

Designers always claim their classrooms are revolutionary – but we're still seeing the same rows of moulded plastic chairs and tables in boxy classrooms. Not so in the New Line Learning academy's Plaza – it's unlike any classroom we've seen before. **Lucy Busuttil** reports.

The mobile classroom



The 'plaza' at New Line Learning Academy in Maidstone, Kent

The New Line learning academy in Maidstone, Kent, has opened a new learning 'Plaza' – to accommodate up to 90 year eight students.

This giant hall has furniture designed to be entirely moveable – to make the space adaptable for presentations, classes and assemblies. All the furniture is on wheels, including the tables – and students are regularly seen spinning from table to table to discuss their work with their peers.

Students must enter the Plaza barefoot. The area is 'IT rich' – it has biometric lighting to allow teachers to control the ambience, 360degree projection and large display areas.

Dividers can be used to break up the space – so workshops can go on simultaneously.



Students put their things away in their lockers, take off their shoes and are ready to learn

The designers

This plaza is a prototype for the architects' (Gensler) true dream – an even bigger plaza for 120 students! The dream could soon be a reality – feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and attendance levels are already up by 90%.

The designers wanted the Plaza to be a 'secure home base' – a centre for assemblies, and a heart for the school. They wanted to improve both mood and behaviour with their designs – the school is in a deprived area. Above all, the designers wanted the area to be comfortable and appealing to students.

They chose blue and white chairs and 150 lockers in shades of blue and white.



Anibal Cruz, senior project designer at Gensler, said: "The lockers are very interesting as this is the first point of entry for the students. Once they have taken off their shoes and put away their personal belongings, the plaza environment seems to relax students and their behaviour is noticeably calmer."

Cruz describes the plaza as: "A new spatial use model". The green, pink and blue overhead lighting is definitely unusual – but it brightens up what could have been a big, windowless room.

The Academy

Guy Hewett, the head teacher, said: "The design gives a strong visual message that the students are entering a different and special environment when they enter our plaza."

The Academy has a business, enterprise and vocational focus – and instructed the designers that they wanted the furniture to look like office furniture.

Teachers were determined to avoid the 'rows' classroom configuration – they wanted to move from a 'factory' to an 'active learning' education model.

By making the chairs and tables wheely, the designers hoped to break down the teacher/student barrier – by allowing everyone to move around and ask questions. It's now easy for students to work in groups or pairs – just by moving their desks.

The school has a firm belief in the importance of 'emotional intelligence' – they take personal development education seriously to encourage individual creativity. The teachers say they expect students to take responsibility for their own learning.



Dividers can be used to break up the space

The furniture manufacturers

Ki, the American furniture manufacturers, supplied the plaza furniture.

The academy chose from the 'Intellect Wave' seating line for schools – which is designed to promote more upright postures and encourage breathing. The line includes the obesity-inspired 'oversized double entry desk' – for students with longer legs and larger waist sizes.

The whole range comes in many colours and sizes, with optional laptop arm tablets on the seats. The company's designers say they were inspired by studies that show that improving learning environments can boost attainment.

Lucy Busuttil is the production editor of 21 Century Schools. Before joining the publisher (Imaginative Minds Ltd) she worked as a freelance writer.