

LEARNING SPACES

MAKING MORE EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

VOL 2.4

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Small Space, Small Budget, **Big Ideas**

Few school projects have unlimited budgets and extravagant briefs. Northpoint Architects looked to the pupils of Tyneview Primary School, Newcastle-upon-Tyne for inspiration to transform a dark corner of the school library into an inspiring 'Reading Pod'.

Tyneview Primary School is a mid-size primary school of circa 280 pupils situated in Walker, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, an area which has suffered from the recent economic downturn reflected by the fact that 60% of the children receive free school meals. The school works tirelessly to engage with the community, link



with local businesses and provide new inspiration and opportunities for its pupils. This is exemplified by the school's Primary Inspiration through Enterprise (PIE) scheme which resulted in a recent visit from Princess Eugenie to recognise the school's outstanding work.

In June 2015, Northpoint Architects were approached by head teacher, Steve Gittins, who set them the challenge of transforming a corner of the school into an inspiring 'Reading Pod'. This would need to be a flexible space to inspire the pupils to engage with reading and enrich a corner of the school's tired library area.

Mr. Gittins describes the initial motivation for the project;

"As Head, my main goal is to provide an environment that is going to stimulate and encourage children ... within my development plan I had a potential project to design and build a reading pod. The main intention was to create a very different learning space; one in which children could relax, reflect, discuss and create."

The key client requirements were as follows:

- Create an enjoyable and stimulating reading environment to promote reading and books within the school;
- Include areas to sit, play, learn and read;
- The space was to be flexible to accommodate

small group activities as well as individual and shared reading;

- All age groups within the school to be catered for.

Northpoint Architects were established as an RIBA Chartered Practice in 2014, evolving from the Robertson Simpson Group, a multi-disciplinary property consultancy firm based in the North East of England. Building on substantial experience within the education sector, directors Joe Moore and Adam Graham were aware of the specific constraints involved with working on school projects including maximising the potential of limited budgets and managing construction phases within holiday periods, at the same time as creating inspiring, durable spaces.

Idea Generation

The key to the success of this project was that the children were engaged from the outset and so could feel a sense of ownership and involvement in the designs. Understanding this, Joe and Adam offered to run a brainstorming session with a class of year 5s, an opportunity which linked perfectly





with the school's enterprise curriculum. This session featured a brief discussion about architecture in general, exploring ideas that the reading room should incorporate and a creative model-making session for the pupils to develop their own designs in small groups.

The session was a success with the class teacher remarking on how absorbed the pupils were and the ideas and models generated providing some helpful insights for the architects. Some suggestions such as the giant octopus, moveable Jacuzzi and climbing wall were perhaps a little ambitious; however elements of enclosure, curved walls and colour would be incorporated as important design features.

Design Development

Sketch designs were progressed with 3D visualisations prepared for two concept options which were sent to the school for comment. The preferred option incorporated a curved enclosure





forming a benched group seating area, separate alcoves for private reading and IT activities and narrow feature windows. The windows would provide a visual link to the hall outside, however the narrow proportions and coloured glazing would minimise distraction and play with the light passing between the spaces.

Procurement

The specialist joinery items led Northpoint Architects to explore alternative options to appointing a traditional main contractor to construct the new reading room. Northpoint Architects approached a local shop-fitting contractor, Thompson Contracts Ltd (TCL) who specialise in interior fit outs of bars and pubs and who are expanding into the residential and education sectors. TCL quickly grasped the vision of the project and formed a collaborative relationship with the architects to develop the details, ensuring that the designs were achievable and could be constructed efficiently and economically without compromising the original design ethos.

It was agreed that the panels forming the new enclosure would be pre-fabricated offsite in TCL's workshop in Seaham to minimise time and disruption on site. The panels could then be delivered and fitted within the half term holiday,

a perfect solution to the health and safety issues involved in managing the interface between building works, pupils and staff, and the school's daily activities. The vertical coloured slats serve the dual purpose of adding rhythm and vibrancy to the outer skin while also concealing the joints between the pre-fabricated panels.

Completion

The Reading Room was completed in October 2015 within the budget of £13K +VAT and has been acclaimed as an undoubted success. The flexible working space means that the Reading Pod is constantly occupied with teachers and pupils excited to utilise the space and consequently fulfils the brief of encouraging increased engagement with reading and literacy.

When lit up during an evening performance, it was remarked that the curved wall and glowing coloured windows gave the room an appearance of a spaceship having landed in the school hall.

Some feedback from the school children:

- "The pod is great – I like the bean bags and carpet" - Year 1 Pupil
- "It gives me time to think and I just enjoy being in there" - Year 3 Pupil
- "I like it because it's different" - Year 6 Pupil





product on time and on budget with the benefits of off-site construction and their shop-fitting expertise.

We are involved in projects ranging in size from this single room up to multi-million pound offices and workshops. No matter the size it is great to see creative design ideas come to life and be enjoyed, we look forward to hopefully working with the school again in the near future."

The Future

The recent budget in March 2016 outlined the Government's plans for all schools to become academies within the next decade. This will open up opportunities for schools to have more control over their budgets and construction project procurement. Joe Moore

The school's Assistant Head and Literacy Leader, Lidia Rea, added:

"It means we can give a genuine environment to reading and creative writing and really celebrate children's work – the children love going in, and they think it's special. It is truly a great addition to the school!"

Joe Moore, Director of Northpoint Architects summed up the project:

"This project was a pleasure to be involved with from start to finish. We enjoyed the challenge of leading the class brainstorming session and were pleasantly surprised with the children's enthusiasm and ideas. TCL were the ideal contractor, buying into the design ethos and delivering a superb

product on time and on budget and allow more flexibility for schools and academy trusts when it comes to refurbishment and new build projects:

"We are currently assisting the Areté Learning Trust (Stokesley School) in North Yorkshire with a £1.5 million re-cladding and refurbishment project which will rejuvenate and improve the look and performance of two of their poorest quality buildings. We are delighted that funding for the project has just been secured following an application to the Education Funding Agency's 'Condition Improvement Fund'. Works are due to start on site in June 2016 and we are already starting talks with the school regarding the next project."

As existing school building stock begins to age and fail to meet performance standards, there are opportunities to enhance learning experiences and uplift the school's built environment. Careful design, engagement with staff and pupils, and considered procurement options can enable architects to fulfil, or exceed, project aspirations, regardless of the project scale or budget.

Project Details

Client: Tyneview Primary School
Architect: Northpoint Architects
Contractor: Thompson Contracts Ltd
Completion Date: October 2015
Cost of Works: £13,000 +VAT

Northpoint Architects is an RIBA Chartered Practice which forms part of the Robertson Simpson Group.