Throughout the building, therefore, sounds (and smells) are free to flow from space to space, to create a sensorially stimulating atmosphere (and environment), which while being theoretically impractical, works well to create an ordered state of chaos that is believed to train each child's focus and strengthen their ability to concentrate.

Internally, the spaces maintain the Montessori principle that classrooms should be child-centric. With child-sized furniture, and no traditional teacher's desk set in an intimidating position, the need to subdivide spaces was seen as an opportunity to engage and stimulate children. Using Paulownia (an Asian hardwood that is almost as light as balsa wood), hundreds of feather-light timber boxes were made in four modular sizes that can be re-arranged by the children when directed to do so. Ideal for storage, screening, sitting on and climbing, these boxes are just about robust enough without creating opportunities for injury, being soft to the head and with edges softened by 5mm radii. Within these fully flexible spaces the only anchors that exist are the tree courtyards, that bring light, air and life to the centre of the plan, the open-plan lavatories situated at the ends of two segments, and the single sink units that sit in the space like individual village wells, attracting up to eight children at a time who gather round in so-called well conferences.

Other playful touches include the outdoor taps that allow children to clean up and wash down, set on four-inch timber logs, glazed rooflights, that give peep-hole views between roof and classroom; scramble nests around tree trunks; and a slide that provides the most direct route down from the roof. Clearly the children were the principal client for this project. However, saying something for the teachers.

Tazaki has maintained his promise to provide them with their own roof house, with a single step ladder in the staffroom that gives the adults their own direct access and escape route. ROB GREGORY

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