

Meeting Lesley McMillan

Lesley McMillan is someone members of the general public may never have heard of, but believe me if you have visited any of the council's buildings recently you will have seen her work.

She describes herself as an interior designer, and she transforms the interiors of council buildings by adding splashes of colour where they are often most needed.



A dining table made by Grassmarket Community Project features in the family area of the Throughcare and Aftercare service area created at The City Chambers

Most recently she has created a lovely space in The City Chambers for the Throughcare and After Care service which is where we met up with her. This is now on the right hand side of the main entrance to the City Chambers and it is situated in a previously underused space.

The service is for young people who are in care or leaving care and offers them a transition to life after care, planning out where they will live and work as well as offering them guidance on their rights.

Lesley explained the design process : "We met with all the services who would be using the space, speaking to representatives from each trying to find out what their needs were. With this area it was necessary to create a very homely environment. It is used for job clubs and is a place where people can get support services, so we needed to make a nice space with a less institutional feel. But it is in a corporate building here at The City Chambers, so there is a balance to be struck."

The space has been created with a lot of wood. Lesley

explained this use of a natural palette was very deliberate. She said : “I really like biophilic design ”

Wait what on earth is that? Lesley laughed and explained it was really very simple. She said : “This is about bringing nature into the interior. It is proven that if you are outdoors then it raises your serotonin levels, making you happier and more relaxed, so if you can do that to the inside of a building then that can be beneficial.”

(If you want to know more about biophilic design there is a handy site [here](#).)



There is a whole wall in the family room which features a hedge. Well there is nothing more natural than a hedge! We photographed Lesley there for this article so you can see for yourselves that really she does practice what she preaches. And another wall in the family space is made of Burmese teak which was reclaimed timber from a school gym hall. This was a deliberate attempt to make the area suit its users.

Lesley is rightly proud of the feature saying “Well a lot of younger people come in here so we were trying to make this space a bit more ‘funky’ for them!”

THROUGH CARE AND AFTERCARE SERVICE

Colin McGinn is a Team Leader at Throughcare and Aftercare. He told us that this newly designed area will make a big difference to the work his team does.

He said : “We are responsible for looking after young people up to the age of 26 now. The approach I take is that I think about the age when people leave their parents, so this is all about steering young people towards the next stage of their lives. It can be a minefield.

“We have about 14 people in our team. We have dedicated

workers concentrating on things like literacy. I trained in Social Work and residential care and in our department we work hand in hand with other teams across the council.

“Our client list can be made up of up to 500 young people at any one time.

“Now we are working in this space which we are calling the Grassmarket Room. It is gorgeous. I really like the hedge!

“We provide a really good service and our office space has up till now been quite homely. It worked for us, but this area will bring the service up to a whole new level.

“We will have group work and independent living skills courses here. We have a washing machine here too, so the possibilities of showing young people a variety of life skills are endless.

“We have a really successful Job Club running with partner agencies and we will be able to meet with young people here about jobs available for them and help them apply. We also work with young unaccompanied asylum seekers which we have found an increasing problem in Edinburgh. We are only scratching the surface here, and some of these young people may have been victims of trafficking for example.

“The service we provide is fantastic but this space will greatly add to it. My staff team are bowled over with how this looks and it will help how our young people feel welcomed and valued.”

Central Library

Lesley has a background in interior architecture which she studied at Edinburgh Napier and has worked in private practice and with Edinburgh University in their Estates Department. Now she has worked with the council for about six years working on libraries and early years centres. (That’s nurseries to you

and me.)

One of the first places we encountered Lesley's interior design was at The Central Library which she revamped with colour and soft furnishings. There is even somewhere to make yourself a cup of coffee which would have been unheard of in years past.

Lesley continued "It was important to create really flexible spaces there, particularly in the Children's Library where the space towards the rear of the building might be used for Bookbug Club or author events. There is a huge tree with a nook in it, which is a cosy space that children can hide in. It is a lot of fun to work with children's projects."



Fox Covert Nursery School where the indoor and outdoor environments are seamless – and the beautiful wooden furniture created by Grassmarket Community Project features in both.

At Fox Covert Nursery School I met Lesley a couple of years back where she had installed toy washing machines made of wood.

You can see some of those in our video made at the formal opening by then Education Convener Paul Godzik in 2015.

Lesley laughed at recalling my surprise at the toys used there and explained : "I started working with Early Years and on the nursery environments with the first batch of new builds in 2015. The following year we did about six refurbishments, and lately we have completed another five new builds. So the council has made a lot of progress with nursery environments. Again I have brought in a lot of biophilic design and nature into the interiors. The spaces also encourage children to play

outdoors in what is called 'free play' and the big sliding doors in the nurseries allow that. But the thinking is that if there is a softer environment in the interior then it is a softer transition."



Some of the items made by Grassmarket Community Project for the council's nursery schools

The wooden washing machines and other toys used in the nursery departments across the city came from the Grassmarket Community Project.

Lesley told us about that relationship : "When I started working on Fox Covert Nursery it was obvious from my fact finding that the teachers wanted to use natural play equipment and furniture. My first idea when I met with Tommy of GCP was to get lots of tree stumps sanded and lacquered so that children could sit on logs inside the nurseries. Our relationship evolved from there, and now they have produced beautiful coffee tables and larger tables for places like Heathervale Young People's Centre and this Throughcare and Aftercare space here. It has been a really great relationship."



A dining table features in the family area of the Throughcare and Aftercare service area created at The City Chambers

MORTONHALL CREMATORIUM

Lesley also worked on a rather different commission in the refurbishment of part of Mortonhall Crematorium.

The refurbishment of the multi-denominational crematorium had a project budget of £2.1 million. The original building was designed by acclaimed architect Basil Spence and is now Grade

A listed. The project included a requirement to update the interior furnishings, restoring the organ and installing high definition web cameras to enable services to be streamed to the internet. Lesley dealt with the family room which started off as a very sterile office environment. The aim was to create a new space which would be more comforting for the bereaved. There is even a rocking chair and a kettle.

In her report after the work was complete Lesley wrote : “The family room offers a flexible space with a table to sit at to make arrangements. At the heart of every Maggie’s Centre is a kitchen table: Inspired by this concept ‘Kitchenism’ A bespoke informal timber table was created with a tactile waney edge. A bespoke tea prep point was also created.”

This is where families go to choose urns, the entry in books of remembrance, collect the ashes of their loved ones all of which are emotional experiences. The new room uses rainbow colours and a palette of natural materials and colours ‘to help create a calming, nurturing and holistic environment’. Rather than a red carpet down the middle aisle there is a natural grey carpet where the colours from the stained glass windows can be reflected by the light outside.

Lesley said : “The particular focus on the interior

refurbishment there came largely from Maggie's Centres and the approach that they had used there. It was about the reception and reconfiguring a private space where people could go to make their arrangements. In Maggie's Centres it is about a bright non-institutional environment. I thought this was a particularly good opportunity for GCP. One of the items which features largely at Maggie's Centres is the kitchen table which makes it a softer more relaxing space.

"So we made a private family room that looked almost like a domestic setting with the comforting timber used there."

The result is a comforting space which would not be out of place in any family home as you can see below.



GOVERNMENT SUPPORTED BUSINESSES

As in any of the council's departments, Lesley has to work within tight budgetary confines, and the council's own Procurement team encourage working with Scottish Government supported businesses.

She explained what that means : "A government supported business is one where 50% of the staff are either disabled or disadvantaged. Businesses which I have worked with include Matrix in Fife who have produced some bespoke wall cubes, shelving and units, and North Lanarkshire Industries who produce some nice upholstery."

The workflow for interior design now begins largely on a computer with Computer Aided Design or CAD, but there is a lot of 3D involved. (It all sounded a bit too technical for me!)

Sustainability is also key and the use of wooden toys contributes to something called the 'circular economy' as the furniture is more robust and will last longer.

Lesley continued : "I am working on lots of school projects

just now, like St Crispin's and refurbishment of classrooms for children with autism. I am also looking at facilities for children with autism in main stream schools too.

"Outwith my day job I chair an Education Design Advisory Council with the Society of British and International Design. There we are looking at inclusive environments for schools and libraries and we share these across the UK.

"We look at all classrooms and try to calm down any sensory overload so that all rooms in schools are inclusive – again the biophilic design comes into play.

"I am on a learning journey with all of this! Especially with areas like technology in schools – nowadays we have more spaces where there is collaborative learning. In the future there is potential for 'flipped' classrooms where children could be learning about something by watching a lecture online and then discuss it collaboratively.

"I was involved in the design of the Learning Lounge at Liberton which was a finalist in the Education Building Scotland Award for Inspiring Learning Spaces.

"It is a really natural space and has lots of 'breakout' and collaboration furniture. There the 'flipped classroom' concept was featured where there is no main focus wall but opportunities throughout the classroom to have white walls and screens."

Finally we asked Lesley what her favourite colour is?

Unsurprisingly with all the nature around her designs she replied : "Green and blue!"