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# Dressing for school

Architect Benni Allan  
goes back to class



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Before teaching architecture at the **University of Greenwich** and studying it at **UCL's Bartlett School of Architecture**, [estudio b](#) founder [Benni Allan](#) received his education in southern Spain, at one of the country's first British schools. This year, he has returned to the classroom, leading a renovation project that has given the building a stunning new façade inspired by the surrounding landscape.

The school was established by Benni's father in 1973 and, in the decades since, has delivered a wide-ranging education to 150–300 students at any one time – including Benni – taking them from primary school all the way to A-Level. Given the small size of the student body, its pupils are a diverse, multicultural group, coming from more than 50 countries around the world.

In accordance with Spanish planning laws, the school's location on designated agricultural land means that any new buildings have to be classified as 'temporary' – the current primary school is housed in a 30-year-old prefabricated structure. Despite ongoing maintenance over the years, the building has inevitably

weathered and become tired – it needed a significant facelift. In addition, Benni's younger brother had recently begun to help manage the school, and as well as wanting to ensure its buildings were up to scratch inside and out, and to improve its facilities, he was keen to give the school a radiant new energy and a distinctive architectural identity that would inspire its students in the years and decades to come. When you're a small family-run rural school with limited budgets to play with, having someone in the family who can help is a bonus...



Preparation and plans for La Falda

Re-enter Benni. Despite the demands of the estudio b schedule (including a recent collaboration with artist **João Vasco Paiva** for **Bold Tendencies** and the forthcoming Deptford bar-coffee shop **Stockton**), Allan jumped at the chance.

*'This project means a lot to me; the school has been part of my whole life and has helped to define who I have become – I am very excited to be able to give back in some way. I spent almost 16 years at the school – I still spend time with the friends I shared a class with since reception and a lot of the teachers have been like aunties and uncles to me. Not only am I excited to be able to return to show my appreciation for the school, but I'm also looking forward to offering the schoolchildren a lively new building to enjoy.'*

**- Benni Allan**

Limited funds meant that material options were restricted and only low-tech construction methods would be available, so Benni set about designing a façade that would be inexpensive to construct and relatively simple to fit to the existing building. He chose corrugated tiles in the form of bitumen panels – commonly used on warehouses and farm buildings – as the material could be easily shaped and painted, while being easy to maintain. Fitted to a lightweight aluminium frame, panels of various sizes are arranged in a mural-style composition of different tones of red – a visual reference to the terracotta tiles that characterise the roofs of houses throughout the region, and to the warm, bold shades that dominate the palette of Mediterranean villages.

The interplay of the changing light and strong shadows across the façade transform the building throughout the day, made even more striking by the soft appearance of the panels after they have been painted – a technique developed through extensive testing and prototyping in the studio.

Another visual inspiration for the interplay of colour and pattern is the traditional festival attire of Valencian women – something recognised by the school's teachers as the project developed. As the new façade began to emerge, they began referring to Benni's design as '**La Falda**' – the Dress. The name has stuck.



Preparation and plans for La Falda

The project is very much a grassroots operation. Benni, his family, and a number of his architecture students have undertaken the making and fitting of the facade and the overall renovation of the school themselves. This is not just a budget-saving measure (although the total cost of the build has come in at an astonishingly modest £1,000) – it’s part of the Allan family’s can-do approach.

*‘I have always been used to working with my father and brother. My dad is a talented and determined individual who would rather work out the problem and build it himself than let someone else make it. Our attitudes to making and our can-do approach have definitely come from him.’*

**- Benni Allan**

Benni’s hope is that this do-it-yourself ethos will, in turn, inspire the school’s own students, helping them develop an understanding of materials, construction and the role buildings play in shaping environments and the people within them. In fact, the success of La Falda has already led to plans for future projects having the students themselves involved in designing smaller buildings for the school. It’s entirely possible that Benni Allan may not be the only successful international architect to emerge from a small school in the Spanish countryside.

*‘I hope that the dressing of the school will open students’ imaginations to the possibility of what a building is, and also what learning spaces can be. I feel strongly that learning environments should foster and empower students of all ages to be curious. I think an understanding about materials and buildings is as important to wellbeing and learning as other subjects, and being sympathetic to the built environment around us is key to a sustainable future.’*

**- Benni Allan**

For more information about Benni Allan and La Falda, please contact Jess Knowles at [j.knowles@zetteler.co.uk](mailto:j.knowles@zetteler.co.uk) or on +44 (0)7921 579524.



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## Note to Editors

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### **About Benni Allan**

Born and brought up in Spain, Benni takes a socially engaged, open-ended approach to architecture, creating elegant, thought-provoking spaces that stimulate emotional responses and enhance the experience of those within them. His forward-thinking, experimental practice has attracted international attention since he graduated from UCL's Bartlett School of Architecture, earning him a 'One to Watch' listing from the British Design Council in 2015 and a shortlist nomination for RIBA's Rising Stars Award 2017. Benni worked on projects spanning the cultural, arts, education and residential sectors with architectural practices in London and China before setting up his own studio, estudio b, in 2016.

Allan shares his collaborative and process-driven approach as both a lecturer at the University of Greenwich, and as a RIBA ambassador working with schools in Hackney to broaden awareness of architecture as a practice and profession.

**Instagram** [@benniallan](#)

**Twitter** [@benni\\_allan](#)

### **About estudio b**

Founded by Allan in 2016, estudio b has worked on fashion showsplaces for the likes of Topman Design, Erdem, D&G and Ports 1961; retail environments for brands including Penhaligons, Adidas, ASOS and Black Milk; as well as arts, renovation, extension and speculative projects across the UK, Europe and China.

<https://estudiob.co.uk/>