

Designing and building a youth club

A number of factors should be considered when designing, building or refurbishing a youth club. Unfortunately, more often than not, these factors are overlooked. ReDesign Youth is a registered not-for-profit organisation, dedicated to updating, modernising and improving youth centres and clubs. Their research and blueprint for the design of the building is outlined here.

Youth clubs should be located in the heart of the town, just like community buildings. When they are located far away on estates or on the fringes of town, young people feel marginalised from the beginning. Rather than being out of sight, they need to be central to the community.

Buildings should be up to standard. Poor quality buildings contribute to the negative image of youth clubs and risk being judged as 'undesirable' by parents who then refuse to allow their children to attend.

Youth clubs should have ambience. Design is not about fitting the maximum number of pool tables into the cheapest building, usually a square box. Avoid giving it an 'institutional' feel by designing and utilising the space in an interesting and original way. Think about the interactions you are hoping to encourage and the appropriate spaces for them. Don't maximise the space by fitting in what is 'required'. Providing a range of open and more closed spaces, encourages different activities and interactions.

Buildings that are merely functional remove any joy from the activities and often make it look and feel like an army barracks.

Design from the inside out

The design and build of a youth club should be determined by what goes on inside it. Youth club buildings have two main purposes, and these that should influence the layout:

- to facilitate social interaction;
- to deliver personal development opportunities in a safe, supervised environment.

Getting young people involved in the design process of their club is strongly advised by youth workers – 74 per cent of those who responded to the Clubs for Young People Workforce Survey already involve young people with the design of their club. Finding out where their interests lie and what they want to achieve for the club encourages ownership amongst them and a sense of responsibility in getting the club developed. Achieving this means consulting members, listening to their views and understanding their needs, taking into account the club's goals and finding a way to achieve that within the building and design limitations.

Collaborate on design

Not all youth clubs will have the luxury of starting from scratch with a new building. Most often, they will be attempting to improve existing premises on a limited budget. However, all the following principles should still be followed to maximise a refurbishment opportunity which reflects the needs of the youth club and young people.

A common problem is that due to lack of experience and low expectations, young people are unaware of the potential their youth club and building have. Running information sessions, providing examples of models of good practise from elsewhere, and visiting other youth clubs can help with this.

While in conversation with young people about this, it's also an ideal time to discuss what they feel is expected of their youth club in the wider community.

Once the views of young people are taken on board, the hard work begins. Finding out what young people want tends to be less difficult than finding a way to deliver their vision in a safe and affordable way. However, it is important not to provide only what you can afford but to find creative solutions to raising the finance for what young people actually want.

Too often, a club's 'ambience' is not given enough consideration when design is discussed. Rather than being all about money, design is actually more about young people's choices and involvement in the project. None of us goes into a restaurant solely for practical reasons – it's cheaper to eat at home. We go in because we are seeking something different and we make a choice based on a number of different factors including its design.

Where an architect is involved, it's crucial they understand that the design must reflect not just the young people's views, but also the project's needs and aspirations. Too much importance can be given to 'fitting in' activities, which makes the space feel institutionalised and often resemble a large box.

Design goals should include:

- ❑ creating a range of spaces to encourage different activities. A home-like environment is smaller scale and encourages talking and relaxing. Large open spaces encourage running around and letting off steam;
- ❑ instilling a sense of welcome on arrival – at the entrance, in the lobby and the reception areas;
- ❑ providing good sight lines from the road into the building. Public house owners learned that more women will enter if they can see what is happening inside. The same is true of youth clubs – allow clear views of what happens inside so that people can see before they enter;
- ❑ maximising natural light;
- ❑ installing indirect lighting to boost the ambience, and avoiding institutional, unnatural finishes, textures and colours;
- ❑ providing transitional space between indoor and outdoor space. Not all young people will be comfortable about coming into the youth club and may prefer to stay outside on the street. To build a bridge with this group some external space is essential. This can still be a defensible space with fencing around and may be a rain canopy but it allows a gradual entering into the building and joining in with activities. It may be the case that these young people never come inside but it still provides a great opportunity for them to come into contact with responsible adults.

Remember that the club design and décor continue to impact members every day. So, the design process should be used to encourage creativity and not be too focused on what is merely 'cool' at that time. That kind of interior will quickly tire. Invite young people to first look at successful shops and other spaces they like and discuss them.

Creativity

Developing young people's creativity is a common goal of youth clubs. The club's design can help achieve this by:

- ❑ involving the young people in all design and decoration discussions, and any activity going forward;
- ❑ using colour and textures inside the club to communicate a sense of fun. Wall murals should be considered for common areas but be careful as they can send a strong message of ownership by certain groups;
- ❑ rules of colours are that opposite colours (on the colour wheel) say blue and yellow are dynamic and encourage movement. Adjacent colours say blue and green are more harmonious and provide a calmer setting;

- ❑ displaying and celebrating youth art work in various different ways promotes pride and confidence amongst members. But be original here, it's not school, why not let young people decorate areas from time to time, rather than merely adding a painting to a wall;
- ❑ updating design displays regularly so that it remains new and inspiring and young people feel they can make their mark.

Autonomy

Although they are supervised, youth clubs are optional, so their design must reflect this. Activities don't have to be in different rooms. It's better to have an open plan space with adjacent areas coming off it providing activities for young people to try out. Better to stumble across an art class than have to sign up for it, even if it is easier for the staff.

- ❑ café/snack bar design can be copied from places where young people aspire to go and in which they would like to spend time;
- ❑ games, computers can be wireless and used throughout rather than in a 'room';
- ❑ friends and companions can meet in areas where there is only space for a few seats to allow for privacy;
- ❑ quiet space for solitude can be slightly removed from the main area by being high up and can then still be supervised.

Health and safety

A design that instills a sense of safety and security amongst members is essential for clubs. Therefore, space strategies must be considered when planning for:

- ❑ equipment – its use and storage, and ensuring neither this nor the fittings and furnishings contain asbestos;
- ❑ physical access – unauthorised and potentially dangerous individuals and groups must be prevented from entering;
- ❑ visual access – spaces must be monitored for potential child abuse situations;
- ❑ cleanliness – an easy-to-clean interior is vital. Non-toxic building materials should be used to maintain the building and premises;
- ❑ light – maximise natural light and ensure good indoor air quality for members' health.

Don't forget the staff

There is no club without the staff, so consideration must be given to their space and design requirements too. They need space to develop programmes, a place where they can think and plan, somewhere they can meet people and host visitors, as well as store equipment and records. Good design will often provide glazing in a way that allows both working and some supervision.

Architects and contractors

The relationship and general understanding between architects, contractors, young people and youth workers is very important. It is key to all parties to not lose sight of the priorities of the club – creating a place that promotes effective youth work and positive activities. According to a recent report in a myplace review (Investing in Youth Facilities: Findings from Recent Experience DCSF November 2008), a better level of understanding amongst one another is the key:

- architects and contractors need to understand youth work, the practicalities of managing buildings and facilities, and the importance of taking young people's ideas seriously and working with them to develop their ideas;
- young people, youth workers and volunteers need a better understanding of the design process and timescales. They need more knowledge about the level of detail needed in specifications, how changes can be made without too much cost and how to interpret architectural drawings and plans. Make your designers produce 'sketch models' – they are much easier to understand and should not be too expensive.

Case studies reveal that after initial hesitation from architects and contractors to work directly with young people, it developed into a positive process for both sides. A number of architects had met with young people in the evenings to talk through designs and ideas, and had visited existing youth clubs to get a better understanding of the work. Contractors and builders also allowed young people and youth workers on site visits during construction (within health and safety requirements).

As a result, young people felt they had been taken seriously as clients and they experienced enhanced confidence and a sense of responsibility.

Structural inclusion

The design of a club has a huge impact on young people from all different walks of life, and all young people should feel welcome – particularly those with disabilities. To maximise this, along with lifts, ramps and specific equipment, clubs should consider:

- accommodating wheelchair users in the kitchen with moveable work surfaces and sinks;
- developing a 'welcome pack' specifically aimed at young people with disabilities, designed by young people;
- including disabled young people in outdoor and adventure activities by adapting boats or incorporating a tilt into a climbing wall;
- consulting a disabled young people's group on plans for a new centre, followed by an audit of how good access really is;
- purchasing evacuation chairs for wheelchair users;
- making drum kits available that can be fixed to wheelchairs;
- including showers and adult-size changing tables in toilets for disabled users.

Youth club buildings

Depending on budget or current resources, youth clubs will have some or all of the following facilities. These elements form a useful checklist for creating a flexible space that enables young people to flourish:

- reception area – all entrances should be visible from here, as should the common room;
- commons/game area – the 'heart' of the club, all other spaces should revolve around it. It should naturally 'grow' out of the lobby and past the reception area;

- café/snack bar – this can range from self-service vending machines to a full-service café and kitchen. Ideally, it should be adjacent to the eating area in the common room;
- activity rooms/gymnasium/sports hall – these can range from small classroom-style spaces to a full-sized sports hall, depending on the club. At least two activity areas should be on offer; one for arts/drama/music and the other for physical activities. For a gym or sports hall, if budget permits, ensure it meets recognised standards and has a separate entrance, so it can be used for separate after-hours events when the club is closed;
- computer area – this provides young people with supervised computer and internet access for homework and for play;
- older volunteers' room – these styles of rooms are useful as a separate space for older youth to socialise independently of the rest of the club. Its functions are like those of the Common room and should include games, TV watching and conversation. Ideally, these rooms should feel private but have a sense of connection with the rest of the facility;
- meeting rooms;
- outdoor activity areas;
- adequate space for storage.
- support spaces should include:
 - administrative office(s);
 - toilets and caretaker facilities;
 - kitchen;
 - mechanical/electrical/communications space.

Small local clubs

Small local clubs make up the majority of youth clubs. They are every bit as important as larger youth clubs and centres and aim to deliver the same quality of service but, because of the buildings they work out of, space can limit some of their activities.

Whatever their size, youth clubs are continually challenged to aim high. Even with out-of-date, poorly maintained buildings considered far from being 'fit for purpose', a small investment of capital can make a huge impact on the services they provide.

Because these smaller clubs vary from one location to the next, pinpointing a specific range of facilities for them is difficult. The following factors can help:

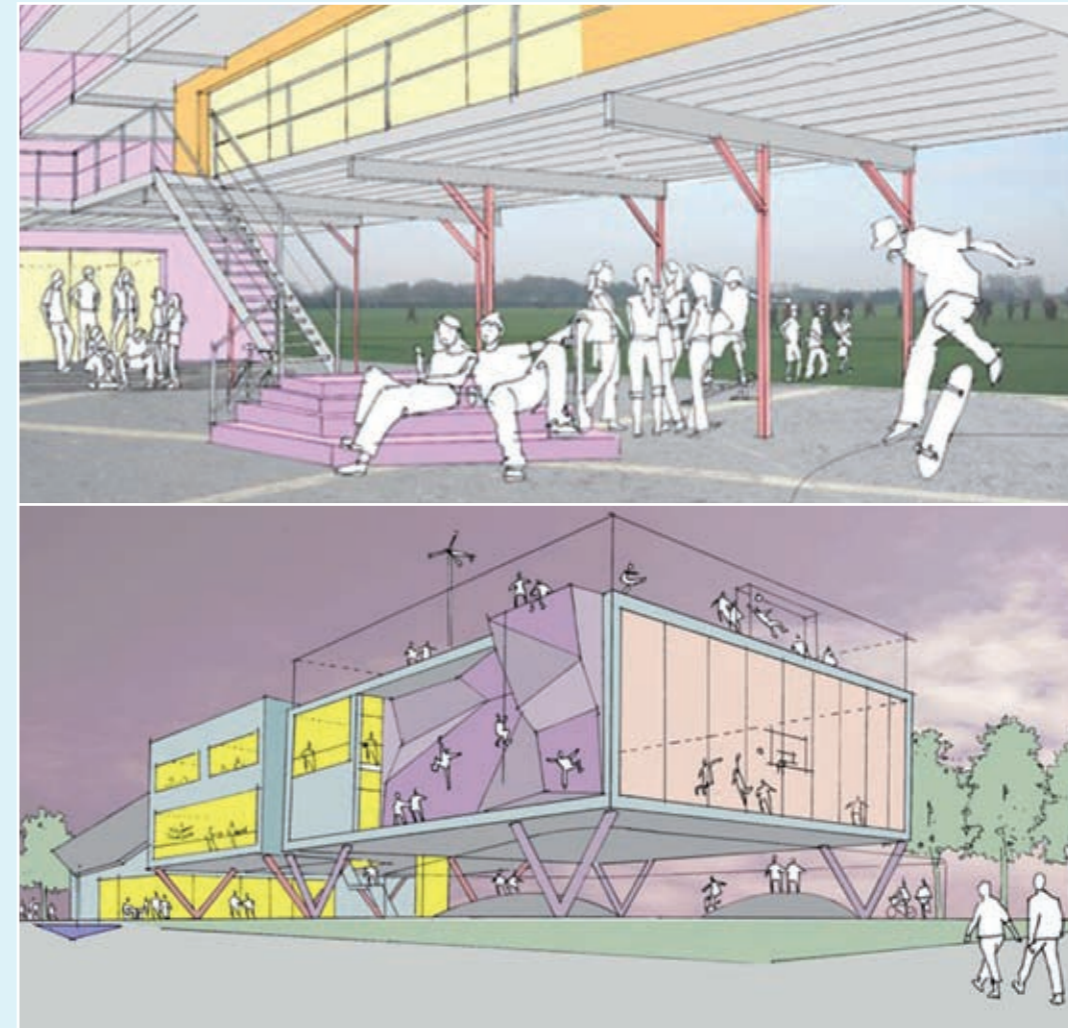
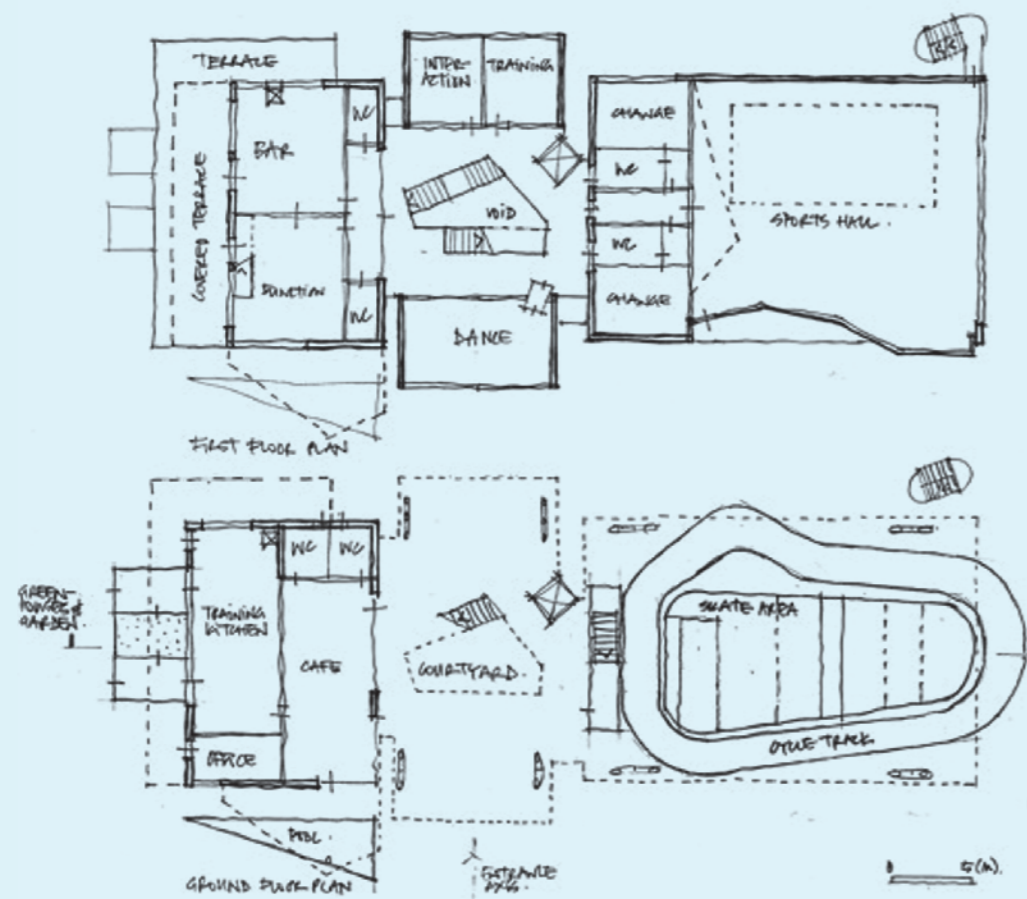
- the location of the club should be somewhere that young people have easy and safe access to. And, ideally it should have easy access to other nearby facilities such as a youth shelter, sports centre or field;
- the building's design should exude a warm, safe and inclusive environment;
- young people should be invited to get involved in the design of their club, so that the setting is a young person-friendly and welcoming environment;
- informal recreation and a positive activity programme should be able to take place in the club;
- information, advice and guidance should be freely available to young people via notice and display boards;

- lighting, security, storage and access given to young people with disabilities should be a priority;
- if the club is in 'shared use', the space should be designed in a way that ensures the safety and security of its members. Shared use works best when some areas are shared and some are used solely by one organisation. Without this no one feels they have ownership and the facilities deteriorate accordingly.

Small local club buildings

The core 'areas' a club would ideally have sole access to include:

- an activity space;
- a common room/chill-out space;
- a small meeting room – for one-to-one meetings or small groups;
- kitchen or facilities for snacks and drinks;
- toilet facilities for girls and boys and separate for adults;
- dedicated storage space.



Illustrations by Pitman Tozer architects and ReDesign Youth

The concepts of this design can be applied to all buildings. They are:

- transitional space between inside and outside is provided in the centre of the three buildings that make up the design;
- views into the centre are important so young people know 'what to expect';
- zoning of the building into three separate parts;
- all the zones can be used independently and have their own heating and lighting systems. In the middle is an open courtyard which acts as a transitional area:

zone 1 delivers sports, cycling and skateboarding area underneath, sports hall on the first floor with changing facilities, general outdoor activities on the roof and climbing on the sides. By raising the sports hall off the ground we create three areas from one building;

zone 2 delivers training, media, arts for alternative education;

zone 3 is a social enterprise which generates income towards the operation of the club and provides work experience of enterprise to young people. On the ground floor is a training kitchen and café providing refreshments to the adjacent football teams and playground users. Above it is a licensed bar and function room for hire for meetings, weddings and birthdays.