

Niddrie Mill and St Francis, Edinburgh by Elder and Cannon



Elder and Cannon's joint campus for two primary schools has a kind of 'creative sociability', elbowing its way into Edinburgh's deprived Craigmillar community, writes Malcolm Fraser. Photography by Keith Hunter

There are few simpler, happier briefs for an architect than the bunch of sunny classrooms, gathering places and playgrounds that make a good primary school. But, times being what they are, state schools' happy simplicities tend to come sorely burdened by a mess of politics and policies, advice and advisors. And given that the new Niddrie Mill and St Francis Primary Schools are set within the comprehensive regeneration of a failed city neighbourhood – Edinburgh's Craigmillar is one of Scotland's six Pathfinder regeneration areas – its context is further complicated by the politics and policies of regeneration.

However, Glasgow-based firm Elder and Cannon Architects and PARC Craigmillar (essentially Edinburgh City Council in partnership with its arms-length self, developer EDI Group) have produced something innovative from these processes, something of real interest and relevance. This has been at some effort and cost, and under a business model and regeneration process that must be bust, given today's climate.



The Pathfinder models were the Scottish government's big regeneration idea. They are exemplars of neo-con economics, tabula rasa 'regeneration' predicated on private sector partnership and the business-model bubble of an endlessly rising housing market. This being Scotland, delivery models have benefitted from being less privatised, more statist. But the tabula rasa model, where the built environment is scapegoated for what are principally social and economic woes, stays. So the solid, serviceable 1930s council tenements – set within urban layouts with potential for much improvement – have been landfilled, and the emptied Craigmillar is now a clean sheet on which to write new urban theories.

Scotland has gone 'new urbanist' – the theory that promotes a narrow, European urban model as the only tradition in town, and is obsessed with perimeter blocks and 'the street'. In this project, the emerging layout is handled well by overall masterplanner Llewelyn Davies, and by Page\Park Architects with landscape architect Ian White Associates, who planned the immediate area. It is, essentially, Beaux-Arts axial. It puts me in mind of a small, planned, French town; certainly more novel than traditional. Streets are heavily home-zoned and

their best-practice, pedestrian-friendly measures may help to build a fresh, neighbourly community – if they survive Craigmillar’s youth.

The brief for the Niddrie Mill and St Francis Primary Schools’ joint campus rose out of these wider considerations, placing the school at the head of an axis and at the community’s heart – as schools always were in the old Craigmillar. From the roof terrace of the new school, I could see at least four abandoned schools, emptied of children, and some with demolition commenced, by the same ‘blame the buildings’ policies applied to the area’s housing stock.

Elder and Cannon has produced something innovative, something of real interest and relevance

The ‘joint campus’ bit of the brief needs explaining. Scotland suffers from the ‘scourge’ of Protestant-Catholic sectarianism, but our powerful Catholic clergy demands that the government reinforces their community’s separateness through social engineering – a kind of elective apartheid that ensures the scourge is kept warm. The winning of joint campus status and a shared front door for these schools highlights the nasty absurdity of this, though I am not qualified to explain the symbolism of the St Peter the Gatekeeper moment just inside, where Catholic children turn left and Protestant children right. Nevertheless, the single site allows Scotland a school – and a community – with the potential for unity.

The arms-length half of the client, EDI Group, is renowned for its promotion of Scottish architectural talent, and Elder and Cannon Architects was engaged through the sort of creative approach to the OJEU process that councils seldom embrace. Over nearly 30 years, Elder and Cannon has consistently produced work that combines a modernist care for mass, light and movement with a contemporary concern for the integrity of the city. It is hard to understate the high regard that Scotland’s architects have for the firm, though its concentration on the craft of architecture has been at the expense of the modern primacy of marketing, and its reputation remains unfairly local.

How Elder and Cannon’s joint campus addresses its community is interesting. It terminates the masterplan’s principal axis, but while almost all British schools sit lonely on their sites, Niddrie Mill and St Francis acknowledge new urbanist principles by building hard up to the street in a way that, again, seems pleasantly small-town francophone. Whether Scottish culture will adapt to such pleasantness is another matter, and blinds are already in use – though they obscure views of building sites rather than urban life. But such engagement, and the parallel pushing of informal front-door ‘playground’ into the public realm, is a welcome, optimistic innovation.

A shared front door for these schools highlights the absurdity of Protestant-Catholic sectarianism

The two schools and their nurseries sit in separate wings along two east-facing streets, opening up the maximum playground and sports space to the west, all focused on an axial view (triggered, oddly, by the sprinkler tank building) out to Arthur’s Seat, Edinburgh’s urban mountain. The wings are united by a drum of internal and external space, and the resultant geometry of rectangular wings, circular drum and interstitial triangles is worked to provide a gradation of gathering places – from the rooftop terrace, through the building and out to the playgrounds and the landscape.

The contract was ‘traditional’ design and build; novation occurring with around 80 per cent of the design complete. Elder and Cannon’s big, successful moves are intact, as are the main materials and detailing in robust red brick with concrete dressings and big windows. But there is a sense, in some of the more detailed resolutions of geometries and thresholds, of design development curtailed, and in the final 20 per cent of the design the contractor’s supply chain has delivered some dreary finishes and furnishings.

The principal spatial grouping is classroom clusters, with groups of six class bases spilling out through big, folding door-protected openings into the roughly triangular interstitial breakout spaces. The combination of privacy and social mix is good, but it sometimes seems that spatial flow has been trumped by the complexities of the geometry and the supply-chain finishes. A particular regret lies in the rigid ceiling grid, which grates with the geometries that want to flow beneath it and the small rooflights that sit adrift in it.

The schools are built hard up to the street in a pleasantly small-town francophone way

Good internal/external threshold space is provided for spilling-out and engagement with fine views. While the rooftop terrace has been corralled by the teachers, the drum works well for younger children’s play and as a

threshold to the grounds beyond, with the layout working hard to bring the creative sociability of the schools to the fore. The west-facing playgrounds and pitches, maximised by pushing the entrance facade up to the street, feel generous, sunny and protected.

The entrance threshold is less successful. There is a deep, sheltered terrace between the public square at the head of the axis and the school's main internal circulation space, but the joint front door sits apart from it in a constricted position. Its bald detailing contrasts with the tall, concrete porte cochère that protects the nursery entrances further down the streets.

Elder and Cannon's recent reputation is founded on its magisterial, multiple award-winning work for the private St Aloysius School in Glasgow's tightly gridded urban core. The practice seemed to flourish in the city's restricted sites and with the direct, client-to-architect relationship of a private school client. The Niddrie Mill and St Francis joint campus feels like a less assured work, with the challenges of novel geometries, a more disparate client group, and design and build impacting on the clarity and detail of the layout and resolution. These are, however, secondary considerations, for the schools are so clearly designed around happy simplicities.

Significantly, this is the best mainstream state school built in Scotland in some time. However, the project is not financed directly from the public purse, but from the expected profits of Craigmillar's regeneration. It is not certain whether the money has been gathered – nor whether it ever will be. Neither is it certain what the prospects are for financing the John McAslan-designed secondary school that is intended to follow, and all the other regeneration infrastructure and 'affordable housing' that the government's housing-bubble policies were to provide. I suspect that this will stand as a lonely exemplar.

The more direct public procurement route is, however, creditable. The sort of across-the-board, shared-focus, client-to-masterplanner-to-architect model that is essential to achieve a coherent piece of placemaking is not possible within PPP – it needs to be driven by a client committed to public interest, rather than one focused on private profit, as any private consortium building public facilities must be.

In Edinburgh, as in the rest of Britain, we are desperate for investment into our school estates and wider communities. It seems to be taking time for us to notice the economic zombies in our midst; to twig that housing-market-bubble-led regeneration is dead and PPP/PFI should be too. So how do we build and repair the schools that we need?

In the meantime, we should celebrate the success of organisations like PARC Craigmillar in adapting current models to better serve our communities. We should applaud their creative partnerships with such careful, talented architects as Elder and Cannon, and commend the simple, happy place they have made for the children of Craigmillar.

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