

BEYOND THE WALLS

IN THE SECOND PART OF HER SERIES
LOOKING AT MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR
OUTSIDE SPACES, JUNO HOLLYHOCK
CONSIDERS THE PLACE OF THE
INFAMOUS 'DEMOUNTABLE'...

Humanities

In the US, 34 of the 50 states play host to a new form of schools known as 'Virtual Schools'. They have no classrooms or playgrounds and cost approximately half what it takes to run a traditional bricks and mortar school according to US think tank the Brookings Institute. What I find interesting is how this re-defines our concept of a classroom. For pupils attending a Virtual School, it might be their bedroom or dining room. For our pupils in the UK, however, we still imagine a 'classroom' to be a fairly typical space within a large building.

Primary schools tend to have smaller, cosier classrooms – they reflect the younger child's need for an identifiable home base and have personal features like cute character pegs with names on them. Increasingly, in contrast, secondary schools are businesslike works of modern architecture. The classrooms are often subject specific; art in the art room, science in the labs, drama in the dark and melancholy caverns where the teenage literati hang out at break times.

But what happens when the number of students means that more classroom space is needed?

All hail the relentless march of the demountable classroom; those standardised, tacky tacky boxes that hunker down on school play grounds and often have muddy sink holes leading up to the doorway when the weather is bad. They come in a range of fetching shades of grey. Or brown. They can be freezing cold in the winter or stuffy and hot in the summer, they develop odd, unidentifiable rattles and squeaks and are billed as 'temporary classrooms' although the industry advertises that now that they have a life expectancy of 60 years.

They are often placed on areas of the school ground that are considered less important than the car park. For example, let's just say, oh I don't know – the playing field, the wildlife pond or maybe the vegetable growing beds. But how



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necessary is it to flick to the catalogue page 'Classrooms, Demountable' and tick the 'rush me a double discounted boxed set of the little grey classrooms at your earliest convenience', really? Here are some alternative options:

1. Hidden space

Have you audited the use of your existing internal spaces? Do you know that you definitely need more classrooms or would some creative timetabling ease the pressure? Try auditing the capacity and use of each room for a two-week period to see how much vacant time there is. Consider too the versatility of the rooms available; just because it says 'art' on the door does not necessarily mean that you have to teach only art in the space.

2. Community buildings

Many secondary schools have very good relationships with local businesses and sporting clubs. Is there room to develop your students' understanding of the wider world and the working environment by seeking to hold regular lessons in one of their spaces?

3. More use of the outdoors

Why not improve the physical activity of your students by deliberately timetabling regular use of your outdoor space? Whether that involves environmental sciences in the habitat area, food technology in the raised beds, literacy projects

in the amphitheatre, maths measurements relating to architecture and the built environment or the history of local landmarks, the outdoors is a rich and natural source of teaching opportunities.

4. Making good

If you have tried all the above but cannot for the life of you squeeze another pupil in without resorting to cramming them into the cleaning cupboard then it's time to think about how and where you place your demountables or other classroom builds. Where possible build up not out – utilising multi-storey build solutions will reduce the footprint of the building and preserve some of your school grounds. Adding vertical planting and roof planting features to your new buildings will increase the biodiversity of your site and improve the aesthetics, as well as, naturally, providing more fodder for teaching.

5. Shop wisely

There are a range of demountable classrooms available on the market – a little judicious shopping around will ensure that you get the best value for money. There is no longer any need to settle for the traditional grey box when you can have high quality eco-style classrooms with attractive modern features that blend nicely into the natural landscape; we particularly like the 'Learning Escape' buildings (tgescapes.co.uk); the company understands the importance of learning outside and creates buildings that are nice to look at and fun to learn in.

Finally, always remember that obviously, classrooms are important places – but so too are school grounds and we endanger them at our peril; all teachers know that facing feisty teenagers who have not been able to run off their post-morning-study energy is not a task for the faint hearted, and we face a serious escalation in unmanageable behaviour related incidents if we do not allow pupils the space that they need out of doors.