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A Meeting Place to Learn
in Rural Iceland

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PROJECTS

A MEETING PLACE TO LEARN IN RURAL ICELAND

“Where the glacier meets the sky, the land ceases to be earthly, and the earth becomes one with the heavens.”

– World Light, Laxness

“On the day we heard that there was agreement to establish an upper secondary school in the region, every house in Snaefellsnes flew the Icelandic flag,” explained one parent in the first workshop to develop the Snaefellsnes Upper Secondary School.

The new school in this rural Icelandic region will be a “meeting place to learn” for students aged 16 to 20. The Snaefellsnes region is a predominantly fishing and farming community located approximately two hours away from the capital. The picturesque region is a destination for tourists to Iceland and has inspired generations of artists and writers such as Nobel Prize Icelandic author, Halldór Laxness.

The Snaefellsnes Upper Secondary School will be a place for students to meet with a new, challenging approach to learning. The school will minimize formal classes and schedules to reinforce active learning and individual choice. Both students and teachers will learn to develop new knowledge, a key competency in the 21st century. As well, the school will be a meeting place for learners from the community of all ages and types, in attendance during the school day as well as in the evening. Supporting these goals, the new school building is designed to create a flexible, social and stimulating environment.

Strategic workshops

The strategy for the school began with four workshops where the key stakeholders worked with the architects and a consultant (they took place from May to August 2003). The first three workshops included student representatives, parents, community leaders, Ministry of Education delegates, and educators and school directors from other parts of Iceland. They worked together to catalyze the goals for the school, including its approach to teaching and learning, and to outline the school’s organisation. This process led to agreement on the programme for the school building, which is the basis for the design

underway by Sigurdur Bjorgulfsson and Indro Candi of VA Architects (Reykjavik). The fourth workshop involved the school’s future students.

The workshops were important to establish consensus within the community, and between the ministry and the community. While the ministry leases the school building for educational purposes and reviews the building design to assure that it meets their requirements, in this project the local community will finance and oversee the construction. Although the three fishing municipalities which make up the community are historically competitive, they are now working together to realise a shared school, demonstrating collaboration between all parties.

An important goal established by the stakeholders for the workshops was to “think-out-of-the-box” and to use creative inspiration. As a new type of school based on use of distributed learning (ICT), expert teachers and directors from other schools offered reassurance that the new ideas were possible based on their experience. The process was interactive, requiring problem solving, listening and negotiating. In this way, the workshop was similar to the type of educational experience being proposed for the new school.

Professional development professor Hafþór Guðjónsson from the University of Iceland presented a broad overview of current thinking with regard to the learning process referencing the “whole student life”¹ and the “layers of learning”.² These references helped settle the mission of the school to emphasise social exchange as an important part of the learning process, and reinforced ideas to create an open environment in which students could choose where, when and what they studied within the framework of the national curriculum.

The student workshop was a 12-hour day, starting with a presentation from the other workshops and ending with a student presentation to the key stakeholders. The students embraced the idea to offer a far more open, independent setting for learning at the upper secondary level. In teams, they enthusiastically designed their own version of the new school with some expert advice from the architects.

1. Dewey, J. (1916/1944), *Democracy and Education*, The Free Press, New York.

2. Nixon, J., J. Martin, P. McKeown and S. Ranson (1996), *Encouraging Learning: Towards a Theory of the Learning School*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

School concept and design

The concept for the school is to create a highly flexible environment for a variety of types of learners and diverse learning activities. The building, designed for 170 students, is small in size (approximately 1 600 m²), yet large in scope and possibility. There are no traditional classrooms, as the educational programme emphasises individual and group learning, with distributed learning opportunities, which can take place anywhere in the building. All students will have their own laptop computers which will be their mobile “desk”. The building offers four zones for learning with a diversity of types of spaces where students can work together or individually.

In the centre of the school is the Open Learning Zone. This zone provides work places for 80 students. Five discussion rooms are provided, several small group work and counselling rooms.

In the Information Zone the students and teachers can find special help for research purposes, training in research skills, access to print media and an alternative quieter work environment for students. This zone may also be used in the evening and throughout the day for lifelong learning activities.

The Contemplative Arts Zone is a student-centred learning area focusing on the use of multimedia, digital recording and other conceptual work. The Student Union offices and a retreat area for students to rest and read are included in this zone.

The Teacher-as-Learner Zone emphasises the changing role of the teacher as a coach. This zone is intended to be an area where teachers learn from each other in an open way and collaborate while preparing their courses.

In addition to the learning zones, the school includes a café, a modest multipurpose room for dining (seating 85) and social activities, as well as a small sports hall; the school also has access to other community facilities. Students and others from the community can work in the café in a relaxed and social atmosphere. Regional facilities for competitive sports and research facilities for certain science classes are among those to complement the school’s infrastructure. This use of resources throughout the region helped to keep the allocated square meters within the proposed budget.

Making use of distributed learning and the high-speed network supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, the school will manage a broad range of curriculum offerings through exchange with other upper sec-



Student presentation



Students working on school design

ondary schools across Iceland. Over the last ten years, the ministry has put in place the necessary technical infrastructure to support distributed learning with high speed networks across the country. These networks support electronic communication and video conferencing; linking all the upper secondary schools, the lifelong learning centres, and the universities and research institutions in Iceland. Access to international electronic databases and libraries has been negotiated on a national basis, enabling anyone with an Icelandic electronic address to access these information sources for free.

Everyone from the strategic workshops agreed that a contemporary design for the school building was important. The architects responded to this request with sweeping roof lines and large organic-forms in plan. The school building is intended to be a small village, with an interior street or “square” in keeping with the goals for the school to promote social interaction. The school is scheduled to open in fall 2004.

In addition to input from the key stakeholders, the project team studied a number of references and examples. More than 20 upper secondary schools, universities and lifelong learning centres participated in interviews and shared “lessons-learned” with Project Manager Hronn Petursdottir. The upper secondary school in Selfoss, designed by Maggi Jónsson, a school built in the 1980’s as a prototype, was a useful model of a successful design with emphasis on the social environment. Another important precedent for this project was an innovative primary school, Ingunnarskoli, designed by Bruce Jilk with VA Architects in 2001 for the City of Reykjavik (see *PEB Exchange*, no. 47). On the eastern coast of Iceland, Framhaldsskoli, an upper secondary school constructed as an educational building and community centre, was a unique model for the project. The principle of this school, Eyjolfur Gudmundsson, agreed to join the workshops and share his experience. References also included schools from other Nordic countries and elsewhere, such as the Australian Science and Mathematics School recently opened in Adelaide (see *PEB Exchange*, no. 46).

Economic drivers

The Snaefellsnes community was concerned that the absence of an upper secondary school was significantly diminishing their ability to cope with their future. Without an upper secondary school, parents have had no choice but to send their youth to another region or to a city to continue their education. The effect has been economic and qualitative. “We miss our young people,” the parents explained, “we can’t have proper sports teams, and we miss the energy of this generation.”

The existence of an upper secondary school is important to maintain economic and social well-being in the rural Icelandic communities. Increasingly, Icelanders are leaving the rural and small towns and re-locating to the capital (approximately 75% of the population now resides in the Reykjavik region). Social, employment and educational opportunities are leading reasons for this migration.

The success of the Snaefellsnes Upper Secondary School to sustain the rural community will be important for Iceland and may impact other school programmes in the country. Economic and environmental conditions and new possibilities with the use of information technology are changing the value set and opportunities for the Snaefellsnes region. Skills required for employment demand retraining and continuous learning. The region hopes to compete for new industries to locate within the region, in addition to seeing existing ones succeed.

In these ways, the new school will be critical to the effort to continue to maintain the rural community and to improve its quality of life.

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More information on this project can also be found in English at

<http://www.menntagatt.is/default.aspx?pageid=160>

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A NEW LIBRARY FOR GALWAY-MAYO INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The newly-built library at Ireland’s Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) is innovative in design, responds to environmental conditions and identifies the campus with its location. The library is part of the Learning Resource Centre recently constructed to meet the institute’s objective for a new landmark frontage. The campus, overlooking Galway Bay, dates back to the 1970s and reflected the standard regional technical college building throughout Ireland at that time: pre-cast concrete cladding panels combined with ribbon windows, which lack a sense of

