# Local youth programmes turn SDG goals into neighbourhood change



August 12 has been marked by the United Nations as International Youth Day since 1998; this year's observance, themed "Local Youth Actions for the SDGs and Beyond", places the spotlight on young people translating global Sustainable Development Goals into community‑level practice. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the 2025 commemoration includes an official programme in Nairobi, in partnership with UN‑Habitat, featuring interactive dialogues, a youth innovation showcase and a suite of knowledge products intended to amplify local youth-led solutions. The Day's history, the agency notes, stretches back to the 1998 Lisbon conference and the UN General Assembly's endorsement the following year. (References: UN DESA; ArchDaily summary.)

Education and place‑based learning are central to that localisation agenda: programmes that teach children and emerging professionals to read, question and remake their surroundings help turn policy priorities into everyday civic practice. The three initiatives highlighted here — a London‑based learning agency, a Romanian architecture education movement and a New York University fellowship — illustrate different entry points for young people to engage with the built environment, from early years play to mid‑career leadership training. (References: ArchDaily; UN DESA.)

In London, Urban Learners — a female‑founded not‑for‑profit established in 2018 — designs bespoke art, architecture and heritage learning for children and young people from under‑represented backgrounds. The organisation frames participatory, experiential learning as a route into creative careers and civic agency: its programmes range from guided trails that take pupils into the heart of public art projects to practical workshops such as the Recycled Room, where students design with repurposed materials to foster environmental awareness and design skills. Urban Learners is also the instigator of the Museum of Brutalist Architecture (MoBA), a digital and physical project developed with local schools and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund that combines exhibitions, oral histories and learning resources to connect architectural heritage with community identity. The organisation says its work seeks to broaden access to cultural and heritage opportunities while training volunteers and teachers to replicate those learning encounters. (References: ArchDaily; Urban Learners; MoBA.)

De‑a Arhitectura in Romania approaches the same objective from an earlier stage in the schooling journey. Founded in 2011 and led predominantly by women professionals, the initiative has built a volunteer network of architects and teachers to bring playful, experiential built‑environment education into schools, starting with children as young as three. According to the association, its programmes promote spatial awareness, critical thinking and civic responsibility through school‑based workshops, participatory design projects and teacher training. De‑a Arhitectura's recent conference, TALKS 2025 — convened at the Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism in June — gathered educators, architects and cultural professionals to discuss how architecture education can support sustainable development and civic engagement, drawing on guidance from UNESCO and the international Built Environment Education Charter. (References: ArchDaily; De‑a Arhitectura TALKS 2025.)

Across the Atlantic, New York University's Schack Institute of Real Estate has launched the Building Better Cities Collaborative, which the university describes on its programme page as "a platform to develop urban leadership, unlock strategic value, and drive civic change." The two‑semester fellowship targets mid‑career built‑environment professionals and combines collaborative research, studio sessions, masterclasses and regular engagement with public officials, investors and subject specialists. NYU's materials state fellows will commit roughly one day a week to the hybrid programme; organisations may also participate via a partner primer. Expressions of interest opened in July 2025 — with an application window noted on the institute's site — and the university plans a full programme launch in spring 2026. The initiative is positioned as a way to equip leaders to confront climate volatility, housing shortfalls, social inequity and fiscal pressures through systems thinking and urban foresight. (References: ArchDaily; NYU Schack Institute.)

These three programmes sit beside a wider shift in architectural and urban education that spans continents and career stages. Recent sector activity includes Lesley Lokko's Nomadic African Studio, a new roaming workshop model for architecture across Africa, and the establishment of the Zaha Hadid Scholars Programme at the American University of Beirut, announced by the Zaha Hadid Foundation as a fully funded award for undergraduate architecture students beginning in September 2025. ArchDaily has also covered debates among educators — from Sir Peter Cook's reflections on the state of architectural instruction to Harvard GSD's recognition of Mauro Marinelli with the 2025 Wheelwright Prize — underscoring a moment of experimentation in how the profession nurtures research, pedagogy and global practice. (References: ArchDaily; Zaha Hadid Foundation.)

None of these initiatives promises overnight solutions, yet together they underline a pragmatic truth of the SDG localisation agenda: durable urban change depends on skills and relationships cultivated at the neighbourhood scale. By equipping children to read and re‑imagine their streets, by training teachers and volunteers to use buildings as learning tools, and by preparing mid‑career leaders to think across systems, the programmes highlighted here convert lofty targets into everyday capabilities. As the UN's International Youth Day reminds us, youth are not merely beneficiaries of policy but active agents of urban transformation — and investment in place‑based education is one of the most direct ways to turn that agency into measurable progress. (References: UN DESA; ArchDaily.)

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change), [[2]](https://social.desa.un.org/issues/youth/events/iyd2025)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change), [[2]](https://social.desa.un.org/issues/youth/events/iyd2025)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change), [[3]](https://www.urbanlearners.org/album/who-we-are/), [[4]](https://www.urbanlearners.org/museum-of-brutalist-architecture-moba/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change), [[5]](https://www.de-a-arhitectura.ro/talks-2025/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change), [[6]](https://www.sps.nyu.edu/about/academic-divisions-and-departments/schack-institute-of-real-estate/building-better-cities-collaborative.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change), [[7]](https://www.zhfoundation.com/news/zhf-and-american-university-of-beirut-announce-the-zaha-hadid-scholars-program/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](https://social.desa.un.org/issues/youth/events/iyd2025), [[1]](https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.archdaily.com/1033012/international-youth-day-three-educational-initiatives-for-community-led-urban-change> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/youth/events/iyd2025> - United Nations DESA's International Youth Day 2025 page outlines the observance held annually on 12 August to spotlight youth issues and celebrate young people's contributions. The 2025 theme, 'Local Youth Actions for the SDGs and Beyond', emphasises youth‑led localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals and promotes community‑driven implementation. The page describes the official commemoration in Nairobi in collaboration with UN‑Habitat, planned activities such as interactive dialogues and a youth innovation showcase, and accompanying knowledge products including infographics and storytelling. It explains the Day's history, referencing the 1998 Lisbon conference and the General Assembly endorsement in 1999, and provides resources for participation.
3. <https://www.urbanlearners.org/album/who-we-are/> - Urban Learners is a female‑founded not‑for‑profit education and design agency established in 2018 that creates bespoke art, architecture and design learning programmes for children and young people. The site describes their mission to improve access to creative opportunities for those from non‑traditional backgrounds, emphasising participatory and experiential learning. It lists projects including Sculpture in the City, Camden Highline education, and the Museum of Brutalist Architecture (MoBA), and notes partnerships with cultural institutions, schools and industry partners. The organisation provides workshops, outreach, volunteer training and research, and promotes architecture education as a pathway to diverse creative careers and civic engagement worldwide.
4. <https://www.urbanlearners.org/museum-of-brutalist-architecture-moba/> - The Museum of Brutalist Architecture (MoBA) website explains a digital and physical initiative founded by Urban Learners in partnership with Acland Burghley School and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. MoBA seeks to raise awareness of Brutalist buildings, their social and cultural contexts, and the communities that inhabit them. The site outlines educational resources, exhibitions, and events aimed at engaging young people and local residents, offering a digital collection, learning materials, and opportunities to contribute personal stories. It frames MoBA as an inclusive heritage project that connects architectural appreciation with community identity, activism and contemporary cultural practices and education.
5. <https://www.de-a-arhitectura.ro/talks-2025/> - De‑a Arhitectura's 'TALKS 2025' page announces the fourth edition of its conference, 'The Value of Architecture in Education', held on 8 June 2025 at the 'Ion Mincu' University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest. The event convenes educators, architects and cultural professionals to discuss how built environment education supports sustainable development education and civic engagement. The programme details panels, workshops, and a gala celebration, referencing guidance from UNESCO and the UIA's Built Environment Education Charter. The site also describes the association's origins from 2011, its volunteer network, and ongoing school‑based programmes that promote spatial awareness and participatory learning for children.
6. <https://www.sps.nyu.edu/about/academic-divisions-and-departments/schack-institute-of-real-estate/building-better-cities-collaborative.html> - New York University's Schack Institute of Real Estate webpage outlines the Building Better Cities Collaborative (BBCC), a two‑semester leadership fellowship for mid‑career professionals in the built environment. The programme develops interdisciplinary urban leaders through a hybrid curriculum of collaborative research, masterclasses and studio sessions, plus engagement with public officials, investors and field experts. The page explains fellows commit one day per week to the intensive course and that organisations can participate through a partner primer. It provides an expression of interest form with a July 31 deadline and notes links to NYU’s Urban Lab and institutional resources supporting practice and policy.
7. <https://www.zhfoundation.com/news/zhf-and-american-university-of-beirut-announce-the-zaha-hadid-scholars-program/> - The Zaha Hadid Foundation's announcement describes the establishment of the Zaha Hadid Scholars Program in partnership with the American University of Beirut (AUB). Beginning September 2025, the initiative will fully fund and support two undergraduate architecture students annually for five years, selected on the basis of merit and need, across three academic years. The page highlights Hadid’s connection to AUB, notes the Issam Fares Institute she designed, and quotes university leaders expressing pride in the collaboration. The Foundation frames the programme as a continuation of Hadid’s educational legacy and indicates further institutional partnerships and fuller details will follow soon online.