When Andy Theobold of architects Fielden Clegg Bradley picked up two awards at the South West regional RIBA awards for his design of a school building, we asked Gary Spraklen, Innovation Director at A4LE UK to take a trip to the West Country to see what all the fuss was about.
‘Our building, The Red House with its dramatic overhang and strong colour scheme, is a physical representation of our creative and aspirational approach.’ You could be forgiven for thinking this line comes from a tech-savvy city startup or a thriving creative design agency but the truth is far more exciting ... this is the Plymouth School of Creative Arts, a beacon of hope for education in the South-West of England. A school which embraces creative learning in all subject areas in environments that were built for making.
Plymouth School of Creative Arts is a 4-16 mainstream, city centre, all-through school sponsored by Plymouth College of Art. The vision for Plymouth School of Creative Arts grows out of an established art college ethos in response to the serious erosion of the arts and creativity in schools. Founded in 1856, Plymouth College of Art has a long history as an independent specialist in arts, craft, design and media education in Plymouth and the South West of England.
The building is iconic, it stands broad in its urban post-industrial environment, a catalyst for community regeneration in Plymouth’s Millbay docklands, an area included amongst the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. The colour means it cannot be missed. Yet despite this, nothing about the exterior screams ‘school’. There is no branded signage or ghastly banners, just a simple sense of belonging through design.
The building recently picked up a RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) South West Award with the judges stating, 'The mixed response to the urban grid and street geometry – following and repairing the urban grid on the south and breaking rank on the north is successful in creating a very legible public/private divide. On the public side the entry is strongly stated on the street and leads to a procession through the building via lofty atria that makes for easy orientation. They continue, 'This is a large school in a single wrapper, with a diversity of spaces including long-span large-volume hall, theatre, dance studio, technical spaces et al neatly stitched together in a free-flowing plan.' For me, this is what makes the school so exciting, they’ve really thought hard about the sort of spaces needed to match their pedagogy. With this, comes a beautiful harmony of large open spaces to support learning alongside specialist spaces/studios all equipped with the latest tools and technology to enable better learning.
Light floods into this building and as I enter I cannot help but be impressed with the calm but bright first impression. As I look into a large atrium space, I’m inspired by beautiful, high quality artwork - a mix of learner work and visiting artists. The work is spread throughout the four floors but never becomes cluttered or over-stimulating. 

Alongside the work is often a citation about the background of the piece. There is a strong sense of the natural environment throughout, from the solid wood dining tables and benches that dominate views across the central ground floor space to the wooden sail boat that hangs delicately above my head. All of this is in stark contrast to the industrial view and provides a sense of balance and reason in our world.

Furniture has been carefully selected to match the pedagogical need but unlike so many new-build projects this doesn’t mean throwing the baby out with the bath water. At Plymouth School of Creative Arts, you can see an excellent mix of new and bespoke furniture alongside reclaimed and repurposed items. Among these reclaimed and repurposed items, I saw old shop counters that you may expect to find in a haberdashery store or similar used to exhibit the learners’ work. In one corner, I find a second-hand sofa repurposed for a new life. The sofa, which may have been used in a bachelor pad during its former-life, created a zone within a learning space and immediately added depth and meaning to the space.
Throughout the building, polished concrete floors continue the studio feel while also providing obvious cost benefits in the build. The floor provides a sense of connection between space while natural finishes and clear signage denote spaces - a particular favourite of mine being the ‘Culinary Art Studio’ for Food Technology. Exposed services provide a modern feel while again reducing build cost. With the services exposed you get a sense of the network infrastructure required to keep a school of this size connected.

Connection is an important element of learning at the Plymouth School of Creative Arts where online learning is an entitlement for all. The school adopts a PBL (Project Based Learning) approach to the National Curriculum which in itself is not new but the unique blend is most definitely distinctive. The school itself defines its distinctive approach under the following headings:

- Making to Learn
- Studio Ecology
- Individual and Different Learning & Development
- Intrinsic Responsibility for Learning
- Systematic Approach to the Learning Strategy
- Continuum of Creative Practice

You can read more about each of these on the school’s website, for me it’s the ‘Systematic Approach to the Learning Strategy’ that stands out as I tour the building and see lessons in action. During my visit, Andy Carpenter, Deputy Head, explains to me the school’s assessment model. Andy explains, ‘Our approach is underpinned by an assessment model which functions to offer multiple and dynamic layers of data in order to support analysis for different purposes throughout the school community. Rather than being used to prove, we use assessment data to improve. By improving the relevance of curriculum experience and studio practice (teacher), we secure improvement as
learning and growth (student). The learners I speak to back up Andy’s comments with many of them showing me how they use HERO (an American based virtual learning environment/online assessment system) to input their own assessment data and attach their own evidence using the personal learning checklist from National Standards. It’s a great example of a personalised approach in action and serves to highlight the embodiment of the aspirational approach that The Red House was built to serve.
It’s the interconnection of everything that impresses me as I tour the building. Around every corner I get a sense of community and relationship through the synergy of building design and then the careful application of planned activities. I ask Andy a simple question, ‘Why? Why this approach?’ His reply is equally simple; ‘For learning to be meaningful it has to make personal sense and support collective development. This quality of ‘being’ is what both connects and adds to the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of learning and systems. Our way of being is altered when we create possibilities in our lives; the horizon alters and we’re able to see differently – and further – than before. Doing things differently requires courage and passion, which together generate purpose and the mindset for stretch;
the determination to push myself beyond what I’m presently capable of. This is what underpins learning at Plymouth School of Creative Arts.

Andy’s comments are reflected in the school’s latest Ofsted Inspection Report which reads, ‘In line with the school’s vision, the pupils quickly learn to lead their own learning by working things out for themselves, under the guidance of the teacher. They are totally engaged in, and enjoy, the activities. This contributes to their good behaviour and growing confidence’. This is clearly a culture that was well established at startup and is now ingrained into every element of the school and its learning community.

Going back to the RIBA South West Award judges, I love their closing remark, ‘The very loose structure necessary for teaching hundreds of children of every age in a largely open plan environment is arrestingly unconventional’. I don’t know about you but I certainly feel we all need school buildings that are ‘arrestingly unconventional’ now and again to break the mould. Plymouth School of Creative Arts is just that and stands as a testament to what is possible even in the toughest of new build climates.

Plymouth School of Creative Arts is a school where they have not only thought hard about the details needed to be successful but have done far more than so many others by putting these thoughts into actual practice. Every detail from the design of the building, to the layout of spaces, to the approach in curriculum and the forensic use of data to inform and ultimately improve learning just works! This is a school that truly gets that great learning is a progressive, interconnected and human experience - you cannot help but be left feeling inspired and challenged to re-examine your own approach. I cannot wait to go back!

Plymouth School of Creative Arts was designed by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, who kindly allowed us to reproduce the photography taken by Hufton & Crow. Feilden Clegg Bradley can be contacted on www.fcbstudios.com, email bath@fcbstudios.com or phone +44 (0) 1225 852 545. Hufton & Crow can be contacted on www.huftonandcrow.com, email photos@huftonandcrow.com or phone +44 (0)203-4115316. Photography ©Hufton & Crow

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It was at the Prince of Wales First School in Dorset where Gary first developed a reputation for his drive, enthusiasm and the innovative use of technology to both challenge and support all children to reach their full potential. It was as a result of his work using iPads with children with physical disabilities that Gary won the South West Digital Educator Award in 2012.

Gary is a Member of the Jurassica Project Advisory Board and specialises in turning a vision into reality.