Building a nursery school as a pavilion to a park that does not yet exist, among residential towers that are to be demolished and having just six months for its construction, helped stimulate the creative juices at Alsop. The result is a fun building, a marker of change in its area, and one that will fit in in time.

This is all happening within a masterplan by Terence O'Rourke. The nursery is on the extensive Stonebridge Estate in Harlesden, north London, which has been and will continue to be rebuilt over many years. Demolition of the adjacent tower and slab is a couple of years away, and the nursery will be sitting in a building site after that. The open-feeling, yet contained, building is both a neat architectural move and a protective necessity.

Alsop's play enclosure is an industrial portal frame, adapted to form a trapezium on plan, which broadens to address the proposed park. Corrugated metal and polycarbonate form a sheltering roof. Enclosure 'walls' are of metal mesh, heavier at ground level for security. The architect has made this feel more intriguing than forbidding, though. At high level there are mesh butterflies and rosettes. Along the sides run rows of coloured Flexiglas louvres interspersed with the upper mesh (see Working Details, pages 32-33), which can cast multi-coloured sunlight patterns on the nursery floor. At night, uplighting of the mesh and downlighting from fittings attached to the containers shift the focus again. In time, climbers will populate the lower mesh.

Within this simple enclosure, the architect has created a complex world for children to explore. Three container stacks are disposed to create three partially enclosed outdoor areas for use most of the year – for soft/sand/water play, for exploring a willow and hazel tunnel and den, and for a yurt. Project artist Joanna Turner is experienced in commissioning artworks for special education needs, and initiated, for example, the soft-play area and willow and hazel structures. The yurt was specially made by Bruton Yurt Company; it is building regulations compliant, its timber grid framing insulated with sheep’s wool, with double glazing, appropriate airtightness and underfloor heating.

The recycled containers are stacked three-high to form three buildings, connected by open steel-framed access decks (these do not support the containers, so do not need special structural fire protection). Imported from China to south Wales, the containers were adapted partly off site, with openings made, porthole windows inserted and, on the top floor, the end doors fixed open to support...