

Designing with Children

Woodland Shelter

Located at the edge of a woodland site in Dorset, Woodland Shelter was built with the aim to replace a derelict game-keeper's hut with a round-wood timber shelter. Part of a family estate, this would be used by the kindergarten and local community when the weather conditions did not allow for outdoor activity. With minimal infrastructure, a total budget of £12,000 and a team of 150 volunteers aged 1-85, including carpenters and beginners, the project was initiated by architect-builder, Dan Morrish, the owner of the woodland and the kindergarten leader at Edmondsham Estate. It took place between April 2012 – May 2013 mainly during family weekends.

Motivation

The project was driven by a keen desire to have children working alongside adults in a real work project, so that a building could be created by the mixed aged communities who would be the end users. According to Emily Charkin, researcher and wife of Dan, who documented the project work at Edmondsham Estate, local families were encouraged to get involved through school newsletters, word-of-mouth, local press and national sustainability press. There was an intention to not focus on teaching and childcare as main purposes of children's involvement; rather, Dan felt that initiative to contribute to the building process should come from the children according to their own will, with the adults keeping a less formal, fellow-worker or instructor role.

Children's involvement

The participating children and teenagers contributed to almost all part of the building work, including de-barking, chiselling joints, laying floors, shingling the roof, digging foundations, raising the frame, as well as support work, such as preparing and wash-up lunch, serving tea, keeping the fire going, and keeping an eye on younger children. The materials used in the building process were the following: chestnut pole frame, cedar shingled roof, larch cladding, oak windows and doors.

What

Shelter and meeting place for a local woodland kindergarten school and other community and education events

Where

Edmondsham Estate, Dorset, United Kingdom

Age

1-18 (3+ those who made active contributions to the project)

Group Size

A total of 150 volunteers

Project Stage

Construction

Children's Roles

Builders, Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

Timescale

April 2012 – May 2013

Partners

Dan Morrish (Designer, parent)
Woodland owner (Lead partner)
Kindergarten leader (Lead partner)
150 volunteers, multi-age (Participants)

At the beginning of new activities, the children were told and shown, physically what to do and how to do it. Almost all children spent time working, playing and watching the adults at work. Some of their play was very close in content to adult work going on, such as digging, wheel-barrowing, building camps, or building bike ramps. All in all, it was difficult to categorise children's activity as only 'play', 'work' or 'watching'; work was often turned into a game.

Children's involvement was very much characterised by learning by doing, watching, listening, and asking questions. In this light, the children took on many roles: learners; carers of younger children or being looked after themselves; players; fellow volunteers; or, even, experts, when, for example, they took the lead to show other children and adult volunteers how to do tasks safely debarking the timber. Roles and hierarchies between adults and children were thus blurred. Children did not always display an eager participatory mood, however. They sometimes displayed (permitted) resistance to helping with the building tasks, either actively or in more indirect ways with day-dreamy or sulky offers of help.

Outputs and outcomes

The shelter was the key output of this collective build endeavour. Emily's accounts point to some other interesting insights as to how adult-child relationships developed in this context. As one parent remarked, the space created a 'parallel dimension', where children could participate in a real-life mixed-age project, where the rules of hierarchy and space were not predetermined or fixed.

Important in this sense is an understanding that adults and children worked *alongside* each other; at lunch, for example, Emily observed, the children had been served first by the adults, while by dinner-time children and adults served themselves in a more integrated way. Children's sense of shared ownership and pride in the project was evident by the end of it; even when they were bored they stuck with it, because 'it was their job', a parent remarked. Or, to quote a girl, aged 9, as she whispered to her father speaking on the phone to her mother: '*Tell mum we raised four frames.*'

Acknowledgements

The above text on Woodland Shelter has been co-authored by Emily Charkin.

Resources

Building for Families. 'Woodland Shelter' <http://buildingforfamilies.org/projects/woodland-shelter/> (accessed 16 July 2014)

Charkin, E. (2012) 'Through the looking glass to a parallel dimension: An ethnography of a mixed-age woodland building site', *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 2(2), 133-138.





Building rafters. Courtesy: Emily Charkin



How to saw. Courtesy: Emily Charkin



Roofing, Woodland Shelter. Courtesy: Emily Charkin



Woodland Shelter volunteers. Courtesy: Emily Charkin



Woodland Shelter. Courtesy: Emily Charkin

