

The kids are alright — Architects and designers are increasingly collaborating with the end users of spaces and places — and that includes children. We take a look at the projects and practices in the UK bringing young people into the heart of the co-design process and helping them shape their built environment.

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There is one form of collaboration in architecture

and urban design which is often overlooked, or even sneered at: that with children and young people. But if young people are the users of a building, a space, a place, could their involvement in shaping them help make the results more inclusive and successful?

As with any community-engaged projects, architectural collaboration with young people runs the risk of being tokenistic, delivered in a half-hearted way for PR appeal. But slowly, in the UK, institutions and bodies – from the V&A to the city of Hull to Hackney council – are taking on what some see as a risky process and wholeheartedly embracing it. Meanwhile, alongside established practices such as White Arkitekter and De Matos Ryan opening up projects to the voices of young people, new kinds of practices and organisations have been set up, including Build Up Foundation and Matt+Fiona, that prioritise collaboration with children as central to design and build processes.

Matt+Fiona (M+F), a London-based practice established in 2016 by architect Matthew Springett and educator Fiona MacDonald, is dedicated to co-designing and building spaces and structures for young people with young people. When we meet on a rainy October afternoon, MacDonald talks of

1 (previous page) Collaboration writ large: the welcome post at Build Up Foundation's new Hackney public space

2 & 3 Matt+Fiona's project on an allotment in Hull was created with a group of teenagers over a 12-week period

4 Initial paper models for Matt+Fiona's playground structure for Phoenix School, created by the students

5 The final built structure at Phoenix School in Bow, east London

'the realisation that children are the experts on their world, spaces they use, what their needs are. As a designer you should collaborate with that knowledge. We wanted to bring children into the beginning of a project – to set a brief, then co-design and build.'

In 2017, the education team of Hull City of Culture asked Matt+Fiona to work with a group of 14- to 16-year-olds excluded from mainstream school to create a structure in an allotment in eastern Hull. M+F worked with six young people over a 12-week period – from dialogue to design to build – to create a new bright green, wooden, den-like shed for the kids. 'Those young people had never had a space of their own,' says Springett. 'They took huge pride in it.'

For the SEN (special educational needs) Phoenix School in Bow, east London, M+F worked with a range of children and their teachers in autumn 2018 to co-create an outdoor structure for the students. 'Environments and spaces are really important to young people with autism,' says MacDonald. All the schoolchildren made creative paper models to inspire the form of the structure; then M+F worked with the more engaged kids to choose and develop their favourite designs from the paper models. The result is a much loved, and used, playful wooden shelter of bold geometric forms. >



1 - TED MENDEZ 2 & 3 - FRENCH + TYE 4 - FIONA MACDONALD 5 - ROB HARRIS



London-based architecture and engagement studio make:good, set up in 2009 by Catherine Greig, involves communities (of all ages) in shaping local spaces, but has delivered a number of projects with children specifically. This year, it worked with the two-site Valence Primary school in Dagenham, east London, to create 'mindfulness structures' in two playgrounds. Commissioned by Bow Arts, make:good spoke to 180 9- and 10-year-olds, asking them what they think makes a calm space; those conversations grew into collaborative design and the two playful wooden structures were completed this autumn. Patterns taken directly from the pupils' work were incorporated directly

6 One of make:good's 'mindfulness structures' created in collaboration with pupils from Valence Primary

7 & 8 Exploratory models for the spaces by Valence Primary pupils

into the finished structures, giving the children ownership and authorship of the spaces.

In an ongoing project in Paisley, Scotland, Glasgow-based studio New Practice (formerly known as Pidgin Perfect) is working with the users of a youth club to help them open a new youth cafe. New Practice has talked to teenagers about the space, finding out what it means to them and what they want from it, leading to collaborative design for interior layout and branding. Now the collaboration has grown to include SketchUp workshops and participatory budgeting, thus building skills. The finished space is due to open in spring 2020. >



Children-specific spaces are not, however, the only spaces children use – public spaces and buildings are used by people of all ages. Architecture practice De Matos Ryan recently delivered an extensive co-design process – with a broad range of community members, including roughly 100 children – to inform its designs for revitalising the V&A Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green. The practice worked closely with students from two primary schools and one secondary school, as well as observing an early-years group to see how they used the existing space (if nothing else, giving 22 toddlers GoPros in a museum sounds like a route to some brilliant footage).

Though the V&A has used co-design as a tool before, 'this is the first time we have opened up the process to children', explains director of Design and FuturePlan Philippa Simpson. 'It is certainly risky, but also surprising, encouraging, inspiring and therefore invaluable.'

The V&A and De Matos Ryan were keen to infuse the

renewed museum with a sense of 'wonder'; it was vital, then, that they used wonder in the co-design process. Introducing the primary school kids to the museum's optical toys collection, the project team helped the children make their own kaleidoscopes. Plenty more co-design workshops – generating imaginative drawings – followed. This process 'significantly impacted' the final design for a sculptural central staircase called The Kaleidoscope, says practice co-director Angus Morrough-Ryan. The plans – which also include improved internal navigation, new studio spaces and a new sensory, welcoming arrival landscape – recently received planning approval and the project is due to complete in 2022.

'It's important to seek influence from young people in public spaces because they are using them,' says make:good's Greig. 'We so often think about it from a singular perspective. Our understanding of those places and their uses needs to be more diverse.'



9 & 10 Co-design workshops for the V&A Museum of Childhood project included creating optical toys based on the museum's collection

11 De Matos Ryan's vision for the museum includes a sculptural staircase called The Kaleidoscope, inspired by the co-design process



9 & 10 - VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON 11 - DARC STUDIO

This notion has been a driving force behind Swedish practice White Arkitekter's recent Places for Girls programme. In 2017, the practice started a project looking at the unequal use of public space in Sweden, responding to research showing that with children over seven, boys become the predominant users of 80% of public space, leaving girls excluded. In collaboration with Stockholm's Skarpnäck Municipality and theatre group UngaTur, White set out to find out why, and work with teenage girls from Skarpnäck's youth council to explore how to shape places more inclusive of them.

The practice brought the programme to London after seeing the need for it. Having started to work more on major projects in the UK – the practice now has a base in Shoreditch – White saw a value for it in a place where communities still face high levels of exclusion and vulnerability. 'Young people are in such need of good public realm and safe, good-quality outdoor space,' says Linda Thiel, director of White's London studio. Youth clubs are in decline and public funding cuts have impacted services and activities available to young people. 'They have nowhere to go, and end up hanging out in dodgy places,' says Thiel. 'Asking young people how they want to use public space is really important.'

Expanding on the workshops and research undertaken in Stockholm, this summer White worked with 12 girls from Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, aged 12-13. In workshops facilitated by students from the London School of Architecture, the girls discussed the school's local area, mapped their routes and generated ideas for how the neighbourhood could be improved and made to feel safer and more enjoyable. It was a little heartbreaking to hear first-hand how they experience some of the public spaces: 'I don't approach the playground [in Hackney Downs],' one girl said, 'because weird people watch children play there.'

The girls soon became energetic and engaged, buzzing with ideas to improve the area such as activity centres, street art, fountains, roof gardens, playgrounds, colourful pavements 'to make the roads less scary', public seating, planting and lighting canopies. Before collaboratively developing these ideas into propositional models, the girls drew up manifestos for good public space. 'Public space should be all-inclusive,' said one girl. 'It should make you

feel comfortable.' Another said she wanted public space 'to be like a cosy rainbow, full of colour and art'. Thiel hopes that the girls might go on to be ambassadors of positive placemaking in their neighbourhood.

Build Up Foundation, started in 2014 and based in London, is dedicated to involving young people (spanning ages 6 to 23) in shaping their local spaces. The drive to set up the organisation, explains director Huan Rimington, was the realisation that so much was being built without young people having a say. 'Young people are growing up feeling excluded and feeling like they can't change things in their environments and in their lives,' he says, when we meet in Hackney. Rimington – who previously designed playgrounds and worked for Citizens UK – wanted to help change this.

The Shade, a 2018 Build Up project in Waltham Forest, east London, funded by the council's Making Places programme, involved working and speaking with 60 young people, mainly 11- to 14-year-olds, to transform an empty piece of land in their estate. Build Up helped them map the area and identify what was important, before collaborating on designs and building. It is now a revived space for everyone, with seating, planters, a stage and a table tennis table. 'It is a space that is intergenerational,' says Rimington.

This October, Build Up completed a co-designed public space on Flanders Way in Hackney. The project, known as Build Up Hackney, has been delivered in collaboration with youth charity Hackney Quest in addition to 20 local children and teenagers. It has transformed a neglected corner of land overlooking a junction into a welcoming and inclusive space with benches (of different heights), swings, new trees, painted bins, new lampposts, colourful wooden posts and even mounted cast-iron reliefs showing drawings and quotes by the children (messages include 'Keep Hackney safe', 'Always believe in yourself' and 'Help the environment'). Build Up also involved two local older teenagers, Daniel and Shanique, on paid placements to work on the project. At the entrance to the new space, an inscribed wooden post reads: 'This space has been designed & built by young people.'

It all kicked off with a local crowdfunder project and was then supported with a £30,000 grant from the Mayor of London. The project meant getting the council to sign up to a process of letting young people have a say. 'They were not at all used to this kind of process,' Rimington says with a knowing smile. 'You have to persuade people that this thing designed by young people will be quality and not risky.' But later in the process, people from the council came to review the designs made by young people. 'It was transformational – suddenly they were getting excited,' says Rimington.

That excitement has rapidly scaled. At the launch of the space on a chilly afternoon in late October, the mayor of Hackney Philip Glanville presented Build Up Hackney with the 2019 Team London Awards' Crowdfund London Award. He asked the gathered crowd of people: 'Do we want more projects like this?' A huge cheer of 'yes!' was his answer. 'I'm really committed to making sure more projects like this happen in more places around the borough, so there are spaces owned and built by young people,' Glanville said. 'When a place is child-friendly, it's community-friendly.' >

'Asking young people how they want to use public space is really important.'

Linda Thiel

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12 & 13 White Arkitekter's Places for Girls workshops with students from Mossbourne Academy in Hackney

14 Young people getting involved in the construction of the co-designed The Shade project in Waltham Forest, enabled by Build Up Foundation

15 An intergenerational space: The Shade project has transformed an empty plot on the Aldridge Way estate

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16 Co-design workshops for the Build Up Hackney project with local schoolchildren

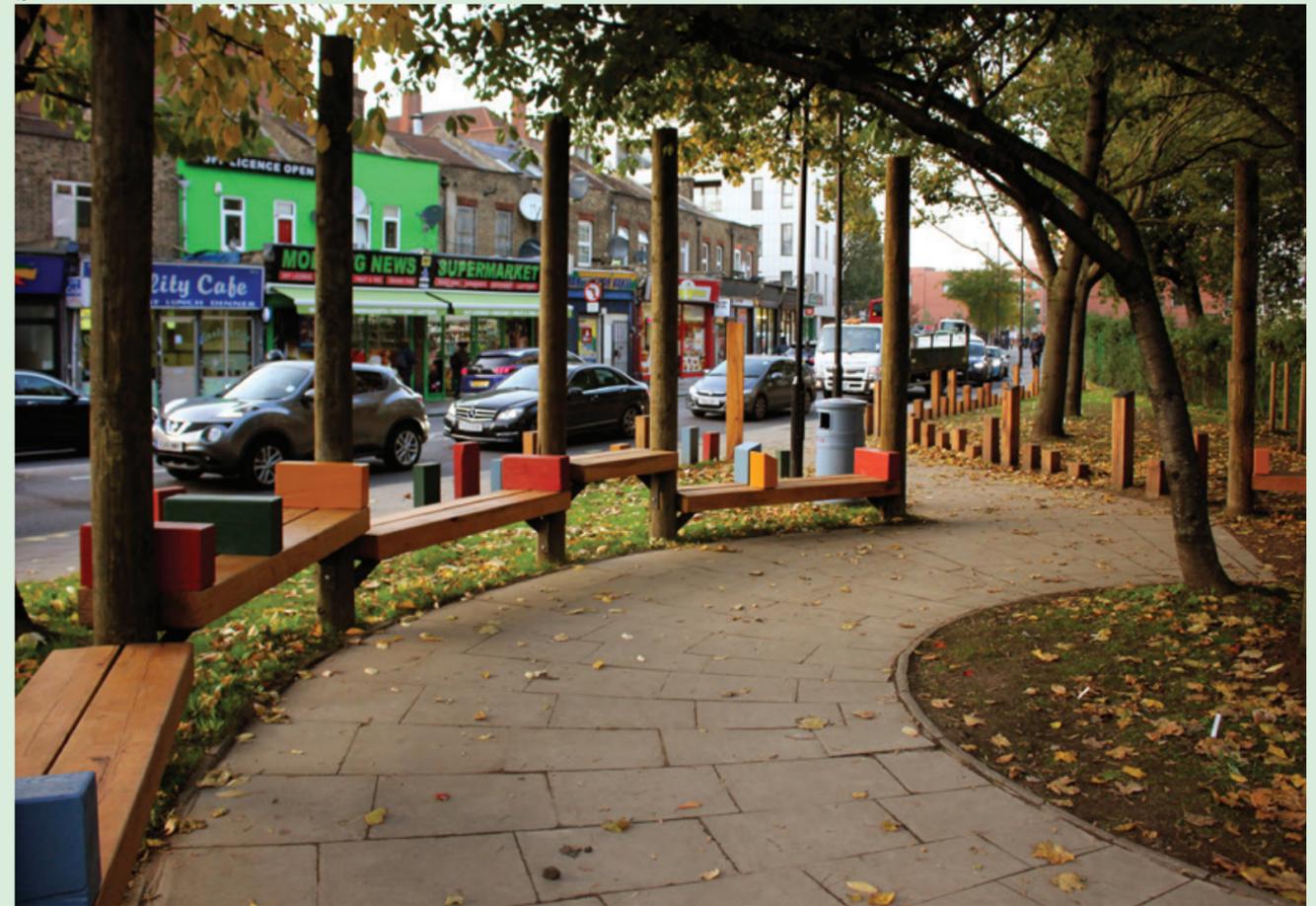
17 On site: young people learn skills collaboratively constructing the Build Up Hackney project

18 & 19 The completed project, a public space with swings and seating, on Flanders Way

Hackney Council has committed to supporting young people shape public spaces in the borough and in collaboration with Build Up will be exploring future project sites this winter. ‘We want to shift this from being a one-off to being a mainstream process,’ says Rimington. ‘It should be thought of by councils as a fair and inclusive way of making regeneration happen.’ Daniel and Shanique, speaking at the launch of the Flanders Way site, agree. ‘There are so many young people eager to transform their area into a positive environment for everyone and this is proof,’ said Shanique. ‘Growing up in Hackney, we didn’t

have opportunities like this. It has allowed me for the first time to do something permanent in my area.’ Daniel added: ‘This should be a starting step for more things like this to happen – not just in Hackney, but in London too. It would bring communities together.’

It’s clear there are challenges, risks and barriers to delivering this kind of work. For starters, clients need to be willing to commission it, and practices have to have the right kind of insurance to do it, never mind the right kind of attitude – but there can be myriad benefits to the field of architecture, as well as to the participants. >



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Huan Rimington

‘Compared to off-the-peg solutions, these processes aren’t cheap or easy – people need to see the value of investing in them,’ says M+F’s MacDonald. ‘The true value of these projects is way more than what we put on the price tag.’ Plus, architects need to see this kind of co-design as an opportunity for, rather than challenge to, the profession, she adds: ‘The architecture profession is still needed, but it can be much richer including those voices.’ De Matos Ryan’s Morrogh-Ryan reflects this view: ‘The perspective of a child and how they perceive spaces is critical. They have an unencumbered mind. Often they put forward ideas that are more ambitious. They are buzzing with ideas – it gives an energy to the co-design process.’

Inspired by the Places for Girls programme, White Arkitekter is beginning to explore the potential to adopt such engagement as a tool on architecture and urban regeneration projects. ‘As an architect, I now more fully grasp the importance of listening to the full demographics of a community and how much that can benefit the outcome of what we design,’ says Thiel.

Work like this is also plugging a gap that is growing in education. Design and Technology is disappearing from schools in the UK, following its removal from the list of core subjects in the early Noughties and the impact of austerity and funding cuts. Statistics from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) in 2017 revealed that GCSE courses in design and technology have disappeared from nearly half of schools in the UK. In addition to projects like this, programmes such as Open City’s Architecture in Schools are attempting to address this educational loss.

At the opening of Build Up’s project in Hackney this October, the children involved in co-designing and building it explained it was the first time they had worked on this type of project, that it had given them a range of skills, and that they wanted to do more projects like it. ‘I have learnt so much about building things,’ said 12-year-old Sereena. ‘This experience has been so special to me. I can build anything now!’

As well as skillsbuilding, many point out the importance of supporting civic voice. M+F’s Springett sees this type of work as ‘a way to get young people to think about the agency they can have in their city. With a lot of young people, engaging them allows their voice to be heard. This work is about supporting an empowered community who can shape their city.’ It also, he adds, helps young people become more confident and collaborative.

This notion of agency is the recurring theme in conversations about this type of work with young people. ‘Very early on as a society we shut down that civic voice,’ says make:good’s Greig. Listening to and co-designing with children and teenagers challenges the assumption that it’s impossible to impact your surroundings. ‘By the time they’re teenagers, people have an ingrained sense of a lack of agency,’ adds Greig. This is supported by research such as Hackney Quest’s 2018 report, Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes, which reported that only 13% of the children (9- and 10-year-olds) they spoke to ‘felt that young people are listened to when decisions are made about the area’.

Asking for ideas isn’t enough though. ‘You have to listen and play back to [the young people] what you’ve heard, check it with them,’ says Greig. ‘Then you need to put that information in the context of conversations with other people, and the wider restrictions. It’s important to make everything transparent – you’re not going to build that sense of agency and civic voice unless you’re honest.’

The news about young people these days seems to suggest a growing sense of civic engagement. If young people can fill the streets to call for climate justice, if we can start to listen to them seriously about pressing social and environmental issues, then surely we can harness their civic voice to shape places and spaces that are more inclusive, sustainable, and better designed. The job of public and private clients, and architecture practices, is to enable this for young people. The future, and its built environment, are – after all – theirs. ■

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20 Build Up Foundation, members of the local student project team and Hackney mayor Philip Glanville at the launch of Build Up Hackney