

Architecture & Design Scotland

Ailtearachd is Dealbhadh na h-Alba

CASE STUDY

Social Learning Spaces in Further Education





Introduction

"Social learning spaces act as a medium through which the social and academic aspects of university life can coincide... Providing a place for students to interact with their peers as well as academic staff members outside class and take command over their learning." [1]
[Social Learning Spaces and Student Engagement, 2011](#)

Social learning spaces are environments that encourage collaboration and support both informal and formal learning. Often considered to be a new taxonomy of space, social learning spaces have been established for nearly two decades in higher and further education, and studies have shown them to help improve the student experience and assist with student attraction and retention. [2] More recently Further Education Colleges involved in the refurbishment of their current estate or in the building of new campuses are including Social learning spaces as the key requirement of their design briefs.

There is often an overlap between defined social learning spaces and in-between places such as atria, circulation and open classrooms which are more passive spaces. However, these places are also frequently designated as informal social learning spaces. This practice is a smart idea for several reasons, including space and cost efficiency, not to mention providing students with a range of choices of where to be. This paper will explore both active and passive social learning spaces and highlight best practice in the design of recently completed FE projects

Key Learning Points

The following key learning points were identified as fundamental to the design of successful social learning spaces:

- Social learning spaces are important for wellbeing, in addition to fostering learning opportunities outwith the classroom
- In principle, these institutions employ a suite of spaces that are flexible, multi-functional and sufficient to their capacity
- Large central atrium spaces can promote a strong sense of social wellbeing for individuals passing through and groups coming together, forming a community.
- Large, adaptable spaces can meet a variety of current needs and provide for future requirements through movable partitions and flexible furniture.
- Catering facilities play a central role in fostering social dynamics, creating a community space as a large singular volume or a series of smaller instances with unique identities; dispersed throughout a campus.

Clockwise from top left:
Forth Valley College,
City of Glasgow College; City Campus,
Ayrshire College; Kilmarnock Campus,
Inverness College; University of the
Highlands and Islands. Images by BDP,
Keith Hunter, Keppie and Reiach & Hall
Architects.



Examples

The primary examples illustrated in this study are drawn from four Scottish Colleges that have completed projects in the last five years.

Forth Valley College, Falkirk Campus

Forth Valley College (FVC) was established in 2005 from the merger of Falkirk College and Clackmannan College. The New Falkirk campus and HQ officially opened in January 2020 and is the largest of the institution's schools. The 21,000sqm facility designed by Reiach & Hall Architects was completed at a cost of £83m.

City of Glasgow College, Twin Campuses

The City of Glasgow College (CGC) was established when Central College, Glasgow Metropolitan College, and the Glasgow College of Nautical Studies merged in 2010 to create the largest college in Scotland. The twin sites of Riverside and City were opened in 2015 and 2016 respectively at a combined cost of £228m.

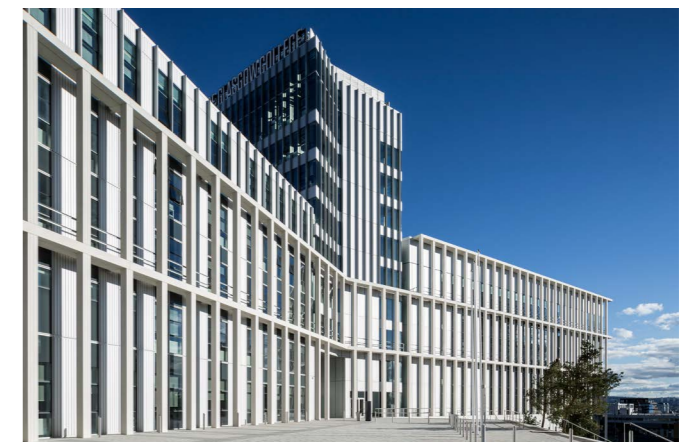
Both projects, designed in partnership with Michael Laird Architects and Reiach & Hall Architects are on a massive scale. Riverside Campus is spread over seven floors (70,000sqm) while the City Campus occupies ten floors (200,000 sqm+) in the centre of Glasgow.

Ayrshire College Kilmarnock Campus

Ayrshire College (AC) was established in 2013, following the merger of the three leading colleges in Ayrshire – Kilmarnock College, Ayr College and the Kilwinning and Largs campuses of James Watt College. The new four-storey (19,255 sqm) campus at Kilmarnock designed by Keppie Architects opened in 2016 at a cost of £53m.

Inverness College

Inverness College University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is based in Inverness in the Highland Council area of Scotland and was opened in August 2015. The three-storey (19,500 sqm) building was designed by BDP architects and completed at a cost of £50m.



Below: The AC refectory adjacent to STEM workshops, Catering at the heart of FVC, CGC's coffee shop approach. Images by Keppie, Reiach & Hall, and Keith Hunter.

Opposite: Students socialise in at CGC. Image by Keith Hunter.



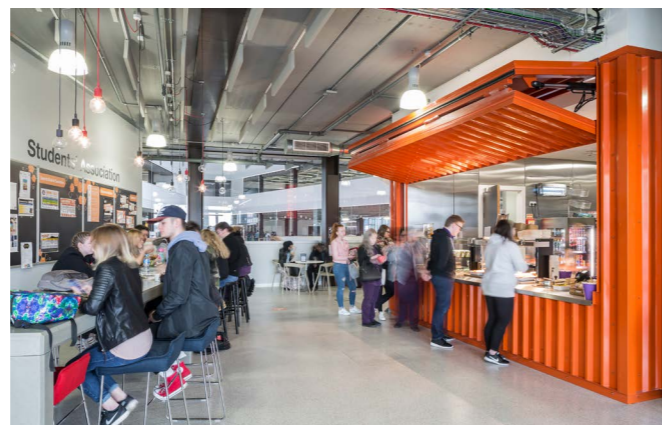
Basic Principles

The last decade has seen a rapid development of social learning spaces in the Further Education Sector, stimulated by extensive refurbishment and building programs throughout the UK and beyond. The interest generated by this has led to studies undertaken by both educators and design professionals. As a result of the research and growth in this area, some basic principles have been established.

In 'Better Libraries and Learning Spaces,' [3] the following key principles are recommended:

- Design flexible or multi-functional spaces that can be reconfigured daily/weekly/monthly to suit a number of functions ensuring the space is fully utilised.
- Creation of choice with a variety of spaces to suit different learning styles and needs.
- Provision of sufficient volume of space to ensure that learners are comfortable.
- Removal of barriers between the formal and informal spaces.
- Inclusion of collaborative and social space.

The projects that are shown in this document embrace these principles and exemplify good practise in the design of social learning spaces.



Catering

The college canteen or refectory is one place on any campus that virtually everyone passes through and uses. It is, therefore, often considered the most prominent and valuable shared community space on campus. In all of the projects examined these essential places support both the social aspects of college life and the student learning experience.

The refectory at FVC is located at the heart of the building and is designed as both a social and learning space. The layout combines a mixture of fixed booths seating where informal student and staff meetings can take place with more flexible furniture that allows the students to customise the space to accommodate different group sizes or activities.

In AC, the location of the refectory on the first floor helps to unify the building generating a sense of one single facility by connecting it to the STEM workshops via a large glazed window.

In their city campus, CGC took a different approach by populating the building with smaller cafés and coffee areas rather than having one central canteen space. This distribution may be partially due to the vast scale of the building, yet benefits students by creating a variety of options depending on their requirements.



Below from top: AC's curriculum resource areas (2) and social learning area within the circulation at FVC Images by Keppie and Reiach & Hall.

Opposite Right: From top: A sculptural bench at UHI and the learning landscape steps at CGC city campus. Images by BDP and Keith Hunter.

Holistic Learning Environment

The projects examined all include dedicated social learning spaces. However, a broader concept is also evident - the holistic learning environment. All areas of these campuses are designed with a view to encouraging learning, communication, collaboration and community.

Research by Shirley Dugdale concludes that "Campuses need to be conceived as "networks" of places for learning, discovery, and discourse between students, faculty, staff, and the wider community." Conceiving the overlapping nature of spaces is important to create networks of places and hubs, which "can offer choice to users and generate synergies through adjacencies and clustering of facilities". [4]

Students are naturally social and generating spaces where they can meet both with each other and with staff in a social setting will improve their overall student experience while also providing increased opportunities for learning. Dining spaces provide essential opportunities for peer-to-peer informal interaction, sustaining and supporting the community. These spaces can naturally be developed to encourage learning, however, other areas, such as circulation routes, atria and outdoor spaces can further support learning and potentially inspire cross-disciplinary interest. The majority of the examples featured in this document are conceived as holistic environments where 'learning can and should happen anywhere within the building'. [5]

In AC, pockets of space are located on various floors within the deep circulation space surrounding the atrium. 'Curriculum Resource Areas' - adaptable, IT-enabled informal learning zones inhabit these spaces. The curriculum resource areas are furnished with a variety of modular items that can accommodate different groups, sizes and activities.



"My vision for the new campus in Kilmarnock was always about having a campus that hugs the community and about having something that people would want to come along to - they would want to engage in learning or they would want to come along as members of the community or our employer base and use the facilities"

Heather Dunk OBE. Principal Ayrshire College (AC)

"These spaces are critical in providing informal active learning environments which support/enhance the more formal teaching spaces that they are directly adjacent to. In-between space is seen as an integral part of the college's overall curriculum offer rather than just viewed as transition type areas." [6]

The circulation spaces in FVC are also designed as informal learning areas. Walkways are up to three metres wide and are populated with flexible IT-enabled furniture. Mark Dawson, architect for the project, states "the circulation becomes as important as the classroom spaces themselves." [7]

FVC also features shared spaces adjacent to the more formal teaching space. These 'Courtyard Connection Spaces' are open to the primary circulation allowing individual and group informal study. Similar hybrid spaces can also be found at CGC Ref where informal classrooms open onto circulation space to create a greater sense of volume and provide flexible, adaptable space.

Outdoor Spaces can be overlooked but provide surprising opportunities to support learning. In Inverness, the landscape design is of particular importance and features the award-winning open air space, 'An t-Eilean', (the Island) a place for meetings, events and performances. 'Learning bowls' and sculptural benches are also set into the landscape to encourage students out of the building to meet, relax and study. While the rural landscape around Inverness may naturally support outdoor learning, such spaces are not restricted to rural areas. CGC City Campus, located at the heart of Glasgow City Centre, sits on a steep incline negotiating a 10-metre change in site level. A terrace of steps required to reach the main entrance from the city centre was planned as an integral part of the informal learning spaces according to Brendan Diamond, CGC project director:



"The steps are very much part of the social space of the college, but it's also a learning space. During the summer you probably would see people out on the steps, it's south-facing and relatively sheltered, so a fantastic space and fully wi-fi enabled." [8]

The steps inside the entrance space of the college are equally important. Designed to be as much sat on as walked on, the steps are used for teaching, seminar groups, events or simply as a place for friends to gather and meet. At the Riverside Campus, a courtyard is designed as a protected 'cloistered' space providing sheltered areas to meet, relax and contemplate.

Below: AC's 'shopping mall' atrium houses various commercial outlets such as a beauty salon. Images by Keppie.

Right: The vast atria found in CGC City and Riverside campuses. Images by Keith Hunter

Space and Light

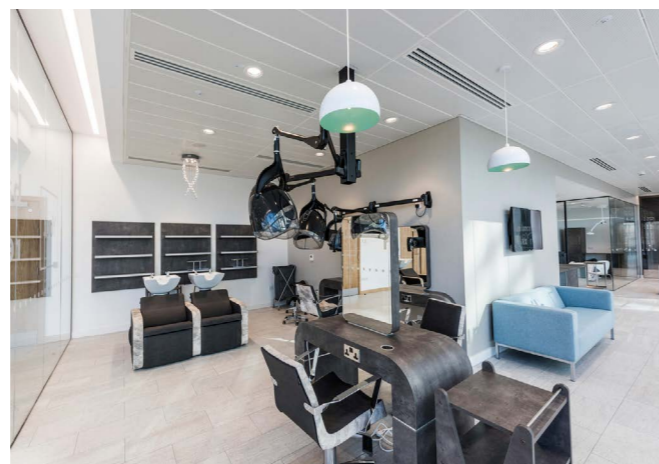
Entering a site to a generosity of space and light is an often overlooked but important aspect of promoting a sense of wellbeing and providing a positive student experience. Each of the examples features large volumes of space or atria with generous space and light which creates an important central space linking to other areas and helping to orientate students and visitors. However, beyond this, they perhaps have an even higher value in promoting a sense of community and potentially encouraging a degree of cross-disciplinary curiosity and discourse.

In Ayrshire College, the atrium space was conceived by the client as a shopping mall. A familiar and easily understood place where students could develop their enterprise skills via the various commercial outlets such as the beauty salon or restaurant, connect with employers, perform or simply meet and gather.

"The College mission – to prepare students for the world of work – is exemplified in the large, open volume that is central to the building's identity and function. This welcoming, accessible space is where engagement with the public and the business community takes place. It is a vibrant collaborative environment, where students enjoy direct interaction with employers and local people, developing their communication skills through a practice-based learning curriculum." [9]

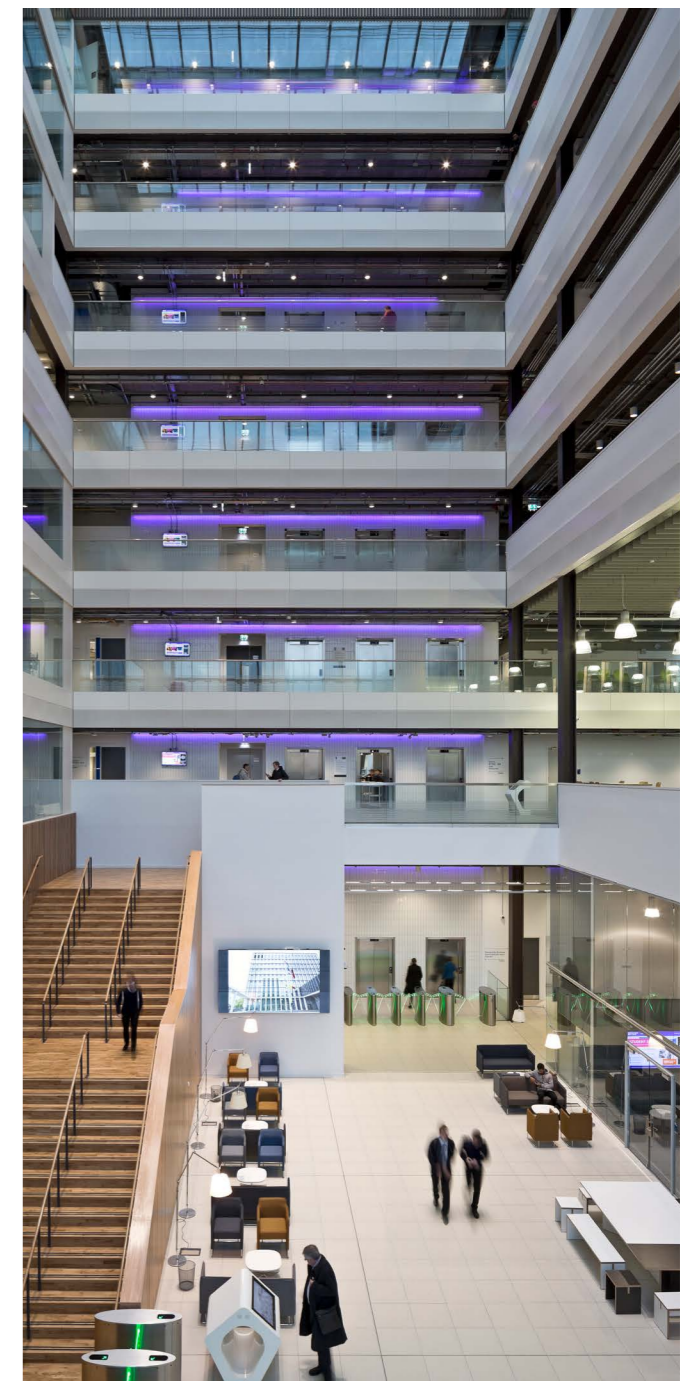
Keen to eradicate any sense of the traditional institution and embrace something more relevant CGC also conceived their larger volume spaces as a shopping mall. In these spaces, students can be impressed by the scale yet at the same time feel comfortable that they have a range of choices from big and bustling to small and intimate.

Shared social spaces, teaching spaces and even specialist workshops are often organised around these places; promoting connections and enhancing the sense of community. The teaching spaces in CGC are organised around two shared areas, the atrium and the courtyard and the activities within these spaces are visible from the circulation routes.



"Promoting a sense of a single community. Students are encouraged to investigate opportunities outside of their own discipline with the prospect of cross-discipline interaction and projects."

Brendan Diamond, Project Director: CGC, Michael Laird Architects



Below: Learning on display with glazed panels at FVC. Images by Keppie.

▼
Opposite from Left: City views from the CGC Riverside campus and visual connections at FVC (2). Cascading light in the CGC Riverside campus atrium. Images by Keith Hunter and Keppie.

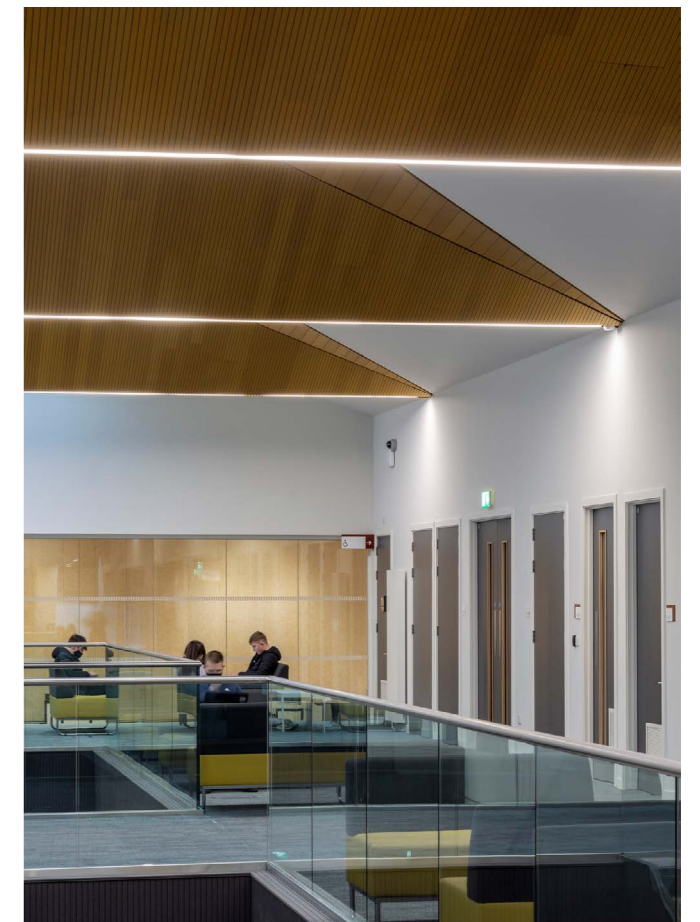
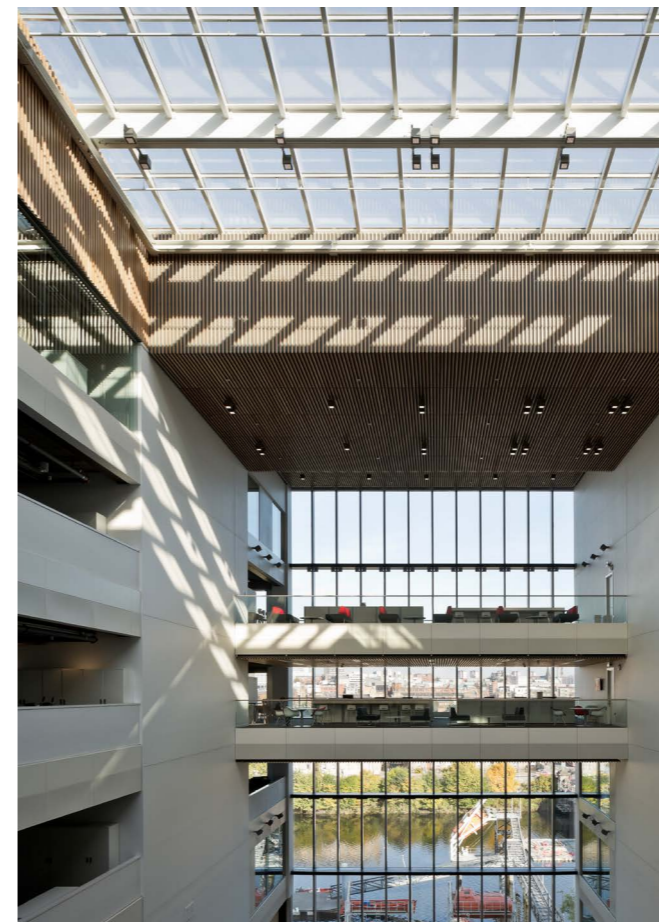
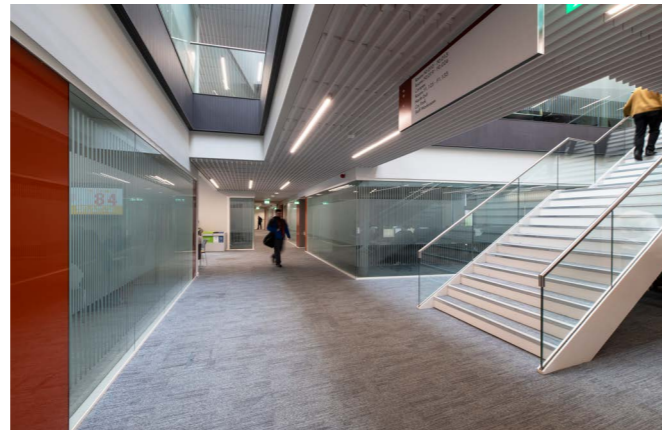


Using visual connections to encourage students to explore other disciplines is a feature shared at FVC. Glazed side panels in classrooms permit students and visitors glimpses into the classroom to experience:

“It feels like a busier campus. Rather than walking down a corridor with a whole series of doors [...], you could see what learning was happening and it got you in the mood for it so creating the right environment” [11].

Similarly, in Ayrshire College, a large glazed screen connects the STEM block with the refectory and atrium space, allowing students to view the activity therein.

The use of natural light is prevalent throughout the exemplar projects. The seven-storey top-lit atrium in CGC city campus floods the space with light while the vast glazed frontage of Riverside performs the same function and frames a spectacular view of the river and the city. The atrium and glass front at Ayrshire also creates a bright, positive space and FVC employs large roof lights, floor to ceiling glazing in primary corridors and strategically placed voids to develop connections and emphasise the feeling of space and light.

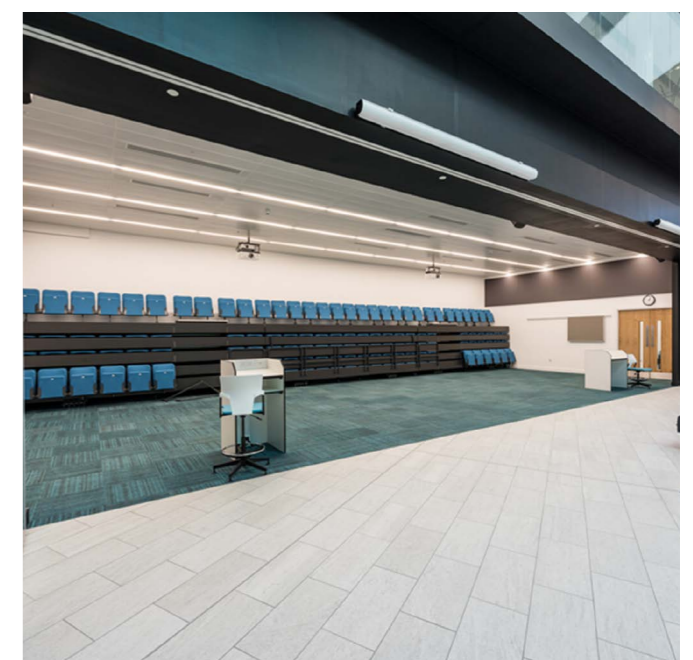
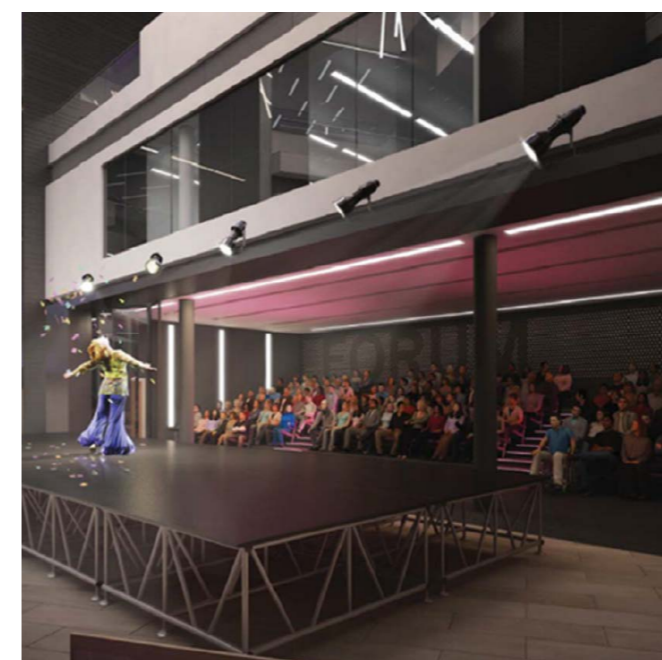
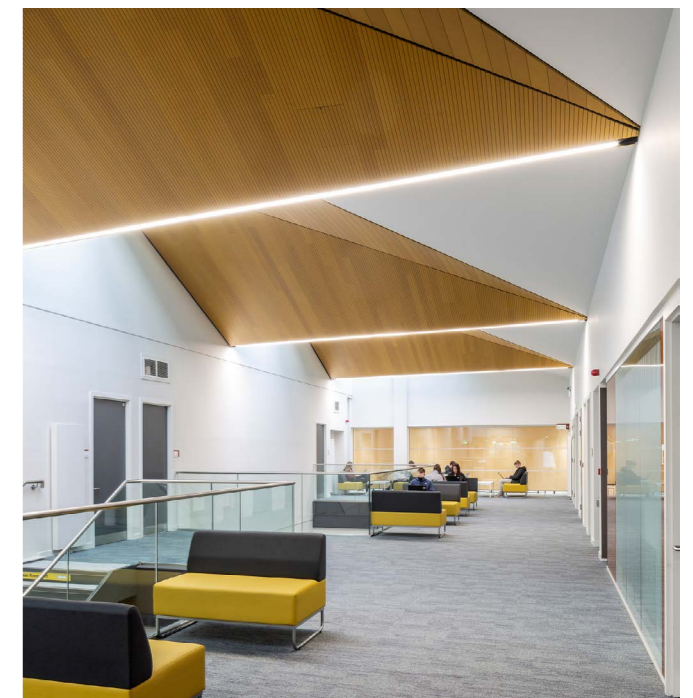


Flexibility

While space, light, and other invisible factors are vital to these successful environments, furniture is the tangible human-scaled element that people most often respond to.

Furniture is a critical component of the atria and within many of the large-volume spaces examined; “the big thing from the students was the furniture solutions that went in,” according to project architect for AC, Ryan Sylvester [12]. All examples were carefully furnished in modular or flexible IT-enabled furniture that supports a variety of choices; from group work through to solo contemplation.

The ability to change and adapt a learning environment enriches the visitor’s experience by providing a changing landscape that they can adjust and customise while ensuring the optimum use of space and avoiding spatial redundancy. Often these large volume areas include or are linked to flexible areas. In FVC for example, a series of flexible spaces in the entrance can be opened out using relocatable walls that generate space of up to 620m² when all of the partitions are stowed. A flexible lecture theatre located at the rear of Ayrshire College’s atrium employs a retractable acoustic glazed screen. This attribute maintains the requirement of a lecture theatre while providing an area that can adapt and open out to other uses and opportunities.



Below from Left: A vast glazed facade at CGC maximises use of natural light and outdoor learning opportunities on 'An t-Eilean', (the Island) at UHI. Images by Keith Hunter and BDP.



Conclusion

The example projects all enthusiastically embrace the notion of social learning space and contain many examples of good practice in their conception, design and layout. Each project has been conceived to a degree as a unified and holistic learning environment taking advantage of deep circulation spaces, courtyards and outdoor spaces opening a rich variety of spatial opportunities to students. Atria and other large-volume areas provide a valuable sense of light and space that promotes wellbeing. While acting on a more practical level as a centre-place that physically and visually connects people, places and things, helping to orientate students and supporting the idea of community.

Vital social spaces such as cafés and refectories are designed as both learning and social space and are located in proximity to these centre-places. Throughout all of these spaces, flexibility or adaptability is a critical feature, whether this relates to furniture that can be moved or adapted to suit different groups sizes or activities or whether it is the space itself.

References

This case study was conducted by Nomad RDC on behalf of Architecture and Design Scotland.

- [1] & [2] Matthews, Kelly & Andrews, Tori & Adams, Peter. (2011). Social Learning Spaces and Student Engagement. Higher Education Research and Development. 30. 10.1080/07294360.2010.512629.
- [3] Watson, Les. (2014). Better Library and Learning Space: Projects, Trends, Ideas. 10.29085/9781856049726.
- [4] Shirley Dugdale, "Strategies for the New Learning Landscape," Educause Review (Educause), March/April 2009: 51-63.
- [5] Ryan Sylvester, Project Architect Ayrshire College Kilmarnock Campus – Keppie Architects, interviewed [12/05/2020].
- [6] Ryan Sylvester, Project Architect Ayrshire College Kilmarnock Campus – Keppie Architects, interviewed [12/05/2020].
- [7] Mark Dawson, Project Architect FVC – Reiach & Hall Architects Interviewed [27/05/2020].
- [8] Brendan Diamond – Project Director, CGC – Michael Laird Architects, Interviewed [15/05/2020].
- [9] Ryan Sylvester, Project Architect Ayrshire College Kilmarnock Campus – Keppie Architects, interviewed [12/05/2020].
- [10] Brendan Diamond – Project Director, CGC – Michael Laird Architects, Interviewed [15/05/2020].
- [11] Mark Dawson, Project Architect FVC – Reiach & Hall Architects Interviewed [27/05/2020].
- [12] Ryan Sylvester, Project Architect Ayrshire College Kilmarnock Campus – Keppie Architects, interviewed [12/05/2020].

With thanks to the following for use of their photography: BDP, Keith Hunter, Keppie and Reiach & Hall Architects.

Find out more:

www.ads.org.uk

@ArcDesSco

T: 0131 556 6699

E: info@ads.org.uk

Bakehouse Close,
146 Canongate,
Edinburgh EH8 8DD

Level 2, The Lighthouse,
11 Mitchell Lane,
Glasgow G1 3NU

**Architecture &
Design Scotland**

Ailtearachd is Dealbhadh na h-Alba