

# Designing with Children

## OPEN Youth Centre

The OPEN youth centre project was part of myplace – a programme launched in 2007 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families with the aim to deliver youth facilities across the UK on a local level. This was part of the government's Aiming High for Young People strategy, the aim of which was to improve young people's access to positive activities. With a government capital investment of over £270m and each youth centre having received grants of up to £5m, the Norwich project involved a Grade II listed redundant banking hall in the city centre, identified for conversion into a venue for a range of activities and resources targeted at young people aged 13-25 years.

### Motivation

Myplace was driven by the active participation of young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in the development, design and running of the youth centres. Young people made up half of the committee deciding on myplace investments and each individual myplace project also had to demonstrate participation of local young people.

The idea to establish a youth support venue in Norwich was conceived in 2000, after the death of three youngsters in the city after dark. In response, youth club owners together with the voluntary and statutory sector, including the Lind Trust, set up the SOS project, which initially offered a night bus service for young people. This was followed in 2003 by the Lind Trust buying the former Barclays bank site in the centre of Norwich with the aim to accommodate OPEN. Youngsters' involvement in defining the venue identity and activities on offer was thus seen as a key element for the project development, making them partners in the effort to reduce antisocial behaviour and crime in the area and at the same time helping to engender a sense of ownership of the venue. The Minister for Children and Young People, Dawn Primarolo, equally stressed children's creative input as a significant driver for their engagement: *'We have put young people in the lead of decisions about myplace projects like OPEN, because we believe in their creative talent and that they*

### What

A Grade II listed building refurbished into a 24-hour youth centre for young people in Norwich

### Where

Norwich, United Kingdom

### Age

12-18

### Group Size

40

### Project Stage

Brief, Concept, Design Development, Technical Design

### Children's Roles

Clients, Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

### Timescale

November 2007- October 2009

### Partners

Hudson Architects (Design)  
Myplace, Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (Initiator)  
OPEN Youth Trust Norfolk (Lead partner)  
The Lind Trust (Partner)  
Local young people from Norwich (Participants)

*are the best people to design and plan the places their generation and future generations will want to attend and enjoy [...]*'.

## Children's involvement

In this context, a youth forum comprising 40 young people aged 12-18 years old were consulted throughout the design process. Their key role in the design process was that of a client: they had active input in deciding on the venue activities and resources, the graphics, signage and furniture design, and also selected the project designers: Hudson Architects. One of the young people involved in the development of OPEN, Rob, 18, described his role as such: *'I was part of the group that looked at the building plans, did fundraisers, chose the furniture and learned a lot about charity work.'*

According to Anthony Hudson: *'their key demands were bright colours, decor that spoke to their demographic, plus music and media facilities, a climbing wall and (high up in the list) good toilets.'* Although the young people's ideas and aspirations for the venue were more radical than those of the trustees, the design team prioritised their suggestions and took them on board, as Anthony comments: *'A lot of time you're thinking, "Is this exciting enough for them?" We've got quite a young team but we all did things like going nightclubbing for research, just to make sure of the levels we needed to hit.'*

Anthony describes the working relationship that he had with the 40 youngsters as a fulfilling experience: *'Having brought up children in Norwich, I have found it really rewarding to work with OPEN and help bring their vision into practice. It's a major achievement, which will have a tremendously positive impact on the lives of young people in the local area.'*

## Outputs and outcomes

The venue opened in 2009 at a cost of £12 million. During the opening ceremony, the Minister for Children and Young People, Dawn Primarolo, was taken on a tour at the centre by young people. An array of walkways and platforms stretches across four floors to accommodate a range of activities for local young people: sports and socialising areas, events halls, quiet study spaces, an IT suite, reflection and escape spaces, a music venue, theatre, climbing wall, young people's nightclub, educational kitchen and cafe, dance and performing arts space, and a health centre. Organisations such as Connexions and the Prince's Trust and local drugs and alcohol charities have offices in the building, which diversifies the level of support that local youngsters can get.

Some of the youth forum members went on to work at OPEN, such as David Mills and Trish Abbs. Commenting on the success of the venue, they stress that it's about feeling safe: *'So far the nights have been a complete sell-out, which just proves that if you give young people the opportunity to be independent, and offer them something which is otherwise unobtainable, they'll have an amazing time – without a drop of alcohol involved.'*

The young venue users seem to enjoy the new addition in their community: *'I love it, because there are lots of awesome, fun, bright spaces where you can chat, relax and meet new people of similar ages'*, says Poppy Mabbit, 16. The project director Russ Dacre naturally shares their excitement: *'I had one boy come and say "You're Russ Dacre? I love you!" because he likes the place so much [...]*'

From a design perspective, OPEN has attracted architects, politicians and community groups

from across the country to get inspiration and ideas. Its success in this light is reflected in the following awards:

- LABC East Anglia Building Excellence Award 2010;
- RIBA East Community Architecture award 2010 and receives a Commendation; and
- prize for the RIBA East Heritage Award.

## Resources

Archello – 'Open Youth Venue' <http://www.archello.com/en/project/open-youth-venue> (accessed 3 June 2013).

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Myplace – 'First myplace centre opens in Norwich' <http://www.myplacesupport.co.uk/Feature-Articles/first-myplace-centre-opens-in-norwich.html> (accessed 3 June 2013).

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OPEN Youth Centre, Norwich. Courtesy: Edmund Sumner (photographer)





*Chill-out area with climbing wall, OPEN Youth Centre, Norwich. Courtesy: Edmund Sumner (photographer)*



*Reception area, OPEN Youth Centre, Norwich. Courtesy: Edmund Sumner (photographer)*