

# Designing with Children

## Vittra 'Telefonplan' School

When a new Vittra school was being developed in Stockholm, designer Rosan Bosch was appointed to work on the proposal in collaboration with children and teachers. The Swedish free school organisation Vittra generally strives to develop innovative teaching and interaction methods for educational purposes, incorporating digital media and digitally-based teaching and learning methods. Going beyond the conventional classroom-based teaching, their concept of teaching is organised around learning groups which are structured according to achievement-level and which follow the school's specific educational principles. The principles centre on ideas such as 'the cave', 'the campfire', 'the show-off', 'the watering-hole' and 'the laboratory'.

### Motivation

Seeing the school spaces as the most important tools for learning and education development, the designer Rosan Bosch approached the project with forming a core 'design group' consisting of children, teachers and designers. The main purpose of working with the users was to design a school for what it is actually being used as a supportive learning environment for various types learning and learners. In accordance with the Vittra philosophy, this process was aimed at adding to the learning functionality of the school, by creating a school that children would love and enjoy using.

### Children's involvement

Before the project began, the designers carried out interviews with children from different schools to gain a better understanding of what would motivate them to learn more effectively in a school environment. After this initial exploration, a core design group was formed to address concept making and design development, including decisions on some details such as material selection. The teachers and children invited to the core design group came from different schools, backgrounds, age groups and social environments to allow a certain variety. Children were recruited on a voluntary basis, with some of them being recommended by the teachers. Although the group members were not future users of this school, two teachers involved in the process applied for a job there after the school was completed.

#### What

A new school

#### Where

Stockholm, Sweden

#### Age

9-14

#### Group Size

8

#### Project Stage

Brief, Concept, Design Development

#### Children's Roles

Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

#### Timescale

The workshop duration was 3-4 months over the summer of 2010 and the school was completed in 2011

#### Partners

Rosan Bosch (Architect)

Vittra Schools Organisation (Funder)

Children from different schools in Stockholm (Participants)

The design workshops took place in 5-6 meetings over a period of 4 months. The children were given an important role and their voice was considered equal to the rest of the team. Some teachers found themselves experiencing a switch in their way of working and thinking in order to design a learning environment entirely different from that to which they were accustomed. The role of children as expert consultants and creative inspirers was reinforced by giving them the power to speak out and have their voices heard and respected. They were engaged in discussions about what kind of school would appeal to them and which parts of the intermediate proposals they did not like. Those involved in the core design group did not attend the new school as pupils, so they took part at the opening celebration to see the realised results of their collaborative work.

The pupils were taken on a journey through their needs and preferences in their life as learners. First of all, the children's learning behaviour was observed, then a group was encouraged to imagine a course of their typical day – in a form of a film script – describing daily activities and how they would like to feel according to what is happening. Some basic questions were discussed around what kind of design would support such a timeline of the day, using various methods to aid the conversation such as pictures, slideshows and movie clips through the on-going process. After each session, the designers went back to their offices and designed a proposal, which was then commented on at the following meeting. Variations and alternatives were discussed and tested on models. The drawings and models were mainly used to aid the dialogue and express ideas rather than to sketch the actual learning spaces. Teachers, children and designers were all equal partners in the process and came to a solution through this dialogue.

## Outputs and outcomes

A new Stockholm school –Vittra Telefonplan – was built as a result of this design process. The final interior design included some distinctive custom made features aiming to serve Vittra's requirements for a school to act as an educational tool for learning through everyday activities. Children's and teachers' wishes and needs for most effective learning were respected and incorporated in the final design.

Although the project shows the most important sign of success: happy users, there are some divided opinions about the innovative school design. The pupils' opinions are generally very positive towards it; however Vittra school organisation, for a time, struggled to find people who were willing to teach in these unconventional environments. The majority of criticism was aimed at what was perceived to be a lack of walls dividing the school into classroom spaces. Yet, the school provides a variety of spaces with differing degrees of enclosure tailored to both children's varying needs and to what is considered to be effective learning. Soon after opening, the school became so popular that the first year's intake exceeded the expectations of the school.

After the completion of the project, the designer's experiences were brought together into a design manual to guide the future designs of Vittra schools in Sweden.

## Quotes

*'... to be honest, the way I see Vittra schools design, I would love that my office looked that way as well. I feel that children's design is just as much about allowing a kind of playfulness, and letting it be part of our lives and environment. Why when we get adult does everything*

*have to be so dull and serious and kind of easy to clean? And nobody gets disturbed by it, you know? It's just because you put colour on something, you can't be taken seriously, which is rubbish. So I also think it's as much about actually designing with and for children as maybe also not thinking of children as children. In a way, it's just taking them seriously as users of what you are designing ...'* Rosan Bosch, Architect

## Resources

Euronews (2012) 'Building the schools of tomorrow *Euronews* August 14 2012. Online. Available: <http://81.92.237.180/2012/08/14/building-the-schools-of-tomorrow/> (accessed 9 December 2013).

Personal communication with Rosan Bosch (2013).

Rosan Bosch 'Vittra School Telefonplan' <http://www.rosanbosch.com/en/project/vittra-school-telefonplan> (accessed 5 December 2013).

Vittra Telefonplan presented by Videobrigade <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYH1alyaBjM> (accessed 9 December 2013).



'The Mountain'. Courtesy: Rosan Bosch; Kim Wendt (photographer)



Dance Hall. Courtesy: Rosan Bosch; Kim Wendt (photographer)



'The Cave'. Courtesy: Rosan Bosch; Kim Wendt (photographer)





*Organic conversation furniture. Courtesy: Rosan Bosch; Kim Wendt (photographer)*



*'The Lunch Club'. Courtesy: Rosan Bosch; Kim Wendt (photographer)*