

Should teenagers be involved in the design of our built environment? It's not a question that dominates the agenda of your average construction meeting. But attitudes are changing. Co-design is a grassroots movement of architects, teachers and designers who believe that enlisting the imagination and unfiltered honesty of the under-twenties to build youth-friendly public places is a force for social good.

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) is also on board. To mark the 100th anniversary of Becontree, one of Europe's largest housing estates, the institution commissioned POoR Collective, four young London architects who champion a people-first approach, to design an inviting hang-out for local school children utilising those students' practical input and insights.

POoR (Power Out of Restriction) was set up in 2019. It is one of several UK groups and practices that are working with young people on projects – community centres, housing estates or pub-

Developers have ignored young people. 'When did you last see a teenager on a housing project billboard?'

lic spaces. The aim, says POoR co-founder Shawn Adams, is to forge closer links between teenagers and their environment by making the latter feel "inclusive and welcoming".

Another POoR co-founder, Ben Spry, expands: "There's a limited number of spaces where teenagers feel at home. Public spaces like parks, are usually designed with children in mind. Pubs are for adults. But everyone craves an informal space where they can unwind."

Co-design is mutually advantageous. "So many young people are creative and have interesting ideas – they just need guidance and the skills to come up with a tangible design. That's where we come in. Any profession or industry can stagnate if its outlook is too homogenous. We're simply trying to relieve the monotony by acting as a conduit for fresh ideas," says Spry.

Their mission is also a response to the government's cuts in funding for youth clubs. According to a recent survey by Siân Berry, a Green party member of the London Assembly, more than £36mn was cut from annual youth service



drawing and maths-based games, led to the final design.

The sociably circular seating, in high-lighter-bright hues, is crowned by translucent canopies (a nod to that supermarket portal), giving it the feel of a Pop Art bandstand mixed with a fair-ground carousel. The piece, called "Bringing Home to the Unknown", was on display to the public as part of a RIBA installation in Regent's Park last October.

But benches are just the beginning. "Eventually we'd like to co-design larger buildings – schools, community centres – where children can make their mark," says Spry.

Child-centred design theories have existed since the 1970s. "But they've really gained momentum recently, especially in architecture schools," says architect Victoria Thornton, founder of education charity Open City, who also started the popular Open House events in 1992.

"Architecture should reflect society; at the moment it doesn't," she says. "Co-design is a positive step forwards that ultimately benefits everyone. I'd like to see it embedded in the system."

Some might argue that all this smacks of blue-sky thinking; a box-ticking exercise in doing the right thing. Thornton's response is that collaborative design helps to develop soft skills through workshops held in schools, museums or architectural practices. "Learning to work in a group, accepting failure and finding ways to resolve that and move on; giving presentations and critical thinking; this can be applied to almost any job."

Funding cuts have also affected art and design teaching in schools. Carpentry, textiles and ceramics are fast disappearing as resources wane. The

Talkin' about rejuvenation

Architecture | Projects that collaborate with teenagers are building both skills and better neighbourhoods. *Serena Fokschaner reports*

budgets across the capital between 2011-12 and 2021-22, representing a fall of 44 per cent. The survey also found that more than 600 full-time youth worker jobs have been cut. A decade ago, there were almost 300 youth centres across London; more than 130 have closed (Berry's findings did not include centres that had shut temporarily due to the pandemic). "Lots of teenagers have nowhere other to hang out than on the streets," says Spry.

Adams and his colleagues share nostalgic memories of youth-clubbing days. "They were a formative part of our childhood. We made friends, messed about and let off steam," he says. "The people in charge were about 10 years older than us. But they became our role models. It's where we felt part of our community. Those spaces felt as if they belonged to all of us."

For the Becontree project they began by asking the children where they felt safest. Their telling responses ranged from "a sports pavilion" to the canopied entrance of a local supermarket. A six-week design process, involving

(Main picture and top right) the team behind the green timber-frame pavilion completed together with students in Hull — Patrick Mateer

(Below) Architect practice Matt + Fiona working with UCL's Bartlett project — James Tye



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activities involved in co-design projects – model-making, woodwork and CAD (computer-aided design) drawing, for example – develop the practical skills that are “the foundation of [the UK’s] creative industries and one of our strongest exports”, says Thornton.

From their Waterloo studio, architects Fiona MacDonald and Matthew Springett of Matt + Fiona work with London students aged 11-14 as part of the outreach programme of The Bartlett, UCL’s architecture faculty. They “recognise the need to work with young people before they choose their GCSEs [at age 13-14] to ensure they’re not narrowing their options too early,” says MacDonald, who sees this as part of a wider drive to foster diversity in design.

The pair have worked with more than 2,500 children, and advocate a hands-on approach. “Some co-design ideas can be a bit pie-in-the-sky with promises of taking children on a nice design journey that will never become a reality. Like an art class-plus,” says MacDonald, who first encountered the concept on a project in Japan in 2013, rebuilding after the tsunami two years earlier. “The children I worked with over there were far less risk averse than their parents. I was struck by their resilience – and imagination. They led the way.”

In Hull they worked with pupils aged 11-16 from Oakfield, a school for pupils with social, emotional or mental health difficulties, to devise an outdoor classroom for the school’s allotment. During

‘Young people are good at reading a built environment and working out if it’s built for them – or for money’



the three-month project, the children learnt design engineering and carpentry techniques. “It gave them a sense of seeded ownership. They gained confidence in voicing their opinions and seeing their ideas being listened to, in a real-world sense,” says Springett.

The emerald-green timber frame pavilion, which functions as den and learning space, has a high lookout for bird’s-eye views. Large pivoting, counterweighted doors can be locked at night or opened during the day to provide a canopy for the deck outside. Rubber paint ensures that it will weather north-eastern climes. Shortlisted for a Dezeen Small Projects Award in 2018, it

(Clockwise from main) ‘Bringing Home to the Unknown’ in Regent’s Park by students at Mayesbrook Park School; a seat made under guidance from We Made That; a student works on a project jointly run by architects Matt + Fiona

Luke O’Donovan, James Tye



Social housing designed by ZCD Architects, experts in child-friendly cities

won an Architect’s Journal People’s Choice prize.

To design a new town square in Wealdstone, Harrow, Holly Lewis of We Made That, a group of researchers, teachers and architects, began by asking local businesses for their input: “They weren’t interested. But young people were.” A workshop was established and the 17-18 year-olds – who discovered the project through a campaign on social media, events and the local youth club – designed and produced a range of robust, modular outdoor furniture for the square. “It became an education in the industrial design process. The pieces are also available to buy. That’s important because they learnt about the commercial value of making,” says Lewis.

The We Made That collective is dedicated to designing “equitable” public spaces, says Lewis. “Young people are very good at reading their built environment and working out if a place that been designed for them – or for moneybags. There’s a tendency to patronise young people. We find their opinions are acutely observed. They cut to the chase.”

At ZCD Architects, director Dinah Bornat, an expert on child-friendly cities, says young people have been ignored by developers in recent decades. “When was the last time you walked past a billboard for a housing project and spotted a teenager on it? There’s been a tendency to stigmatise young people and typecast them as antisocial. We focus on the negative aspects – like knife crime – and not on their wellbeing.”

“Young people are often seen as hard

to reach. In fact, it’s easy, because they’re at school. And because they’re pedestrians they know their neighbourhoods inside out,” adds Bornat, whose recent projects include social housing in Buckinghamshire where the two-storey properties are arranged around a communal garden.

“It’s not about handing over a shopping list of wants. We get under the bonnet to work out how they live their daily lives; how they’d like spaces to work for them. Teenagers are children as well. They need places to play – and meet. They need brightly lit paths so they can get to their friends’ homes safely. And they really value nature, and peace.”

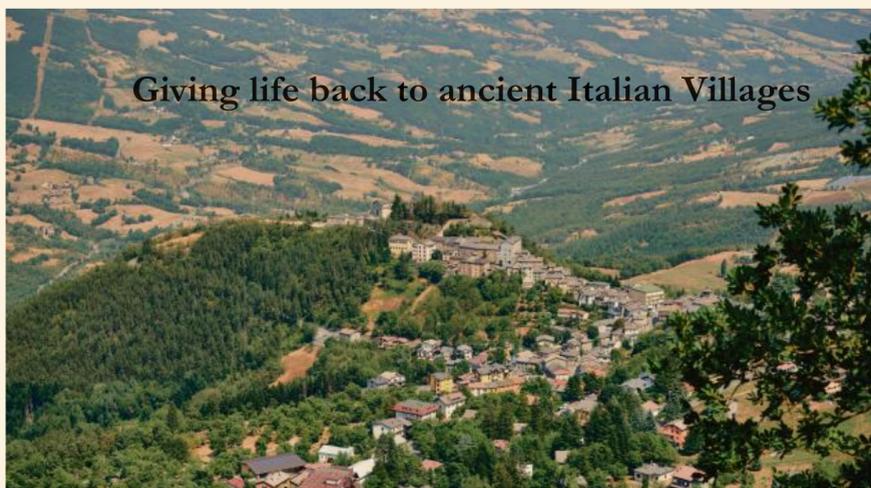
This is all common sense – and yet, she says, these elements have been ignored. “We’re learning from those mistakes to build better places. We have a duty of care to the next generation,” says Bornat.

Bornat has also developed a youth engagement tool kit called Voice Opportunity Power, which is free to use. It is not just popular with design graduates, she says, but also with councils, developers and construction firms who are beginning to grasp the mutual benefits of a two-way design conversation.

Matthew Springett says the movement is also gathering support from his more conservative peers. “When we began lots of architects were sceptical. Some argued it would diminish the profession.” Now, however, they see that it can have the opposite effect. “That’s because co-design is making more people aware of the importance of good design, and how it can improve the quality of all our lives.”

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ITS ITALY is leading the regeneration of ancient Italian villages, regenerating properties, opening new clubhouses for the community and supporting local businesses.

Venturing in the Italian countryside, it is very common to find small villages full of culture, history and culinary traditions. Many tourists fall in love with the idea of buying a small property or business and starting a new life there.

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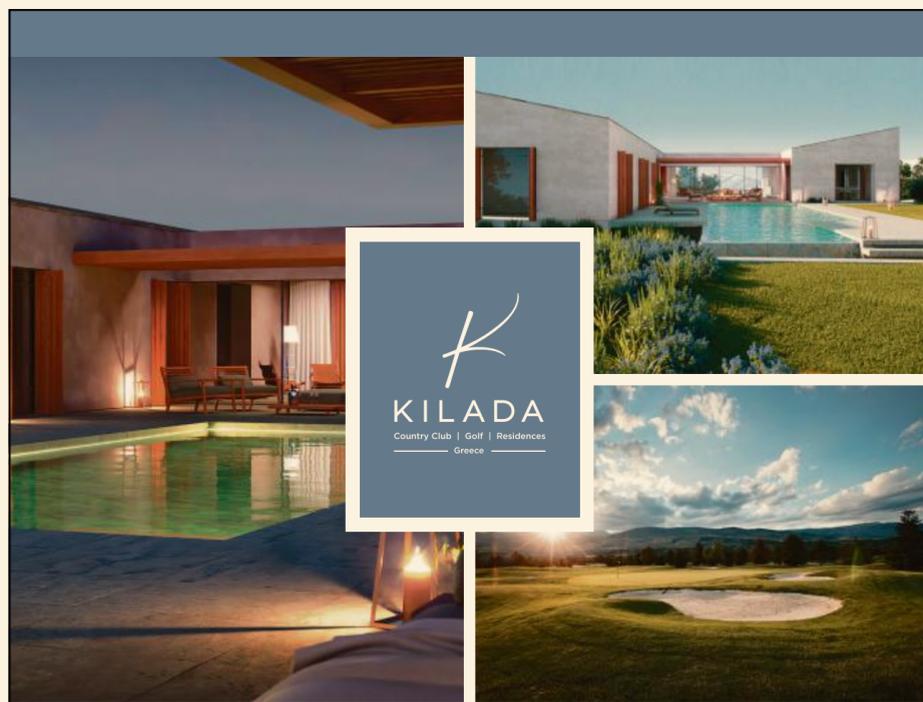
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