

The Underbank

An inclusive educational and social hub designed to support disadvantaged students from across Stockport and Greater Manchester.

The Underbank aims to **improve the academic attainment and social outcomes of disadvantaged students** across Stockport and Greater Manchester. In a relaxed educational environment, students are guided by educators and engage with learning materials collaboratively, **extending learning time beyond the school day**. The space also acts as a social hub, **encouraging students to build meaningful connections** and a balance between education and recreation. In addition, The Underbank intends to **educate parents, teachers and public sector professionals** about the challenges faced by the disadvantaged youth, providing substantive and lasting resolutions.



The Problem

Disadvantaged students in the UK are on average **18.1 months behind the rest of the class** in academic achievement by the age of 16.

The gap in GCSE attainment between disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils has **stopped closing**. At the current rate, it will take **560 years to close this gap**.

(Education Policy Institute, 2019)

Challenges Outside the School Gates

A survey of over 7,000 teachers across England reported that 37% of pupils – equivalent to 3.3 million schoolchildren or nine pupils in an average class of 25 – faced **barriers to their education** (Action for Children, 2024).

Living in an Unstable Family Environment

Reported by 66% of teachers, this induces emotional distress, disrupts cognitive development and reduces academic engagement.

Behavioural and Emotional Issues

64% noted persistent disruptive behaviour, which leads to suspension or exclusion from school, reducing learning time in the classroom.

Mental Health Challenges

53% stated mental health issues, with the pressure of educational attainment contributing to increased feelings of anxiousness between students.

School Refusal or Poor Attendance

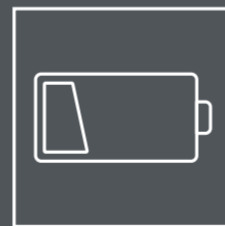
Reported by 45% of teachers. Students who were unable to participate in lessons found it increasingly difficult to catch up, perpetuating disengagement.

Poverty

Poverty itself was also a significant barrier to education identified by teachers working in the most deprived areas (66% compared to 23% in the least deprived areas).



The Effects of Child Poverty on Education



84% of students in poverty show signs of tiredness and fatigue at school.



79% of students are unable to concentrate during lessons.



77% are consistently absent from school, affecting attendance.



69% repeatedly disrupt lessons, reducing learning time.



65% of students in poverty are unable to complete homework outside school.



More than a third described as 'solitary' at school, with little or no friends (Newson, 2016).

(National Education Union Survey, 2024)

Bridging the Gap

How can disadvantaged students be supported in their academic and social lives?



Access to Resources

Access to learning materials, such as books and revision guides.

Academic Support

Additional academic tutoring, to extend learning time beyond the classroom.

Social Spaces

Relaxed lounge spaces to encourage meaningful friendships.

Training for Teachers and Public Sector Professionals

Skills and knowledge for adults to shape educational policy and teaching practices.

Support for Parents

Education, resources and solutions for parents to better support their child's educational outcomes.

Response to Site and Context

Stockport and Greater Manchester

37% of children and young people in Greater Manchester are living in poverty. That is 11 children out of a classroom of 30 (Greater Manchester Mayor's Charity, 2024).

Figures from 2022 tell us that 9.6% of children (aged 0-15 years) in Stockport live in absolute low-income households. This varies greatly across the borough (Stockport Council, 2025b).

13.8% of pupils in Greater Manchester were considered persistently disadvantaged, higher than the 10.9% national average (Education Policy Institute, 2019).

Children and young people with SEND support in Stockport:
25.8% - Social, emotional and mental health.
19.6% - moderate learning difficulty.
(Stockport Council, 2025a).

17% of the UK's population are estimated to be living in poverty, which equates to 49,000 people in Stockport (Stockport Council, 2025b).

Disadvantaged students in Stockport have reduced post-16 outcomes, with only 84% remaining in education or employment, compared to 95% nationally (UK Government, 2024).



Site Map

The site for this project is located on Great Underbank, on the lower street level of the historic Stockport Old Town.

A designated conservation area, with **historic architecture and a rich heritage**, the Underbanks provide a unique backdrop for this space.

With its position in the centre of Stockport, and close proximity to transport links, connecting the site to the rest of Greater Manchester, The Underbank is an **accessible destination for both students and adults**.

Key

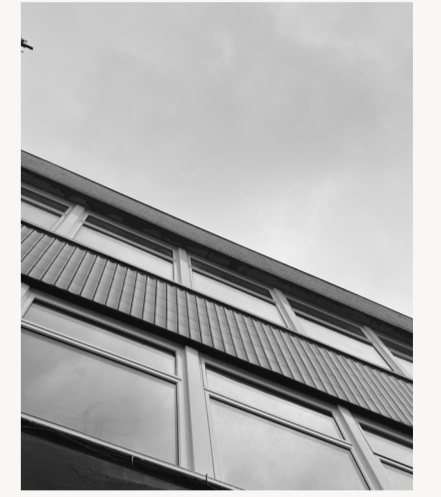
- Site Location
- Buildings
- Transport Links
- Walking Routes
- Roads
- Railways
- Inland Water

Photographic Study

Grounding the concept in its context required a **close response to the architectural forms and details of Stockport**.

A photographic study of the surrounding area of The Underbank revealed a **distinct contrast between curved and linear geometry**, with arched forms and rounded details.

The tactile materials and textures of Stockport's historic architecture, set against the glazed panels and mesh screens of modern developments, established a **layered and compelling visual language** across the site.



The Site

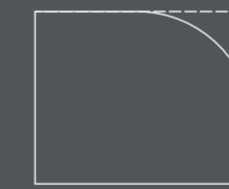
A **distinctive building with a prominent location**, 51 Great Underbank sits in the centre of the historic Stockport Old Town.

With the town centre occupying two different levels, the building backs onto the ground of High Bank Side. This position provides an **additional entrance point** into the building, from the upper street level at the rear.

Currently part of a £7m regeneration of the Underbanks area, the refurbished 1960s commercial building has a **unique architectural character**.



Concept Principles



Curved Detailing

Rounded edges to thresholds, joinery, wall finishes, furniture elements and details.



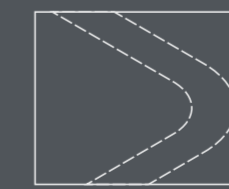
Repeating Linear Patterns

Through materials and finishes, room dividers, glazing manifestation and acoustic baffles.



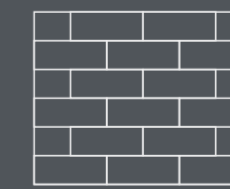
Arched Features

Vaulted details over elements of the design, linking the project back to its Stockport context.



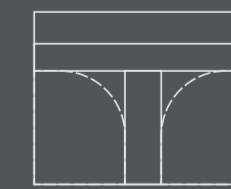
Zoning with Floor Finishes

Dividing spaces through different flooring, creating a 'paving' around specific areas.



Stockport Colours and Textures

Utilising a colour and materials palette with visual links to Stockport's architecture.



Exposed Structural Supports

Emphasising the building's structural and architectural components as integral design features.

Design Strategy



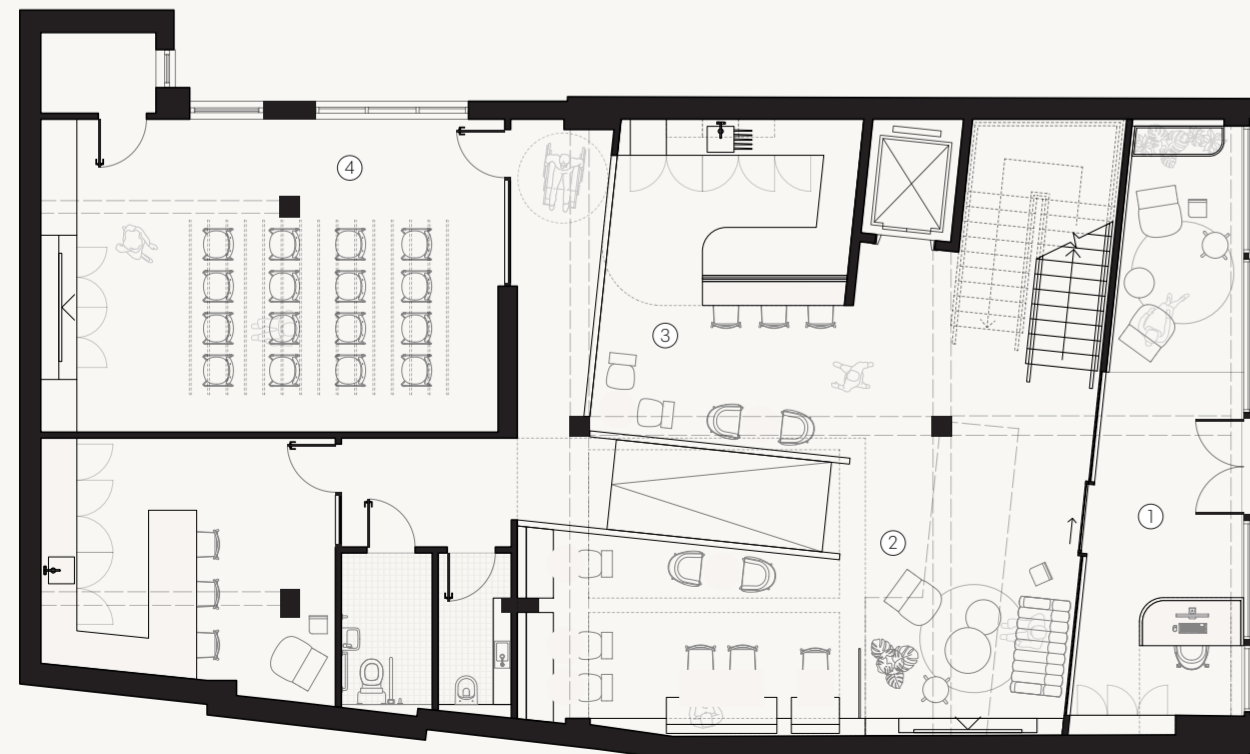
Second Floor Plan

- 10. The Junction - Reading Corner and Activity Zone
- 11. The Commons - Student Lounge
- 12. The Square - Outdoor Lounge and Sensory Garden



First Floor Plan

- 5. The Exchange - Meeting and 1-1 Support Room
- 6. The Viaduct - Student Collaborative Study
- 7. The Underpass - Independent Focus Rooms
- 8. The Archive - Student Quiet Study and Library
- 9. The Bypass - Terrace Garden



Ground Floor Plan

- 1. The Façade - Reception and Arrival Lobby
- 2. The Interchange - Ground Floor Lounge
- 3. The Market - Refreshment Counter
- 4. The Hall - Lecture Room

Accessibility in Materials



- Acoustic Felt**
Controls sound levels in quiet spaces, creating comfortable environments for individuals with hearing, cognitive or sensory processing needs.
- Carpet Tiles**
Enhances accessibility by providing firm, slip-resistant surfaces that are easier for mobility aids to navigate than thick, loose broadloom carpets.
- Upholstery Fabrics**
Soft fabrics are utilised to design comfortable seating options, providing crucial support for individuals with mobility, sensory, or pain-related disabilities.
- Contrasting Floor Finishes**
The use of different carpet tile and LVT floor finishes creates contrasting colours and textures that act as visual guides through the spaces and help define specific areas.
- LVT Flooring**
Provides a smooth, continuous surface without the deep grout lines associated with traditional tiles, preventing wheelchairs or mobility aids from catching.

Accessible Circulation

Where possible, circulation routes of 1200mm have been maintained. Although a structural column restricts wheelchair access to the ground floor lecture room, this has been abated by the integration of a 1500mm turning circle nearby.

Signage and Wayfinding

Coherent signage and wayfinding throughout The Underbank, with distinctive symbols and clear arrows, provides a comprehensible visual guide, directing users around the space.

Accessibility in Section

Ground Floor Entrance
Entrance relocated to a position with level grade, removing the need for the existing steep access ramp.

Vertical Circulation

While student access into the building by way of the external rear staircase introduces concerns for wheelchair users or individuals with limited mobility, the installation of a lift across all levels provides vertical circulation and efficient access.

Emergency Routes

The construction of a new fire exit staircase from the first floor ensures that each level of the building has an appropriate means of escape.



User Experience and Lived Realities

The Students

This project focuses on secondary school students as the principal users of the building, with the aim of **improving educational and social outcomes**.

The Deprived



Disadvantaged students from low-income households, often lacking access to the resources needed for a good education.

- Excluded
- Disappointed
- Wishful

The Unsettled



Children facing instability at home, from parental divorce to eviction and frequent moves, who lack a supportive home environment.

- Unstable
- Confused
- Forgotten

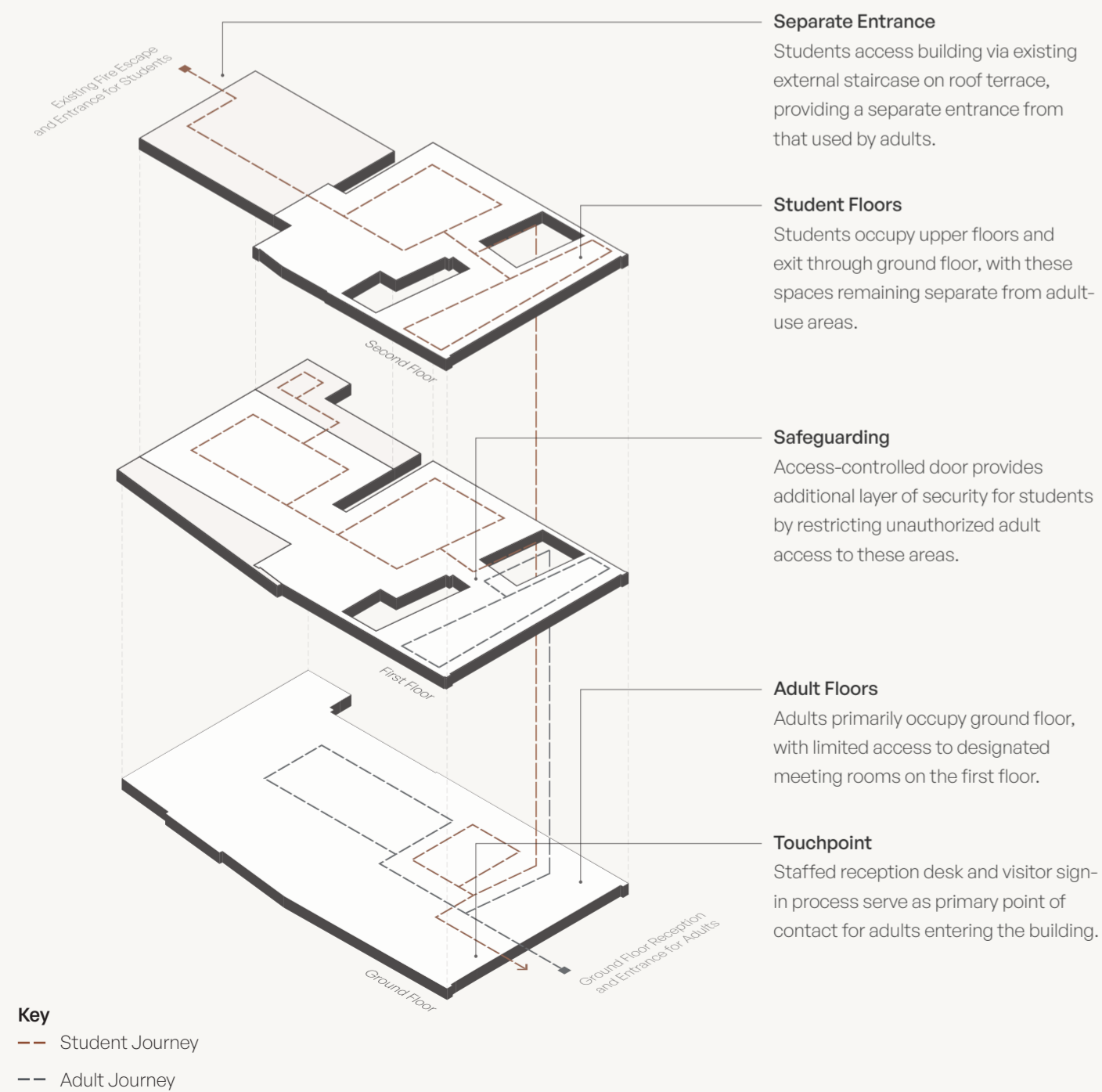
The Unsupported



Students with additional needs, such as mental health challenges or learning disabilities, who may need further support in their education.

- Disregarded
- Vulnerable
- Underserved

Access Points and Circulation



The Viaduct - *Student Collaborative Study*
Collaborative learning workspace and study area, with arched booths. Space for students to engage with educational materials in groups, further **embedding social connections and academic participation**.



The Commons - *Student Lounge*
Relaxing lounge space for students, with seating, books, board games and pool table. Area for students to **build meaningful friendships**, which acts as a **'halfway point' between the classroom and the home**.



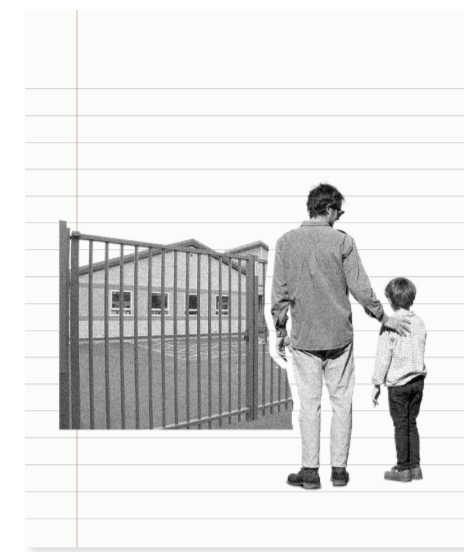
The Square - *Outdoor Lounge and Sensory Garden*
Acts as a **separate entrance** into the building for students, providing **more welcoming and efficient drop-off experience**. Features outdoor lounge space and sensory garden, **with links to nature** and a range of seating spaces that **facilitate moments of relief for students**.

User Experience and Lived Realities

The Adults

As secondary users of the space, the project intends to **educate adults** about the challenges facing disadvantaged students.

The Parent



The Educator



The Uneducated



The parents, guardians and supporters of these disadvantaged students, sometimes lacking the knowledge for the solution.

- Distracted
- Frightened
- Helpless

Teachers and school staff that work with disadvantaged children, who may not fully understand some of the issues they face.

- Concerned
- Discouraged
- Confused

Politicians, and those with the ability to bring change, often lacking the experience and consideration for these students.

- Unaware
- Misguided
- Uninformed

Access During the School Day



Before 9am:

Students access the building before the start of the school day, and guided by teaching staff, are introduced to learning materials in a supportive and collaborative environment. Acting as a 'halfway point' between the classroom and the home, the space extends learning beyond the school day.

School Hours:

During the school day, the building is used as a teaching space for parents, teachers and public sector professionals, providing education about the challenges faced by disadvantaged students.

After 3pm:

At the end of the school day, the space is used by students to deepen understanding and extend learning time. The building also acts as a social hub, establishing a balance between study and socialisation spaces, with the intention of providing student recreation and building meaningful connections.

Enscape Flythrough

This flythrough illustrates the two user journeys through the space, providing an overview of the building's access points, circulation routes, design features and overall spatial experience.

QR Code and Link to full video.



The Hall - Lecture Room

A formal educational space that supports adult learning and discussion around the factors that contribute to educational disadvantage, **promoting understanding and informed engagement.**



The Exchange - Meeting and 1-1 Support Room

Informal workshop and support space designed for adults to **explore, understand and discuss the barriers to education** experienced by disadvantaged students.



The Interchange - Ground Floor Lounge

A welcoming and flexible socialisation space with a refreshment counter and relaxed seating, providing opportunities for parents, teachers and public sector professionals to **connect and build supportive relationships that foster understanding and compassion.**