Opposite, clockwise: top floor of the Children's Centre, where the roof lets in considerable daylight; a customised yurt is part of the teaching space; "outdoor" play area.

Balconies between. Spray insulation, cabling and plasterboard lining were also done off site, though there was some on-site power circuit connection plus installation of data cabling.

Generally, the containers are structurally self-supporting, although beams have been inserted where the sides were removed, and in a few instances there are columns buried within partitions. The containers were available in 6m or 12m lengths. The majority used here are 6m long, but some have been cut down to create the 9m-long units on the top floor and the staircase enclosures.

Designed for Stonebridge Housing Action Trust and officially known as the Fawood Children's Centre, the project replaces an existing facility. Following the government's Sure Start principles, it provides education (and health checks) for three-year-olds to five-year-olds, as well as support for parenting. The ground floor and first floor are the nursery spaces. The second floor is the Children's Centre, including adult learning facilities and a base for community education workers. The whole Children's Centre can be hired separately by community groups when the nursery is closed in the evenings or at weekends. Overall capacity is around 45 mainstream children plus 10 with special educational needs. (Creche facilities for children up to two years old and their parents are located elsewhere in Brent borough.)

This was a design and build contract, with the architect novated to contractor Durkan. Relations were good and the architect had opportunities to work with subcontractors, especially on the mesh facades. Site workshops were held and mock-ups made during the contract. The only significant source of delay was caused by problems achieving the required quality of work on the containers, usually adapted for more prosaic uses, which led to an opening in October rather than a July handover.

Where containers have previously been used as mainstream buildings, such as a container City in London's Docklands, they lack the feel of second-class accommodation. In the whole scheme is idiosyncratic enough to make the containers feel at home. The cost analysis shows that adapting containers is not cheap. Architect Alan Lai suggests they have about a 20-year life. There is the facility to add to the stacks in future.

The idea of sheltered, protected play spaces is not new. For example, in a more open context, Cottrall & Vermeulen Architects used an overhanging roof to shelter their buildings and playlocks, though there was no direct access to surrounding green space (7.10.04). Here, for Alpco, the nursery has to be more contained. It is an ingenious solution of protection and openness, and of keeping children's world apart, while making an abstract visual statement of future coming to this improving, grey neighbourhood.