

The Development Process

'Functionality is the main goal for learning spaces.' *Museum Educator, Anon*

The development process for a proposed new or refurbished space – or where you are just trying to make the best of your existing space – can be summed up as 'the three Cs': communication, consultation, collaboration. Whoever is heading the project must ensure that all three happen.

This process by which a learning space is developed is as important to get right as its location and what goes inside it. Who helps to make the decisions and how those decisions are made determine the kind of space you will end up with. If the education team is not properly involved in this, the odds are you will not get the space you want – nor the fittings, furnishing and equipment you need to run successful programmes.

'Make sure you and your entire team, and potential users of the space, are involved ... Ensure that directors are clear about who the space is for – is it likely to get overshadowed by the need to bring in revenue and be used for corporate hire/events?' *Museum Educator, Anon*

Forming a project team

Whatever the type or size of project, form a 'project team' – even if it is just you and a colleague. This enables you to share ideas and responsibilities, and sends the message that you mean business. The more ambitious the project, the larger the team; and in a listed building, the team should include a conservation officer. The head of education should always have a central role in any team's decision-making process.

With a new build or major refurbishment, the team should appoint a project champion or leader to:

- act as the main conduit for all information and documentation between architect(s) and the site
- establish and manage effective liaison and consultation internally, including with building and conservation staff

- manage the different lines of decision-making with external bodies such as trustees, owners and funders
- maintain continuity throughout the project, especially in the light of staff changes
- agree timetables that suit the demands on the staff as well as the architects
- ensure that the different teams on the site, such as education or curatorial staff, have access to and can negotiate on those elements of the development that directly affect their work

The project team should itself reflect the three Cs, as well as setting up straightforward and transparent arrangements for keeping all staff up to date, having consultation sessions at key points, and ensuring that staff work together rather than in isolation. The project leader's role will sometimes be that of a referee ensuring fair play and bringing new players on to the field.

At one site, different teams (such as education and visitor services) 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.

No team can embrace all the professional and practical know-how that is required to create a successful learning space. The project team, and the different teams, should therefore draw on the knowledge, experience and expertise of particular individuals either internally or from outside. It might be a good idea to establish sub-groups to research and develop specific aspects of the space, like access.

As emphasised above, it is vital to consult with the users of the learning space, and of the site as a whole. The education team should ensure that its actual and potential users are consulted in some effective way: this includes children and young people. Look for ways to do this based on practical involvement in developing the space. For example, children can help to work out whether the proposed space is the right size for the numbers and activities envisaged. One site got each education team member to act as an advocate for the different audiences it served, and consulted informally with local contacts and community networks.

The stronger the team, the more you will be able to question and propose on equal terms with other senior management, architect(s) and contractor(s). That will help you to steer the direction of the new space according to your imperatives rather than be driven by theirs.

'... the devil is always in the detail and ... that requires a much more collaborative approach.' *Paul Mainds, Chief Executive, The River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames*

Get involved

Whatever the scope of the project – from rethink to new build – carry out these three tasks:

Check out the building: If you are working in an historic, listed building with a management plan, do you know the implications for the siting, size or fitting-out of the kind of learning space you want? Talk to buildings and conservation staff.

Agree on whom the space is for: For example, is it for a broad range of users, for specific types of user, for the staff who work with them – or all three? This exercise will also help you to define what *you* mean by a successful space rather than what others – such as trustees, senior management, funders or architects – might mean.

Do the research: Visit other sites with learning spaces that interest you. Ask how they went about rethinking or refurbishing the space. With any new build, find out what other spaces the chosen architects have designed. Become familiar with the technical jargon and culture of architecture. Learn to read and interpret architectural drawings (see *Where to Find Out More*, p.46).

'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.' *Carolyn Roberts, Head of Education, Horniman Museum, London*

Changing circumstances

A key test for any project is how you respond when budgets are cut or problems arise over locations and dimensions. The clear and coherent framework established by the Horniman Museum is a useful model here, although the project team crucially did not include the head of education. They were able to cope with a 20% cut in the funding available for the Museum's redevelopment. Spaces were smaller but quality was maintained and a 'better building' resulted because of the team's ability to 'just think harder about what we really wanted and be more creative about the design'.

In such circumstances the value of the three Cs comes into play even more, because they allow teams to focus on the practical side of an enforced rethink – as at Bolton Museum & Art Gallery, where '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'.

'Talking to people helped us build a vision of what it should look like and how it should be built.' *Dave Millis, Architect, Bishops Wood Environmental Centre, Worcestershire*

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