

The kids are alright

Forget table tennis. Britain's first luxury youth club offers teens Vitra chairs, a media lab and even a VIP area.

Kate Burt takes a tour

Shouldn't be long," says the receptionist, issuing a visitor pass. "Do have a seat over there while you wait." "Over there" is a stylishly angular arrangement of suspended bench seating made from crushed granite resin, flanked with stainless steel planters and elegant cacti. Polished pop tunes waft from speakers somewhere up above; the lighting is gentle, and bounces off the giant, black Perspex logo on the wall, in its slick, modern font. It could be the entrance lobby to the offices of a hip, and wealthy, style magazine. This vast grade II listed building in Norwich city centre opened last month at a cost of £12 million. Architect-designed, it houses a nightclub and juice bar, and cool gizmos like movement-sensor lighting. And it's furnished with the sort of designer pieces you might see in the pages of *Elle Decoration*.

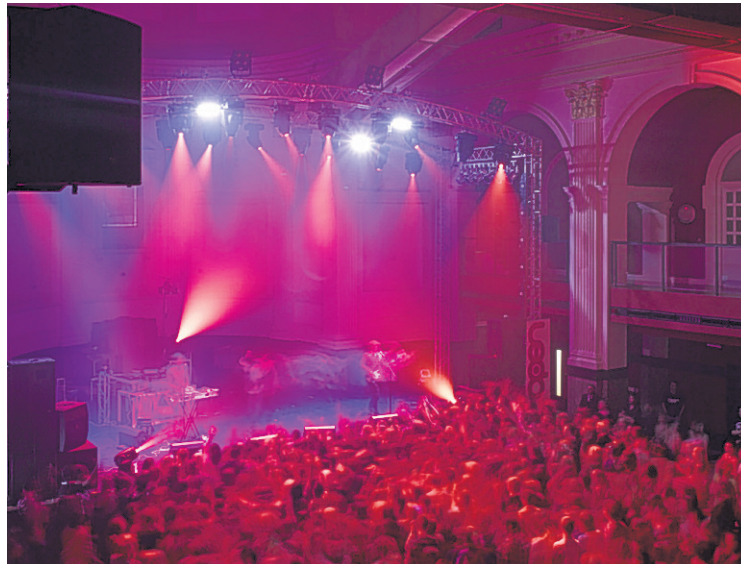
This is OPEN, Britain's most luxurious youth club. It barely relates to the traditional youth club, usually housed in a community hall with tatty furnishings, a table-tennis table and a dispiriting institutional air. No wonder the intended "youth" clientele are more likely to be found wandering aimlessly around the streets, or seeing how long they can eke out a couple of quid in McDonald's.

"Quite often young people are given the worst," says Russ Dacre, OPEN's passionate project director, and a former youth worker. "It's like, 'Oh, we haven't got a use for this, perhaps we could let young people use it.' OPEN is the flipside of that. It's saying 'This is the best, and this is for youth.'"

The idea for OPEN was conceived in 2000, following the deaths of three young people in the city after dark. In response, the city's youth club owners, together with local voluntary and statutory agencies, including the Lind Trust, set up the SOS project. Its first enterprise was a bus service for young people who were having difficulties following a night out. It was so popular that the SOS team felt a permanent drug- and alcohol-free space for young people was needed.

In 2003, the Lind Trust bought what would become the OPEN venue – the site of a former Barclays bank – for £2.5 million, and donated it, along with a substantial chunk of capital. Other funders chipped in, including the Government's Department for Children, Schools and Families, which also set up the myplace programme, a £270m nationwide initiative to reinvent Britain's youth clubs and facilities. OPEN is its gleaming prototype.

And if it looks impressive, that's thanks to the teenagers who go there: a 40-strong youth forum was consulted on everything from appointing architects to deciding which facilities were dealbreakers. "Number one was a live music venue – because you can't really go to see gigs if you're under 18, or afford them," say David Mills, 20, and Tris Abbs, 21, who were recruited as forum members six years ago and now work at the venue. They excitedly point out some of their favourite bits of the building; the live venue idea turned into a serious 1,200-capacity



Teenage kicks: (clockwise from top left) the bathroom, lobby, meeting room and nightclub of OPEN; a more traditional youth club amenity EDMUND SUMNER/JOHN VOOS

space, with tickets for big-name acts, all limited to young punters, costing just a fiver. There's also the nightclub, which claims to be the country's first dedicated under-18s venue. It's a vision of black-stained woodwork and zinc, pink recessed lighting, state-of-the-art DJ equipment, and a gleaming white bar stocked with soft drinks; random breathalyser tests at OPEN rule out alcohol smuggling. It's about feeling safe, insist Mills and Abbs. "And so far, the nights have been a complete sell-out," says Abbs, "which just proves that if you give young people the opportunity to be independent, and offer them something which is otherwise unob-



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tainable, they'll have an amazing time – without a drop of alcohol involved."

There's also a swanky VIP area on the balcony overlooking the stage, furnished with four Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec alcove sofas from Vitra (at nearly £5,000 each). Didn't they consider Ikea? "It's about sustainability," says Abbs confidently. "My school bought Ikea furniture for the common room and it broke within a week when someone jumped on it. We need things to last."

"Also," points out Mills, "if you had manky sofas people wouldn't value them. But with this, they can see it's cool – and if you think something's cool, why would you destroy it?"

Elsewhere, other sharp ideas include the copious free-to-use internet kiosks; a reading room sponsored by Borders and furnished with Wiesner Hager reclining chairs; a dance studio; a media lab with PCs fitted to custom-made tables which allow the machines to sink out of sight when they're not needed; and flatscreen TVs in every room – there are five in the café, which is styled to resemble a park, with grass-green flooring and street-lamps. There's also a games room with the latest Xbox and PlayStation games. On top of all that, several complementary organisations including Connexions, the Prince's Trust and a local drugs and alcohol charity also have offices in the building, so there's support on tap for a variety of issues.

Russ Dacre, naturally, loves how the building has turned out, but doesn't think it matters whether kids notice the attention to detail or not. "I had one boy come and say, 'You're Russ Dacre? I love you!' because he likes the place so much. Others will come in, use, abuse and then vanish. It's really cool there's a variety. I just feel lucky to have the opportunity to positively influence their lives

and I'd love to see this project have an impact on antisocial behaviour and reduce crime." He says local people have already noticed there are fewer young people on the streets.

But most importantly, what do the punters reckon? "I love it because there are lots of awesome, fun, bright spaces where you can chat, relax and meet new people of similar ages," says Poppy Mabbit, 16. "The thing I love," says Josh Worley, 14, "is that it's a place where young people can do what they like – pop in for a chat with mates, play on the Xboxes or check Facebook – and all for free."

"We don't have to sit on wet grass in parks shivering all evening, or hurry to finish drinks before being kicked out of coffee shops," says 15-year-old Faye Tattam.

On my way out, a group of boys in school uniform bundle past into the games room. One of the boys' mobiles rings. "We're at OPEN," he says in that patronising teenage tone. Where did you think we'd be?"

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