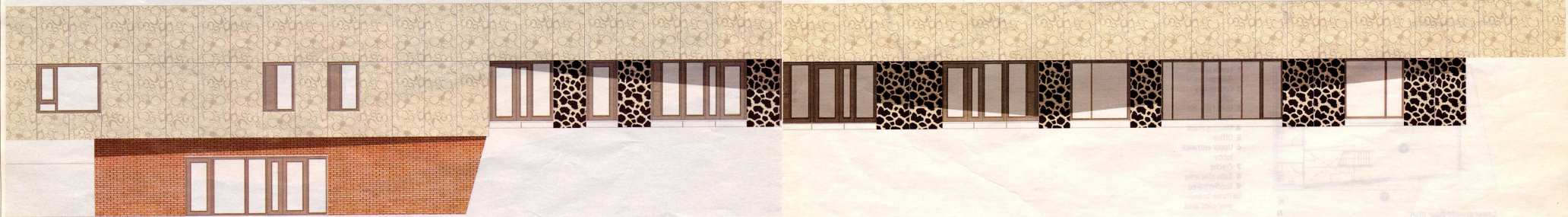


# Works

Cottrell & Vermeulen's Folkestone nursery may be low-budget, but it's full of good ideas, writes Graham Bizley. Photos by Ioana Marinescu

## Animal magic





At the end of an ordinary suburban street in Folkestone lives a creature 60m long with the skin of a giraffe. It waits politely to be discovered at the end of a terrace of houses, its tail draped across the school playing field.

You don't really notice it from the bottom of the street as it sits in line with the houses. As you get closer, a two-storey elevation begins to stand out. With a restrained palette of orange brick, dark-stained timber windows and grey cement fibre-cladding panels, it is distinct from the houses but not perversely different. Once you have entered its territory, however, it starts to show its true colours. The brick-clad lower floor extends less than one-third the length of the building before being subsumed by a rise in ground level. The cement fibre panels of the upper floor

continue, floating above the ground, revealing bright colours and textures beneath.

The Folkestone Neighbourhood Nursery and Community Centre – houses a 110-place nursery, creche and community facility. The Kent Architecture Centre organised competitive interviews in 2002 and Cottrill & Vermeulen were appointed in December of that year. The practice was presented with a very tight programme as the client wanted the building to be operational by March 2004.

Suggesting that they won on the basis of pragmatism, Richard Cottrill says: "I think they chose us because we said it was impossible." The client is more generous, pointing to the practice's record of innovative education buildings using exposed materials in inventive ways. Either way,

the £1.2 million building is open for business just a year and four months after the architects were appointed.

Cottrill describes how they originally thought of the building as a "wrapped present" sitting on a brick lower floor plinth set into the hillside. The consultation process was short but intense. Rather than a questionnaire-based sociological study, the practice started by presenting its initial scheme in the form of a provocative document to which people could respond directly. During a series of one-day workshops, ideas emerged quickly – including the one to wrap the building in a pattern based on Folkestone Sure Start's logo, a giraffe. A planning application was made just four weeks after appointment, with amendments submitted as the consultation



Previous: Nursery play area at upper ground level.

Left: The west elevation aligns with the houses of the terraced street from which the nursery is accessed.

Far left: West elevation to the car park.

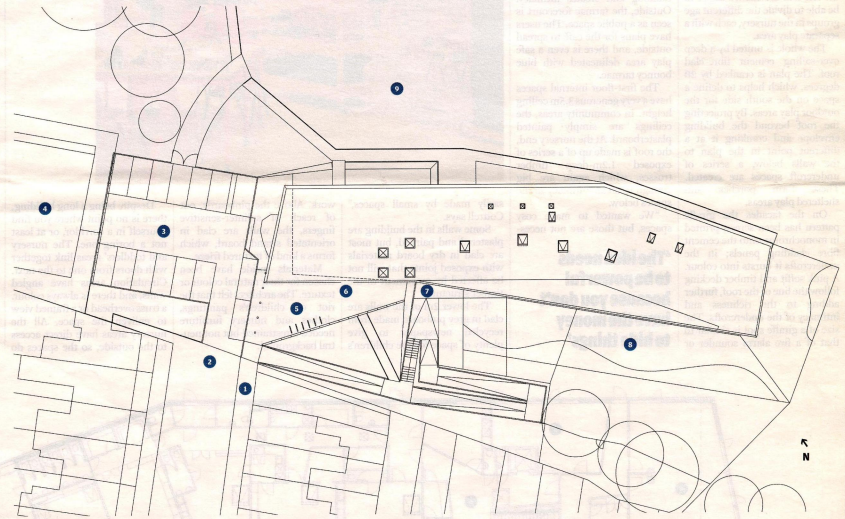
Bottom: South elevation showing the pronounced change in level across the site.

process progressed. This concise consultation worked very efficiently for the architects.

The Folkestone Neighbourhood Nursery and Community Centre is not a catchy title, but just to call it a nursery is an understatement and misses the point of the Sure Start initiative. Set up by the government to provide children, parents and communities with what it describes as "better outcomes", Sure Start is an ambitious programme. A community can apply to become a Sure Start area and the scheme is set up with different priorities in each case depending on the needs of that area. Nursery-age education is the core service, but the programme also provides childcare to enable parents to work. The Folkestone centre is the first to have a nurse practitioner on site.

Site plan of Folkestone Neighbourhood Nursery and Community Centre

- 1 Pedestrian entrance
- 2 Vehicle entrance
- 3 New car park
- 4 George Spurgeon Primary School
- 5 Courtyard
- 6 Lower ground floor entrance
- 7 Upper ground floor entrance
- 8 Nursery playground
- 9 School playing field



The Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative competition, organised by the Department for Education & Skills and C&E in 2001, aimed to generate "models of excellence" to encourage those charged with delivering new facilities to set their sights high. Cottrell & Vermeulen received a commendation for its entry for the Besley site. By organising a competitive interview, Sure Start made the decision for a high-quality building and it has got one. The architect has understood the programme, the site and the budget, and has responded in a manner both pragmatic and joyful.

The building lies along the southern edge of the George Spurgeon Primary School playing field. Public facilities are located in the two-storey western end near the street and the nursery occupies the single-storey eastern end. Its long form is generated by the site and the client's desire to be able to divide the different age groups in the nursery, each with a separate play area.

The whole is united by a deep over-sailing cement fibre-clad roof. The plan is cranked by 20 degrees, which helps to define a space on the south side for the outdoor play areas. By projecting the roof beyond the building envelope and cranking it at a different point in the plan to the walls below, a series of undercroft spaces are created. These form porches and sheltered play areas.

On the facades the giraffe pattern has been screen-printed in monochrome onto the cement fibre cladding panels, in the undercrofts it bursts into colour. A pink silt and timber decking follow the line of the roof, further adding to the richness and intimacy of the undercrofts. The size of a giraffe spot is similar to that of a fire alarm sounder or

bulkhead light, so all the necessary clutter of a public building disappears in the camouflage. Cottrell emphasises that, on a low-budget building, "the idea needs to be powerful because you don't have the money to hide things".

The coloured giraffe skin continues inside in the entrance reception. Located between the community facilities and the nursery, the reception area has two approaches. A lift and stair arrive directly from the public café at ground-floor level, which is intended as the main entrance. The stair is monolithic; its solid balustrades clad in red-painted MDF. Its presence in the little café is fascinating, like an elephant sitting quietly at a corner table sipping a cup of tea.

This theme of oversizing an element to reduce the scale of the space in which it sits is used to good effect throughout the building and creates intimacy. Outside, the tarmac forecourt is seen as a public space. The users have plans for the café to spread outside, and there is even a safe play area delineated with blue bouncy tumour.

The first-floor internal spaces have a very generous 3.5m ceiling height. In community areas, the ceilings are simply painted plasterboard. At the nursery end, the roof is made up of a series of exposed 1.2m-deep timber trusses, which again are big enough to create intimacy in the spaces below.

"We wanted to make cosy spaces, but those are not neces-

**'The idea needs to be powerful because you don't have the money to hide things'**



Left: Nursery space, surmounted by 1.2m-deep timber trusses. Right: Stair between the community café and the facilities on the upper ground floor.

sarily made by small spaces," Cottrell says.

Some walls in the building are plastered and painted, but most are clad in dry board materials with exposed joints that will not be affected by movement in the timber structure.

"The lower 2m of the walls are clad in grey pinboard made from recycled newspaper to give plenty of space for the children's

work. Above the pinboards, out of reach of splinter-sensitive fingers, the walls are clad in orientated strand board, which forms a kind of textured frieze.

Materials inside have been chosen for their natural colour or texture. The architect felt that the riot of children's paintings, clothes and nursery furniture needed a restrained but not neutral background.

Despite being a long building, there is no point where you find yourself in a corridor, or at least not a boring one. The nursery and toddlers' areas link together with doors from one to the next. Circulation areas have angled walls, and there is always colour, a truss overhead or a framed view to enliven the space. All the nursery areas have direct access to the outside, so the spaces do

not need to be separated for fire reasons. Subtly angled walls expose the rich palette of structure and materials in different ways, making each space distinct.

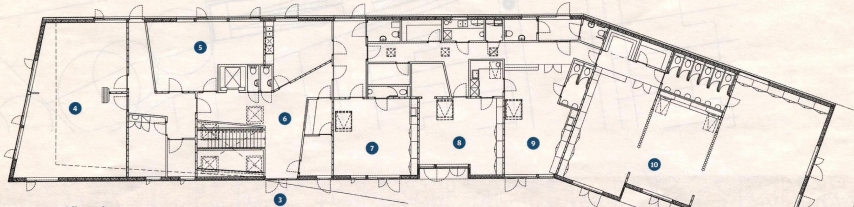
There are areas where the money obviously ran out. The landscape planting has been left to the local community. There are also areas, such as the lighting, where time pressure meant design decisions slipped out of the architects' hands.

Cottrell & Vermeulen requested suspended compact fluorescents in nursery areas and ceiling-mounted battens in the community areas. The choice was left to the mechanical and electrical engineers, who got carried away with the catalogue. I counted 11 different types of light fittings.

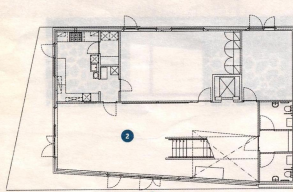
The Folkestone nursery finds a pleasing equilibrium between simplicity and quirkiness. Interest is created by a few simple moves, such as the high ceilings, textured materials and the cranked form.

It is a distant descendant of those unloved, earnest community centres built cheaply in the sixties and smashed up by vandals in the seventies and eighties. The most common criticism of such buildings was that they were ugly. The Folkestone nursery could not be called beautiful, but its simple form is certainly elegant, seductive, slicky and ground-hugging.

I am dying to know whether we have cracked the problem of low-budget public buildings. At least we have got beyond the eighties reaction of giving every building the symbols of domestic architecture, whatever the scale or function. It would be great if ideas as generous as involving the users in the design process and injecting a bit of joy into the project turn out to be the right answers.

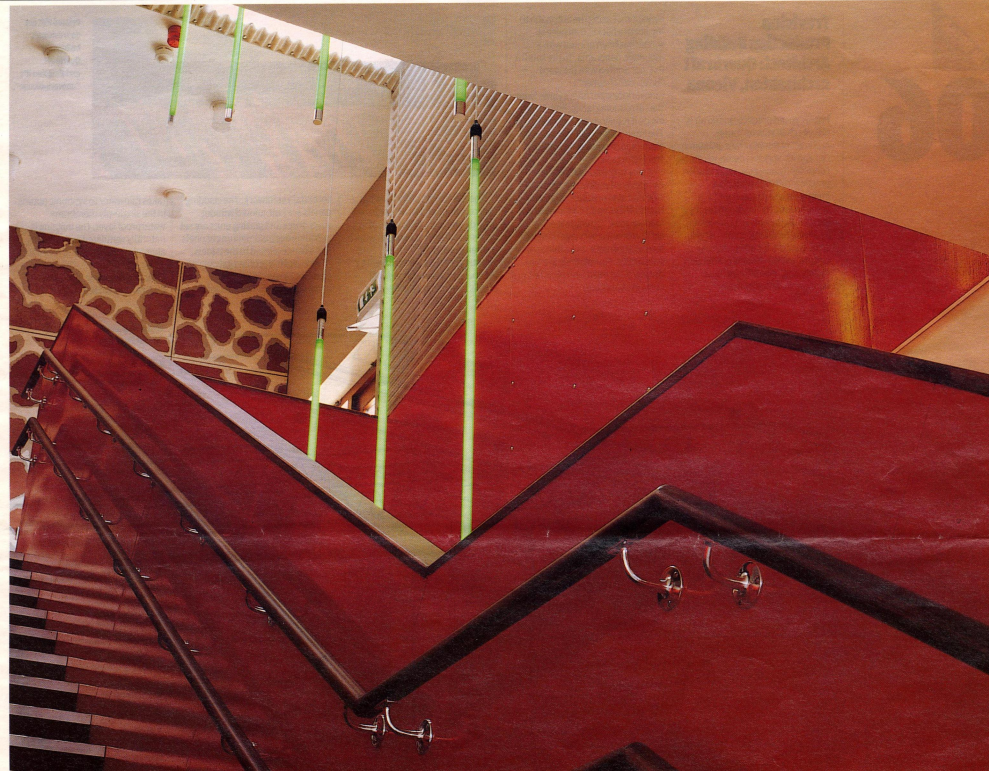


Upper ground floor plan



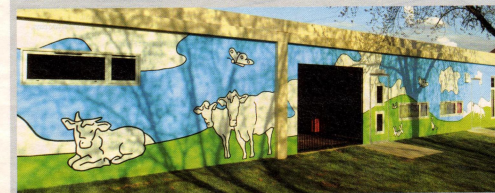
Lower ground floor plan

- 1 Lower ground floor entrance
- 2 Community café
- 3 Upper ground floor entrance
- 4 Meeting room
- 5 Office
- 6 Upper entrance lobby
- 7 Creche
- 8 Baby play area
- 9 Toddlers area
- 10 Three-to-five-year-olds area



**Architect**  
Cottrell & Vermeulen Architects  
**Client** Kent County Council  
**Structural engineer**  
Haskin Waters Robinson  
**Mechanical & electrical engineer**  
Max Fordham LLP  
**Quantity surveyor**  
Stockdale Consulting

**Prints charming**



Cottrell & Vermeulen's Folkestone nursery is the latest in a line of projects in which the practice has explored the application of surface decoration to its buildings. The recently completed Wellgate nursery in Dagenham (above left) is an off-the-shelf Portakabin that Cottrell & Vermeulen was asked to

customise. The practice developed a farmyard scene that was spray-painted onto the building's steel facade with the use of adhesive vinyl stencils. Where silk-screening lends itself to the generation of repeated patterns, this technology is ideal for single-image applications. Its 2002 postgraduate

accommodation for Churchill College, Cambridge, (centre) incorporated images from research work by a Churchill graduate on the external soffits. Photographs of the crystalline atomic structure of silicon, obtained from tunnel-scanning microscopy, were silk-screened onto composite aluminium panels. These were mounted

above the entrances of each of the buildings.

For its 2003 Parsloes Online building in Dagenham (right) the practice worked with artist Simon Patterson and fabricators at Ford to create a steel security screen. The screen carries a map of the world that was laser-cut at the Ford plant and then hand-painted on site.

