

Location & Dimensions of the Space

The first questions when rethinking a learning space are:

- Is it located in the right place?
- Is it the size we want?

If the answer is no in either or both cases, consider the possibility of relocating to a different space, or reshaping the existing one.

For a proposed new space, consider:

- Where should it be located?
- What size should it be?

To answer these questions, address – and consult on – such issues as:

- What do we want to do in the space?
- How many different types of activity do we want to offer?
- What areas do we want within the overall space (e.g. teaching and non-teaching, offices, toilets, reception area, lunch area)?
- How often will the space be used?
- How many children or adults do we want to cater for in a group?
- How many people will be involved overall?
- Based on the above, how much space do we need?

- Where do we want the space to be, in relation to other spaces in the site (e.g. exhibition areas, staff offices, café or shop, gardens or dedicated outdoor areas, toilet facilities if not exclusive to the learning space, main entrance or a separate entrance)?

- Do we want the space to be situated in a central, public and highly visible location?

The site as a whole has a huge influence on the location and dimensions of the learning space within it, in terms of its own geographical location, structure and shape. That influence extends to perceptions of learning in cultural sites. For example, the view that the whole site is a learning space may be valid but can also limit a site's thinking about what a dedicated learning space should be for and where it should be. This is another justification for having an educational presence at senior management level, and on any project team for developing such spaces.

At the same time, compromises have to be made for the simple reason that a fully flexible, useable space is so difficult to design or rethink because something is always at the expense of something else.

In addition, disadvantages relating to the location, structure and shape of the site as a whole can create problems for or limit the potential of any new learning spaces within it. This can be particularly challenging with a listed building where conservation issues need to be considered and where innovation and radical thinking may be required more than for a brand new site.

'Dimensions were controlled by the original building, as were the accessibility and location.'
Museum Educator, Anon

Related to this is the need to build flexibility into a space, in terms of types of use and future development.

The continuing adaptability of the building is due to the design and layout of spaces being carefully thought about at the start. (Extract from the Techniquist case study)

Such problems should be addressed collaboratively between education team and project team – and any architectural team – in order to deliver a space that adheres as closely as possible to the agreed brief. Taking the time to understand the issues of location and dimension, and being helped to appreciate these, can enable the education team to resolve many difficulties in acceptable ways.

Most learning spaces in non-national sites are located on the ground floor, with others tending to be either on the first floor or in the basement. National sites tend to favour basement locations for learning spaces. This can create problems of light levels as well as diminishing the visibility and status of education in the site. Each site must decide which floor best suits its own space. However, one crucial issue is accessibility. If a space is located above or below ground level, make sure there are lifts of a sufficient capacity to move people to and from that level quickly and easily.

Putting spaces together

Work out which areas need to be adjacent to one another. Decide if you want the learning space to be next to or within an exhibition or gallery area. For example, at the Lighthouse in Glasgow, the education offices are easily accessible from the Education Workshop space.

'Press for as much space as possible. Children, especially, are not second-class citizens and shouldn't be squeezed into a corner.'

Museum Educator, Anon



This allows education and technical support staff to readily interact with workshop participants. At the Women's Library in London's Whitechapel, the exhibition hall includes two education spaces, one enclosed within it and the other above on a mezzanine level. This enables workshop participants to move easily between their own work and the reference material.

Working out dimensions

Getting the dimensions of a space right is as important as determining the right location – and sometimes more so. The fundamental issue is to make sure you have enough space to cater for the group numbers you want, especially with Primary-age children. Our research for *Space for Learning*, and previously for *Space for Art*, suggests that the minimum space allocation per person should be 2.8m² – this is more than the DfES recommends for school spaces, but it is based on real experience in a range of sites. This space allocation means that for a class of 30 children, any space should be a minimum of 84m². Our survey of sites reveals that more than half are unhappy with the size of their learning spaces. The size of spaces identified in the survey ranged from as small as 7m², with an average size of 45m².

Architects, and even a site's own senior management, often fail to understand the space requirements for a class of 30 children. Consequently, many learning spaces can cater for only half that number. **One site spoke of the 'flawed logic' in the original plan of assuming that the learning spaces need only cater for half a class at a time.** This is a crucial issue and you should not agree a space's dimensions until you are satisfied that it is large enough for your needs: cost saving on space just generates additional costs in management and staffing.

Some architects appreciate the importance of sufficient space. Paul Swart, the architect redeveloping the River & Rowing Museum's learning space, observed lessons in action to see how children move around and use a space. Test this out yourself. Involve users and staff to check how many people can fit into the proposed space; move equipment and furniture in and around to see what is possible, and how much circulation space and accessibility you will have. Use chalk marks on the floor and draw circulation maps so that architects and senior managers can actually see how people work in and move around the defined space. If the space allocated is not going to work, use the evidence from your 'test run' to justify and press for more space.

'Ideas for the design came from seeing what [the children] do and how they move through and around a building; how they use their eyes and senses.'
Dave Millis, Architect, Bishops Wood Environmental Centre, Worcestershire

Whatever size you have, or are allocated, consider the following:

- Opportunities for display
- Quality and level of available light
- Views outside the space
- Access to an outside space for activities and/or lunch area
- Ready access to basic services
- Level of external noise
- Easy access to toilets and potential lunch area
- Easy or dedicated access from the street
- Accessibility out of hours
- Opportunities for flexibility, adaptability and expansion
- Maximum number likely to use the space in a single session and over a year
- Amount of specialist equipment or furniture required

- Range of activities and type of work to be offered
- Amount of storage required for equipment, materials, and users' work
- Whether you need separate spaces for different purposes, e.g. dark room, or a handling area for valuable artefacts

Check out what is possible within the allocated space. For example:

- Will every part of the learning space be accessible to all?
- How many people can work in it comfortably at the same time?
- How difficult will it be to move around in the space?
- What equipment and furniture can be accommodated within the space?
- Which activities can be run, and which cannot?
- How quickly will staff and users get a sense of how the space works?
- Will you have enough education and support staff to service the space?



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Dave Millis, Architect, Bishops Wood Environmental Centre, Worcestershire



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| 1 & 4
The Women's Library | 6, 8, 9 & 10
Bolton Museum & Art Gallery |
| 2 & 11
The Horniman Museum | 7
Technique Science Discovery Centre |
| 3
Bagshaw Museum | 12
Ulster Folk & Transport Museum |
| 5
The River & Rowing Museum | |

