

## **A Brief History of the Building Exploratory**

### **1996 - 1999**

In 1996, Polly Hudson, founding director of the Building Exploratory, was approached by the Hackney Society to produce a proposal for a historic buildings museum in Hackney. During the same year, Hackney Education and Business Partnership commissioned a report looking at the relevance of such a centre to schools, and pilot projects were run with two local schools looking at the feasibility of involving children in the development of displays.

This early investigative activity made it clear that any such centre based in a deprived borough such as Hackney would need to be much more broadly based and very hands-on to be of interest and relevance to the local community. It also became apparent that there was no other place in the UK where residents could find out how their homes were built or how the built environment was managed and maintained.

A blueprint was required for an exciting and informative hands-on centre that would appeal to community members of all ages. The centre would work with heritage organisations, housing providers, schools, construction organisations, planners and architecture professionals. Issues such as tackling social exclusion, developing technical and creative skills and creating local jobs were particularly relevant in the Hackney context.

In January 1997, acting under the umbrella of the Hackney Historic Buildings Trust, the project got underway. A DCMS grant enabled the rent of space at the Professional Development Centre, a storyline for the exhibition was laid out, and the first exhibit, our giant floor map of Hackney, was built by 350 local school children. By March 1998, the project had worked with 700 members of the local community, provided creative workshops for children, created a teacher's pack and worked to produce a wide range of educational exhibits including the London jigsaw.

Despite early critical acclaim, the Historic Buildings Trust closed the project in June 1998 due to difficulty securing core funding. However, in October the same year, the Building Exploratory was able to re-open with a new board due to the generosity of grants from the Ashden, Glass-House and Tudor Trusts. It became a limited company in December 1998.

In 1999, the Building Exploratory was awarded charitable status and the staff team had grown to four people, with a team of committed volunteers also crucial to the development of the exhibition. Educational workshops with adults and young people were already a key part of the Building Exploratory's programme, and work continued on the development of the ground-breaking exhibition. The exhibition as you see it today began to take shape, including an innovative Geographic Information System, the first publicly available system, developed in partnership with the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (University College London), a 10-ft model of one of the demolished Holly Street tower blocks, and a giant-cross-section through a typical street.

## **2000 – 2008**

In 2000, the Building Exploratory reached a turning point, securing grant funding from the Clore Duffield Foundation that enabled the completion of the exhibition and the employment of a full-time team of delivery staff. Visitor numbers increased dramatically. The Exploratory's founding director, Polly Hudson, moved to a new position of Creative Director, overseeing the Clore Duffield funded development work and a new Director, Nicole Crockett, came into post.

The exhibition was completed in 2001 and the Building Exploratory began a process of broadening its audiences within the community. A full education programme was now underway, and a comprehensive programme of special projects with community groups began to develop.

Between 2001 and the present day, the organisation has consolidated its funding base to secure a team of staff and the presence of the permanent exhibition in Hackney. The core team now consists of a Director, a Lifelong Learning Officer, two Education Officers and an Administrator working alongside freelance and project-based staff members. Schools, professional groups, families and drop-in visitors now regularly visit the Building Exploratory from all over London to get involved in the exciting activities on offer.

In 2004, the City Bridge Trust funded the development of outreach resources and activities for older people. The creation of this service gave rise to a regular group meeting fortnightly at the Building Exploratory to explore themes ranging from history and heritage to regeneration of the borough. In 2007, the group voted to name themselves the Senior BEEs (Building Exploratory Explorers) and several of them have become dedicated volunteers. This unique group is attracting new members all the time.

The Building Exploratory has also developed a wide range of high profile partnership projects, funded from a number of sources. These have included the Kingsland Road Panorama, the Newington Green 'treasures', 'calico springs', 'Memory Blitz', the Clapton Portico Interactive, and, most recently, 'Religion & Place in Tower Hamlets'. These innovative projects have wide-reaching impact on the local community and have been recognised nationally and internationally as replicable models for development elsewhere.

The Exploratory's virtual presence has also expanded, with a Heritage Lottery-funded lifelong learning resource about Hackney, [www.brickfields.org.uk](http://www.brickfields.org.uk), 'Memory Blitz', a 2006 project collecting people's memories of the way WWII shaped the borough, and [www.religionandplace.org.uk](http://www.religionandplace.org.uk), launched in March 2008.

The Building Exploratory is currently seeking a new home in order to improve physical access to our exhibition and resources. We continue to pursue the founding principals laid down by Polly Hudson of involving local people in the ongoing development of the programme and the exhibition. A number of

community forums are being developed to inform and participate with the staff team in moving the organisation to its new home.

The Building Exploratory would like to thank the following organisations for their funding and support since 1996:

Hackney Society, Hackney Historic Buildings Trust, Hackney Education and Business Partnership, DCMS, The Ashden Trust, The Glass-House Trust, The Tudor Trust, The Housing Corporation, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Clore Duffield Foundation, The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, The Ernest Cook Trust, the DETR, English Heritage, Arts Council England, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), the Heritage Lottery Fund, MLA, New Opportunities Fund, The Big Lottery, The City Bridge Trust, The Stuart Heath Charitable Settlement, The Stepney Community Trust, London Borough of Islington, London Borough of Hackney, The Learning Trust, The JJ Charitable Trust, the Mark Leonard Trust, Jack Petchey Foundation, Taylor Woodrow, the Learning Trust, Thames Wharf Charity, The Institute of Structural Engineers, JP Morgan Fleming Educational Trust, the Mercer's Company, the Thames Gateway Creative Skills Partnership, The Royal Society, Cable London, Thames Water, The Rayne Foundation, Stanhope PLC, Lend Lease, Pollard Thomas Edwards, Berwin Leighton Paisner, Shepphard Robson, Teighmore Limited, Gardinier & Theobald, Investland Group PLC, John Doyle Group, Service Point.