Disruption

NOBODY SAY "SCHOOL"

The playful and stylish Learnlife hub in Barcelona, Spain uses the studio concept to help teenagers blossom into independent learners with a sense of purpose.

By Irena Barker

Sandwiched between a Mexican restaurant and an artisan cobbler on a pedestrianized Barcelona street, it would be easy to mistake the Learnlife hub for a small art gallery or fancy shop.

Intriguing artworks in the windows attract curious viewers every day and people frequently stop to take pictures and peer inside.

But despite appearances and its trendy city-centre location, the Learnlife hub is neither of these.

Avoiding the word school, or even college, the hub is a privately-funded learning base aimed at teenagers who want an alternative to standard school offerings in the city.

Here, the focus is on nurturing learners' well-being and relationships as a foundation for discovering their interests and directing their own learning.

The young people are helped along their way by "learning guides" (rather than teachers) within a series of studio spaces, which allow them to immerse themselves in their passions.

The studios include a makerspace for activities such as art and fashion, woodworking areas, a food lab, multi media lounge and sound studio.

The building is also home to a co-working space which allows learners to be inspired by professionals working in their areas of interest.

It is hoped that the hub will become an example of best practice in learner-centred education that will inspire many other such institutions across the world.

This well-lit learning utopia, with its bright white walls, Scandinavian-style timber fittings, resplendent plant life and playful nooks and corners has been a labour of love since the very start.

Until 2017 the space was a lawyer's office, until it was spotted as a potential site for conversion by Sol Espoille, the architect in charge of creating Learnlife's first hub.

"From the beginning I was completely in love with this place mainly because we are in the heart of Barcelona, we are in one of the most beautiful pedestrian streets," says Espoille.

"The location is really fantastic as we are near the universities and the curious buildings."

One benefit of the building was that the internal courtyard – typical of Barcelona buildings – had already been covered over, allowing for the creation of a central performance area lit from above.

The final space is licensed for 350 learners but the aim is for Learnlife to grow its current full-time student numbers from 65 to around 150. Many more will attend its evening programmes for young people attending mainstream schools.

Despite the obvious benefits of the building's location, the conversion itself had its challenges – and its opportunities.

Courses were already running in the building with 35 learners in attendance while the conversion was being carried out, with the inevitable noise and dust.

"It was completely inspiring and a challenge," says Espoille.

"It was the most amazing experience. We have plenty of stories about involving the learners in the design process."

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Learners were put in charge of coming up with a use and a design for one particular small space under a staircase, and carried out workshops and research to decide what it should be.

They eventually emerged with the idea of the "Yellow Submarine", a focus room where people can go to make a Skype call or work undisturbed on something requiring intense concentration.

"They had to think about budget, measurements, maths, design process, team building and finally making a presentation with their results," says Espoille, stressing the advantages of an "organic" design process where not everything has been decided in advance of works taking place.

Young people have also been involved in the development of the furniture.

Learners were set the challenge of designing stools that could be mass-produced, flat-packed and involve no glue or nails.

A winner was chosen from a number of prototypes and is now in use in the spaces.

The striking timberwork throughout the building — including eye-catching "beach hut" style booths in the entrance hall — was created by Learnlife's own in-house carpenter, but it has already inspired learners to work with wood.

Involvement of learners is key to much of Espoille's work – she is the founder of the Arquikids project which encourages children to become involved in architectural design.

But there is a lot more she is proud of in the design of the learning hub.

"Our philosophy in terms of the space is that in every corner we have a challenge to make a learning experience around that.

"One of the objectives was that the whole building is somehow a learning environment, it invites you to learn something, even the bathroom."

THE CREATIVITY OF THE SPACE INSPIRES THE LEARNERS TO BE CREATIVE

This concept is illustrated perfectly in the hub's toilets where giant murals illustrate the long journey water goes on before arriving into our taps.

Playfulness is also key to the design, says Espoille who incorporated skateboard racks for learners, many of whom skate to school.

One of her favourite spots in the school is the lobby "shark attack" scene constructed from a deckchair, mirror and a surfboard with a bite taken out of it.

While offering some fun for visitors to the school to take a selfie and amuse themselves, it also covers some ugly electrical boxes.

The use of wooden swings for seating is also not just a whimsical bit of fun – enabling learners with ADHD or autism to move or rock as they work helps them to focus and concentrate.

"There's always a reason, I like to challenge myself to think that every corner has a function but also a story behind it," says Espoille.

This sense of fun itself has a function, explains Stephen Harris, an experienced headteacher and now chief learning officer at Learnlife:

"The creativity of the space inspires the learners to be creative," he says.

Above all, while Learnlife is about learning, it is far removed from everything young people might expect from an exam-focused and teacher-centred traditional school.

Learners do not study for specific qualifications at the hub, although they are supported by staff if they want to gain them through distance learning options.

"Kids come into the space and they have no concept of school," says Harris.

"They may have been damaged by their school experience but here they can relax emotionally. The space encourages positivity." ■