

Redefining What A School Can Be

Marcus Orlovsky is a founder of Bryanston Square, an educational consultancy that aims to transform public schools into places of learning and inspiration—not just for their students, but also for their communities. His focus is on the consortiums that compete for Private Finance Initiative (PFI) funding for the new public schools being built in the UK.

This article appeared originally in *Dialogue* 10. ©2005.
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What led you to focus on PFI?

Marcus Orlovsky: PFI consortiums design, finance, build, and operate a lot of the new public schools here on behalf of their communities. When we looked into it several years ago, we found that most of these schools were very functional, but with no delight, no style. So we started asking the consortiums, “What will make a great big difference to learning?” We pressed them to go with design-led rather than construction-led teams and solutions.

How did you help them do this?

MO: We try to break it right down into the ordinary things—what’s going to make somebody want to be here? They need to create really interesting environments—give them soaring atria, give teachers places to take students to sit down for a cup of coffee and discuss the merits of Wordsworth. Isn’t it the teacher’s job to enable talent wherever it resides? We need to create places where that will happen. That means finding talented architects and getting them to put aside their preconceptions of what a school is. They have to ask the kinds of questions that a retail designer might ask—what will draw them in? Schools are facilitators of learning, so how do you get people there in spirit?

Suppose we’re creating a school for a thousand students. It’s got to interact with them, and be a place where they each feel they can find a home that stimulates them—and doesn’t overwhelm them. If you’re noisy and energetic, it needs to be lively. If you’re quiet and contemplative, you want that—the school needs to offer these differences. Providing them doesn’t necessarily cost more. Good design often means just being smart.

Why do you involve the community?

MO: Most schools are used from eight to four, Monday through Friday. They have no real use other than that. What about evenings, weekends, and everything else? You need to sweat the asset, so the costs get shared among a number of different uses. If you sweat it, it's going to live, because different groups in the community will make it their own.

How much impact are you having?

MO: In the last three-and-a-half years, we've worked on £3.0 billion worth—three or four hundred new public schools in which we've had a major say. And we'll be running about 70 of them. We used to think, if you create a great place, it's all going to happen. It's only in the last year that we've realized that maybe it won't—maybe some of them need our continued intervention over time to make sure they live up to their potential.

More information on Bryanston Square can be found at www.bryanstonsquare.co.uk