

# Underneath the motorway arches

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 LONDON'S newest nursery centre is approached through a maze of unfinished building sites, dead end streets, mud and rubble. It is a modern one-storey block with strange angles because of the motorway stilts that tower above it. It looks rather like a child's posting brick, plumb in the middle of a bad mugging area with small windows to make it as vandal-proof as possible.

The Maxilla Centre will open under Westway tomorrow filling up a piece of bleak, noisy, overshadowed waste land, previously thought of as impossibly useless, with something happy and hopeful. It is the work of six young women who started the Westway nursery association five years ago. They hope it will be more flexible and more helpful than any of the other 13 nursery centres in Britain. There will be room for ten babies, 30 toddlers and 60 nursery school children. There is also a parents' centre, a toy library, a launderette—all backed by a fully-qualified staff and additional helpers.

Judith Wilcox is the co-ordinator of the project. A former teacher and community worker, she came to realise the painful lack of nursery schools and that playgroups were not being used enough because they were not offering the right things. So in 1973 she founded the association, aiming for a centre which would meet the needs of both children and their parents.

Most of the local mothers either work or want to or need to, so the usual nine-to-five hours are useless for them. 'We will open from eight in the morning until six in the evening and provide breakfast, dinner and tea', says Judith Wilcox.

The centre can only take children from a very small local area. 'It is a political decision. We're saying that everyone has the right to nursery education. We shall even be taking kids from the battered baby unit down the road. They are closing down because of lack of funds.'

The catchment area consists of three local tower blocks, and one low-rise plus a very few local streets. Predictably the high rise blocks create the greatest difficulties for mothers: 'We've visited people on the twentieth floor of one of our

blocks who have two children. The lifts only go to the nineteenth floor so these parents have to get out and walk the rest of the way up with prams, shopping, kids etc. There are no cafes or shops, just one sort of super-market thing and the park is 20 minutes' walk away. There are women muggers round here too, so people are wary of opening their doors to visitors.' An unfair proportion of high-rise mums are unmarried. Two parent families, it seems, won't accept the flats any more.

Establishing the centre has been a bureaucratic nightmare. The Department of Education and Science looks after the educational side and the Department of Health and Social Security the day care. They each have different policies and regulations.

Complications crop up all the time: ILEA have strict regulations on hygiene. The nursery school children (under ILEA) may not eat their dinners with the toddlers (under the Borough). The school has to have its own washing up facilities and sterilising unit. But the two lots of children do eat their breakfasts together and off the same plates!

Nothing daunted, the Association is already planning a similar centre in Earl's Court where there are many single parent families in bedsits, many homeless families, a high suicide rate and many mentally ill. 'Perhaps things won't be solved until you have a Ministry for Children' says Judith.

The Maxilla building cost £280,000, three quarters of which was stumped up by ILEA and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The rest came through the Urban Aid programme and from several charities. Colin Lowndes, through the Vanessa Lowndes Charitable Trust, has given £50,000 capital for the centre itself and about £1,000 for equipment. 'He came down in his Rolls-Royce to look at the site and I think he was really shocked when he saw it,' says Judith Wilcox. 'He expected something like a park and found gypsies squatting on what looked like a bomb site. He took me to lunch at the Hurlingham Club and there were all these beautifully dressed children dancing little ballets in front of beautifully laid out lawns—such a different world.'

Barty Phillips

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