

Brentwood School

Joanna Sutherland enjoys the latest in a series of playful brick buildings designed by Cottrell & Vermeulen

Photos

Anthony Coleman



Home to one of Britain's oldest purpose-built classrooms, Brentwood School is an independent school for girls and boys aged three to 18. The Senior School was founded in 1557 and grew significantly in the nineteenth century, while the Preparatory School was founded in 1892. Architect Cottrell & Vermeulen has been expanding the school's Essex campus since 2007, and the completion of new and remodelled facilities for the Preparatory School, alongside a new reception for the Senior School, are the latest additions to its ongoing work there.

Two earlier projects are located within the Senior School campus; the first, completed in 2011, provided a new classroom block and Assembly Hall situated either side of an existing listed late-Victorian sixth-form block which was refurbished (AT220); the second, completed in 2015, expanded the existing library with a Learning Resource Centre (AT267). Between them, the design and placement of the new buildings brought an urban order to the school's main street frontage, and organisationally transformed the heart of the campus, enclosing new courtyards and forging new physical and visual connections across the site.

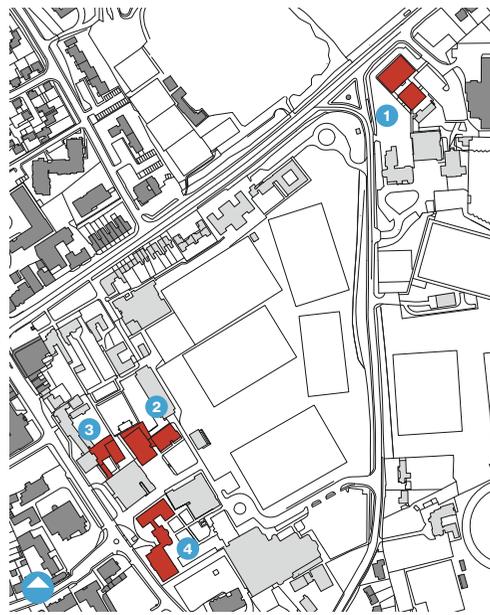
Below

The new prep school at Brentwood School comprises expanded existing accommodation and two new buildings – a multi-purpose hall and an adjacent classroom block.



Key

- 1 New prep school
- 2 Bean Learning Resources Centre
- 3 Reception
- 4 Sixth-form centre



As part of an improved overall organisation of the main school site, the newly completed reconfiguration of the entrance operates in tandem with this earlier work. It further enhances the street frontage, creating a clear point of arrival and increasing transparency and connectivity to aid visitors in navigating themselves around the campus. Within the new reception area an important and formerly hidden facade of the chapel is revealed, delightfully juxtaposed with a dramatic geometric rooflight.

The new work for the Preparatory School also provides organisational clarity. Situated to the north-east of the main school, the junior school's campus is visually linked, but separated by Middleton Hall Lane. Cottrell & Vermeulen has expanded its facilities, providing new accommodation and reconfiguring the existing buildings.



Top
Site plan.

Right
New reception building (2020).

Above right
Previous projects by Cottrell & Vermeulen at Brentwood School: the sixth-form centre (2011) and the Bean Learning Resources Centre (2015).

Opposite
Ground- and first-floor plans of the prep school's multi-purpose hall and teaching block (second floor not shown).

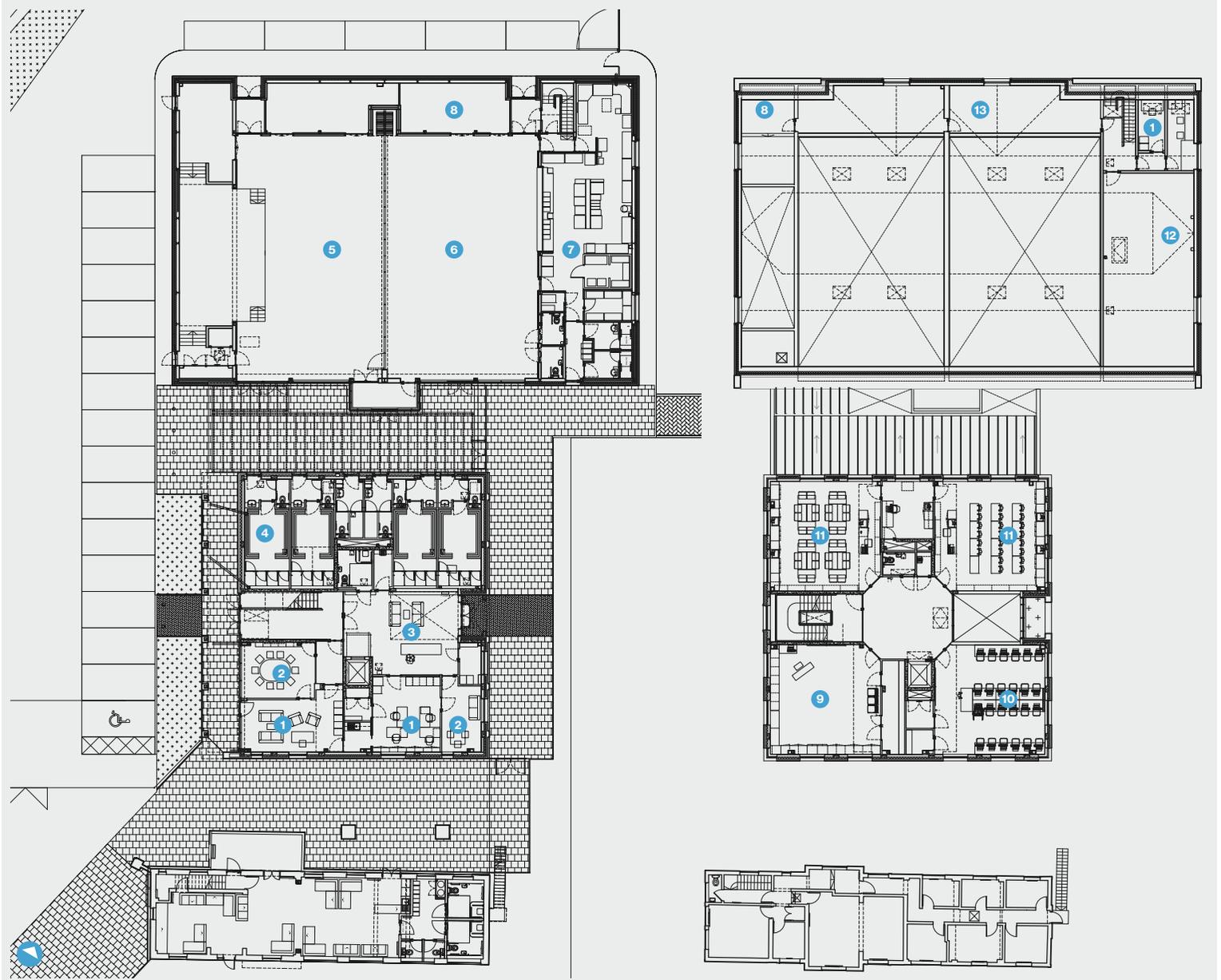


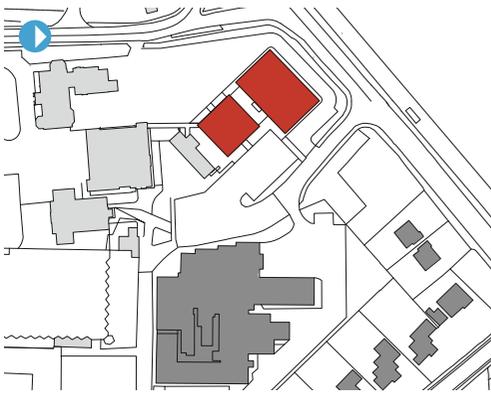
There are many qualities to admire in this suite of projects, but two key characteristics unite them as a body of work. The first is the artful orchestration of new and existing space, internally and externally, in both form and function, to create a legibility that is vital for each intervention within a campus of this size. The second is that the placement and articulation of the buildings demonstrates a joyful expanding and evolving language of brick, using architectural history and context to create a contemporary and weighty design response to place, while maintaining the informal sense of animation engendered by incremental and ad hoc growth over time.

The prep school's new multi-purpose hall and linked three-storey teaching block sit close to a grade-II-listed former residence, Middleton Hall, and both reflect and complement this context. The selective removal of existing buildings and careful placement of the new accommodation has enhanced the setting and visibility of the Hall, and the contemporary referencing of the historic context through the buildings' organisation and architectural expression establishes a new dynamic identity for the school.

Key

- 1 Office
- 2 Meeting room
- 3 Reception
- 4 Changing room
- 5 Assembly hall
- 6 Dining hall
- 7 Kitchen
- 8 Store
- 9 Music
- 10 ICT
- 11 Science
- 12 Plant
- 13 Gallery



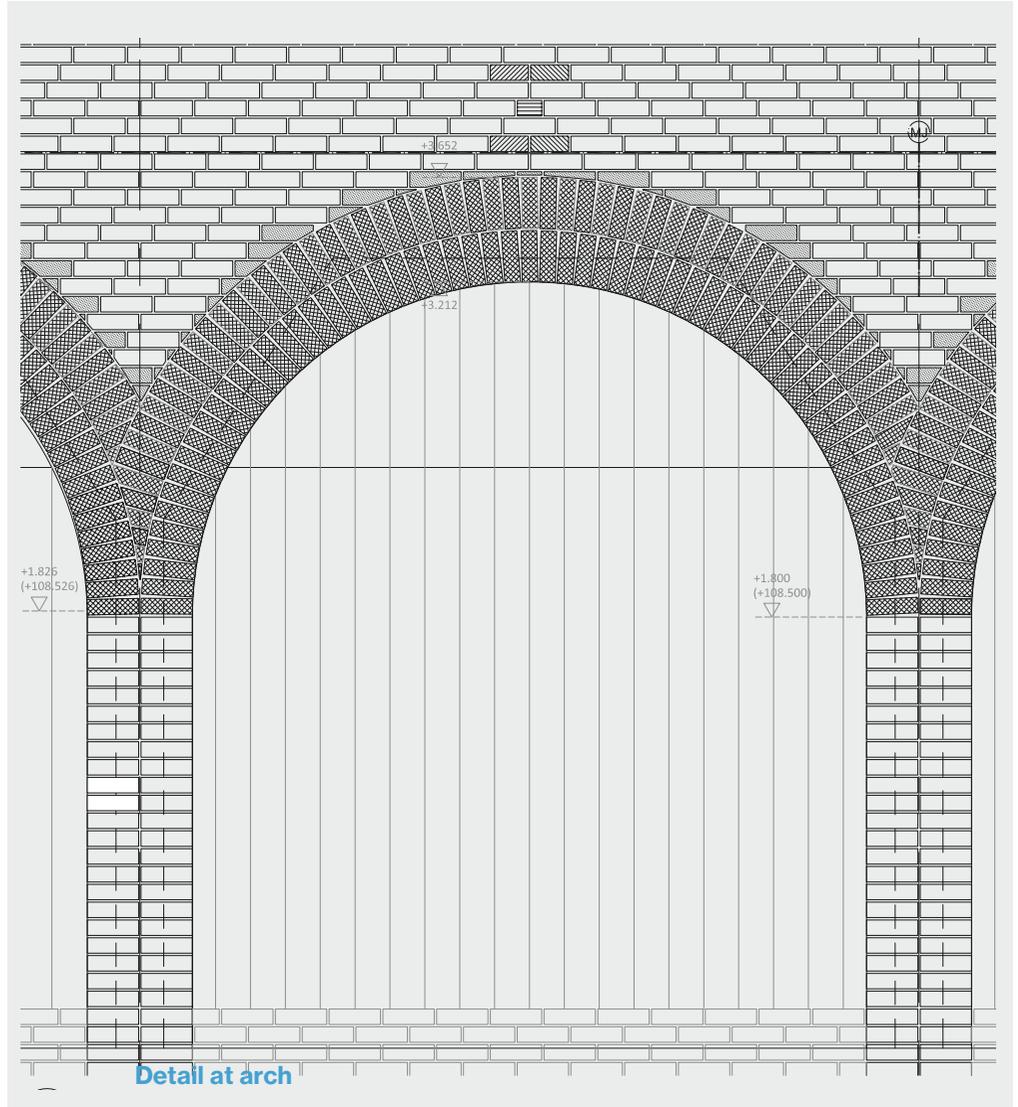
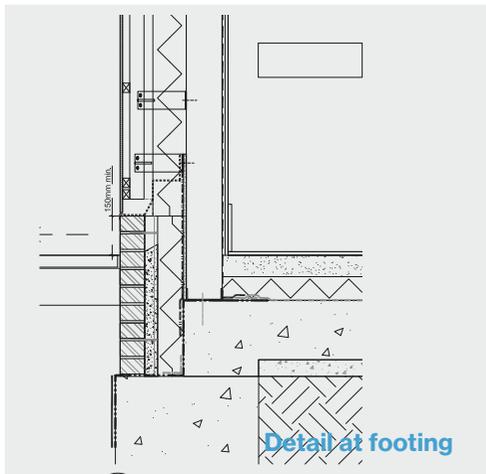
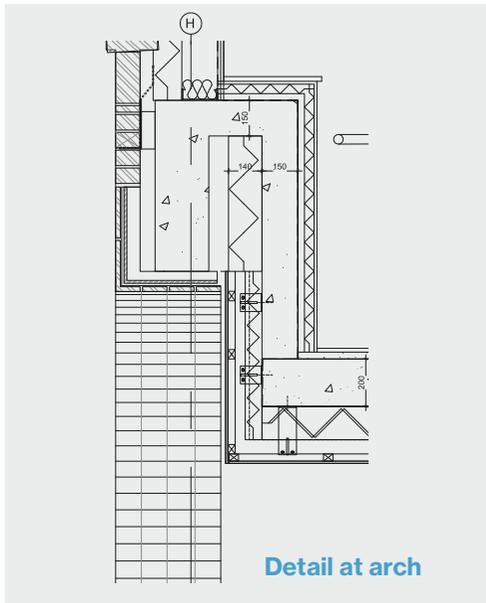


The new-build element extends the prep school's campus towards the northern boundary of the site. The two-storey multi-purpose hall can accommodate assemblies, dining, music, clubs and indoor sports. In a nod to Middleton Hall, the adjacent classroom block has been conceived and planned as a large house, and provides generous specialist teaching spaces for music, ICT, science, art, design technology and food tech on the upper levels. On the ground floor it accommodates a new visitors' reception area, administration space and externally-accessed changing rooms that serve the hall and the fields beyond.

The accommodation has been formed in two blocks to break down the mass of the buildings, and these are linked by a glazed canopy that provides a sheltered connection between the changing facilities and the adjacent hall.

Shifted in orientation relative to the main body of the school, the new buildings are geometrically aligned with an existing former stable block, now facilities for staff, and this linear organisation and cranked composition of distinct blocks is artfully tied together with a new north-south circulation spine which connects all the facilities of the school together.

The elongated configuration of blocks creates a clear delineation and line of security between a forecourt used for arrival and reception to the east, and playgrounds to the west. Yet the formal symmetry and composition of the blocks, conceived in the round, create 'objects in the landscape' which enable multiple readings of 'front' to address the site's prominent corner location and the west facade of Middleton Hall.



The ordered geometry and proportions of the 'original' Georgian Middleton Hall are overlaid with neo-Elizabethan alterations, contrasting symmetry with irregularity, stone with brick, and decoration with plainness. Reflecting this character, the new facades have been conceived in layers, but their composition is less additive and more subtracted. The primary symmetrical forms of the robust, articulated brick buildings are playfully subverted – a truncated arch and a window above corrode the corners of the teaching block – but what really stands out is the circulation spine connecting the buildings.

Morphing in its form and adapting to varied conditions and intersections, it is a canopy, an arcade and a glass butterfly-roofed link. Its cotton candy, pistachio and green seaside-striped lining, accented in places by red-painted structural elements, contrasts with, yet complements the soft red and mottled grey brick. Perhaps this is a neo-postmodern interpretation of the neo-Elizabethan modifications to Middleton Hall.



Opposite, top
Middleton Hall; prep school site plan.

Top
Vertical cladding lines an arcade which terminates the northern tip of the organisational spine, and also lines the covered courtyard connecting the new blocks and and forms a canopy linking back to the main school buildings.

Opposite, left
Brickwork details. Colours reflects the combination of soft red brick and stone dressings found in the existing school buildings. Polychromatic patterning developed in earlier projects within the campus forms a bold chevron pattern to the gables at a high level, and articulates arches and windows.

The articulation of the brickwork evokes the historic context but also amalgamates references to the pitched gables, ground-floor arched forms and decorative motifs developed by the architects in earlier projects at Brentwood School. Flush polychromatic decorative brickwork is used not just to enliven surfaces, but also to accentuate the building forms and pronounce the gables, arches and bullseye windows.

There is a confidence and boldness that has emerged with this phase of the works. The primary forms feel appropriate within this context, and Cottrell & Vermeulen has addressed both the historic buildings and the architectural languages developed in its own earlier work at the school.

Currently the quality of the buildings is not matched by use of surrounding space: a new play space to the west of the new blocks has been designed to enable parents to pick up or drop off children by car, and consequently features a huge expanse of black tarmac delineated with white parking space lines. Catering for cars is a significant consideration in such towns, but there might be a way to introduce more planting and trees to soften the landscape. Likewise, it is a shame that black railings enclosing play spaces have little affinity with the new buildings. Perhaps over time the landscape might be reworked to chime with buildings that possess simultaneous clarity and playfulness, are cheerful and uplifting, and feel wholly appropriate for a primary school. ↗

Project team

Architect
Cottrell & Vermeulen
Structural engineer
Engineers HRW
Environmental engineer
OR Consulting Engineers
Quantity surveyor
Stockdale
Kitchen consultant
D&P Solutions
Main contractor
Rooff
Project manager
Oxbury

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

Brickwork subcontractor
Global Brickwork
Specialist joinery
Witley Jones
Prefabricated arches
IG Lintels
Brick
Ibstock Heritage County Blend, Ibstock Leicester Grey/Leicester
Roof tiles
Weathered Grey
Roof tiles
Marley Eternit
Windows
Comar
Cladding
Rockpanel
Acoustic panels
Soundsorba

