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## Building Creative Confidence

Young V&A's mission is to inspire the next generation with the power of creativity. Designed collaboratively with young people, families and teachers, the museum has been shaped around children's needs and interests in ways that encourage learning through play, foster creative agency and spark imaginations. Rooted in the latest research into early years' development, the three new galleries plus a new programme of exhibitions, events and education programmes for schools and teachers, have been designed to help children build the skills and creative confidence they need to thrive in our fast-changing world.

### New Curatorial and Design Approach

Drawing on the very best of the V&A's world-leading collections of art, design and performance and including objects from 2,300BC to now, from all over the world, Young V&A is the UK's first museum designed entirely around young people, putting national collections at the centre of the experience. Designed to support children at key stages of their development and in ways that are relevant and engaging to them, the curatorial approach is unique to Young V&A.

Co-design, co-production and co-curating with children, young people, parents, and teachers has been central to the project at every stage. De Matos Ryan's initial co-design programme was followed by AOC architecture's 10-month residency at the museum before closure, to open the entire design process to younger visitors. Throughout the museum visitors encounter architectural features, interactives and commissions designed with young people, including:

- A new feature staircase inspired by optical illusion toys from the V&A's collection
- A colour scheme developed with children exploring the surrounding area in Bethnal Green
- Story-telling displays and a self-portrait making station proposed by pupils taking part in a workshop on ideas for new displays
- A patchwork quilt made by local young students using sustainable dyeing practices and embroidery to communicate their thoughts on fast fashion and the way in which design can make things last longer

Objects on display include highlights from across the V&A's historic collections of furniture, fashion, ceramics, paintings, prints and posters, sculpture and beyond, including a **Syrian rattle dating from ca. 2300 BC**, an ancient Egyptian ceramic fish-

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shaped cosmetics dish (ca. 1550-1077 BC), **Japanese Samurai armour**, a print of Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave* (ca. 1831) to design stories relevant to young visitors including the **Micro Scooter**, **Petit Pli clothing** and **Minecraft**. Works by leading artists, designers and changemakers including **Olafur Eliasson, Greta Thunberg, Chris Ofili, Bridget Riley, Virgil Abloh, Keith Haring, Issey Miyake, and David Hockney** are displayed alongside characters from film and TV including **Frankenstein's Monster, Peppa Pig, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Kermit the Frog, Barbie, Pokémon, Spongebob Squarepants and Superman**. In addition, objects previously on display at the V&A Museum of Childhood, such as the 18th century Marionette Theatre, dolls' houses, historic toys, and teddy bears, are all displayed in new and exciting ways.

With a range of sustainable materials, such as recycled plastics made from used yoghurt pots, up-cycled display cases, and hemp cladding, in vibrant colours and textures as well as spaces to play and read, displays address topics that children highlighted were important to them, with inspiring stories of creative acts by young people around the world to encourage children's confidence in their own creativity and self-expression. As a large proportion of the audience are pre-readers and young children, object labels are kept short, and focus on encouraging children and their adults to think creatively and collaboratively. Every gallery features interactives and things to do that enable children to act on the inspiration they take from the collections around them, and to work and play with others to realise their ideas.

## The Galleries

In the **Play Gallery**, the 'Mini Museum' is inspired by the ways that babies and toddlers first experience the world with a sensory landscape in which objects are placed at children's eye level height, where they can discover colours, textures and shapes as they explore the space. Further parts of the collection are displayed within an alphabet running the length of the gallery, helping little ones build communication and oracy skills. Elsewhere a rainbow of cases shows objects by colour, appealing to early learners. A construction zone encourages children to use their problem-solving and design skills with a large marble run, and to have fun building dens and architectural structures in the **Imagination Playground**. The **Arcade** delves into the history and process of boardgame and videogame design, with lots of different games for children to play. It also features a new **Minecraft** interactive, built by Blockworks with support from Mojang and Microsoft, which takes visitors on a journey through a virtual Young V&A and other real and imaginary worlds created by Minecraft players worldwide.

The **Imagine Gallery** includes a variety of spaces to inspire creative expression through performance, storytelling, imagination and community. Children can choose their own adventure and create their own stories inspired by the collections – including the life-size Joey the War Horse puppet in the Adventure area and the original Superman costume worn by Christopher Reeve. A new performance space, **The Stage**, will host programmed activity, such as performances events and readings, while a dressing up box and shadow puppets interactive encourage children to enact their own performances. A new display called *This Is Me* by photographer **Rehan Jamil**, co-curated with young people from the Mile End Community Project, features portraits of local children expressing what creativity means to them. The new photo series is presented alongside self-portraits by leading creatives including **Chila Kumari Singh Burman, Quentin Blake, Kenneth Branagh, Dapo Adeola**, and **Linda McCartney** and an interactive self-portrait-making station. The much-loved dolls' house collection can be explored within a new streetscape, alongside a commission by Emily Queenie created with local schoolchildren exploring what community means to them. Rachel Whiteread's *Place (Village)*, an installation of over 100 dolls' houses, has been re-displayed in an atmospheric space immersing visitors within the work.

The **Design Gallery**, conceived for older children, showcases innovative objects and case studies that explore how things are designed, made and used, and the ways in which design can change the world. Hands on activities, workshops and collaborations with contemporary designers will introduce young people to different design processes and develop critical thinking, ideas creation, and problem-solving skills. Remarkable stories illustrating the power of children's agency are highlighted here, like world-changing inventions such as an Elephant Detector created by a 14-year-old Chinmayi Ramasubramanian in India to reduce human-elephant conflict. **Cocoa Girl**, the UK's first magazine for Black girls designed by Serlina Boyd, inspired by her daughter Faith, is featured as part of a display exploring how design can give people voice. **The Factory** uncovers some of the many processes and materials used in making familiar and unfamiliar objects, where children can see design processes in action. **The Shed** is home to Young V&A's onsite **Studio Resident** –and is a new space where children can experience the work of a contemporary artist or designer first hand and take part in design challenges in the adjoining **Open Studio**.

### Conservation, installation and display

Around 1,500 objects have been through the V&A's Conservation studios in preparation for display at Young V&A. Treatments include the cleaning of a 19th-century plaster lion statuette to return it to its former glory, emergency surgery on a beloved owl puppet from the 1960s ITV kids show 'Small Time' to tackle previous moth

damage to its feathers, reattach its statement hat and give it a careful clean, as well as complex stabilisation and reshaping treatments for a delicate clown nose made from a ping pong ball. The vast array of contemporary and historic objects at Young V&A have given the Conservation teams new challenges, whether creating conservation-approved slime for Star Wars' Jabba the Hutt, to creating a life-like fake potato to display an original Mr Potato Head toy as originally intended, minus the real potato.

Much thought has also been given to the display of Young V&A's collections, led by the V&A's Technical Services team. More than 1700 objects have been carefully packed and transported to the museum and expertly installed with over 1000 bespoke object mounts. Examples include a range of complex and imaginative mounts to ensure **Harry Potter's Nimbus 2000 broomstick** and **Christopher Reeve's original Superman costume** are displayed as if flying in Imagine, while games like **Jenga** and **Buckaroo** are displayed representing them mid-game in Play. Some of the most complicated installations included one of Young V&A's largest objects, the 18th Century Italian Marionette Theatre, requiring a comprehensive set-build ahead of install in Imagine, as well as a Microlino car theatrically suspended from the ceiling in Design as part of a display exploring the impact of micro mobility on the way we travel.

### Supporting the Teaching of Art and Design

Alongside interactives and spaces for making and performance in the galleries, three new workshop spaces and a reading room on the lower ground floor will support a year-round programme of learning and education activity. Programming will range from early years sessions to curriculum-based provision for school learners in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3, after school and holiday activities. Young V&A's Schools' programme will launch this October, offering self-directed visits and curriculum-based workshops throughout the academic year. Following consultation with teachers and parents, it offers a design and skills-led creative programme conceived to support the teaching of the art and design.

The transformation of the museum has been an inclusive process from the outset, with support for learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) considered throughout. Noise, circulation, and accessibility were key to the design scheme, and the new galleries are more flexible and able to adapt to the needs of neurodivergent and disabled young visitors, with quiet spaces, reading nooks and the ability to adjust volume throughout. A new Changing Places facility has also been installed, providing a critical service not only to the museum but to the local area. Thanks to the generous support of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Young V&A created a two-year project, launched in 2022, working with designers and three local SEND schools to understand ways that the museum can make creative education more inclusive and to offer new resources for SEND school groups. Each school is paired

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with a designer and facilitator who work closely with the children and staff to identify a need within the school and co-design a solution for this.

### **Continuing our Collaboration with Young People, Teachers and Parents**

Young V&A's site has a longstanding heritage in Bethnal Green, having been east London's first national museum and is, first and foremost, a community space for local people. To date, over 22,000 people have participated in activities that helped shape Young V&A and we look forward to deepening these connections in the years to come. Children, teachers and parents will continue to play a role as critical advisors and partners through regular community engagement events, partnerships with local organisations and through the work of our Young Collective of 11-14 year-olds, which creates opportunities for young people to help shape our public programme and to learn from creatives and museum professionals.

## Architectural Approach

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As a critical concern for all audiences, but especially those under 14, making sustainable choices throughout has been at the core of the approach. From improved environmental control to terrazzo work surfaces made from rubble from the building site and sustainable hemp fibre panelling, the spaces embody the design principles explored in the gallery displays. Showcases and frames from previous displays and exhibitions have been given a new life, recycled plastic plinths and benches make use of old yoghurt pots, and even old cupboard doors provide surfaces for displaying material. The building is also future-proofed to take advantage of electric heat sources when it is possible for them to be installed locally.

### **Statement from AOC architecture, fit out designers**

AOC architecture have led the design of the galleries and public spaces to reimagine the visitor experience and create new permanent displays, working with base build architects De Matos Ryan and a highly skilled creative team. The transformed museum is the result of an ambitious collaborative design process to ensure the museum reflects its diverse audiences in its objects, stories and spaces.

AOC worked with children, families, teachers, curators and staff to co-design proposals, co-curate the collection and co-produce content. The practice's 10 month residency in the Open Studio provided a testlab for public exploration of proposals before the museum closed for refurbishment. Co-creation defined the development of Young V&A; from the ambition to create 'the most joyful museum in the world' to the

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direct development of the colour palette, from testing user-led concept installations to curating specific contents of co-produced displays.

The 5,200sqm redeveloped museum is both a world-class centre of creativity and an essential public building for the local community. The building's central 'Town Square' provides a generous civic interior for Bethnal Green. It is surrounded by three permanent galleries and a new temporary exhibition gallery, with three workshop spaces dedicated to learning and a reading room on the lower ground floor.

The historic grandeur of the town square is tempered with a London Plane perimeter bench, a family of soft elements and new café furniture. The redeveloped foyer provides a generous welcome with a convenient buggy park and an extensive new shop with added window seats and niches.

A series of figurative enclosures and playful vertical elements have been introduced into the open volumes of the surrounding gallery floors to create a diverse range of experiences whilst maintaining visual connections throughout the building. The gallery names - Play, Imagine, Design - are writ large in redolent materials, enabling visitors to understand the museum in a single glance. Natural light and views out have been reintroduced to the interior. The careful arrangement of enclosures and cases allow the galleries to enjoy extensive daylight whilst conserving the collection.

The Imagine Gallery, on the north side of the building, is a sequence of immersive interiors that create a range of atmospheres, intimacies and acoustics. Its central structure, The Stage, provides a red oval performance space to host the museum's daily programme and present a platform for children to perform their own shows. On the southern side of the building, the Play Gallery is an open landscape overlooking the Museum Gardens. Defined by distinct figures, its legible thresholds and discrete barrier seats ensure different ages and activities can coexist comfortably and allow parents and carers full visibility throughout the space. The 'Mini Museum' creates an innovative gallery experience for pre-walkers and their families, extending the sensory experience of collection objects beyond the case with tactile materials and actively supporting multi-generational interaction. Soft and textured materials line the floor, walls and ceiling, chosen for their performative qualities to support collaborative play and conversation.

On first floor, The Design Gallery combines immersive gallery rooms with flexible open spaces defined by a robust palette of restored existing oak floorboards and reclaimed timber. Tabletop displays, inspired by design studio workbenches, show contemporary objects, with showcases wrapped around the galleries displaying objects from the collection. A hemp-clad studio for a resident designer offers active display windows with sliding doors to support planned and spontaneous communal activities.

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The gallery designs balance the right of objects to be safely displayed with the opportunity for visitors to meaningfully engage with the collection and each other. Displays designed for a range of heights allow for multi-generational visitors to look at the collection differently and together. Analogue interactives integrated with digital technologies encourage visitors to touch and play with objects. Sensory materials and immersive installations ensure visitors experience the collection, beyond the visual.

The ambition for a sustainable museum took the building's early history as its starting point. Museum showcases from both sites have been repurposed and carefully adapted for new displays. Timber from former gallery storage has been reused for new display tables, reclaimed timber studs from temporary exhibitions has been reused for support structures and masonry rubble from the building adaptation works has been reused to make terrazzo for new worktops.

The new structures prioritise low carbon, natural materials. On the first floor, The Factory and The Shed sample the roof trusses and the original 'Brompton Boilers' cladding profile to create new structures evocative of east London's industrial heritage. Their expressed components designed for future re-assembly, are clad in corrugated sheets of low-carbon hemp fibre panels with sugar-based resin made entirely from agricultural waste. Through co-creating with diverse audiences, activating the collection and sustainable material choices the design of the museum reasserts the importance of creativity in our communities and their cultures.

## About AOC architecture

AOC is a practice of architects and designers led by Tom Coward, Gill Lambert and Geoff Shearcroft. Established in 2005 and based in East London, the practice is best known for its new public buildings, transformation of cultural institutions and learning spaces.

Completed projects include the Reading Room, Wellcome Collection; Somerset House Studios and Exchange; and Nunhead Green, a resident-run community centre and housing scheme in south London. Current projects include a new building for the National Railway Museum, Shildon; the masterplan and redevelopment of the National Science and Media Museum, Bradford; the transformation of The National Archives' brutalist icon in Kew; and the redevelopment of Lloyd's Register of Shipping in the City of London.

AOC have built a reputation for the quality of their designs, winning RIBA, Design Museum Designs of the Year and New London awards. The practice's work has been internationally published and exhibited, including the British School at Rome, Royal Academy, V&A and Venice Biennale. [www.theaoc.co.uk](http://www.theaoc.co.uk)

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## **Statement from De Matos Ryan, base build lead**

The ambition was to deliver "the world's most joyful museum". This concept emerged from De Matos Ryan's extensive co-design strategy with local community groups to transform the museum into an exceptional space that sparks the imagination of future generations and encourages creativity to flourish.

De Matos Ryan's approach to preserving and enhancing this much loved and unique heritage building, which once stood in South Kensington before being moved in 1872, was to carefully peel back and reveal the building's original form. Carefully considered, distinctly modern interventions have been introduced to complement the existing architecture. The project promotes the 'Building as a Teaching Tool' and supports the reimagined experience of Young V&A as a place that celebrates innovative making and ingenuity.

Centre stage of this approach is the dramatic staircase, conceived during 40 plus workshops with local school children and inspired by the museum's collection of optical toys. At the end of the main hall, this intervention together with a new accessible ramp cut within the southern gallery footprint delivers side by side stepped and step-free access at the end of the main hall, drawing visitors through the museum, creating a dynamic route to the upper galleries. The stair's magic is activated by the movement of people around its mirrored core, reflecting both them and the museum's extraordinary cast iron architecture in a new light. A new café sits at its base at the heart of the building.

A complete rethink of the museum's circulation and flow allowed novel design opportunities for new galleries. This included the decommissioning of the north staircase to facilitate the creation of a new, fit for purpose open plan area for temporary exhibitions on the first floor. This flexible 515sqm space is set behind a screen that plays with the architectural rhythm of the existing columns and ensures visibility of the barrel-vaulted roofs.

The moment of arrival has been transformed by full height, automated sliding glazed doors, providing an environmental draught lobby and clear views into the main central hall. The previous shop and café have been removed allowing the magnificent original volumes and unique mosaic flooring to be read more clearly. Natural light has been reinstated through the main linear rooflight, returning this rare example of a nineteenth century top-lit museum to its original state.

The lower ground floor has been completely restructured and publicly accessible areas have been significantly increased. The previous community, learning and storage facilities have been repurposed and upgraded as fit-for-purpose object handling and staff spaces along the north side of the building. The previously un-refurbished south side has been structurally altered to create large, flexible studios for all types of uses, including learning programmes and community events, with an abundance of daylight



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and direct views of the museum's surrounding lawn. For the first time, new arched glazed openings provide clear visibility between floors. This reconnects all areas of the museum, bringing learning and display into direct dialogue, delivering a key co-design ambition.

The building's redevelopment enhances comfort with improved acoustics and a better controlled environment to safeguard the heritage asset and its exceptional collections. Sound absorption throughout and improved acoustic separation allows the spaces to be used for various activities simultaneously.

A reduction in carbon emissions has been implemented through the following energy efficiency measures:

- Automatic doors between the entrance building and the main hall act as an effective draught lobby.
- Intelligent ventilation systems suit CO2/temperature levels.
- Improved temperature controls.
- Reduction of vertical temperature difference in the galleries by reinstating ventilation through the roof light windows for heat removal in summer and high-level radiant panel heating in winter, which produces less rising warm air compared with conventional radiators.
- Low energy light fittings with automatic controls throughout.
- Future-proofed systems to allow for green energy sources when possible

### About De Matos Ryan

De Matos Ryan is known for creating simple but imaginative contemporary environments and interventions often within historically or culturally sensitive settings, incorporating all disciplines from landscape to interiors and exhibition design. The practice's confident and well considered end-user approach draws attention through its quality and clarity, ensuring sustainability through not only carbon and energy reduction but also long-term community and business planning resilience. The team believes in the social and public role that architecture plays in motivating a community and works hard to ensure that their projects are both accessible and engaging for all. De Matos Ryan has received numerous awards, including RIBA and Civic Trust. Current cultural projects include Wonderlab: The Bramall Gallery, National Railway Museum (York), The British Film Institute (Southbank London), ArtsEd (Chiswick), Oriel Myrddin Gallery (Carmarthen), Borough Theatre (Abergavenny), Canolfan Ucheldre (Holyhead) and Tullie House Museum (Carlisle). [www.dematosryan.co.uk](http://www.dematosryan.co.uk)