

Designing with Children

Columbia Primary School

Columbia Primary School, with a capacity of 415 children, is in the London borough of Tower Hamlets. The school, on Columbia Road, is a community primary school, with integrated nursery and provision for boys and girls aged from 3 up to 11 years. Children come from diverse ethnic communities and the school has a very strong ethos of creativity. Erect Architecture is a practice located between Hackney and Bethnal Green, London. Oliver (Olly) Woodward, head teacher at Columbia Primary School, commissioned Erect Architecture to re-design areas of the school playground. Barbara Kaucky, founder director of Erect Architecture Ltd, an RIBA chartered practice, has a long professional experience in architecture, landscaping, play and public arts projects. The work of Erect Architecture spans realms from play and community to heritage, residential, culture and public space. Amongst other work, Barbara is known for her design of The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park Tumbling Lodge and Playground in London. Barbara has for some time engaged both adults and children in spatial design, play and exploration.

Motivation

Columbia Primary School had allotted funds (school-raised and external funding) for school grounds development. Erect Architecture was a practice recommended to the school and governors and it won the contract. Erect Architecture likes to use children's engagement in design for school and public spaces and Columbia Primary School's ethos of creative activity meant that the school very much welcomed children's involvement. The School Council children were those the head teacher selected to be directly involved in the design; they then had a remit to report back to the wider school to tell pupils of their participation in the design process and the ideas that came from Erect Architecture.

Children's involvement

This project is one of the four case studies that informed the 3-year Leverhulme-funded

What

Playground area

Where

Tower Hamlets, London, United Kingdom

Age

6-10

Group Size

13 primary school students

Project Stage

Concept, In Use

Children's Roles

Creative Inspirers

Timescale

September 2014 (2-hour workshop)

Partners

Barbara Kaucky (Architect, founder director of Erect Architecture)

Sarah Clayton (Junior Architect, Erect Architecture, facilitator)

Oliver Woodward (Head teacher, Columbia Primary School)

13 students, representing different year groups via their positions on School Council (Student participants)

research project that inspired the collection of projects found in the website. Two researchers (Jo and Maša) observed and documented this case study. The design session lasted 2 hours and took place in the school's designated art room.

While the children were seated on chairs, in a half circle in front of a white board, Barbara began with a short 15-minute presentation of previous work, precedent natural areas and play spaces with a short question and answer session after. She reminded children that they were there to help create concepts for a new playground area, which would be designed and built in their school. Barbara's visual presentation gave children examples of previous work from Erect Architecture. It also showed the sorts of materials and undulating shapes associated with the theme 'nature is taking over the playground', which Barbara provided to inspire children to think outside their normal playground experience. There was a little side-discussion around the space that was to be re-developed as Barbara placed it in context – asking the children if they knew which space they would be working on, then showing the location on aerial map and talking about where the children live nearby.

After seeing the images, children moved to the school art room where Olly, the head teacher, organised children into mixed-age group, non-friendship based threes or pairings. The architects brought in a range of natural materials (twigs, leaves, conker shells, herbs) plus homemade playdough and empty pre-prepared scaled model boards on which to build; the art room equipment supplemented that which the architects brought along. They then, in groups of 2 or 3, with Barbara's direction, began informal group chat, writing and drawing out ideas on shared paper. Everything was pre-laid out with materials so that children could quickly move into scale-model making in their groups and finish off with brief, 15-minute show-and-tell presentations of their work. They experimented with materials and their qualities, building small play structures and relaxation areas within the scaled model board. Children did not move around the classroom; each small group stayed at their own table, as everything was to hand and adults moved around the room to assist where needed.

Barbara encouraged the children to feel like they were 'real designers'. As creative inspirers, the children were involved in such a way that their drawings and discussions directly fed into the existing masterplan drawn up by Erect Architecture; the children's ideas were documented visually and in writing for discussion with parents and school decision makers. There was a transference, into the final build, of children's own ideas and concepts – particularly the children's desires, which came out of the engagement session, to have hiding and resting places alongside the very active climbing structures.

Outputs and outcomes

In addition to the 2-hour workshop that we observed, we, researchers, were given further opportunities to see the extent to which the architects incorporated the children's ideas. The documentation which Erect Architecture passed on to us and the school and parent working group illustrated initial ways in which Barbara and Sarah had incorporated children design input. Additionally, the final playground structures at Tower Hamlets were the only final built outcomes, from the four case studies, which we were able to view at first hand.

The tree-material play structure was built and the playground re-design was carried out in late summer and early autumn 2015. We viewed the completed play area, seeing its full use one playtime in November 2015, during a visit, which coincided with our final dissemination event in London.

Resources

Erect Architecture <http://www.erectarchitecture.co.uk/> (accessed 17 March 2016)



All materials set out for the students.



Architects and children at concentrated work in the school's art room.



Adding a net that fed into the final playground design.



A model-scale playground by a student participant.



Sheer play at the completed playground space.