

The River & Rowing Museum

Space title

Education Centre

Location

Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

Brief project description

The Museum was planned in two phases of development and included a multi-function education space. However, as the project developed, a second building was added to the plans and a purpose-built education room was included. Both phases were completed in time for the opening in 1998. After five years, there is now a need to increase the space available for education use and '... to improve on the quality of everything that education do'.

Cost of project

The total cost of building the River & Rowing Museum up to opening in 1998 was in the region of £10 million. The planned cost of the redevelopment of the Education Centre will be in excess of £500,000.

Participants

Design and construction of the Museum as a whole was mainly funded by the Arbib Foundation, while funding to set up the education service came from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The Museum was designed by David Chipperfield Architects.

The redevelopment of the Education Centre has been designed by a local firm, Blackwood Architects, working closely with David Chipperfield Architects. Funding for the redevelopment is being sought from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Timescale for the project

The development of the Museum as an institution and a building took about ten years, with contracts being signed in the early 1990s and construction completed by August 1998.

In 2003, the Museum held a fundraising ball to raise the match funding required for redeveloping the Education Centre; planning permission was obtained and the application to the HLF was submitted in December 2003. If funding is allocated, the work is planned to start in autumn 2004.

Space location & dimensions

The Education Centre forms the ground-floor level of one wing of the main Museum complex. Currently it comprises one dedicated education space plus a separate foyer containing coat-hanging space for visitors' belongings, and male and female toilets. The existing teaching space measures 72m². The new Education Centre will measure 450m², with enlarged teaching space (216m² in total).

Summary of the project brief

The Museum's plan is to convert the storeroom located adjacent to the current education studio into a second dedicated education space; and to develop a large, informal learning-space 'foyer' incorporating toilets, cloakroom and lunch area with refreshment bar. The new Centre will also allow for improved storage, education offices, and preparation space.

The foyer will be created by building an extension on to the front of the Education Centre, over the existing terrace. This will avoid the expense of ground works – the whole building is located on the flood plain and rests on stilts.

Background to the project

The Museum's education programme has proved highly successful, attracting approximately 8,000 educational users in 2003 – out of an overall figure of 60,000 visitors to the Museum. The education programme is led by a full-time head of education, with an education administrator and assistant, and delivered by a team of six freelance museum tutors who liaise directly with teachers in developing and testing courses. There are a total of 21 curriculum-related courses covering a wide range of subjects and age groups – attendance is charged at £2.95 per head including VAT (2003 prices), with overhead costs subsidised by the Museum. Details of the education programme are published in an annual course prospectus. The Museum also offers a variety of less formal courses for adult learners, children and family events, and adult specialist lectures.

The development process

The River & Rowing Museum is a successful and award-winning building. As Paul Mains, Chief Executive, explains, any problems with the present education space developed from the original brief: 'The architect's brief here was largely about the galleries and the public spaces. Yes, there was an Education Centre, but the architect wasn't particularly focused on that and his experience wasn't in that area. If we learn anything from this ... we didn't perhaps have a strong enough team facing up to the architect and the architect therefore took more responsibility ... it's an inspiring space, but the devil is always in the detail and sometimes that requires a much more collaborative approach.'

The plans for redevelopment of the Centre have been created through a collaborative process involving the Museum staff, Paul Swart as a specialist in school building, and David Chipperfield as a concept architect. All parties have been keen to maintain the integrity of the original building.

Paul Swart, the architect for the redevelopment, confirms the need to pay real attention to the process: 'I think you can't underestimate the focus you have to put on getting a building into position. In doing that, all else gets excluded unless you set up a separate team to do the next phase or to look at how the Education Centre will work. You can't help the fact that everyone is drawn into that construction spiral.'



The outcome

The existing Education Centre is an attractive and useable space, but does have flaws:

- It can be cold, and natural light is limited to one large glass window at the far end of the room and high-level windows along one side
- The original fitted furniture matched the rest of the building, but proved to be less than practical for its function: the cupboard doors were heavy and the height of the surfaces was not suitable for adult or child users. The Museum team solved these problems themselves, replacing the cupboard doors and creating pull-down worktops to cover the sinks, all with the help of a friendly local builder. The result is an improvement, but there are still some difficulties – the sinks have to be aired to prevent mildew, and the pull-down worktops are rather heavy
- The floor covering is traditional lino which shows every mark; it has to be washed twice a day and treated with a coat of emulsion polish once a week. Paul Swart points out that, in an education space, the floor covering should be vinyl with welded joints
- There is a lack of storage space, particularly for large-scale interactives, e.g. those used to demonstrate river processes. These items are currently stored underneath the education room and moved around, as required, by two maintenance staff. The storage space restricts the use of clay and plaster as do the sinks, in terms of the disposal of materials

- Access to the Internet is limited by the structure of the building which has exposed concrete ceilings and no grids or holes for cables. Chris Adams, the Museum's Property Manager, was previously facilities manager in a large Secondary school and knows from experience the need to over-specify in terms of cabling by 400%; this rule will be employed in the foyer space of the redeveloped Education Centre

Lessons learned

The major lessons learned for the River & Rowing Museum are the need for:

1. An education manager to oversee an education project
2. A project team to oversee the new developments
3. An architect with real understanding of education processes and spaces

Paul Swart has observed lessons in practice at the River & Rowing Museum, to see how children move around and to see the space in use. As an architect, he thinks that experience in educational settings is vital: 'You need to have been through a few temporary classrooms and a few Primary school extensions to learn the nitty gritty ... there's not a lot of architecture in some of these things and you don't want to have it, in a way; you want to suit the children first.'

Chris Adams, Property Manager, points out that a useable, versatile space is one of the most difficult spaces to design because 'something is always at the expense of something else'. He goes on to emphasise the importance of the architect's approach and experience: 'The architect in this area needs to be the sort of architect who will come in, spend time, listen, look, listen again, go back, come back and keep working until you come to the point where everybody is confident in it [the brief] – not just the architect and ... not just the client.'

Key factors

Emily Leach started work at the Museum as a curator, having worked for the Oxfordshire Museum Service in both educational and curatorial roles. When the River & Rowing Museum opened, she became Head of Education and has managed the education programme ever since; her breadth of experience is invaluable to the Museum.

The River & Rowing Museum team enjoy healthy debates about what they are doing and why. In the redeveloped Education Centre, storage space will be separated from preparation space, and will be designed to facilitate organisation and order. **The team would like to have a dedicated education technician whose job it is to maintain equipment and to ensure that items are labelled and always stored in the right place.**

They have discussed the use of new technology and conclude that, while Internet access is desirable, it is also important for a museum to offer something 'other' in terms of an educational experience. As Emily Leach says, 'I've tended to take the line that it is handling objects that's important because you can do that here and you can't do it in the classroom.' Paul Mains agrees: 'The point is that they're coming to the Museum for a different experience.'

Paul Mains further points out that it is vital to be realistic about what you can offer and how often facilities will be used. A lecture theatre may sound like a necessity, but if it's only used twice a month, it's a waste of space. He adds that the River & Rowing Museum is fortunate in that it has dedicated spaces for corporate hire and an in-house maintenance team who look after all the day-to-day running of the spaces in the Museum, including the Education Centre. It also has in-house IT expertise and plans to develop its use of new technologies, with flat screens and audio-visual displays in the galleries and other areas of the Museum.

Features:

- The need to plan for the future, creating a building that can accommodate changes, e.g. cabling for new technology
- The challenge of coping with success
- The importance of a strong project team
- The need for input from education staff (at a high level) in the development process for a new site
- The value of an architect who spends time understanding education and the use of education spaces

