

Location

Harbourside, Bristol

Brief project description

The construction of a centre for science and technology, natural history and the environment, comprising attractions and facilities (Explore and Wildwalk) and including an IMAX cinema.

Cost of project

£97.3 million

Participants

Main funding partnership: Millennium Commission (£44.3m); South West of England Regional Development Agency (£17.1m); and Bristol City Council (£15.7m). Architects, Michael Hopkins & Partners (Wildwalk); Chris Wilkinson Architects (Explore).

Timescale for the project

@Bristol opened in July 2000. During 2001 and 2002 it won a series of architectural, environmental and tourism awards.

Space location

@Bristol is housed in a redeveloped dockside warehouse (Explore) and a new building (Wildwalk and IMAX). There is a dedicated education suite in each building.

Background to the project

@Bristol, an educational charity, is part of a £450 million urban rejuvenation scheme in the city's derelict Harbourside area.

The development process

The two education suites were conceived and designed when the project's main focus was on finalising exhibitions, and prior to the development of a clear education strategy. The education suites were situated away from the exhibition areas with education originally seen as a separate activity. Fitting-out of the suites was said to be 'at the end of the queue when the money started to run out'.

The outcome

@Bristol delivers an extensive programme of workshops, themed events and specialist resources supporting curriculum requirements for Primary and Secondary pupils and their teachers. There are also numerous family and other group events and outreach activities. Much of this programme is carried out in the two education suites and around the interactive and multi-media exhibition halls, including a TV studio and planetarium.

The flexible and creative use of spaces and a good understanding between the education and exhibition teams help to overcome the disadvantages of location and fitting-out of the suites – disadvantages created by there being little specialist educational programming input during development. Both education and exhibitions benefit from belonging to the same department, comprising education, project management, ICT and maintenance staff. In addition, the building is wired throughout, adding to the ability to adapt spaces for different activities.

Excellent chemistry and bio-chemistry labs are offset by the existence of a specialist food science lab that can no longer be justified. The two laboratories need upgrading in order to offer all the technical facilities for lab-based work across the science curriculum.

The Wildwalk education spaces are regarded as superficially elegant but impractical. The main building (or 'Explore') learning spaces are not finished to the same standard as the exhibition spaces; however, they are seen as 'serviceable'.

Specific problems for the centre include some poor acoustics, difficult access to toilets and storage facilities, and a noisy air-conditioning system. Ben Barker, Education & Programmes Manager, points to the fit-out not being wholly suited to young children, with desks and workbenches that are too high. But the overriding problem, adds Director of Learning Catherine Aldridge, is that the project was initially more 'architecture-led than looking at day-to-day practicalities'. For example, the Wildwalk foyer has such bad acoustics that two groups together create an unacceptable noise. The main access to the Wildwalk education suite is by a small lift, making it frequently unusable by groups.



Features:

- The need for input from education staff (at a high level) in the development process for a new site
- The need to consider ease of access for educational groups to dedicated education spaces and in terms of circulation around the site
- The need to consider the location and visibility of education spaces in relation to exhibition areas
- The need to consider education as a funding priority when developing a new building which includes education spaces
- The benefit of close working between education and exhibition staff



Indeed, some original design decisions seem to have ignored the fact that the education team would be handling large groups. The meet-and-greet system had to be relocated from the education suites to the main foyer, making a trolley store redundant. There are no dedicated lunch facilities. The TV studio, within the exhibition area, is a closed space that discourages visitor participation, and is being rethought.

Lessons learned

- Always ensure that there is educational involvement and expertise at the development stage, with a clear vision for the programming needs of the spaces
- Running a state-of-the-art science centre requires regular updating and refurbishment
- The visibility of learning spaces – or, in the case of @Bristol, integrating them within the exhibition spaces – is now a priority
- Ensure that there is a workable balance between space for front-of-house activities and space for workshops, storage and offices

Key factors

- An honesty about what is wrong, coupled with creative thinking and hard work to make the spaces work sufficiently well
- A joint approach to education and exhibition development
- A clear understanding about what needs to be changed in any future development
- A proactive approach to learners, in terms of the interactive outreach programme and seeing schools as crucial partners in developing future learning programmes and spaces, including 'virtual' learning spaces

'We know that science centres have pioneered valuable ways of motivating, making accessible, engaging, and conveying fundamental scientific concepts. The challenge for us is to be more proactive in getting schools to accept and absorb these new techniques.' *John Durant, Chief Executive, @Bristol*

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