

Fittings, Furniture & Equipment

The process of 'fitting out' any learning space – rethought, refurbished or new – is as crucial as its location and dimensions. The fit-out can determine the type and extent of activities you can offer, and make all the difference between an agreeable and manageable working environment and one that just makes life hard.

'Fitting out' involves choosing the right sort of furniture, fittings and equipment for your specific needs and those of your various users, and at a price that suits your budget – from sinks to chairs and tables, floor coverings to blinds, power points to what you plug into them.

The wall opposite the windows is fitted with full-length wooden cupboards used for storing tables, school bags, and art & design resources. The wood is solid and well finished. The sink area was made to order, by a firm specialising in fittings for prisons, constructed of industrial stainless steel housing two sinks, one 'child height' and the other for adults. There are large steel cupboards on either side of the sink and kitchen-style cupboards above. (Extract from the Lighthouse case study)

It comes down to five basic decisions: what to have, what type to have, how many to have, how much to spend, and where to locate them. Attention to detail is at the heart of effective fitting-out: it requires good research, effective consultation, learning from experience – yours and others' – and, wherever possible, testing things out before you make a decision.

This education space houses stools and mini-tables which can be set up to create one long rectangular table, or rearranged into small clusters of tables. (Extract from the Bolton Museum & Art Gallery case study)

There should be a parity of quality between the learning space and the rest of the site. Fittings, furniture and equipment should look good while being hard-wearing, compatible with different types of user, readily accessible, moveable and storable (where appropriate), easily and inexpensively maintained and replaceable, and all falling within your chosen or allocated budget. This can be a tall order if the needs of one type of user conflict with those of another.

This is the area of developing a learning space where compromises are most often made. The more you know about all the aspects of fitting-out and the materials and products involved, and the more detail you can include in the original brief, the more likely you are to get what you need. In addition, you will be better able to assess where a compromise can be made without jeopardising the effectiveness of the working environment.

The quality of furniture is high; less so the fittings. A compromise was made between the fittings and keeping within budget or using the money for other things. (Extract from the Techniquet case study)

The watchword is practicality. For example, decide what will work best in the circumstances of your space. Remember that you are equipping what will be a hard-working environment. Assess the need for robustness alongside that of high-quality design and materials, and what other essentials might be purchased for the cost of a top-quality product. Always consider the IKEA factor. Also bear in mind that in creating a flexible space, you do not want it to be anonymous; the space should impart a sense of place and give a sense of the identity of the site.

Consulting others and reaching decisions

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However modest the project, consult with staff and the range of users to compile a list of what you need. For example, surveys of pupils reveal that their ideal space should include comfortable seating and tables at the right height for them. A learning space that caters for a wide range of age groups may have to opt for a one-height-fits-all approach for such furniture as tables and benches, for both sitting and standing work. Such decisions benefit from wide discussion and testing different heights with various users and those working with them. Such a process can lead to one of those acceptable compromises.



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When involved in a new build, work closely with the project manager, architects and contractors. It can sometimes be difficult to make sure you are part of a decision-making process that often becomes *ad hoc* and individual as contractor or architect marks out what they may consider their own professional territory. By the fitting-out stage, you should already have developed an effective working relationship with the architect, who should know by now that you are not going to go away and who should be impressed by your tenacity, attention to detail, and knowledge of the issues and products. None the less, always consider the architect's or contractor's advice and suggestions – and always ask for their advice when you are uncertain.

'The architect listened to us and mostly did what we wanted. We had to fight for a few things.'

Angela Roostan, Operations Manager, Techniquist, Cardiff

Be especially firm about getting the type of, and location for, sinks, power points, tables and chairs that are right for *your* needs. Blackout facilities are a priority, but are often overlooked; this is something that should be incorporated into the original design rather than left until the fitting-out stage. For example, one architect omitted the agreed plan for blackout when he decided that it spoilt the architectural vision of the space as a whole.

Health & safety

Some decisions about fitting-out will be determined by health & safety regulations or concerns. When such concerns are raised, always discuss the issues involved and negotiate possible solutions, rather than be intimidated by them. Ensure that the concerns are valid, and look for solutions that do not jeopardise the effective running of the space.

Safety concerns required less than compatible fire doors. The stained glass of the Education Room doors had to be reinforced between two sheets of strong clear glass. But 'we did get very expensive non-reflective glass which would not break and did not compromise the colour of the stained glass.' (Extract from the Bagshaw Museum case study)

Sourcing

Be closely involved in the sourcing of fittings, furniture and equipment: find out for yourself what works, through research, consultation and experience. This is a major factor in achieving a successful learning space. The Horniman Museum devised a successful process by which education and facilities teams made decisions together. Often, however, the teams were asked to state their requirements but were not involved in the selection or purchasing process. This led to too-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.

Consider your organisation's commitment to sustainable development. Are you committed, wherever possible, to sourcing locally produced resources made from sustainable sources, or to supporting local craftspeople?

Ensure also that you can source replacement parts easily and inexpensively. This is another reason for seeking local suppliers wherever possible – or, when your main users are children, for consulting those experienced in dealing with schools' needs.



'Look for simple, straightforward solutions when fitting-out heavily used areas, and always test things out first.'

Barbara Alcaraz, Deputy Facilities Manager, Horniman Museum, London



1,2,3,4 & 9
The River & Rowing Museum
5,7 & 8
The Horniman Museum
6
The Lighthouse