

Designing with Children

Try before you buy

'Try before you buy' is a national trial project that Argyll and Bute Council initiated in collaboration with the government-funded body Architecture + Design Scotland. The project was identified as part of the public consultation process with pupils, parents and members of the community in Campbeltown, focused on rebuilding Campbeltown Grammar School (part of Scotland's Schools for the Future programme). Thus, prior to the construction of the new school, it was agreed that students and staff would lead the design process for a new space in the existing school, to offer flexible space for exhibitions, collaborative learning and experimentation with interior design. This space was identified on the top floor of the old school building and the participating students and staff had the opportunity to explore and test new ideas. Twenty-four students and six teachers formed the core project team and their involvement lasted throughout the design process: from the brief development, to decision making and budget allocation.

Motivation

The aim of 'Try before you buy' was to enable the school students and staff to explore ways in which innovative and collaborative design techniques can create new educational settings. Designing a flexible space for collaborative learning and various activities that a class cannot always accommodate, reflected the aims of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence. The project is intended to inform the design of the new school, which will open in 2015, and establish a paradigm for school design across Scotland. The engagement of students and staff at the heart of the project reflects the way in which the initiators value the participants' local expert knowledge and infers an acknowledgement of the participants' capacity for creative exploration and hands-on reflective learning.

Children's involvement

Three classrooms and adjoining corridor spaces on the top floor at Campbeltown Grammar

What

A new flexible space for exhibitions, collaborative learning and experimentation with interior design

Where

Campbeltown, Scotland, United Kingdom

Age

12-18

Group Size

24 (in the core team)

Project Stage

Brief, Concept, Design Development, In Use

Children's Roles

Advocates for Change, Clients, Expert Consultants, Placemakers, Trailblazers

Timescale

June 2011

Partners

Ryder Architecture and Space Strategies (Design and engagement)
Argyll and Bute Council (Initiator)
Architecture+Design Scotland (Partner)
24 students and 6 teachers, Campbeltown Grammar School (Participants)

School were joined up to create the new multi-purpose space. This includes an amphitheatre for teaching, a white board, coffee shop style study booths for groupwork/revision purposes and laptop work and a 'chill-out area'. The project consists of four phases:

– **planning:** establishment of the partnership between Argyll and Bute Council, Architecture + Design Scotland, Campbeltown Grammar School, Ryder Architecture and Space Strategies;

– **brief building:** students and staff visited James Gillespie's High School – another school building project in Scotland – with the aim of exchanging ideas. On return, students and staff reflected on their own school and discussed what worked and what did not. (e.g. works: cosy spaces, relaxed reception space; doesn't work: temperature issues, old and uncomfortable furniture, bad sound-proofing). The client team also explored related websites and built models of their ideal learning spaces. Certain priorities were set for the brief development and decided by voting, for example: study booths, flexibility, creation of spaces which would be 'modern' and 'cool'.

– **design and build:** having decided on their key priorities for the new space, students and staff discussed and reviewed the brief with the designers. Based on the brief, the designers then presented three ideas for the layout and use of the space. Students and staff voted again to prioritise issues, such as the settings, colours, zoning, circulation and activities. Such decision making was made based on the available budget, which the students and staff also considered. After producing a final, visual brief, building commenced. A move-in pack providing information about how to use the space and equipment available was distributed to the school; and

– **evaluation:** students conducted an initial evaluation through use of questionnaires, interviews, observation of how the space was used and film documentation. This was followed up by a formal, independent evaluation by Performance Consultancy Limited, who distinguished overwhelmingly positive comments both from staff and students. Students confirmed that the new space met their brief development: they felt that it was indeed bright, colourful, fashionable, multi-learning, relaxing and chilling, just as they planned it to be.

Collaboration and dialogue between the school, Architecture + Design Scotland and Argyll and Bute Council were key to the smooth development of the design process. The bodies that launched the project reportedly also exhibited commitment to a user-led strategy for school design, thus involving actively the school users in all decision making phases.

Outputs and outcomes

Students' and teachers' input led to the development of a multifunctional space for collaborative learning with innovative and modern design. A short film produced by School.ads showcasing the whole process includes various quotes by students and the headteacher, Michael Casey, which points to a successful project: both students and staff love the space, its flexibility and opportunities for experimental teaching and learning.

The 'Try before you buy' area is officially now renamed by the school as i-arena. It has already been used by 40 second year pupils, who are working on a carbon diary project. It is also expected to inform the future design and refurbishment of the school.

Quotes

'The pupils really have had a strong say in the process and have been listened to. We have worked hand in hand with them to get a design that is right. The children have a strong sense of ownership about the area which is fantastic. We will be evaluating how well the space works over the next couple of months' (Sam Cassels, Design Advisor at Architecture and Design, Scotland).

'The new area has really given this 1968 building a real lift and pupils and staff are equally as enthusiastic about using the new area' (Mike Casey, Headteacher).

'The learning that is gained from the innovative development will directly contribute to the design of the new Campbeltown Grammar School which will be developed over the next few years' (Cleland Sneddon, Executive Director of Community Services at Argyll and Bute Council).

Quotes retrieved from <http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/node/> (accessed 2.4.2013).

Resources

Architecture + Design Scotland. 'Try before you buy – Campbeltown Grammar' <http://www.ads.org.uk/smarterplaces/features/try-before-you-buy-campbeltown-grammar> (accessed 4 December 2013).

Campbeltown Grammar School 'Try before you buy - areas unveiled' <http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/node/36398> (accessed 2 April 2013).

Campbeltown Grammar, 'i-arena'. <http://www.campbeltown.argyll-bute.sch.uk/index.php/about-us/tbyb.html> (accessed 2 April 2013).

Campbeltown Grammar: Try before you buy' <http://vimeo.com/39258204> (accessed 1 April 2013).

McMillan, T. 'User-inspired design. A co-design process that actively involves users and meets their needs in the end product", *Input + Ideas. Rethinking Scotland's Policy on Architecture and Place*. p.30-31. Online. Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0041/00414324.pdf> (accessed 5 December 2013).

Performance Consultancy 'Try before you buy at Campbeltown Grammar. An Evaluation' <http://performanceconsultancy.co.uk/try-before-you-buy.html> (accessed 4 December 2013).



Students and architects working on the school design plans, Campbeltown Grammar. Courtesy: Catriona A. Hood



Try Before You Buy, Campbeltown Grammar. Courtesy: Catriona A. Hood



*Students at the new multi-purpose learning area,
Campbeltown Grammar. Courtesy: Catriona A. Hood*