

**LEARNING OUTSIDE FORMAL
EDUCATION: HERITAGE AS A TOOL FOR
YOUTH EDUCATION**

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RCHTECH
**EMPOWERING YOUTH TO REDISCOVER EUROPE'S
ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY**



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Learning Outside Formal Education: Heritage as a Tool for Youth Education

Some of the most durable learning young people do never appears on a timetable. Built heritage — the streets, factories, chapels and stations they pass every day — turns out to be one of the richest settings for it.

Ask a group of eighteen-year-olds what they learned at school last week and you get a list of subjects. Ask what they learned last week, full stop, and the answer is longer and stranger: how to talk to a stranger, how to fix something, how to argue a point and lose gracefully. That second list is the territory of non-formal learning — organised, intentional education outside the school system — and it is where youth work lives.

Non-formal learning is not school with the seriousness removed. It has objectives and it can be assessed. What distinguishes it is that participation is voluntary, the learner's own experience is the starting point, and the outcome is agreed with participants rather than imposed on them. Which is precisely why built heritage suits it. A historic building is a document nobody has edited: it carries the intentions of whoever commissioned it, the skills of whoever built it and the compromises of everyone who altered it since. Read it carefully and you get economics, migration, technology, class and taste in one object, with no textbook standing between the young person and the evidence.

Starting with the young people who are furthest away

ArchTech's learning framework is aimed particularly at vulnerable and marginalised youth, and the case it builds on is instructive. At the Parque Minas de Río Tinto in Huelva — one of the oldest mining landscapes in the world — the Unidos por lo Alto association and the University of Huelva ran non-formal sessions with young people who were immigrants, on low incomes or in seasonal work: site visits, leisure activities and structured reflection rather than lessons. What participants took away was not heritage knowledge alone but a stronger identity-related tie to their own town, and a clearer sense that what they did affected it.

That result depends on a distinction the framework makes explicit through its five levels of inclusion, which run from invisible — diversity overlooked, discrimination subtle — through awareness and intentional inclusion to a culture of inclusion. Most activities advertised as open to "all young people" sit at the first or second level. Moving up takes design, not goodwill.

What young people actually learn

The competences that emerge are rarely the ones announced at the start. Groups sign up to visit a castle and come away with something else:

- Observation and critical thinking — distinguishing what a building shows from what a plaque claims about it.
- Research and source handling — archives, maps, planning records, and the testimony of people who remember the place differently.
- Communication across generations — interviewing an eighty-year-old is a harder social skill than most classroom tasks demand.
- Digital competence with a purpose — geolocation, structured data entry and photographic documentation, learned because a real site needs them.
- Civic literacy — discovering who decides what happens to a building, and that the answer is a person with an address.

From walking tour to record

A guided tour delivered by an expert is not non-formal learning; it is a lecture in the open air. The difference lies in what participants are asked to produce. A walking tour produces a memory. A completed record produces an artefact that outlives the session.

The obstacle has always been technical. Laser scanning, photogrammetry, drones, GIS and building information modelling have transformed heritage recording, but cost and expertise put them out of reach of youth groups. ArchTech's answer is deliberately modest: a standardised digital recording form that a young person can complete on a phone in front of the building. It asks for identification and geolocation, architectural details, historical context, ownership and accessibility, protection status, and at least one

photograph. One field does more work than the rest. Alongside dates and materials, the form asks for collective memory — the traditions and stories attached to the building. That single field changes who counts as a source: a teenager who has been told all week that professionals decide what matters is suddenly being asked for something only local people can supply.

From record to tool

There is a further step, and ArchTech takes it. Having filled in the form, a group can go on to build the thing that collects it. The framework's third unit walks youth workers through designing "Buildings Alert!" — a mobile application for reporting endangered buildings with a photograph, a condition note and a GPS pin, plus a live map of everything reported so far — using no-code builders such as Glide, Adalo or Thunkable, which assemble an application from drag-and-drop forms and maps instead of from code.

The educational value is not the app; prototypes made in a workshop rarely survive it. The value is that a young person deciding what the report form should ask for is making, in miniature, the judgement a conservation officer makes: what counts as evidence, what a record must contain, what can safely be left out. Choosing a platform teaches the same lesson from the other side, since a two-hour workshop and a citywide reporting campaign need different tools. And one design decision reliably starts an argument worth having: who checks a report before it goes live, and what happens to one a moderator rejects? The moment a group settles that, they have discovered that every information system encodes a judgement about whose word is trusted.

The structure that makes it work

Two design choices carry most of the weight. The first is roles: fieldwork is a team task with a photographer, a recorder, a validator and a researcher, which distributes the workload and the learning. The validator's job — checking that entries are accurate and consistent — is quietly the most valuable, because it teaches that a claim without a source is not yet a fact. The second is the reflection sequence the framework uses after almost every activity: one minute alone, two in pairs, four in fours, five with everyone. It looks bureaucratic on paper. In practice it is what stops the three most confident participants doing all the talking.

Recognising what has been learned

Non-formal learning has a persistent weakness: it is invisible afterwards. A young person who spent six months documenting a derelict mill has learned project management, technical documentation and stakeholder negotiation, and has no way of saying so on an application form. ArchTech's assessment is built to be youth-centred: peer review of completed records and prototypes; written or video self-reflection on what proved hardest and what the participant would do differently; and scenario questions that test judgement rather than recall — what would you actually do on finding a decaying building that matters locally but holds no protected status? The purpose is not to grade anyone. It is to make sure the young person leaves able to describe what they can now do.

What it asks of youth workers

Heritage-based youth work asks youth workers to be comfortable not being the expert. The crafts person knows more about lime mortar; the neighbour knows more about who lived there; the young person may well be quicker with the software. No-code tools exist precisely so that the person holding the group does not have to be the person who could build the app. The youth worker's job is to hold the process, protect the group's ownership of it, and make sure the learning is named. That is a different skill from delivering content — and it is the one worth investing in.