



cross trainer

We're more used to a gentle buzz, a sense of activity, a steady flow of traffic, than the full-on noise and bustle that surrounds us here. There's not a suit in sight and we're concerned that we might get swept along in the tide of human movement. We love it.

We've come to Kings Cross, and, more specifically, to the new home of leading English language course provider, Malvern House. It's fast approaching lunchtime and the animated multinational student body is either gathering in the school's cool breakout space or making its way through to the teaching rooms beyond. There's little regard for the journalist or the designer here – and why should there be?

Like we said, we love it.

The fit-out of Malvern House's new teaching centre at Blackstone's Nido development was undertaken by John Robertson Architects, and we're enjoying the vibrancy of the space with JRA Director Festus Moffat, Interior Designer Sarah-Jane James and Malvern House Director of Marketing Nick Hobson.

'This is the third of Malvern House's facilities,' Sarah-Jane tells us. 'There's one in Piccadilly and one in Bloomsbury. This is the first time they've done a bespoke fit-out – beforehand there's not really been any design involved with regards to the look and the feel.'

'Every day we are teaching something like 1,600-1,700 people from all over the world. >>>





▶▶▶▶ Nick reveals. ‘They stay with us for anything from nine months to two years. This is vital for them – their careers depend upon what they learn from us – wherever they go to work in the world.’

‘The rationale for this is that, when they arrive, the students need a lot of basic English and we’ll teach them that in Piccadilly. They progress to here once they are at intermediate level, then later on, when they need to think about Cambridge exams and so on, we’ll send them on to Bloomsbury.’

‘The reason we chose King’s Cross is that this area has reasonably good rental prices and we knew right from the beginning that this is an expanding, exciting bit of London with great communications and public transport links – and it is also very student-friendly. The students want the London experience – and that’s what we’ve tried to bring to this facility.’

‘Our whole business is carefully governed – we’re carefully Home Office monitored and we need to stick to the rules fairly precisely.’

‘We had to exceed the brief!’ Sarah-Jane adds.

From the street, we move through the functional entrance and up through landlord territory before we get to the 1st floor and a first glimpse of the JRA scheme. White walls give way to a vivid red and

we’re suddenly in the throng of Malvern House activity. The reception features exciting graphics in the shape of a world map, set against a reception desk and comfortable waiting area. A low black wall separates the reception area and the access route to the library. ‘Ah, my special black wall,’ Sarah-Jane spots us admiring her work. ‘We needed something here, because we needed to allow the students to circulate through here to get to the classrooms, and also they need to do all the enquiries and registrations here – so we felt we needed something architectural here to create a main thoroughfare and allow the guys here to not be disturbed. Then we have a library and resource centre to the other side.’

‘The students here have come from abroad to learn English – they are not school students,’ Festus reminds us. ‘Many of them will be moving on from here to study at a British university or at an American university. London is a big draw – you can go and study English in a lot of places, of course, but London has a lot of attraction. There is quite a bit of pastoral care that happens here, and we needed to give them quite a bit of space over to that.’

The space allows the students – many of whom are bravely getting to grips with a new country, new city and new language, never mind new school – to be greeted by a friendly face and benefit from a gentle

introduction to the Malvern House experience.

‘The branding here is a big sea change for Malvern House,’ Festus continues. ‘The wall shows how this is young and modern, it is international and it is about the students.’

With The Killers (just to prove Festus’ point) providing a soundtrack for our tour, Sarah-Jane takes over. ‘We wanted this to be an inclusive welcome. It’s important that the students can quickly make that connection with a friendly face. It’s very much part of Malvern House’s philosophy; to be warm, to be accessible – this is open all day and even at weekends. It’s like a club really, as well as where they learn. We’ve also, unlike the other centres, been able to set aside quite a large area to get the internet in, to allow students to meet and to socialise. This is a very important part of the core of this facility, besides having efficient and effective classrooms, we wanted to introduce a little bit of character really.’

‘We haven’t had a great deal of money in our back pocket, so this is really a standard fit-out, but we have done a little bit with the light fittings in key areas, we’ve standardised and raised the levels of the furniture throughout – we’ve really done our best to use the budget in an effective way – and hopefully in a way that shows we went the extra mile here. We worked closely▶▶▶▶



with a company called Artwerx for the graphics, for example.’

‘The way the space looked, felt and worked was very important to them,’ Festus continues. ‘We wanted to go beyond simply what Blackstone were going to give them as part of the original deal. It’s very nice to have a client that really cares about the welfare of the students – and the fact that they cared about it allowed us to do a better job.’

The King’s Cross centre offers superior facilities for students, including 17 classrooms incorporating interactive white boards and integrated IT for online learning. The new centre has capacity to teach over 600 students a day.

JRA has introduced Malvern House to high-end, contemporary design solutions suitable for education. Designs have been developed with the client to offer a carefully considered and efficient learning environment with a focus on providing cutting edge study and leisure facilities.

The breakout area offers a colourful and vibrant atmosphere with full access to internet. ‘There is also a tie-in with Nido (the student accommodation facility) next door,’ Festus explains. ‘There is a café and various facilities at Nido that the students here can use and enjoy.’

The classrooms are laid out to facilitate an interactive learning process including whiteboards and access to online learning. Rather than approaching the classrooms in a traditional manner, the team has adopted a more contemporary layout, with Casala seating and specially oversized tablets running around the perimeter of each

room, providing a flexible, interactive approach. ‘The teachers here have to deliver a lively lesson here – they are little performers,’ Nick explains. ‘This really helps them to do that. We are totally dependent on friends recommending friends and we have to be able to spread that message. This, therefore, has to be absolutely right.’

Artwerx Digital provided several key creative elements for the new Malvern House interior – namely two large scale digital art murals and several smaller artworks.

The first of the murals is the extraordinary large format ‘world map’ installed from floor to ceiling in the entrance space and approximately 8m long, formed from thousands of tiny circular photographs of staff and students of the college. To achieve a sense of surprise, these photographs have been carefully organised into a large-scale composition, where each photograph forms an individual pixel-like element of the total world map image.

The other mural, located in the central breakout space is an entertaining graffiti artwork, which uses contemporary graffiti like text forms, to provide a decorative and informal back-drop to the space. Although the graphic itself functions more as an artwork, the text itself actually can be read as ‘Malvern House College’ and therefore functions simultaneously as discrete or even subliminal branding for Malvern House.

Located throughout the corridor walls within college, Artwerx has also provided six bespoke digital artworks which relate to different aspects of London life and culture, using photographic based images. Malvern

House English Language School has strategic growth plans over next few years which include attracting new students from all over the world. Indeed, Nick tells us that we have met Malvern House at a particularly exciting time, as the business has recently been taken over by leading Singaporean educational specialist AIC – which will open Malvern House up to major new emerging markets.

The opening of the King’s Cross centre ensures that the school will stay at the forefront of teaching English as a Foreign Language in the UK, and the new ownership is clearly full of eastern promise. It’s all a far cry from Mind Your Language. We love it ●

essential ingredients

Client:	• Malvern House
Design & Planning:	• John Robertson Architects 020 7633 5100
Main Contractor:	• The Interiors Group
M&E Consultant:	• MTT Consulting
Cost/CDM Consultant:	• Arcadia AYH
Furniture Supply:	• Radius 01322 665983
Furniture:	• Orangebox 020 7837 9922 Vitra 020 7608 6200 Casala 01256 468866
Graphics & Signage:	• Artwerx info@artwerx.co.uk
Lighting Consultant:	• Intermodern Lighting 01438 817459