales and myths.

About this time a very good friend moved into the house next door. She went to the American school, so we didn't see one another during the day, but after school and at weekends we used to climb up her enormous cherry tree and read up there. It's still a dream of mine – to lie in a tree spitting cherry pits below, while immersed in a book.

Where in the school building did you work as a reading volunteer?

When I started at Pakeman, I was the first volunteer and nobody had given much thought as to where I might do the one-to-one reading sessions. I could sometimes find a space in the library or in a room which was empty, for instance, because that class were out at the swimming pool. There was also a little "hut" which had been built in the upstairs hall for a pupil who was autistic. She had left the school and her hut was hotly contested by everyone who wanted a space to work quietly with a child. It had become a dumping ground for boxes of outdated reading schemes, play props and costumes and general clobber, so it wasn't a relaxing space at all, and it was very cramped.

The alternatives, though, were worse – sometimes I (and soon, other volunteer readers) sat on benches along the sides of the hall, while PE lessons took place all around us. The library was sometimes available, though it was often used for parent-teacher meetings, which took precedence. The books in there were sad and unloved, piled higgledy-piggledy. Again, it was a room which was used to store miscellany – flip charts, screens, stacks of chairs. We would squeeze in and do as best we could, but the interruptions, the not-knowing where we could read, the nomadic carrying-around of a box of books and games ... all meant that readers felt unwanted or at least unappreciated.

I know from volunteers in other schools that the situation at Pakeman wasn't unique. But we WERE wanted and appreciated. The Head and teachers told us so. They valued reading too. It was simply a question of creating a space where it could flourish.

What was your contribution to changing the fabric of the school building?

I was lucky to have access to some funding and with some capital from the school's reserves and the Borough, we demolished an ugly, dark, breeze-block sixties-built Play Centre building in the playground, revealed that it had a Victorian iron shelter structure at its heart, and created a wonderful space which we call the Lodge. It is quiet, warm, light, airy. It has modern loos and a bright, well-equipped kitchen. It is quirkily shaped and offers lots of different views of the playground. It's right in the middle of school, but a bit separate — and half of it is dedicated to reading, showing that reading as an activity is truly valued and supported by the school. Parents, children and staff love the space, and I'm very proud to have been part of making it happen.

What are the defining features of The Reading Lodge?

The Lodge at Pakeman incorporates many features I like when reading: good light, space (not stuffy), quiet (carpets muffle sound), a view to look up at from your book, and good storage to minimise clutter. I think reading is simultaneously looking inward and losing yourself in a narrative (I seldom read non-fiction), and looking outward, so I like the stylised map of London, the world map, the outsized clock and reference books. I've always liked open-plan spaces which can be subdivided. Originally we had wanted a first floor in the Lodge and were going to call it the Loft, but that design had to be dropped, owing to the cost and space needed to put in a lift. I still think there's potential to use the high ceiling spaces in the rest of the school to create cosy reading spots (it's that cherry-tree idea again).

If you could change something else about Pakeman, or another similar school, what would you do?

Other improvements I'd like to see in the school would be better soundproofing. I'm not sure how, but it is distracting to whole classes, to small groups and to individuals, especially those with SEN, to hear recorder practice or indoor (on a wet day) football drills. I do think that less clutter, or better storage for clutter, helps clear thinking and makes wall displays stand out – otherwise that can get lost in the jumble of things leaning against walls. I'd dearly love Pakeman children to have access to grass and trees – a tunnel under Hornsey Road to Kinloch Park would be brilliant!



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Do you think that schools should have elements of the home in their design?

Reading with my parents and then becoming a parent and reading with my children, was always a very special, close time. It wasn't always bedtime, but there was usually an element of "snuggling up" together to share a book. Volunteer readers are taught to pull away gently when a child leans in to enjoy a story – but the safe intimacy of sitting on a sofa would mimic home and (I think) make reading even more special. Individual bean bags in book corners make a school environment seem more manageable and provide a space where a child can enjoy a book by themselves.

What advice would you share with others managing a similar building project?

Get a really good team together – a project manager who doesn't let things slip too much, builders who can handle the project and someone to keep a close eye on the financial side, which is very different from ordinary school finances. Find an architect who understands what you want, even when you can't describe it (but be brave enough to say when you don't like something they've come up with).

What was the most challenging aspect of the project for you?

The most frustrating part of the building project was when the foundations had been laid wrong and had to be re-done. Torrential rain delayed that and we seemed to be making no progress at all. We wanted to be talking about windows and light and decoration and all we had to show for our effort and money was a muddy hole in the ground.

If an architect and an educationalist were to meet for coffee to talk about the future of schools, what should they talk about?

I think if an architect and an educationalist were to meet, they should try to find a combination of new, practical, exciting modern design, with the gracious features of old buildings. I love Pakeman's high ceilings, beautiful parquet floors, lovely sash windows – all have their practical drawbacks, but they are so much more inspiring than 1960's low, rectangular buildings.

This interview was done by email on 27th May 2015.

