

Off-the-shelf schools

Imagine being able to build a primary school in just nine months for £2.3 million – again and again and again. This month sees the launch of a new school product line that claims to do just that, and all you get to choose is the colours. **Kristina Smith** reports

It's amazing the things that people dream up over a couple of beers. Steve Elkin of Willmott Dixon and Scape's Mark Robinson came up with a way to slash 30% off the costs of building schools, leisure centres and health facilities that way.

Their vision – due to be officially launched in March – is called Sunesis (which the scholars among you will know is ancient Greek for 'understanding'). In its first phase, Sunesis will deliver off-the-shelf primary schools. And here's the crucial part: because it is delivered through the UK's only single contractor framework, the costs of OJEU and mini-competitions are wiped out.

This move represents further relegation for the consultants. The architects and designers will design the handful of building choices just once, leaving a small amount of site-specific design to do. As for the QSs, because a set price for these schools is part of the deal, they will be – dare we say it – redundant.

“ If something like this is going to succeed, these are the best conditions for it ”

And though it's less than a year since that conversation in the pub, Elkin and Robinson are already in discussion with 10 interested local authorities, some of whom will be looking to procure more than one Sunesis primary school.

“If something like this is going to succeed, these are the best conditions for it,” says Steve Smith, head of development at Warwickshire County Council who is looking for a suitable project on which to trial Sunesis. “Everyone is looking for certainty. And certainty is the key here: certainty about the accommodation, the price and how long it will take to deliver.”

To be truthful, the ideas behind Sunesis had been brewing long before the brainstorming session in the pub. Robinson, Scape's chief executive, has a local authority background which gives him direct insight into the political and technical

challenges faced by his clients, the councils and other public bodies who use the various frameworks Scape runs.

“A lot of our clients talk to us and they have a lot of frustration, particularly members. They have to make decisions around budget allocation. The cabinet or the executive will say ‘I need £5m for a school’. Their frustration is that they allocate £5m and never know what they are going to get and whether it will be value for money. This way, we can say ‘This is what you are getting, this is what it's going to cost and this is how long it's going to take’”

For Smith it means that he can get decisions more quickly from his councillors, rather than to-ing and fro-ing as plans are worked up: “With this system, we could very quickly have detailed costs and a detailed programme for the members to vote on,” he says. “In a traditionally procured contract, you do things a lot more incrementally and in stages so you achieve very small milestones.”

Close partnership

The relationship between Scape, which is owned by six local authorities, and Willmott Dixon dates back to 2006 when the contractor secured the Scape national framework for major projects, then worth £180m. Last year Willmott Dixon was again successful, with the latest framework worth an estimated £350m.

The Scape framework is unique because it involves just one contractor, something which detractors say risks the client overpaying due to the lack of competition. Elkin, who manages the framework for Willmott Dixon, disagrees: this sort of continuity of work is valuable for a contractor, he says, a fact that was demonstrated in the price difference between the six top bids for Scape's current framework: they were all within 1% of each other.

In the Scape framework's favour is the fact that the cost and time required for a mini-competition are saved; Robinson reckons on average £30k to £50k and around four months. And you know who you are getting – Willmott Dixon. The framework certainly seems to be doing well: Robinson reckons that within the next couple of years it will have handled £1bn of projects since its inception in 2002.



What is a Sunesis school?

The cheapest primary school on offer from Sunesis is the Keynes. It can be on site in 16 weeks, and takes just nine months in total to design and construct.

The layout all makes perfect sense: a double-width corridor down the centre which can be used as learning space and seven classrooms with doors opening out directly into the play areas. Coat hanging areas and toilets are all contained in cloakroom spaces as the children go out.

At one end is a sports hall which can also double as a community space and which can be shut off from the rest of the school for out-of-hours events.

For your £2.3m you get a total area of 1,277 sq m, 20 car parking spaces, an EPC rating of B and a BREEAM rating of

Very Good. Requiring a site size of 10,100 sq m, you also get a fenced, hard-court games area and a 200-m running track.

Keynes' frame is laminated timber, exposed internally. The floors are carpeted, vinyl in wet areas, wood in the hall, with underfloor heating.

For an extra £0.2m and one more month, you can get a steel framed version, the advantage of which is that the frame spans the width of the school so that the use of the building could be changed totally in the future if required.

In response to requests from potential clients, Sunesis has also come up with versions of Keynes incorporating a nursery, two form entry, or configurations that can be added to in future years.

It is the secure relationship between Scape and Willmott Dixon, argue Robinson and Elkin, that has allowed for the investment which has led to Sunesis being developed.

“In the regional frameworks where there is more than one contractor, although they collaborate, innovation is restricted because they have to disclose to the other contractors,” says Elkin. “There is innovation going on, but not extreme innovation.”

Robinson and Elkin, too, must take credit for Sunesis. Robinson, who has worked in delivery, procurement, property and management in local authorities, is that rare beast, a local authority person who understands commercial tensions. Elkin, although a qualified project manager, has had a varied range of roles, including white van man, but does not have a traditional construction head. Very different in personalities – Elkin is all bouncy exuberance, Robinson is more restrained and measured – they have a close working relationship which has allowed them to put the hours in to get this idea to the market.

Once Elkin had convinced Willmott Dixon’s board that Sunesis was worth investing in, the next step was to sit down with Atkins and White Design to pool all their best

“The cabinet will say I need £5m for a school. Their frustration is that they allocate £5m and never know what they are going to get”

ideas about school designs to come up with some prototype schools. They came up with five, and Elkin invented some education-related names for them all.

Keynes (the economist) for the economy model; Newton (observed gravity by watching an apple fall) for the ‘circular’ school; Paxton (head gardener at Chatsworth) for the environmentally sound one; Purcell (composer) for the school with five lines running through it in plan; and Dewey (inventor of the decimal system) for the three-storey building like the stacks in a library.



The brains behind Sunesis: Steve Elkin of Willmott Dixon (left) and Scape’s Mark Robinson

The list of five has since been trimmed to three. The Purcell and Dewey haven’t proved popular during early conversations with local authorities, and have been dropped off the list now. Although the Dewey may make a come-back.

In a way, Willmott Dixon had already been trialling the idea of Sunesis, having built evolving versions of what they are now calling the Paxton in four locations around the UK: Kings Mead in Cheshire, Llanfoist Fewr in Wales, Rogiets in Wales and Shirland in Derbyshire.

The evolution will continue. “As we move forward, the designs will evolve which is what we have always said,” says Robinson. By way of demonstration he rolls out a drawing showing a modified Keynes design incorporating a nursery, and a two-form entry version.

The cost of iconic design

So what does a Sunesis primary school cost? The budget version Keynes (pictured), which is delivered in nine months, costs £2.3m and a Newton will set you back £3m and a Paxton £3.8m. As a client, all you get to choose is the colours.

At the moment Sunesis is only claiming a 20% saving against traditional procurement. The extra 10%, they hope, will come from the supply chain. “Because of standardisation, the supply chain will get better,” says Elkin. “The thing that worries the subcontractor the most at the moment is continuity of work and this provides them with that.” The aim is to find products

that they can buy nationally and deliver using local firms to meet authorities’ political will to boost the local economy.

The next set of drawings off the production line is secondary schools, which Sunesis hopes may find favour with Partnerships for Schools, although with its own framework contractors to deal with, who knows. “Secondary schools are really important to us,” says Robinson. “We feel as though the secondary market has had a big hit. This is a massive opportunity for people to do things differently. They have always gone for iconic buildings and paid for it. There is a better way of doing things.

Warwickshire’s Smith thinks that Sunesis will be less popular for the secondary market, because they have the resources to get involved in the procurement of their own schools, whereas primary schools look to their local authorities for advice.

The next sector for Sunesis will be leisure centres, says Robinson, where there is scope for standardisation of pools, cafes, gyms. After that other building types such as health centres or police stations could follow.

If you’re thinking that this all sounds too good to be true, here’s the caveat: what’s your site like? Elkin and Robinson have grappled long and hard with how to tackle this thorny issue.

“The problem with a new building is that it does interface with the environment that it’s in. And that environment will differ from site to site,” says Elkin. “If you include every possible risk in the price, sometimes people would be paying for risks they didn’t have. It’s trying to find that right balance.”

The solution is to define a list of situations that might be classed as ‘extreme abnormalities’, such as finding ancient remains on the site, or a 400kV cable running through it. In such a situation, Willmott Dixon would go out to the market and get three quotes, working in an open book way. Elkin is very anxious to make sure that this situation is clearly understood, so that clients who do find themselves with unusual sites don’t feel cheated.

Sunesis is certainly a good idea. And it’s a good idea that worked for the Victorians. They used standardised designs for schools, adapted to suit their particular sites.

Others will try to copy Sunesis, but what Willmott Dixon and Scape have over any potential competitors is that single contractor framework arrangement which cuts out the time and cost that traditional procurement and even multi-contractor frameworks cannot compete with.

Robinson and Elkin could really be onto a winner.

What is Scape, anyway?

Scape’s origins are in an organisation called CLASP – Consortium of Local Authorities Special Programme – which was set up in 1957 by the Ministry of Education to improve the delivery of schools and address issues of skills and materials shortages. The result was a system which uses standard lightweight steel elements to build primary and secondary schools and universities, and which was later extended to other public buildings.

CLASP technology had its heyday in the ‘70s and ‘80s, delivering a school a week at its peak. There are over 3,500 CLASP buildings around the country, and the system is constantly being updated to keep pace with Building Regulations and other developments.

Then came the era of iconic schools. Standardisation went out of fashion, although some CLASP buildings continue to be built today.

Scape System Build, or Scape was set up in 2005 with a dual remit: to carry on the good work with CLASP, providing consultancy and advice; and to manage frameworks.

Scape – as in landscape or streetscape – is owned by

six local authorities: Derby City, Derbyshire County, Gateshead, Nottingham City, Nottinghamshire County and Warwickshire County Councils. It is a trading company for the CLASP Consortium.

Scape (www.scapebuild.co.uk) runs several national and regional frameworks which can be used by local authorities or other public sector organisations. This allows councils, NHS Trusts and the like to skip the expensive and time-consuming OJEU or local authority rules, since the frameworks have been procured under these rules. National Framework One covers projects between £2m and £20m and has one contractor, Willmott Dixon.

It is the relationship between Scape and Willmott Dixon which has spawned Sunesis, the off-the-shelf school idea, which they plan to extend to other public buildings. One of the Sunesis model primary schools, but not all of them, uses the CLASP lightweight steel frame system.

And of course, now that money is tight, standardisation is looking altogether more attractive again. Which takes us back to Scape’s roots in the ‘50s.