

The Horniman Museum

Space title

Education Centre

Location

London Road, Forest Hill, London

Brief project description

A new Education Centre as part of a larger redevelopment of the Museum.

Cost of project

Building costs of £13.5 million, of which the Education Centre cost £642,000.

Participants

Client, Horniman Museum; Architects, Allies and Morrison; Funders, Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) plus a range of grant-giving organisations and individual donations.

Timescale for the project

In 1995 planning began for a new development, with the submission to HLF of a grant application in 1997. The original grant award of £17 million was cut by 20% and a new design approved. The 'new' Horniman opened in June 2002 and projected visitor figures of 250,000 were exceeded by 14% in the first year.

Space location & dimensions

The Education Centre forms part of the new development at the front of the Museum, and comprises 200 square metres. The Museum, in the Art Nouveau architectural style, is situated in 16.5 acres (6.6 hectares) of landscaped gardens on a hill overlooking London.

Background to the project

Frederick Horniman was a Victorian business leader, tea merchant, MP, and philanthropist. He was also a prodigious collector of cultural or ethnographic artefacts, natural history specimens, and musical instruments. In 1901 he commissioned a new museum from architect Charles Harrison Townsend to house his vast collection. He then donated both the museum and the collection 'to the people of London forever, as a free museum for their recreation, instruction and enjoyment'.

To celebrate the Museum's centenary, the trustees commissioned a new extension to expand and enhance the overcrowded galleries; provide new facilities such as a café and shop; and create a new Education Centre. The overall aims of, and requirements for, the Centre included the creation of:

- two multi-functional, self-contained education spaces (each about 68m²) for the full range of education activities such as wet work to object-handling sessions, plus presentations, workshops and seminars
- associated facilities such as toilets, lunch areas, cloakrooms, and storage
- a centre that would accommodate school and family groups, community and adult learning groups both within and outside Museum hours

- a bright, spacious, creative feel to the space

An adjacent Hands-on Base was also to be redesigned and upgraded.

The development process

The original brief was put together by the director and senior management team, comprising head of finance, assistant director for curatorial and public services, and head of collections management and special projects. The latter, Kirsten Walker, acted as project champion or leader through whom all consultations were channelled and became the key link with the architects.

The Museum's different teams, such as education, were asked to specify what they wanted in terms of spaces and what should be in them. Drawings and descriptions were circulated for comment and amendment at the two key stages of applying for planning permission and agreeing the detailed designs. The teams were also brought in to discuss specific aspects of the development that affected their future work. An internal team, plus an external consultant, handled access issues.

Two advantages of this approach were that the Museum was always on top of the budgetary implications of changes, and that there was one person able to maintain long-term oversight of the development process.

Kirsten Walker explains: 'One factor was that we started to design the project with one group of people and finished it with another. For example, the head of education changed halfway through and each wanted different things. So we were able to adapt to the changing needs.'

Finbarr Whooley, who runs curatorial and public services, adds: 'One difficulty was interpreting complex drawings. So we always tried to ensure that they were understood. Even so, people sometimes didn't take things seriously until they saw them in reality. That didn't really happen with the education team because they crawled all over the plans.'

Head of Education Carolyn Roberts explains her team's approach: 'We used a 3D model to test the logistics of the "get ins" and "get outs" of the number of groups visiting each day. This helped us plan the layout of furniture and understand the capacity of the spaces for different activities. 2D plans can be hard to follow and models can provide a more accessible and faster consultation format. Each team member acted as an advocate for the different audiences they served, and consulted informally with local contacts and networks in the community.'



Features:

- The value of a project leader, providing continuity in a long and complex building project
- The need for education staff to find a way of understanding, and engaging with, the plans for a new learning space
- Coping with a budget cut part-way through a project
- The value of education staff being involved in sourcing fittings and furniture for a learning space
- The importance of managing the realities of a finished space



This coherent framework for developing the new building also enabled the Museum to cope with having to reduce the budget by 20% because of the eventual size of the HLF grant. Space sizes were reduced or redesigned and a new aquarium was abandoned. But there were to be no cuts in quality. The overall result, according to the staff, is 'a better building' because they had to think harder about what they really wanted and had to be more creative in designing particular areas.

The outcome

Despite having to be scaled down, the Education Centre does what the Museum intended. The two rooms, with a set of sliding doors, have created 'a transformable space that works'. Just as vital, the Centre is self-contained within the Museum with an additional, separate access so that activities can be held outside Museum hours. Access from within the Museum is by a door with a coded lock to prevent unauthorised entry.

The whole Centre is enhanced by large windows down to the floor and, in one room, by skylights. One room is used for wet work; the other for 'dry' activities such as workshops, seminars and lectures. However, their success often relies on good management in order to overcome some less successful space and fittings decisions.

'We did source the tables, chairs and benches ourselves. They are light, foldable or stackable, easy to clean and replace. We looked at what schools use and went to educational suppliers, got samples and tested them out.'

For example, the second room can only be accessed through the first as a corridor could not be accommodated in the final design. The sliding doors are very heavy because of the acoustic baffling, which in turn does not work as well as intended. So discussion sessions in one room cannot be scheduled at the same time as a school group's lunchtime in the other. All security staff are trained to work the heavy sliding doors.

The toilet facilities are exclusive to the Centre. They are fitted to a high quality and usable by all ages – although some fittings are not best suited to heavy use by children, and do need regular monitoring to keep equipment and cubicles working effectively. There are not enough toilets but the number was determined by the size of space available. For the same reason, the Centre's corridors tend to be too narrow but coat-hanging space is recessed. The general management and cleaning regime for the Centre is carefully organised to ensure a smooth operation, helped by the fact that Deputy Facilities Manager Barbara Alcaraz has an education background. The regime is hampered only by a lino floor that has a tendency to ruck up in places.

There is some making-do. For example, the 'green' building attached to the front of the Museum in the 1990s was to be a temporary interactive classroom and environment centre. The education team now uses part of it as offices because they have outgrown those in the Education Centre itself.

Lessons learned

The importance of sourcing fittings and furniture is one of the major lessons to come out of this Horniman development. The results tend to be more successful where the education and facilities teams made the decisions, rather than those with less direct experience. Often the teams were asked to state their requirements but were not involved in the selection or purchasing process. This has led to the heavy sliding doors; cupboard shutters that are hard to operate, and catch fingers because of too little space between shelf edge and shutter; ropes for working blinds that children love to play with; and hi-tech soap dispensers that cannot cope with children's endless fascination with new things. In short, high quality should not lead to over-sophistication.

'Look for simple, straightforward solutions when fitting-out heavily used areas,' recommends Barbara Alcaraz, 'and always test things out first.' A related issue is being able to source replacement parts both easily and inexpensively: this means seeking, wherever possible, local suppliers or those experienced in dealing with schools' needs. Head of Education Carolyn Roberts adds: 'We did source the tables, chairs and benches ourselves. They are light, foldable or stackable, easy to clean and replace. We looked at what schools use and went to educational suppliers, got samples and tested them out.'

Key factors

The critical success factors of the new development, and of the Education Centre in particular, include the detailed, collaborative and firmly led development process; the determination not to have the vision spoilt by a major budget reduction; and the emphasis on drawing on the direct experience and expertise of the users – both staff and school and community participants. Head of Development Marcus Pugh points out that it is a building that now works for all its diverse participants: 'The Horniman is very consultative, formally and informally, and that has led to a great resource.' He adds, 'It has become a bit like a village hall in the way the local community use it for activities.'

