

Working with Architects

'When it came to briefing the architectural team, we knew what we wanted from the building but not what it might look like. That was the architects' job.' *John Rhymmer, Director, Bishops Wood Environmental Centre, Worcestershire*

Architects may only be brought in for new-build projects and are not always involved in rethinking or refurbishing a learning space. When they are, the three Cs of communication, consultation and collaboration apply equally to them. The most successful new or refurbished learning spaces – whatever the size – have come about from a close understanding between client and architect of what is needed. That means talking and listening, as well as designing.

Where you do just have a space to rethink or reshape, and little money with which to make changes, you may well feel that some architectural or design advice or expertise would help. If so, this might come informally from within – for example, from the trustees, the site's friends, regular visitors, or local authority and other networks. (For guidance on how to find an architect, see CAFE's *Creating Excellent Buildings: A Guide for Clients in Where to Find Out More*, p.46.)

It is the individuals involved, and their ability to collaborate effectively, that determine the success of the client/architect relationship. This means understanding each other's approach and needs in terms of designing and fitting-out the space; and identifying and acknowledging gaps in expertise or knowledge of both client and architect.

When an architect is on board, your task is to decide what is needed and provide a 'starter brief' as a guide. The architect's task is to add value, and some magic, to that brief and to the eventual space. Your *joint* task is to come up with the final brief that will deliver what the client wants and the architect can design. In short, it is a two-way process. How can that be achieved? Four of our case studies in particular highlight how this process works: Bishops Wood Environmental Centre, the Horniman Museum, the River & Rowing Museum, and the Women's Library.

Our case studies show that it is best to have one person to act as the main link between staff and architects. Establish regular and straightforward ways for staff to consult together. How this is done depends on your site's culture and staffing structure, but bear in mind the following three crucial points:

- Do not to allow hierarchies to restrict the involvement of the education team in the consultation and decision-making processes – whatever the size of the project. Our work with a wide range of sites highlights that the head of education should always be part of the senior management team, and be seen as a key player in planning any learning space project
- Ensure that everyone is involved in the consultation process in ways that are effective, transparent and trusting
- Make certain that everyone understands what is being proposed. Explain technical terms and architectural drawings and jargon. Always say when you don't understand something. Finbarr Whooley, Horniman Museum's Head of Curatorial & Public Services, comments: '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 it in reality. That didn't really happen with the education team because they crawled all over the plans!'

Don't expect architects to know everything about your learning activities and their requirements; insist on additional expertise being brought in where necessary. In some cases, the architect researches and develops the learning aspects of the new or refurbished space: such an approach can provide new insights into its location, shape and content. Paul Swart, architect for the redevelopment of the learning space in the River & Rowing Museum, says that experience in educational settings is vital:

'You need to have been through a few temporary classrooms and 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.'

Your first job is to ensure that the right people talk to the architects. This is particularly important when those running a site are not commissioning the new building or space themselves. For example, Techniquet Director Colin Johnson explains: 'Realising they did not have the operational experience of such a centre, the Corporation [Cardiff Bay Development Corporation] told the architects that while they were the client in one sense, the functioning client was Techniquet. We had a series of meetings and brought in people to refine our mission and sat down with the architects and looked at the details and how to match the needs with the budget available.'

A vital ingredient, both for you and for any architect involved, is always to show commitment to the project. This helps to maintain momentum, sustain morale within the organisation, and cement the client/architect relationship.

'If you have an enthusiastic client, the building reflects that. If you get clients who don't know what they want, you have problems.' *Dave Millis, Architect, Bishops Wood Environmental Centre, Worcestershire*

Some of the architects we spoke to listed the following key issues to consider when designing a new or refurbished learning space:

Developing the brief

- What activities do you want to carry out in the space?
- What effects will these have on the exhibition/display space?
- What is the best environment for these activities? Focus on the activities and avoid trying to cater for every possible option
- Do you want the learning space to be adjacent to or located within the display of artefacts? Consider the interest created by such a location, but also the potential risks to the artefacts (see *Location & Dimensions of the Space*, p.12).

Working together

- Ask the architect or project manager to write or adapt the brief based on your detailed requirements
- Refine and agree the final brief together
- Appoint a 'project champion' – someone who has the passion and energy to drive the project forward
- Build in a mechanism for reinvigorating the process – have set-date periodic reviews
- Revisit and amend aspirations to ensure that the project is achievable; this will help keep people focused
- Maintain and support the involvement of those who will use and manage the space
- Ask the design team to be flexible and accountable; hold them to what is agreed
- Expect and allow for the growth or reduction of funds and ambition
- Trust in the relationship with the architect
- Respect the use of each other's time

The key question to address together throughout is: Will the learning space work the way you want it to?



1 & 5
The Horniman Museum
2
Bolton Museum & Art Gallery
3
Techniquet Science Discovery Centre
4
The Women's Library

