



Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

The Box Entered by Plymouth City Council

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1. Project Background

The 'Box' is the manifestation of a cultural journey. The opening of the visitor attraction is defined by the 400-year anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower, but the project also provides a place for storage, exhibition, study and interpretation of the historic records and objects for Plymouth alongside contemporary works of international significance.

As a concept The Box was to bring together heritage collections, contemporary arts, and archives into a single managed entity, a unique proposition in the UK. Most of the seven collections were housed in outdated, inappropriate or at-risk accommodation. The collections were also disparate for the public engagement and created inefficient, fragile operating structures. Bringing the collections together in one facility aimed to create a resilience for the institutions and collections. The Plymouth City Council-led project, backed by funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England covers nearly 8,000 square metres – more than three times the size of the original Museum and Art Gallery. The 2020 opening date aligned with national commemorations for the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower in 1620.

It is a concept that started with the need to relocate the record office, and during the 10-year duration of option studies the concept for the project developed and upon receipt of the round 1 NLHF award in 2014 the project designs progressed with Planning Performance Agreement July 2015, Planning Pre-App submitted in August 2015 and full planning and listed building application submitted in March 2016. Works commenced on site in February 2017 and opened October 2020.

Integral to the concept was for the building to reinforce the Cultural Quarter in the city, a long term policy aspiration, with the amalgamation of three listed buildings, the underused library, the museum and St Luke's. The three buildings are unified with a new public piazza at its heart utilising space gained from the removal of dilapidated garages and the closure of Tavistock Place to through traffic.

The Box has and will:

- create a new sustainable home for at risk collections and artefacts and transform the way those collections are accessed and managed;
- connect people with their world-class heritage and instil a sense of pride;
- create a cultural and learning destination in the city for the world;
- put people at its heart, creating active participants;
- provide a seamless blend of technology and tradition, creating an exceptional, immersive and fun environment;
- communicate the power of the city's collections to reposition Plymouth's role in history and history's role in Plymouth.

The design concept inspired the building name with archive raised aloft in a precious jewelled box, a proud beacon emerging above the listed buildings that front it, and below a voluminous space is created and given over to the people of the city with entrance, shop and café opening out into the new piazza. Opposite, the restored former church has been re-imagined creating a gallery for touring exhibitions.

2. Outcomes for People and Communities

The Box is a museum for the residents of Plymouth and also an epicentre of culture that appeals to international visitors. It will be pivotal in helping bring a high level of tourism to the city, providing the local community with opportunities for social and economic growth. Plymouth has many social and economic challenges, and the South West is a critical area in terms of deprivation and relies heavily on tourism as a key economic driver. Tourism is a key market for The Box and the team work to ensure The Box is a must visit when coming to the city.

Long-term, The Box is projected to sustain 250,000 annual visitors who will spend in the wider Plymouth economy as part of their visit. Detailed economic impact assessments were commissioned from Plymouth University. The total spend figure derived from the 250,000 visitors has been modelled at £16,250,000, generating 363 FTE jobs in the wider Plymouth economy.

The Box is a project that brings together the different diverse communities of the city, restoring pride in place. Two international exhibitions (Mayflower and Songlines) sought to give voice to indigenous communities and future exhibitions are seeking to include at least one commission from those who experience racism.

Accessibility was central to design development with regular meetings with the local accessibility group PADAN (Plymouth Area Disability Action Network). The two principal heritage entrances to the building involved stepped access, so the decision was made to create a new principal entrance from the rear and re-orientate the building. This provided opportunity for a level access with covered automated glazed sliding entrance doors and to create space through the closure of the Tavistock Place to vehicles. The additional space enabled the creation of resting places on the approach to the building.

All public and staff areas are accessible within the building despite the original building having stepped floor levels. This has been achieved through the careful coordination of the new build floor levels so that the main new lift is able to serve all of the public areas.

The main exhibition space is in St Luke's, a separate building directly across the piazza from the main entrance to The Box. A step and ramp free route has been provided between the two buildings, with automated glazed sliding doors provided to the front entrance into the exhibition space.

The scheme incorporated principles of Secure By Design including soft landscaping, natural surveillance and lighting.

Ease of interpretation of space and wayfinding has been addressed in high quality clear signage and interpretation material.

A mixture of toilet facilities are incorporated to ensure the needs of all are met. Due to the size of the building 5 accessible wc's are strategically located to minimise travel distances. Opportunity has also been taken to incorporate both handings for the wc's. Gender neutral wc's and separate baby change room have been integrated within the wc strategy along with a Changing Places Facility serving both the building and its proximity within the Cultural Quarter.

3. Planning Contribution

In order to enable the scheme, planning was first secured to relocate the library to the city centre.

There was a dedicated LPA planning case officer over the course of the project, from the initial pre-application enquiry, through the planning application and listed building stages, and including the post consent stage. This was crucial as the project team did not have a consultant planning officer.

A pre-application enquiry was submitted 2015, importantly included a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA). This was "To agree an appropriate way forward in processing and determining a planning application and listed building consent". The PPA included:

- Timetable, including key milestones, consultation periods, Design Review Panel dates, delegated decision timetabling as well as potential committee dates and last dates for scheme amendments
- Key contacts (including 12 different internal and external consultees) and procedures for resolving conflicts

Through the PPA, the planning case officer was the lead contact for the LPA for all matters relating to the pre-application and planning application. This meant that the planners role required effective communication, project management and negotiation skills in dealing with all the consultee comments.

The use of a PPA also strengthened the partnership working required between the planning officer and the project team. By working in partnership, this meant that consultee comments were considered and addressed efficiently.

Through the pre-application process, including 4 meetings, the planning officer was able to secure improvements to the design, addressing comments from Design Review Panel, Highways, Secure By Design and Historic England (HE). An uplift in materials was also secured through the pre-application (granite in public realm and limestone for cladding).

The planning application was submitted March 2016, and because of the pre-application advice, the major application was validated in one day. The application was determined in 14 weeks, including determination by planning committee. The PPA was updated at the planning application stage.

During the planning application process, revised plans were submitted to address consultee comments. Objections were received from Victorian Society and C20th Society. The planning officer sought to address their concerns, working with the project team to secure amended details (reduction in box height). This resulted in the Victorian Society removing their objection to the scheme and also addressed outstanding HE reservations. These amendments secured a unanimous approval by planning committee. The committee minutes thanks the planner for her thorough presentation to planning committee.

Following the initial approvals, over the construction period there were 2 x S73 applications, 2 x non material minor amendments, 20 condition discharge applications (for 47 conditions), and 8 further listed building consents. These took place from 2016 until 2020. These indicate a significant level of planning support required in managing the delivery of the site. The planning officer met with the project team at various stages to go through the planning conditions.

There was also multiple unexpected on site issues as construction progressed. The partnership and problem solving approach was continued through this process, including liaising with historic environment officers and HE on certain matters.

4. Outcomes for climate action

By moving all the collections and artefacts into a single site, with over 2 million objects in total, the partnership organisations achieved reduced carbon footprint by vacating the previous buildings occupied around the city.

A key policy requirement for the site was to safeguard connection to District Heating network which has been a long-term city centre policy requirement. This was secured through a planning condition that confirmed that the plant could be adapted at a later date to connect to a District Heating system.

A PV solar array is installed on the roof which has potential to harvest 31,500 kwh of power.

In terms of minimising energy, the archive has been designed to maintain stable temperature and humidity conditions with a minimum reliance on mechanical controls. The external walls, roof and floor provide thermal and hygroscopic mass to prevent internal fluctuations that could be harmful to the collections through a 300mm thick concrete shell sealed externally and wrapped in insulation.

The operational energy performance rating for the building is 74C, which is a higher performance than the typical score for a public building (100D).

The site is located in a critical drainage area. The surface water was separated from the combined drainage, to go into a public surface water sewer. The drainage was also attenuated through SUDS in tree pits. This was a significant betterment to the existing drainage.

The project has made improvements to local biodiversity, including various soft planting and a net gain in trees. Planners worked with the project team to secure off site locations for 7 trees when infrastructure constraints meant they could not be planted as intended. This was secured in Plymouth Drake ward that is recognized as having reduced tree cover.

Whilst Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) was not yet in policy, bat bricks were installed to secure enhancements. This complemented an existing bat roost which was protected during construction. Bee apiaries were installed on the roof in spring 2021.

The project diverted 95.98% of waste from landfill throughout the construction period. During construction carbon emissions were reduced as far as possible. At a site level this was achieved through efficient use of plant and equipment and efficient site set up and training. Unavoidable emissions are offset through a certified carbon offsetting scheme. All electricity purchased by Willmott Dixon is 100% renewable.

To support the economic growth and sustainable development of Plymouth a number of local Social Enterprises were supported including, Community Wood Recycling, Fruitful (weekly fresh fruit), Hey Girls! (female hygiene supplies), WildHearts Group (stationary supplies).

The project implemented a sustainable procurement plan to prioritise the purchase of construction materials that are certified as responsibly sourced to certified standards (BES6001). 60% of relevant materials were sourced to this standard. All temporary and permanent timber used on the project was from legal and sustainable sources (Certified to PEFC or FSC standards).

The use of durable granite for the public realm is considered to support the sustainability and resilience of the scheme.

5. Outcomes for sustainable development

No Poverty:

Economic impact from the predicted visitor spend.

During construction 81% of spend came from within the PL postcode, equating to approximately £18m.

Zero Hunger: Head chef ran a crowdfunder in 2020 for “Christmas in a Box” to feed 2500 families in need in Plymouth (via foodbank charity).

Good Health and Wellbeing:

Accessible public realm supports wellbeing through connection with others in a safe pedestrianized environment.

Cycle parking encourages sustainable travel.

Range of wellbeing activities:

Arts and Minds group for people living with dementia and their carers .

The Women’s Craft Collective (largest knitting group in Plymouth) whose members have experienced shared challenges in life including social isolation, mental health and bereavement.

Always Welcome: working with social prescribers in the city alongside self-referrals offering a programme of mindfulness supporting people with mental health challenges.

Quality Education

Free entry ensuring inclusivity to the museum which fundamentally supports education.
Two dedicated rooms to support lifelong learning (learning room and university room) including for use by families.
Delivers over 20 sessions for schools of different year groups.
Partnership with the University of Plymouth to deliver a MA in archival practice.

Gender Equality: Female chief executive, 64% Volunteers and 66% staff are women.

Clean water and sanitation: SUDS scheme, free toilets, Changing Places facility.

Affordable and Clean Energy: Safeguard connection to District Heating network, Solar panels .

Decent Work and Economic Growth:

Employment and Skills Strategy condition for construction.
Contractors provided 1,325 weeks of onsite training for 28 work experience placements and 16 apprentices.
Over 1000 visitors attended site visits inspiring a future generation.
Employs 74 staff and engages 150 volunteers.
Currently 2 entry-level career opportunities and there will be a paid internship through a project with the National Portrait Gallery.
A Business Admin apprenticeship progressed into a permanent role as Commercial Assistant.

Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Archive design, Complex structural and fire engineering solutions were required to secure 4 hour fire protection.

Reduce Inequalities:

Fully accessible, including consultation with PADAN.
Consideration of inequalities within exhibitions.

Sustainable Cities and Communities:

The planning process considered air quality, contaminated land, flood risk, Secure By Design, use of materials

Responsible consumption and production:

Diverted waste from landfill throughout the construction period.
Carbon emissions were reduced as far as possible.
Unavoidable emissions offset through a certified carbon offsetting scheme.
Some re-use of demolished limestone in the new construction.

Climate Action: SUDS, Solar panels, District heating, Archive design, New trees, Soft planting, Bat boxes .

Life Below Water:

Code of practice for construction mitigated against construction impacts such as run off and construction dust.
Drainage scheme reduces risk of overflow which has a positive impact upon water quality.

Life on Land

Bat roost was protected during construction.

Biodiversity Net Gain secured through the provision of bat bricks in the build.
Net gain in trees.

Peace Justice and Strong Institutions

Designed as a fully inclusive development, including accessibility throughout, free entry and community engagement.

6. Community Engagement

The Box represents the culmination of a 15-year journey involving a wide variety of stakeholders and funding bodies. Initially driven by the need to replace the Record Office, synergies were identified with other local collections through a consultative approach led by Plymouth City Council (PCC) and realised through the integration of South West Film & Television Archive and South West Image Bank within the scheme. From the beginning of the project, a Memorandum of Understanding was agreed by the four principal partners, with a Stakeholders Board having regular bi-monthly meetings. Business models were investigated before the Box was formed as a single combined organization.

PCC were keen to extend their consultation beyond the immediately accessible user and friends groups associated with the museum and the archives. A City Centre shop was rented and the pre-planning design proposals presented to community. Staff were on-hand to explain the proposals and feedback was reviewed with relevant and useful comments fed into the project briefing meetings.

Throughout the design development phases regular meetings and presentations were organised with the local accessibility action group PADAN. These meetings enabled a useful dialogue to inform both the brief and management planning.

Assessment of the condition and heritage value was undertaken with heritage interest groups consulted informing the early option appraisals on the form and organisation of the building and prioritising the conservation work to be undertaken. This included meetings with Historic England where priorities for the integration of the principal entrances was a major factor, with the 20th Century Society where key 1950's elements were identified for featuring, and with the Victorian Society where the height of the Box parapet was reduced.

The Box marketing team have maintained engagement with the community through a range of channels:

- Digital, social media, websites,
- Face to face meetings, briefings
- Billboards, hoardings, big screens
- Newsletters
- Press including TV news, daily print media and features publications
- Events, local and national events and campaigns

Local campaigns and events that have also been organised include:

- Pop up museums – in City Centre and regionally with 15,000 attending
- Social media campaigns
- City Centre banners and building dressings
- City Centre heritage bus and big screen
- History Festival, Lord Mayors Day, MTV Crashes

The Box remained high profile for the duration of its construction and provided learning experiences to children, students and construction workers during the site works.

The success of the consultation is underwritten by the support it has seen from the public since opening. Despite the restrictions arising from Covid in its first two months 33,000 visitors were welcomed, of which 77% were Plymouth residents. 1382 volunteer hours were logged by 88 individuals, with 351 children taking part in visits from 12 schools. This success continues and the feedback has been fantastic, specific comments include: “Blown away”, “A museum to be proud of”, “Fantastic experience – can’t wait to return” and “Great asset for Plymouth resident and visitors”.

7. Leading Practice

Repurposing listed buildings dating from 19th and early 20th centuries that have been bombed, rebuilt and expanded on numerous occasions presented us with many technical challenges. Some examples requiring innovative solutions are summarized below:

The production of a combined Conservation Management Plan for both the buildings and the collection had not been undertaken before, it was a useful tool reflecting the fact that the building is a part of the collection to be cared for. This was well received by heritage and funding bodies.

Keeping the existing listed building dry while replacing the whole roof structure and demolishing adjacent buildings demanded a scaffold solution that could be propped on varying lines of support.

Suspending the ships figureheads from a four-hour fire rated slab without compromising the cover on the surrounding rebar, and for the construction teams enabling their installation by the exhibition fit-out contractor on the live construction site.

Devising multi-functional robust and secure exhibition wall linings to also conceal environmental control systems and back lit stained-glass windows.

Integrating newly discovered heritage artefacts in the completed project such as the Wynn Scutt mural which received conservation treatment under an artists and tradesmen arrangement during construction works. LPA historic environment officers considered the repair specification.

Meeting the demanding requirements of the Government Indemnity Scheme

Providing a British Standard archive space and freezer and chilled collection storage in new basement construction

Constructing gallery walls 20m long by 5m high with no day joints to achieve the best finish

The use of a PPA to support the determination of applications through a collaborative approach with planning and the historic environment officer, continued through to construction stage, including support for dealing with many of the above issues.

Bringing together five collections from 12 sites and three organisations into a bespoke building was in itself a logistical challenge, however making all the collections available for the public to access in a single study room was a unique proposition in this building.

The joint vision for the project was shared by client, consultant and construction team, this was demonstrated during the wide ranging VE exercise, working collaboratively with the planning officer to ensure the vision and quality was not compromised. A good example was in the cladding system of the archive box which retained its magical ever-changing patina whilst being completely different in its detail.

Despite extensive surveys some issues only came to light during construction such as the asbestos wrapping of the original underfloor heating and the poor condition of the external culvert. Additionally, the exhibition design was developed in detail during the base build contract leading to a few construction changes. We were able to re-phase the construction project to keep the exhibition fit out,

reload programmes and 2020 site opening on track, through the management of partial possessions, ingenuity, cooperation, trust and a concerted team effort. Sadly, the final completion of the project was impacted by the Covid-19 Global Pandemic leading to a 5-month delay to the opening.

Please note that this case study has been taken from their entry form and so RTPI does not take responsibility for accuracy of contents. Readers are encouraged to undertake further research into the project which is likely to have developed since the time that this entry was written.