

Bolton Museum & Art Gallery

Project and Space title

Clore Activity Space

Location

Bolton Museum & Art Gallery is located in a 1930s purpose-built crescent in the centre of Bolton, Lancashire.

Brief project description

A flexible, multi-use education space located within the main Museum gallery.

Cost of project

Bolton Museum & Art Gallery could not afford to fund the space from existing budgets and so applied to the Clore Small Grants Programme for museum and gallery education, funded by the Clore Duffield Foundation. The Museum requested funding of £20,000, but due to fierce competition for limited funds received £12,150. The education space has been created using this reduced budget.

Participants

Dave Edwards is the Museum's Education & Access Manager supported by two part-time Education Access Officers, Tricia Harper and Miriam Moritz. Further support is provided by Liz Shaw, House Manager for Hall i' th' Wood Museum. Jon Finch, ex-Collections Services Manager (now Head of Policy & Development at North West Museums, Libraries and Archives Council), was involved in planning the education space and Ged Gaffey, the Borough's Building Services Manager, handled the fit-out.

Timescale for the project

Work on the education space started in October 2003 and was completed in December 2003. The space was officially opened in February half-term week 2004.

Space location & dimensions

The education space is, in fact, two spaces located at the rear of the first level of the general Museum gallery, on either side of a staircase and with a short open corridor linking one side to the other. The two spaces measure 86.52m² in total.

Summary of the project brief

A flexible education space located within the body of the Museum and providing easy access to the Museum's collections for learners of all ages. The space should be dedicated to educational activities and contain flexible seating and work tables, sinks and storage for resources.

Background to the project

Education is central to the work of the Museum, with a busy programme attracting 11,000 school and family visitors out of an overall annual visitor figure of 127,000 – although, as Dave Edwards explains, 'all previous education work has been done in galleries, with no facilities'. Bolton Museum & Art Gallery is funded by Bolton Metropolitan Borough and houses a collection comprising Fine Art, Egyptology, Natural History, Local and Industrial History and Ethnology.

The Museum building is home to an aquarium (in the basement), an extensive library and archive on the ground floor and the Museum & Art Gallery on the first floor. The basement also houses a purpose-built lecture theatre.

The three first-floor galleries display an impressive Egyptology collection, an art gallery (with changing exhibitions) and a general Museum gallery on two levels housing a wide range of artefacts including one of the key inventions of the industrial revolution, Samuel Crompton's 'Spinning Mule'.

The development process

Gillian Wolfe, Specialist Adviser to the Clore Duffield Foundation, visited the Museum in May 2003, as part of the assessment process for the Small Grants Programme. This meeting led to a review of options for the location and layout of the education space.

When the Museum learned that a reduced amount had been awarded for the project, the education team met to discuss priorities. It was decided that access to water and a floor to be messy on were the essentials, and that the space could do without a fitted screen to separate it from the rest of the gallery – the screen would have been an expensive addition because of the gallery's high ceilings and the location of the education space on either side of a staircase.

The outcome

The education space was created by removing four display cases and their contents. The area to the left of the stairs – when looking from the body of the gallery – has been fitted with two sinks at different heights and kitchen-style units with a linoleum splash-back. As the sink area is located within the body of the Museum, there was a concern about the danger of flooding and damage to artefacts. The simple solution – thought up by one of the education staff – has been to install a stopcock under each sink and a lock on the sink cupboard doors; the water is turned off and the cupboards are locked when the education space is not in use.

The education space houses stools and mini-tables which can be set up to create one long rectangular table, or rearranged into small clusters of tables. The area benefits from three full-length windows, although currently these are covered in UV film. The space can be used for slide shows – the team briefed 'dim-out' rather than 'blackout' – for formal education and for informal family sessions including handling sessions.

Features:

- An education space located within the main exhibition spaces
- The possibility of creating an effective, new learning space on a limited budget
- Finding that creating a dedicated education space can improve the morale of staff and raise the profile of education within an institution
- The benefit of a strong project team
- The need to focus on priorities and on achieving the possible



The space is home to one Apple Mac computer which is used for running slide shows or CDs. The education team's view is that, with limited resources, it is best to focus on what the Museum has to offer rather than trying to compete with schools in the provision of IT and ICT. As David Blair (a freelance educator) explains: 'When classes come here ... they're not here to look at a computer, they want to see the real thing.'

The area to the right of the stairs will house temporary displays, low-tech interactives such as a wooden Noah's Ark and a Lighthouse, along with informal seating.

The education space lacks the kind of storage needed for bulky art materials, stimulus materials and interactives. A useful cupboard under the stairs is currently used by the cleaners; a large museum store located behind the sink area of the space currently houses the Museum's insect collection. The aim is for the education team to take over the use of both spaces, but not in the immediate future.

There are ambitious plans to redevelop Bolton town centre, focused on the Museum and Le Mans Crescent of which it is part, but these involve potential PFI initiatives or substantial bids to the Heritage Lottery Fund. While plans are developing, the Bolton education team are pleased to have created a new, dedicated space on a limited budget – and a space that works well. As Dave Edwards says, 'We don't think of this as finished ... we have the floor, we have the sinks, the units, but apart from that it's developing and it will change.'

Morale has been boosted by the effective teamwork displayed during the project, and by the new-found visibility of education within the Museum. The team are pleased that they did not install a screen and feel that the open-plan space works well. A change in flooring from the gallery to the education space is the only discernible difference which helps to ensure a seamless sight line.

Lessons learned

- To create an education space, you may not need as much money as you think – but you *will* need to be clear about what you want, identify your priorities, and be realistic about what you can afford

- If you know a friendly architect, consult them – advice will not necessarily cost you
- An open-plan education space may mean that noise management is a potential problem, but it also brings benefits, notably the visibility of learning as an activity central to the working of the site
- Make storage a priority or you will struggle forever after. Storage in an art space needs to be capable of holding 3D objects (stimulus or works created in the space). A plan chest is the best thing for larger paper sizes
- Standard kitchen units will not be sufficiently deep for storing art paper, and the central support strut at the front of the cupboard will make it difficult to use the storage space effectively. Standard kitchen shelves will not be strong enough for heavy art materials
- Standard drain fittings will not be robust enough to deal with paints, sand and other art materials; you will need a wide-bore drain and a filter – in this instance, plumbers may not always know best

- Work out good wall display space to avoid problems with unstable display screens

- Focus on the possible – grand schemes are exciting, but they can prove distracting

Key factors

- Teamwork and commitment
- Working out priorities
- Clarity of vision and determination to create a new education space, however limited the budget

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