

a unified whole

BY WU YEN YEN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY THIO LAY HOON

The new Pathlight School at Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10, designed by W Architects Pte, is built on a passion for nurturing and enlightened recognition that design plays a big part in improving quality of life and work.



Gestalt is defined in a dictionary as, 'A physical, biological, psychological, or symbolic configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that its properties cannot be derived from a simple summation of its parts.'¹ Simply put, it is a combination of different factors that when put together, generates something else altogether so integrated and different that the individual parts are no longer identifiable. Make no mistake, gestalt is a rarity anywhere in the world. It is more spirit than statistics, more alignment of vision than financial results. It demands rigour and complete commitment that when found, permeates into every pore and every soul.

It is unlikely that the spirit of gestalt and autism can ever be found in the same sentence. However, like gestalt, autism is a medical condition that affects the wholeness of a human being. It begins in one's neural senses and impairs behaviour, speech, thinking and social behaviour. It is not possible to isolate characteristics of the condition or to treat them separately. These symptoms, in turn, become the person who has it. Often, these symptoms are entwined with their natural talent in various disciplines of art, science, music, etc, the problem and the gift all rolled into one becomes the individualistic character of one who has autism.

Another instance where gestalt and autism can be found together is in Singapore's newly completed Pathlight

School, located in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10. A special school committed fully to the education of autistic children with support from Autism Research Centre (ARC) and Ministry of Education (MOE), Pathlight School promises to impart 'mainstream academics and life readiness skills'² and everything in between. Founder and Supervisor of School Management Committee Denise Phua explains that the vision of the school hinges on one word: Dignity.

About 40% of the students come from needy families and require subsidies from the school and donor organisations to foot the S\$500 monthly school fees. Out of the current enrolment of more than 500 children and wait-list of 200 more, about 15% of the students will need to take the vocational route in order to ever be gainfully employed.

PATHLIGHT SCHOOL

ARCHITECT	W ARCHITECTS PTE LTD
PROJECT MANAGER	PM LINK PTE LTD
C&S CONSULTANT	WP BROWN PTE LTD
M&E CONSULTANT	PARSONS BRINCKERHOFF PTE LTD
QUANTITY SURVEYOR	BEC CONSULTANTS
MAIN CONTRACTOR	KWAN YONG CONSTRUCTION PTE LTD







Daunting as it may sound, still, if charity was given out of pity, then dignity is its antithesis.

'Dignity', Ms Phua mentions, is the only way a school for autistic children can compete by international education standards. This 'dignity' extends to the teaching of the students, the attitude with which they are received, the perception of the students by others and most importantly, the way any life should be lived.

The school takes to task every possible avenue to create the perfect mental and physical environment so that each child will have equal opportunity to learn and live. Every decision in the running of the school adheres to the gestalt of its mission. From the low teacher to student ratio, to the curriculum and facilities that provide students with relevant industry and basic independent living skills, to the selection of a suitable architect and design for its new campus. A dignified building is needed for a dignified purpose.

Mok Wei Wei, Director of W Architects Pte, shares this vision of Pathlight School through the eyes of a veteran architect. Understanding autistic children and translating their needs into spatial qualities is a subject uncharted. To Mok, clarity and imageability of the spaces is important in way-finding for the students. To mediate the neural complexities that autistic children often face, clear massing, muted colours and a sense of order were set in place.

A clear central spine of covered deck space divides the site into two. This forms a flexible multi-purpose area supported on pilotis that while provides a visual anchor, also lifts the building mass to the second storey and allows visual connection to the three courtyards strewn through the site. The usable and visual ground plane is thus cleverly extended and looking bigger. On the left of the spine is the multi-purpose triple-volume block standing tall as the 'flag' of the school and setting its public image along the busy main road. On the right of the spine are the classroom blocks arranged neatly along long corridors with accented doorways and lockers. Above the spine are the administration offices and the curriculum design studios and computer rooms. The distinction between each block and its function is further emphasised by their façade expressions of articulated groove lines and colours. Mok explains that his greatest consolation is to hear that the students had no trouble transitioning from the old premises into the new one as this was the surest way to assess the success of the layout.

Veering from his usual comfort zone of layered spaces and good-class bungalows, Mok explains that the secondary challenge was the tight construction budget of the project. Essentially having to rely on a simple palette of plaster and paint surfaces, creative use of the common materials was designed out of need. Painted brick with articulated horizontal mortar lines helped elevate the simplest of building materials into subtle texturing of facades. Cleverly slanting rows of bricks ever so slightly, an experience of indirect natural lighting without direct glare or wind was achieved in the assembly hall. Careful detailing of junctions and close attention to the economy of design gave the school a stately look. The clean and coherent language looked adequate and self-sufficient, thereby negating any need for extra layering.





What could not be afforded was compensated in kind, through thoughtful provisions. For example, in place of a canteen, a café was set up beside the field, well-lit and naturally ventilated, evidently the most popular spot in school. Here, the creation of an open but controlled space and selected furnishings went well with student-run kiosks to complete a vibrant recess scene. Even the tap fittings at the canteen were selected to be individually different so that students can learn to drop their rigidity and adopt flexibility of use.

The use of cost-effective landscaping also meant that garden areas served both educational and aesthetic purposes. Species of plants for the Spice Garden were selected out of those taught in classrooms. Leaf imprinted concrete stepping-stones and tiling patterns gave quiet charm to otherwise sparse courtyards. Vertical creeper screens, strategically positioned, shaded the observation rooms that had to be kept discreet and dark.

Ms Phua relates that moving into the new school has confirmed their belief that the quality of built environment makes a difference to everyday learning and living. The students had taken positively to the liberated grounds and the parent volunteers, when asked to help with spring-cleaning, were extra zealous in their efforts. Ms Phua attributes this to a sense of pride, that their children can now study in a beautiful school. Completed on a shoestring budget, what imparts the sense of hope and enthusiasm is not opulence or snobbery but a sincere and calibrated combination of hardware (architecture) and software (school mission and staff) that helped create a holistic environment: gestalt.



The key to Pathlight School's success is that, besides a passion for nurturing, there is enlightened recognition that design plays a big part in improving quality of life and work. This is clearly evident in the collaboration with W Architects Pte. In-house, a competent design department was put together to teach design studios as well as to help showcase students' artwork and channel their creativity into a long-term asset. There is even a gift shop that carried students' artwork, that with the help of the design teachers, transformed students' raw materials such as scrapbooks and doodling into ready-to-wear tee shirts and postcards. Only design and a well-managed team can mine the natural talent that autistic children have, and show that to the world.

Pathlight School has not given only its students and parents hope and optimism for their future, but also architects hope that through positive environments, even public institutions with the most difficult budget can be a work of gestalt. +



¹ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company*

² *Pathlight School motto*