

Interview

Homes where we all live...

Nicole Crockett is Director of Hackney's Building Exploratory. **Jo Moulds** finds out how such a resource can promote a feeling of ownership within communities



The Building Exploratory in Hackney, London, is an education centre which is the only interactive centre focused on the built environment of its type in the UK – if not the world. It is a place which puts a focus on sustainability through all its activities and Nicole Crockett, Director, is proud to be at the helm of a charitable organisation which has a direct hand in educating all ages in architecture and the built environment – not subjects that are usually taught in schools.

Crockett's background is in the field of built environment education. After a PhD from the University of Edinburgh, she began her career in the Architecture Unit at Arts Council England before progressing to Assistant Director at the Architecture Foundation in London, which led to her current role. She has been involved with the UK Architecture Centre Network since it began and currently holds the position of Chair. She is also a trustee of the Greenwich Foundation.

The Building Exploratory was set up in 1996 by a local resident, Polly Hudson, who strongly believed that people should feel proud of living in Hackney and should be given the opportunity to learn more about where they live, the history of the borough and a sense of their surroundings in context. It is one of those places that – once you know about it – remains in your mind forever, along with a feeling that here is a place where people care about their environment, the buildings which inhabit a space and how community, people and buildings fit together. In a borough which is one of the most ethnically diverse in the UK – some 95 languages are spoken – and where one in six adults receives Income Support, this is a much needed resource.

Every year, 70 per cent of Hackney schools take part in the Building Exploratory's education and arts programmes and the Prince of Wales Institute for Architecture has heaped it with praise, saying: "Every city, town and village needs one of these. Very important and significant work."

Over time, an exhibition about Hackney grew up, and a 3-D 'Hackney Map' was assembled with the help of local residents. People still come to the Building Exploratory today and say "I built that part of the map."

Crockett says it shows a sense of ownership: "We want people to feel that the Building Exploratory 'belongs' to the local community. This Exploratory is in Hackney but it could easily be in any other community or part of the world. Each 'Exploratory' would be entirely different, as every part of the country has its own social history."

The Exploratory attracts attention from academics, government and businesses all over the UK and also the world, and is seen as a "model of national replicable significance". There is even talk that an Exploratory for the London Olympics will take the concept of the Building Exploratory and adapt it to the Olympics' land in London as the scheme begins to take shape.

Crockett cites the example of the Lifelong Learning Officer, Karen Elmes – the only such officer in the country – working with the community as an example of the way the centre puts life in Hackney into perspective for all age groups:

"Karen either brings people to the Building Exploratory to show them around the exhibits and to give them a chance to talk about their experiences of living in Hackney or she goes out to the local community, taking parts of the Building Exploratory to them. This quite often happens in the case of going to see older Hackney residents."

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"One of our aims is to help to raise awareness about communities. People may never have thought about architecture as a subject which affects them but, of course, architecture does affect people every day."

The Building Exploratory has a particular section devoted to construction. "This is a section which is in the research stage. We are educating people about how their houses are built, how the services fit together, how a building stands up. People have a right to know – to a greater or lesser extent depending on their particular interest – about their neighbourhoods and what makes them work: the green spaces, the shops, the public transport and the context in which you find them."

One of the projects the Building Exploratory has explored is a panoramic view of Kingsland Road. This is one of London's old Roman roads – a fact that becomes immediately obvious when you look at the map from a bird's eye view. It's the type of connection that you may never have thought about, even if you had lived in the area for years.

"We took photographs of all the shops along a section of the Kingsland Road and then researched each building's history," says Crockett. "People love the project as they can then picture the buildings in their minds, or go and visit them again with the panorama, and the road begins to come alive."

The Building Exploratory is also increasingly looking at sustainability as a theme that is going hand in hand with construction. Crockett says: "The construction industry is having to engage with the sustainability debate. Planning regulations are forcing the industry down this path and it's a debate which the Building Exploratory will be reflecting on. Sustainability thinking will permeate through all our programmes."

At the moment, the Bridgehouse Trust, one of the Building Exploratory's funders (alongside Arts Council England; the Commission for the Built Environment (CABE) and the National Lottery, to name a few), is working with Donnachadh McCarthy of 3 Acorns Environmental Eco-Audit, to put the centre through an audit of its own environmental footprint.

"It's difficult for us to change the fabric of the Building Exploratory as we are in a rented building," says Crockett. "We can't do anything about the windows and the heating, for example. However, we do have control over our printing processes, the personal behaviour of our staff and education through our programmes. The audit is going to be extremely useful as it is going to have an impact on how we work, our knowledge, how we communicate and deliver our work."

One of the main principles of the Building Exploratory is to examine where materials come from, how they are used, how they can be reused, and setting the built environment in the context of the wider world.

On a more individual level, a family workshop about nest boxes, "Mouse in a House, Fox in a Box", aimed at 5-12 year olds, gives young people the chance to think about nature around them and how they would like to live if they were an animal or a bird. This translates to thinking about how they themselves live. Is it comfortable

where they sleep? How does the light affect them? What materials would they like to use in their home? Crockett says: "Often, you find that the adults who accompany the children to workshops find the processes as fascinating. They think they are coming to a simple children's workshop and they find themselves questioning their own surroundings – how they live and how they feel about it.

"If you have a transformative experience, you feel differently forever," says Nicole. "That's the aim of the Building Exploratory. We introduce people to thinking about buildings and space and the process makes people feel special – that their homes are special. You cannot underestimate the value of these experiences." 

Nicole Crockett is currently the Chair of the Architecture Centre Network (www.architecturecentre.net). This network is an independent body that co-ordinates, supports and advances the work of architecture and related centres around the UK. There are currently 22 Architecture Centres in the UK. For more information about the Building Exploratory, visit: www.buildingexploratory.org.uk

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