

Designing with Children

FLaT Sir E Scott School

A link, between Lisa MacKenzie, landscape architect, Anne Cunningham of The Lighthouse and the staff and pupils of Sir E Scott School, was forged between 2004 and 2006. This was enabled by Scottish Executive funding of FLaT, the Future Learning and Teaching project. FLaT's aims were to '*support those local authorities, school clusters, schools and teachers in classrooms who had an innovative and exciting idea that they wished to pilot*'.

Motivation

For Lisa MacKenzie, her innovative involvement in design around learning environments was based on her own curiosity and that which developed among the school children aged 12 to 13; together they sought to understand the landscape of Harris in a new ways and in old ways and then translate these understandings into external learning spaces around the school. There was an underlying aim to create design proposals that were genuinely in tune with the existing ecosystems around the school. Throughout Lisa's work with young people of E Scott School, questions were continually addressed around: scale, distance, taking inventory, biodiversity, ecosystems, sustainability and climate; interaction and play.

Children's involvement

It was a week's uninterrupted time spent with the children, and with considerable support and facilitation from Anne Cunningham from the Lighthouse, Scotland's Centre for Design and Architecture, that enabled children to come up with their own contributions to design in an especially immersive, yet non-prescriptive way:

'I think the wonderful thing about children is that there's unpredictability and that sometimes they come up with things that you would never have thought of and they're not afraid to say the wrong thing and I think that's fascinating' (Lisa MacKenzie).

What

Proposals for school environment design

Where

Tarbert Harris, Western Isles Scotland, United Kingdom

Age

12-13

Group Size

25

Project Stage

Brief, Concept

Children's Roles

Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

Timescale

2004-2006, series of workshops and week-long fieldwork

Partners

Lisa MacKenzie (Landscape architect)
Future Learning and Teaching Project FLaT (Funder)
Scottish Executive (Funder)
Anne Cunningham (Facilitation)
The Lighthouse, Glasgow (Facilitation)
Gordon MacDonald (Head teacher)
Pupils at Sir E Scott School (Participants)

At the start of this project, Lisa became aware that although the Sir E Scott School was situated in a fascinating and spectacular setting on the Isle of Harris, school pupils' engagement with and awareness of their physical and cultural landscape was not at the surface of their daily lives. Lisa's work with pupils was a process that she described as '*awakening*' their sense(s) of place and of unearthing their dormant understandings of human interactions with nature. The young people's existing encounters with nature around the school were mostly limited to football games in the school grounds but fieldwork and workshop sessions with the pupils revealed their curiosity and energy for exploration of the physical and social landscapes in and around the school setting.

Much of the fieldwork time was spent being out around Harris' wild edges where the children would take 'inventories' of the outdoor environment. Simple cardboard squares were used by the children to frame what they saw and enable them to identify contrasting aspects of the landscape elements they encountered. Mirrors were used as a resource to let children collect 'moments' and images that inspired them. Luminous sand helped children trace lines, sometimes rooted in the area's history, around the landscapes they roamed. Activities of measuring, tracing and tracking were coupled with playful and less systematic actions such as dancing and shouting.

The word '*translation*' features heavily in Lisa's descriptions of her accounts of these early stages of children's involvement in the design process; she talks of the classroom follow-up work being used to '*translate details into a new language for design*' and '*just as scientists and artists reveal process invisible to the naked eye, we encouraged children to translate their findings back to us*'.

The fieldwork was organised fairly loosely with plenty of time for exploration and for the children to follow up on what they found interesting:

'And we wouldn't set many parameters, you know, it would be about them, out in their environment and making drawings and then we would probably come back and have a discussion about what those were, and then I think from that discussion we might identify themes that were really important to them in the place'.

The freedom and time for immersion in the outdoor places of Harris was, for Lisa, what made the children (and the adults involved) react so positively and so engagedly in the design process.

Accompanying the fieldwork, was planned time for children's collections of narratives and tales from their families and others in their local community. The children would then be able to piece together a bigger social and cultural representation of Harris and their school setting and this information would go to Lisa and Anne again for interpretation and transformation into ideas for the school grounds designs.

Outputs and outcomes

The design proposals created by Lisa and the children at Sir E Scott, were heavily influenced not only by the children's reactions to their fieldwork but by their own interest and histories. For example, the schools' engagement in quite competitive sports, felt by the children to represent 'battle' with other schools, was translated into design for a playing field depicting two interlocking stags' heads. At times, the children's preferences for colours and materials – especially tactile ones – surprised Lisa. Together, they came up with ideas such as: a 'hairy

wall' (retaining wall crammed with plants) and a hydroponicum for growing, learning and potentially selling produce. More detailed drawings and design proposal description are written up in the document, *Designs on my Learning – A guide to involving young people in school design*, published by The Lighthouse. The project was used as an exemplar design for the Scottish Executive's initiative to improve the quality of learning environments throughout Scotland and Lisa went on to disseminate her working processes at a number of conferences in 2006 and 2007.

Resources

Edinburgh College of Art 'Lisa MacKenzie' http://www.eca.ac.uk/staff_profiles/view/lisa-mackenzie/2883/design-for-learning-21st-century-schools-sir-e-scott-school-tarbert-isle-of-harris/ (accessed 1 July 2013).

Future Learning and Teaching Programme <http://www.flatprojects.org.uk/about.html> (accessed 1 July 2013).

Personal communication with Lisa MacKenzie (24 April 2013).

The Lighthouse (2006) 'Senses of Place. Designing Scotland's Future Schools'. Online. Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/920/0049729.pdf> (accessed 1 July 2013).

The Lighthouse (2005) 'Designs on my Learning. A guide to involving young people in design'. Online. Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/920/0049548.pdf> (accessed 4 December 2013).



Courtesy: Lisa MacKenzie (photographer)



Collection moments with mirrors. Courtesy: Lisa MacKenzie (photographer)





Courtesy: Lisa MacKenzie (photographer)



Courtesy: Lisa MacKenzie (photographer)