

Designing with and for Children

Unicorn Theatre: Monday 23 January 2006

Conference Report



'We were delighted to be asked to host this event. I thought it was great; full of ideas, alternatives, inspiration, and variety'

Tony Graham, Artistic Director, Unicorn Children's Theatre.

'My thoughts on the day is that it was well organised, very informative and a great event for architects to have attended. Hopefully, this helps bring the involvement of young people in design a step forward. I enjoyed myself learnt a lot from this experience.'

Emrys Green. Young delegate attending with a group from the National Children's Bureau.

Action for Children's Arts took the theme of 'Designing with and for Children' for the first of its 2006 Inspiration Days (events which bring together artists and other professionals working with children to focus on particular aspects of current interest). The design theme was chosen to celebrate the opening of the new Unicorn Children's Theatre in Southwark - the UK's first purpose built children's cultural centre. The day brought together a wide range of organisations and individuals involved in creating spaces for children and in working with children to encourage them to explore their surroundings, providing the 130 delegates, guests and speakers with a mix of presentations, workshops, tours, visits and discussions.

The Conference was opened by **Tony Graham**, the Unicorn's Artistic Director who had overseen the whole process of creating the new building, including a three year programme of consultation with local school groups. He was followed by **John Sorrell**, keynote speaker and instigator of the 'Joined up Design for Schools' project; **Jules Mason**, Head of Citizenship and Development, British Youth Council; and **Caroline Gallogly**, facilitator for PLAY-TRAIN, Birmingham. The afternoon session was led by **Martin Drury**, Founder of The Ark in Dublin; and **Sally Goldsworthy**, Director of the Discover Centre in Stratford, East London. Delegates were then given the choice of two out of six workshop/breakout sessions focussing on the work of **The Building Exploratory** in Hackney; **Junior Open House**; **The South Bank Centre**; **School-works**; **Innovision Media**; and **Sense of Place**. The closing session was presented by a group of children from **Children's Express**, interviewing the architects who had designed their school buildings.

Session 1: Involving children and young people

The first three presentations formed a single unit focussing on the right of children to be consulted and on the benefits which they and the adults involved could gain from the process.

John Sorrell

John Sorrell presented '**Joined Up Design for schools**', a programme of activities which he had set up and that had now been running for several years. One of the outcomes of the project was the realization of how infrequently we seek children's views when making decisions which directly affect them, and how much they have to offer when they are treated with respect by adult decision-makers.

Each individual project within the programme starts with 'The Conversation'. It proceeds to workshops to discover what the children want to change about their school site or building and culminates in their presenting a client brief which is then discussed with their architect/designer. These briefs can be very imaginative involving pictures, exhibitions and, in some cases, role play and performance. The architect/designer also has to present their credentials to the client group - it is very much a 2-way conversation.

The children do NOT design anything. They are involved in exactly the same way as any other client, going on visits to restaurants, outdoor spaces, galleries, theatres etc to open their eyes to possibilities and choices. The vital thing about the whole process is that children develop skills that help them think and act creatively, gain in self-confidence and interact with the wider world.

Jules Mason

Jules Mason is Head of Citizenship and Development at **The British Youth Council**, an independent charity run for young people by young people up to the age of 25.

He stressed the importance of the journey that young people can make once they become involved in a well-run project. Some of the key points he made are as follows:

- It's only by designing with children and young people that you will end up with a product that meets their needs
- The government is now coming on board with this idea, and trying to find ways to meet the five government objectives in 'Every Child Matters'.
- Accountability is becoming increasingly important when a building is publicly financed
- The process of consultation gives young people skills they may not otherwise get.
- 'Ticking the box' is no longer sufficient in terms of consultation; you need to clarify your objectives and realize that it takes time to get young people on board.
- There is a feeling that both children and young people are 'consulted to death' in a one-off sense. It's no good just asking them for opinions and then disappearing. They are interested in outcomes.

Jules recommended delegates to look up the online gateway **Participation Works**. The gateway was set up to improve the way practitioners, organisations, policy makers and young people access and share information about involving children and young people in decision making. It has been developed by a partnership of NGOs (The Children's and Young people's Participation Partnership:

CHYPP) working together to develop a more strategic and long term approach to participation in the belief that improving the influence children and young people have on public decisions requires a new collective and collaborative approach between NGOs, Governments, and children and young people. (web site contacts are listed at the end of this report).

Caroline Gollogly

PLAYTRAIN is a Birmingham-based organisation which since 1981 has provided high-quality training and consultancy for organisations working with children and young people aged 0-18. It carries out research and development projects, bringing fresh ideas to bear on key issues in work with children and young people.

Caroline Gollogly works as a facilitator for PLAYTRAIN. She took the conference through a Case Study based on a consultation process that PLAYTRAIN carried out with Manchester City Centre Art Gallery, which began a major renovation in 2000. This project was involved a group of 12 children aged 6-12, some of whom were partially sighted (recruited via the RNIB). Very few had even been inside an art gallery..

The group were 'trained' to be consultants - a process which involved them thinking about context, fact-finding, and visiting before putting together a list of what they liked/didn't like. Their suggestions covered basic human needs establishing that children want to talk and touch - both things which are often prohibited in galleries.

She explained that the PLAYTRAIN approach did not end with consultation but aimed to create a pathway of participation, with young people learning skills which would help them in the future and many asking to be involved in other projects.

SESSION 2: FOCUS ON THE UNICORN

The second session of the morning gave delegates the opportunity to find out more about the Unicorn Theatre and the consultation work which it had carried out. They were offered a choice of two out of three options: a **tour of the building** (some groups were led by Keith Williams, partner of Keith Williams Architects, who designed the new theatre); a workshop led by the Unicorn Education team; and a guided visit to '**In the Box**' an installation created by local children to explore their lives, expectations and dreams.

One of the young delegates, Emrys Green, who attended the Conference on behalf of the National Children's Bureau, chose to go on the theatre tour and then to visit In the Box. Emrys wrote a report in which he describes this part of the day as follows:

'Then there were two breakout sessions, each for 40 minutes. I firstly attended the 'In the Box' presentation. This was living proof of the creativity of children and how they have the ability to design and create meaningful designs. After this I joined a tour of the Unicorn Theatre, which proved very enlightening and showed some amazing designs for ease of accessibility, lighting and

architectural structure. To do this there are features such as an open staircase, Front of House and Back of House lifts. In addition there were long glass windows on the stairs and an open air design with plenty of glass and use of crevices to create the space.'

The third choice for delegates was **'The Floors should be made of Chocolate'** led by Alison Barry, the Unicorn's Education Officer, starting with a presentation of the three year project which the Unicorn ran with selected Southwark schools during the development and construction of the new theatre.

Alison began by explaining that they had always been aware that such a project would be a challenging experience but the Unicorn was a theatre for children and everyone involved wanted to be inspired by the children and have a dialogue with them. The project involved problem solving and sharing expertise with children, artists, educators, school teachers and heads. It was about art (showing that a theatre is something more than bricks and mortar) and was developed through the art - writing, poetry, artwork, drama, dance and film. The acoustics were tested with sessions with the architect, with children making the music and sounds which interested them. The aim was to be honest, to build the trust, to get it right.

At the start of the process many of the children did not even know what a theatre was. Basic terms needed to be explained. Their interest grew as the project progressed and the sense of ownership which had evolved began to show through when the children who has taken part in the consultancy set up the Youth Theatre and now 'hang out' at the theatre. The general consensus was "we got a part in everything".

SESSION 3: CREATIVE SPACES

Martin Drury - Founder, The Ark in Dublin,

One of the most inspiring sessions of the day was given by Martin Drury who described The Ark, a pioneering children's cultural centre which was first conceived in 1992 and opened in Dublin in 1995. It embraces all art forms, involving some 22,000 children and 5,000 adults every year in a series of 8 programmes structured around specific themes.

The building is partly converted from a former Presbyterian Meeting House and partly purpose- built. Intriguingly, the new structure is designed with large doors to the back of the stage which can open up during the summer months to enable the Ark to play to a large external audience.

Martin guided the Ark's development and ran it for the first five years. The principles he established are set out below. They encapsulate the key messages of the Conference as a whole.

1. The Child as Citizen
 - Children are citizens of the here and now - not the audiences or artists of the future.

2. Making Meaning
 - Through the arts children 'make' themselves and improve their selfhood
 - Richer arts experiences lead to richer childhoods and to richer citizenship

3. Presentness
 - Children are citizens of the here and now - not the audiences or artists of the future - being 8 is not about being a quarter of 32 or a fifth of 40 - being 8 is about absorbing the images of an 8 year old and it lasts just 365 days.' We are the music while the music lasts'
4. Encounters
 - The Ark is a place for children to encounter the arts - each encounter enriches both the artist and the child
5. Continuum of engagement
 - From looking and listening through interaction and on to participation.
6. The *Work* of Art
 - Emphasis is placed on revealing, demonstrating and engaging in the practical process of making art, through references and sources; trial and error; materials and tools; repeating the process
7. The Arts Connected
 - Connections are made with history; science; the environment; religion; sport etc. through interdisciplinary programmes. e.g. by focusing on 'Flight' or on 'Colour'. The Arts do not have a monopoly on creativity but are just one form of it
8. Enriching the Curriculum
 - The curriculum is a broader concept than a syllabus. Seconded teachers work on the staff of the Ark. The Centre enriches the work of teachers, which then enriches the education of children
9. Focusing on the New
 - Form and content are expanded and developed. Risks are taken in exploring the darker end of children's dreams
10. The Excellent
 - In programming works appropriate to children's arts, not simply reflecting the adult paradigm; balance, between disciplines, ages, and increasingly diverse cultures; in the quality of the personnel employed; as a public service.

Sally Goldsworthy , Director of Discover

Discover is a creative Centre in Stratford, East London, for children aged 0 - 8 years (though with a few activities extending the age range to 11). Schools and parents work in partnership with Discover to stimulate children to use their imagination and to explore the world around them through creative play and through stories.

The Centre was designed for and with children on the basis that all children:

- are capable of expressing a view - however young
- have the right to express their view freely
- have the right to have their views taken seriously

The process began by consultation with children in play schemes; working with 'Save the Children' in schools; mounting Creative exhibitions workshops; a 3 year outreach programme; and a series of Preview days with families and schools

As the design work developed a Children's Forum was set up drawing in children from the age of 3 upwards with the aim of 'teaching the adults to think like children'. The children worked with the Discover team to develop concepts and themes; with activities to develop the design and feel of the building; and with the exhibit designers Bremner and Orr to develop and create the exhibits. They used a wide range of techniques including model making; film and photography; visual arts; drama; interviews (including interviewing other children); sound recording; stories and using space to imagine something new.

Discover is currently working with Stratford City Partnership to enable local children to express their views and ideas about the changes happening in the area - a role which will increase as the 73 hectare Olympics site is developed. Experience to date demonstrates that their participation not only gives them a sense of 'ownership of change' but also helps strengthen the communities they live in.

SESSION 4: ENCOURAGING EXPLORATION

Delegates then split into groups to take part in various workshop sessions - each designed to illustrate how different organisations were working with artists, architects and designers to develop the principles and practices outlined during the earlier sessions.

The Building Exploratory

Based in Hackney, the Building Exploratory is an interactive exhibition exploring buildings and the built environment. Dr Nicole Crockett, the Director, explained that this the first education resource centre in the UK to focus on the built environment. It is open to adults and children, individual visitors and groups taking part in activities and workshops pro.

The Building Exploratory is unique in that many of the exhibits are made through arts projects with local people. Each year 70% of Hackney Schools take part in the education and arts programmes, and thousands of local residents join the workshops and public tours. Its focus is on Hackney - with exhibits showing how the area has changed over the centuries from farmland to the current high density inner city. The exhibition and related activities encourage visitors to explore their surroundings, providing them with a much need 'language' to help them become involved in what is happening in the area. (Hackney is also one of the key Boroughs for the Olympics development.)

Open House Learning:

Open House Learning is a charity based in London and established over 14 years ago, opening over 600 buildings where the public do not usually have access to create a festival celebrating the architecture of the city. Catherine Smith, who led this session, heads the education team for Junior Open House, a programme aimed at Primary aged children where buildings are used as learning tools and 'OPEN Up' its equivalent at secondary level. These programmes reach out to over 10, 000 learners each year. A DVD of a project undertaken with the Almeida Theatre in 2005 illustrated the approach.

Open House seeks to make the awareness of architecture a discovery for adults and children. It seeks to peel away the layers of each building by questioning what is about; why it is built the way it is; whether you enjoy being there; and what like or dislike about it.

During the discussion which followed the points raised included:

- experience showed that often the views of children are only sought after the project was well underway.
- children to be given a good grasp of the language of building. It is not an instinctive skill within our society.
- children tend to see buildings as 'mountains' - just part of the landscape - not part of them
- where other arts forms were used to introduce children to architecture the art tended to become the focus rather than the building.

Innovision Media

These same themes ran through the presentation given by Simon Elliott, an actor by training who now runs the education based charity Innovision Media. He was introduced by Victoria Thornton (founder and Director of Open House) who had worked with Innovision Media and Creative Partnerships South on a project with Southwark schools. The project had looked at Potters Fields, an empty site between Tower Bridge and the GLA headquarters and explored what might be built on it. The video of the project (shown as a background to the discussion) was entitled 'Architecture of the Emotions' as it explored how children (and people in general) respond to their surroundings - often in ways they cannot articulate.

Innovision Media aims to find ways of enabling people, particularly children and young people, to express their ideas about the sort of places they want to live in and the facilities they need: bringing together a range of disciplines and merging art with technology, education with hands-on experience, and the techniques of drama and theatre with day-to-day communication.

A Sense of Place

The session presented by musician and sound artist, Robert Jarvis, demonstrated how children could explore the places they lived in through listening, recording, and creating pictures and presentations using the sounds they hear around them. He showed a DVD made during the project

HEARTS (Higher Education, Arts and Schools) undertaken with trainee teachers from the University of Canterbury and year 7 children from schools in Kent and explained how the sounds which the children had experienced were co-ordinated into various arts works - including a sound picture and a musical production.

The South Bank Centre

Shân MacLennan, Education Officer for the South Bank Centre, opened this session by showing a short video animation made by children from Stockwell Primary School which illustrated their view on how the Festival Hall was built.

She explained that the Royal Festival Hall is currently being redeveloped and one area is to be devoted entirely to children. Thousands of children visit the RFH every year. The idea of the new space is that secondary school children can come in and run the area for a day; making films; developing their ideas in dance; producing drama and music. Children from local school and from farther a field will be involved in the design of the space deciding on such aspects as the colour scheme, lighting, seating, and flooring. For example, one school has already designed a computer game based on the designing of this space and another group is working with the Takash Quartet, sampling sounds, so that they get the acoustics right.

It is currently just a shell, with power and plumbing but the aim is to transform it into a fantastic place for children - designed with and for them.

School-Works

Apart from their own homes, children spend most of their time in schools. Hugh Dames, who led this session, is Projects Manager for 'Schoolworks', a charity dedicated to improving the design of school buildings.

As with previous speakers, Hugh stressed the importance of children participating in the design of the buildings they use and detailed the positive outcomes of this process:

- Ownership
- Fitness for purpose
- Cultural Change
- Management
- Better Education
- Good business sense

Specific areas which could form the focus for discussion included Learning spaces; ICT provision; Well being at school; and Social Spaces. One suggestion he made to start off the process was for a school to designate a small area as a 'wish wall'.

SESSION 5: DESIGN FORUM

School buildings were also the theme for the final session. After a short break for tea, cakes and chat, the Conference re-assembled in the theatre for the climax of the day - a Design Forum co-ordinated and presented by a group of young journalists (a group of children drawn from two secondary schools in Hackney).

During the six weeks prior to the Conference, Cany Ash and Claire Richards (**Ash Sakula Architects**), with the media based organisation '**Children's Express**', ran a series of workshops in two schools: the newly opened Mossbourne Community Academy (designed by Richard Rogers Partnership) and the 1970's award-winning school Stoke Newington School (designed originally by Stillman and Eastwick-Field with a new media block added recently by Shephard Epstein and Partners.) During the workshop sessions, the children explored the schools, videoed areas which particularly interested them, and interviewed school colleagues to get their opinions.

The young journalists were joined on the platform by architects from Ash Sakula and from the three practices involved in designing their schools so that they could be interviewed about the decisions they took.

The issues raised encapsulated the conference discussion, 'why involve young people in design?' The answers included

- they are the reason it is being built,
- it provides an interactive building,
- young people have a sense of pride and ownership of the space
- young people have energy, are inspiring creative and free thinking.

All the architects were enthusiastic about the process of children and young people participating, though acknowledged that this is not yet common practice - even the DfES publication 'Excellence in Education - Making of Good Schools' does not suggest a place for the consumer voice. More work is needed to train architects to work in participatory practice, and for building commissioners and whole site building teams to allow time and resources for this way of working.

The school building environment is a vital part of a child's experience of their education. Whether they are bullied or feel safe, whether they enjoy and achieve or feel excluded; whether they feel encouraged to play out of doors and eat good food in a friendly space. All this starts with the client brief and the architect's vision.

The Conference ended where we need to begin - listening to children and young people about the things that affect their lives; be it the colours of toilets, the width of corridors or the need for private safe spaces.

Contacts and web pages

Ash Sakula Architects - www.ashsak.com
The Ark, Dublin - www.ark.ie
British Youth Council - www.byc.org.uk

Children's Express - www.childrens-express.org
Carnegie Young People Initiative - www.carnegie-youth.org.uk
Children's Rights Alliance for England - www.crae.org.uk
Discover - www.discover.org.uk
Innovision Media - www.innovisionmedia.co.uk
Keith Williams - www.keithwilliamsarchitects.com
National Children's Bureau - www.ncb.org.uk
National Youth Agency - www.nya.org.uk
Open House/Junior Open House - www.londonopenhouse.org
Participationworks - participationworks.org.uk
PLAYTRAIN - www.playtrain.org.uk
Robert Jarvis - www.robertjarvis.co.uk
School-works - www.schoolworks.co.uk
Sorrell Foundation (Joined up Design programmes) - www.sorrellfoundation.com
South Bank Centre - www.southbankcentre.org.uk
Save the Children - England - www.savethechildren.org.uk
Unicorn Children's Theatre - www.unicorntheatre.com

Publications Recommended by Sally Goldsworthy (Discover)

A Journey of Discovery - Judy Miller - Save the Children Fund
What would you do with this space? - CABE Space
Can you hear me? Gerison Lansdown - Bernard van Leer Foundation
Spaces to Play - Alison Clarke & Peter Moss - National Children's Bureau.