

# Designing with Children

## Spotlight

Spotlight started life as a bid, to the myplace programme, to support the development of creative arts spaces for young people from some of the most deprived areas of England. The government's myplace scheme (launched 2007), in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund, made available a £134 million for a total of 57 youth centre projects to be completed over the 2011-2013 period. Myplace aimed to deliver youth facilities across the UK at a local level. This was part of the government's Aiming High for Young People strategy, the aim of which has been to improve young people's access to positive activities.

### Motivation

Myplace was driven by the active participation of young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in the development, design and running of the 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.

Young people were seen from the outset as the programme clients. A key aspiration through the collaborative process was for the young people involved, the project partners and other stakeholders to create positive experiences of team-working together and to establish a collective identity. An ethos of enabling local young people's sense of ownership and empowerment within the borough has evidently marked the overall development process of this particular creative arts space.

### Children's involvement

Young people were engaged between February and September 2010. Throughout the engagement period, young people's views on the development of the Spotlight creative arts space were fed into the Development process on at least a fortnightly basis. The Spotlight Management Team comprises the following groups:

#### What

Youth centre

#### Where

London, Langdon Park, United Kingdom

#### Age

13–early 20s

#### Group Size

Core working team: 37 young people; wider youth engagement: 710 young people

#### Project Stage

Brief, Design Development

#### Children's Roles

Clients, Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

#### Timescale

February 2010–September 2010

#### Partners

Poplar HARCA (Housing Association)  
(Initiator)

Langdon Park School (Partner)

Poplar Boys & Girls Club (Partner)

Tower Project (Partner)

Tower Hamlets Council (Partner)

Myplace (Department for Education, Big Fund) (Funder)

Local young people (Participants)

- Youth Empowerment Board
- Spotlight Sub Group
- Langdon Park School
- Poplar Boys and Girls Club
- Poplar HARCA
- LB Tower Hamlets

The Poplar HARCA Youth Empowerment Board comprised 25 young people aged 15+, who received mentoring and training to support their role representing young people's views from the wider engagement context to the Spotlight Management Team. Spotlight Sub Group was a particularly important player in this process: this is a sub-group of the Youth Empowerment Board who met 7 times between April and August 2010 to consider the views of the Wider Young People Engagement. This smaller group was formed by 12 young people aged 13-19 living in Tower Hamlets and considered key design, services and marketing issues for the arts space while, at the same time, worked directly with architects on the site development.

These groups were involved in the following ways:

- August 2009: the Youth Empowerment Board visited the Salmon Youth Centre in Bermondsea for inspiration, accompanied by Fluid Architects. After discussing the appearance and facilities of the centre they then went on a residential trip during which a facilitated discussion was held about the Salmon Youth Centre and about the relationship of Spotlight to Langdon Park School;
- March 2010: Away days at the OPEN Centre in Norwich. Young people, architects, builders and other project partners spent time together to understand each other's points of view;
- defining the brief discussion meetings: discussion groups with the Youth Empowerment Board and local youth clubs, facilitated by A Studio Architects and supported by the YEB officer from Poplar HARCA;
- wider consultation process: the Youth Empowerment Board met with community groups, distributed questionnaires and coordinated focus groups with disabled young people, young women and lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender (LBGT) young people. These activities took place on the street and outside school gates. Youngsters from at least 20 different ethnicities were represented in this consultation process; and
- brief development: five representatives of the Youth Empowerment Board interviewed the design team. The architects were interviewed in a separate session to ensure that adults and professionals did not dominate the interview process. Following the selection of the design team, the Youth Empowerment Board then visited reference buildings as a starting point for discussing what worked for them best with the architects. This process led to the masterplan development, where youngsters used keywords and phrases to describe how they feel about the space. (e.g. 'cool', 'got to have style', 'like the idea of light', 'glass', 'relevant to us', 'big', 'mustn't look like school'). As part of the design process, the young

people also engaged with model making and selection of materials.

Aart Koning, the A Studio architect who led the brief development process, found working with the youngsters an exciting process: *'It was pretty scary [laughs], it's exciting. I mean when you normally go and see adults you sort of know what to say, you know what the expectations are. But when you do it with the children, it's always unpredictable.'* He also commented on children's reactions to their engagement: *'[They] were very hands on, very excited, because they felt they could make informed decisions.'*

Aart gives a more detailed picture of the roles that the young people played:

*'[...] they formed the brief, they developed the brief, they [...] made sure it was within budget and that the programme was delivered on time. They were very much involved in development of the brief, what it would look like, what colour it would be, whether it would be the right image, the type of spaces they would get, what would be next to each other, very much in development of the design.'*

The decision making process was based on six core values, which were discussed and agreed by the young people, partners and the project team members: Embracing, Celebrating, Aspirational, Iconic, Nurturing, Empowering. These values were seen as the overarching principles that informed the services delivered by the centre as well as the design and building elements of Spotlight. Having these as a point of reference enabled the young participants to be consistent about their wishes and requirements for the centre. They asked, for example, for the building to be quirky, funky, fun – but not childish. The nearby Canary Wharf towers particularly inspired the young people in developing the design identity of the centre. They also requested a 'creative industries' focus, particularly around music recording and performance. The ideas developed and decisions made were the outcome of group work between the project partners, the Spotlight Sub Group and the Youth Empowerment Board.

## Outputs and outcomes

Spotlight opened in October 2013 at Langdon Park, London. The key driver for the venue is creativity: this is seen as an empowering agent, enabling young people to engage. It offers the following facilities to young community groups: games area, cafe/lounge, music recording studios, music recital space, media suite, performance hall (music, dance, drama), IT hot desk with pop-up computer screens, creative/art/fashion space and a health clinic (later renamed '1-2-1').

According to the myplace youth engagement report, key aspects of the building design and centre services have been shaped through the active engagement and intervention of the young people – e.g. choosing the name for the centre, giving design input and choosing the logo, interviewing the architects, defining the key services that should be in the centre and how it should run once it is open. The engagement process was reported to engender a sense of ownership by the young people involved, who anticipate the launch of the centre with excitement. This is confirmed by Julianna, Chair of the Youth Empowerment Board: *'[...] our vision and image are still intact, but obviously we haven't seen the finished product, so now that it's coming we're really really excited, it's really fantastic to be part of something so wonderful.'*

# Resources

MyPlace Spotlight. 'Youth Engagement Report (2012)' Online. Available: <http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/20120814-HIG%2009c%20Spotlight%20Youth%20Centre%20GLA%20report.pdf> (accessed 4 December 2013).

Personal communication Aart Koning (20 May 2013).

Spotlight – 'A unique creative centre for young people' <http://syclondon.org.uk/> (accessed 4 July 2013).



*The design team and Poplar HARCA Youth Empowerment Board members on the construction site. Courtesy: Poplar HARCA*



*Art room. Spotlight. Courtesy: Poplar HARCA*



*Poplar HARCA Youth Empowerment Board Members are being shown plans of the under construction youth centre. Courtesy: Poplar HARCA*