

YOUTH

# GENERATION GAME

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**With prospects bleak, what can the design and programming of youth spaces do to engage and inspire the under-25s? Here are a number of inspirational individuals and schemes working hard to harness their talents, enthusiasm and skills**







**THERE IS A** crisis affecting the youth of today, brought on by sustained global economic recession: not only are there fewer jobs available for school leavers, but higher education has become increasingly unaffordable; and for those kicking their heels at home, there is precious little to do thanks to widespread cuts in youth services.

According to a news article in *The Guardian* newspaper in February, 20 per cent of under-25s in the UK are without a job (actual figures vary between 140,000 and a million, depending on who's supplying the statistics). Across Europe, an estimated 14 million of the under-25s are 'not in employment, education or training' (aka NEETS). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a 2014 Prince's Trust survey revealed that levels of depression among the under-25s are at an all-time high, thanks to this lack of opportunities for meaningful engagement with the workplace or with wider society. In a recent broadcast for TEDx in Athens, Sam Conniff, the co-founder

Livity came up with a way to utilise the underused space that proliferates in urban centres around the UK

of innovative youth-driven marketing agency Livity, declared: 'We are systematically wasting one of the most powerful, one of the most important, one of the most precious natural resources at our disposal, because every single day we systemise the failure and deny the opportunity that we have within all of our young people.'

Conniff has certainly played his part to try and redress this situation, along with his fellow Livity founder and director Michelle Clothier, since starting their business 13 years ago. Both of them were working in marketing –specifically in

youth-targeted marketing – and they saw an opportunity to connect youth brands more directly to the voices and insights of their target audience while simultaneously bringing training, mentoring and skills-development to these young participants; not to mention employment. Livity now employs around 50 young people at its base in Brixton.

Clothier, who spends a great deal of time listening to young people, says: 'This generation, the millennials, and the new generation coming through, do feel they are at a disadvantage. [Thanks to] the global circumstances in which they've grown up they have been positioned in potentially quite a negative way that is going to make their own progression possibly more challenging, but it might also stimulate them to be the generation that has to come up with some very different solutions. They won't care about having a voice and a vote in the traditional organisations and institutions. They will create their own. We could be on the brink of a really >

Previous page and left Three Norwegian students went to Senegal to build a youth centre, naturally ventilated and using local materials

**CASE STUDY**

**Project Niafourang**  
Senegal

In 2011 Assad Ansar, Andreas Brunvoli and Tore H Grimstad travelled to Senegal to build a youth centre. The three students at Norges Teknisk-naturvitenskapelige Universitet in Trondheim, Norway, had approached non-profit organisation Friends of Niafourang in the hope that they might have a chance to design and build a sustainable youth centre for this community, which suffers from a lack of infrastructure and investment as well as massive unemployment, leading many young people to leave the area in search of work.

Friends of Niafourang's mission is to improve conditions for these young adults. But the students also saw an opportunity to provide skills and training during the 10 weeks of dedicated planning and hard labour it took to complete the project. With a computer room/library and a large multipurpose space for seminars, performances and village meetings, the form of the 250 sq m structure did not need to be complex. But it did need to be sustainable – only local materials could be used, and no electricity. Compressed sand from a nearby ditch was used to make bricks – hand-pressed in a local machine and stacked with a little cement. A neighbouring village was able to weld the steel brackets that hold a corrugated aluminium roof in place, raised slightly for ventilation, and extended to create a second floor, reached by external ladder.



**Client** Friends of Niafourang  
**Designers** Assad Ansar, Andreas Brunvoli, Tore H Grimstad  
**Area** 250 sq m  
**Cost** Not available  
**Completed** 2011



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exciting new generation. It's our job as older members of the community to find ways to facilitate them and empower them and set them up to be the best they can possibly be.'

An additional solution Livity has helped to create in this landscape of shrinking opportunities is space. In the run up to the 2012 Olympics, with 'legacy' being a matter of huge importance to the politicians and pundits, Clothier and Conniff came up with a way to utilise the underused space that proliferates in urban centres around the UK so that young people can have somewhere to support their activities, whether putting on a play or starting a reading group.

'Somewhere To' is a nationwide resource, digitally and physically connecting young people with a massive variety of spaces and places for almost any purpose – from an old town hall for a 'pop-up department store', to Tate Modern's Turbine Hall for some BMX stunt riders (see case study). Two years into four years' worth



Above The New Generation Youth and Community Centre by RCKa in Sydenham, where facilities include a games room

of Big Lottery funding, its remit has evolved to support young entrepreneurs by finding spaces to use on short or long-term leases as a base to get their businesses off the ground.

Luckily, thanks to the investment of the Labour Government's MyPlace scheme, Somewhere To, isn't the only option young people have to find inspirational spaces outside of their homes or the local shopping mall. Though the scheme has now been discontinued, more than £240m was invested in the construction of more than 63 facilities, with the last few projects showing ever greater ingenuity in making every penny count, and ever greater engagement with target users.

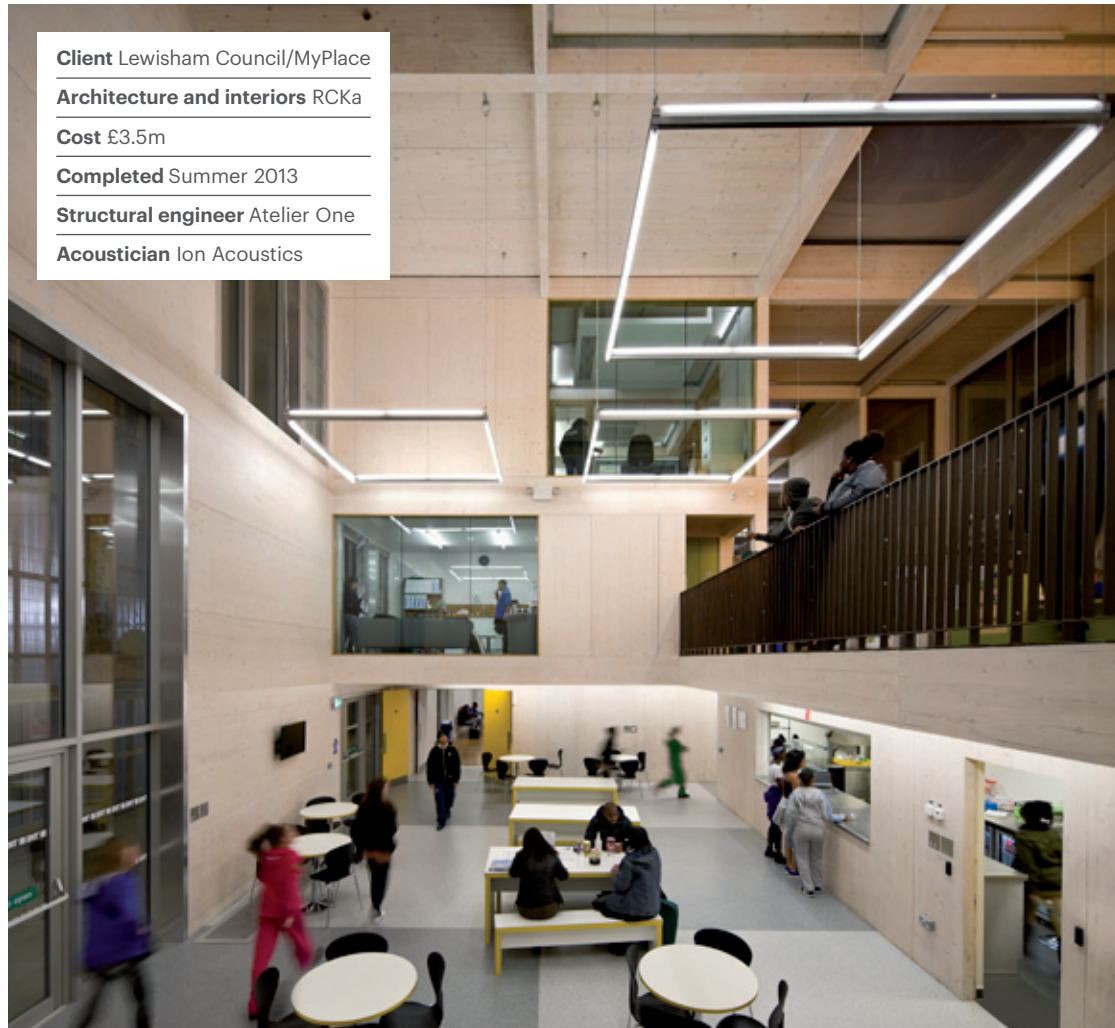
Garnering a huge amount of both architectural and community praise – as well as a Civic Trust Award 2014 – is The New Generation Youth Centre in Sydenham, south-east London, the first building to be completed by young practice RCKa. With £3.5m MyPlace core funding, Lewisham was able to commission

## CASE STUDY

### The New Generation Youth and Community Centre Sydenham

The translucent polycarbonate skin of The New Generation Youth and Community Centre (TNG) reveals a building pulsing with opportunities for young people in the London borough of Lewisham. With climbing wall, training kitchen and cafe, multiuse games area, recording studios, health clinic, dance and performance spaces, teaching and conference rooms and an IT suite, TNG provides a multitude of welcome distractions, healthy activities and opportunities to help young people gain skills and expand their horizons. RCKa, a young practice determined to create 'buildings that support people', undertook lengthy consultations with stakeholder groups, the most influential being a steering group of young people from the area whose desire for a spatially exciting and connective interior was instrumental in driving the innovative solution. A series of single, double and triple-height spaces with multiuse connecting areas and generously wide staircases maximises legibility and visibility throughout the building. This porous interior also increases the penetration of daylight through large and loosely configured windows, as well as views out on to a games area, a 'winter garden' and park beyond. Interior walls and ceiling are clad in lightly whitewashed engineered timber, left exposed apart from an acoustically lined performance space.

**Client** Lewisham Council/MyPlace  
**Architecture and interiors** RCKa  
**Cost** £3.5m  
**Completed** Summer 2013  
**Structural engineer** Atelier One  
**Acoustician** Ion Acoustics



## CASE STUDY

### Somewhere To



Somewhere To is not one physical space, but a portal to a massive database of underutilised buildings that are offered to young people aged 16 to 25 for occasional or longer-term use, thanks to this online resource set up and run by youth marketing agency Livity. Founders and directors Sam Conniff and Michelle Clothier saw this as an opportunity to connect young people to the businesses, organisations and community around them, while also giving young people places and spaces to use, whether for a reading group, a writing group, for rehearsing music, shooting videos or movies, for gallery space or performances. Says Clothier: 'We act as the space broker, find a space and put that space holder together with that young person. The wonderful thing is that the transaction becomes mutually beneficial. A phenomenal percentage of the businesses we connect with say they have a really positive experience and would be happy to do that again. The benefits go two-way.' Through Somewhere

To, a group of stunt-riding BMX bikers were able to stage a performance in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Another group was actually given access to No 10 Downing Street to film a promotional video for the scheme involving boxers beneath the chandeliers and parkours ricocheting off the walls.

Funded initially as an Olympic Legacy project, the scheme won Big Lottery funding in 2012, to establish itself over four years. From that point forward, it is meant to be a self-sustaining business. A recent evolution is the provision of short and long-term space for start-up businesses, to give the next generation of young entrepreneurs a vital business base. Livity's Somewhere To team has built up a network of 18 regional organisations, from architecture practices to traditional youth organisations. 'They act as delivery partners,' says Clothier. 'They know their area, they understand where the kids are and where the interesting spaces are and how to reach out to the community.'





a really inspirational facility to replace the borough's last remaining youth centre – a dilapidated and long-closed school hall on the same site as the proposed new centre, next to Sydenham Wells Park. Consultation with some 30 groups including local youth theatres, Millwall Football Club's outreach programme, church groups, the Centrepointhomeless charity and a steering group of young locals, substantially informed the look and feel of the Centre, says lead architect Dieter Kleiner.

Kleiner and his fellow directors at RCKa formed the practice in 2010 with the specific intention of creating buildings that really supported their occupants' aspirations and activities – partly inspired, it turns out, by Kleiner's experience of working on Norwich's stunning Open Youth Venue (a former bank turned into a youth centre, which featured in FX's last youth-focused feature, December 2011), while at Hudson Architects. That was Kleiner's first experience of a more hands-on,

**'People from the local authority could see at the meetings how engaged the young people were'**

participatory design process, working closely with the centre's young target audience.

'It was a pleasure working with these young people [and seeing] how sharp and engaged and intelligent and forthright they are about what they wanted – sexual health advice, that kind of thing,' he says. 'They weren't shy in coming forward with what they needed. It was great seeing how many positive things can come out of having [the stakeholders] on board. It can be slightly more challenging and the goalposts have to shift a bit more. You have to work a bit harder as an architect and be a bit more nimble but

when you get to where you want to, there's so much more buy in.'

With TNG, it was the young future users' advocacy of large, interlocking spaces that helped persuade the local council to approve the innovative interior layout. Inspired by the stage designs of Adolphe Appia, the spatial configuration renders activities visible from all parts of the building – 'like a theatre for life to unfold on', says Kleiner. 'People from the local authority could see at the meetings how engaged the young people were with these flexible spaces – double and triple-height spaces cost more so often you don't get them. But they change the nature of the building completely.'

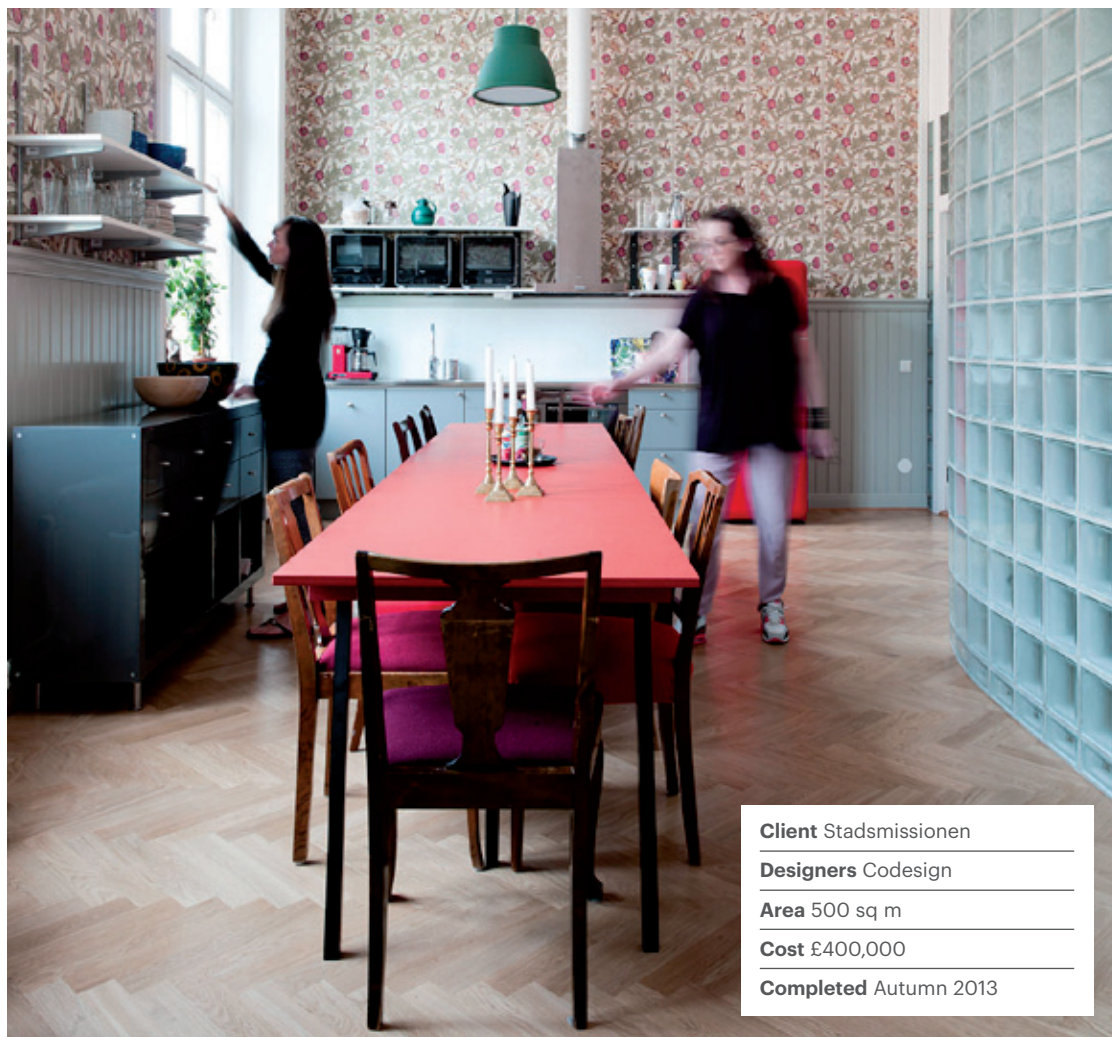
Now around 200 young people a night visit the facility, thanks in part to this consultation-enhanced local awareness and engagement. A series of public tours after the building opened were 'amazing', says Kleiner. 'It was like I had briefed people to say the stuff they said. They said it's such a democratic space.' He is >

## CASE STUDY

**Stadsmissionen  
Sweden**

Despite the enduring stigma around the idea of visiting a sexual or mental health clinic, few could deny the appeal of this Stadsmissionen youth health centre, created by Swedish practice Codesign. For a sexual health clinic and a mental health clinic (with separate entrance for young men and their male-only therapists) the brief from Stockholm charity Stadsmissionen was to create a welcoming environment to break down initial resistance of potential teenage clients. Codesign had just one floor (500 sq m) of a worn old school building from 1888 to work with, and one which had been thoughtlessly refurbished in the Sixties and again in the Eighties. Through consultation with the clinical team and volunteers, a main objective was identified of creating a staff hub in the heart of the floor plan to facilitate knowledge exchange. The hub consists of a central staff kitchen with large dining table for meetings, plus a big office for volunteers and reception to serve both entrances.

Filled with secondhand furniture and heavily discounted designer furniture, the therapy rooms feel funky and modern yet homely. The £400,000 budget covered stripping out the venue, new plumbing to gynecology rooms, five new toilets, new electrics, new openings in load-bearing walls, new floor surfaces, fixtures and fittings, plus all furniture.



**Client** Stadsmissionen  
**Designers** Codesign  
**Area** 500 sq m  
**Cost** £400,000  
**Completed** Autumn 2013

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delighted that they have taken such ownership of the scheme that when interviewed for a local newspaper, the young people claimed to have designed it themselves. 'We didn't ask them to say that. But if they feel that they've designed it, we couldn't ask for any more.'

Despite the vacuum left by the closure of the MyPlace scheme and the lack of local authority fundings, there are, happily, still new projects in the pipeline. In Norwich, for example, a wealthy local philanthropist has hired RCKa to convert a car showroom into a 6,500 sq m youth facility, keeping the car workshops for training and apprenticeships, and adding a boxing gym, among other facilities.

Who will be left to run the youth centres that still exist is the really key question, if local authorities decide to further shrink their provision? But here, Kleiner is upbeat that design can make the difference. He says: 'Arguably the way things are moving, you are

## In Norwich a wealthy philanthropist has hired RCKa to convert a car showroom into a 6,500 sq m youth facility

going to have to encourage local people to get involved and you'll do that by enthusing people – not demanding it. That's the potential for these buildings. They can inspire and connect people. Architecturally one of the things that was important to us was to attract people who otherwise wouldn't want to go in the building.'

It's a strong argument: if the quality of the spaces is good, then more commercial revenue can be generated by hiring areas out, and more people will be attracted to provide services – for young people, or for the whole community – in them. **FX**



**Above** A recording studio is among the facilities provided at Birmingham's The Lighthouse youth facility, by Associated Architects

## CASE STUDY

### The Lighthouse Birmingham

Thanks to MyPlace funding, Birmingham's young citizens of Aston, Lozells and Newtown now have a state-of-the-art £5m facility. Birmingham-based practice Associated Architects seized the opportunity to create an 'iconic landmark within the community', according to architect Rav Kumar.

Extensive consultations among its target audience of 13 to 19-year-olds informed the type and layout of facilities: a series of informal public spaces, group meeting rooms, IT rooms, social areas and a cafe and advice centre on the ground floor, with sports hall, dance studio, changing facilities, music rooms, a recording studio and business units on the two upper floors.

Semi-transparent coloured cladding allows the sports hall to be entirely naturally lit during the day, with LED lighting in the evening casting a blue glow out on to the community and reinforcing its 'beacon' status, next to a major route into Birmingham city centre.

The external expression of the building seeks to articulate the internal private and public areas, with the ground floor's public spaces, social areas and advice centre visible through full-height security glazing.

It was a regional finalist in the Civic Trust Awards 2013.

**Client** Birmingham Youth Service

**Architects** Associated Architects

**Project Value** £5m

**Completed** 2012

