

Designing with Children

Living Spaces

Alison Clark, an early childhood researcher at the Open University, was funded in 2004 by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to work on a three year project she entitled Living Spaces. As she states in her 2010 book 'Transforming Children's Spaces', at the heart of the Living Spaces study was her interest in involving young children in the design process of learning communities; in this study, a nursery within a primary school and a children's centre. Only the nursery case study is discussed here. Alison intended for children as young as 3 to participate in design. The project enabled researchers, architects, practitioners and parents to listen to children and each other as part of a wider culture of listening, which Alison sees appropriate for both children *and* adults. Alison's exploration involved children and adults in the design process of new nursery and reception classrooms so that they would be integrated into the main body of the school.

In 2001 Alison pioneered a '*multi-method approach in which children's own photographs, tours and maps can be joined to talking and observing to gain deeper understanding of children's perspectives on their early childhood settings*'. This approach, described by Alison as The Mosaic Approach, was used in the Living Spaces project to involve the young children in the early stages of design. Alison uses this approach as she believes that it serves as a common language, a bridging language, between children and architects because it predominantly focuses on visual language.

Living Spaces is an example of children engaging with spatial design as expert consultants. Here the children's perspectives and insights were meticulously gathered and genuinely intended to inform – and did inform – architects who created buildings that those same children (and others) were to use in their everyday lives.

There were three phases to the project at Ashmole:

– in the autumn term in 2004, Alison and architects worked with 3-4 year olds in the nursery class;

What

Nursery building

Where

London, United Kingdom

Age

3-7

Group Size

23 in early design phase and 29 children in post occupancy review

Project Stage

Brief, In Use

Children's Roles

Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

Timescale

2004-2006

Partners

Jennifer Singer (Architect)
Greenhill Jenner architects (Architects)
Alison Clark (Researcher)
Bernard van Leer Foundation (Funder)
Children at Ashmole Primary School
(Participants)
John Jenner (Architect)

– in the summer term (2005), Alison worked with the same children and also with 4-5 year olds from the reception class. Building work took place over the rest of the 2005/6 school year; and

– during the autumn and spring terms of 2006, the nursery and reception participants were joined by year 1 and 2 children to review the build with Alison.

The study was chosen by Alison, in part, for the background of the architects working on the school build and refurbishment: Greenhill Jenner, for Alison, had developed a reputation for and interest in participatory approaches to design and early-childhood design.

Motivation

The architects working on this project were committed to the idea that the children who inhabited the buildings would be the chief experts on those spaces. Thus it was hugely attractive to them to work with someone with a facilitator-role who would really tap into the children's understandings and experiences of the nursery and school space. For Alison, as researcher, her motivation for the project was promotion of dialogue between children and adults; her work is grounded in supporting what she calls a democracy of early childhood and raising the profile of children's voices in design. Within the Living Spaces project, Alison asked the key question (predominantly of children but also of adults) 'what does it mean to be in this space?' Her approach to this project was also guided by her own notion of architects and what they bring to participatory design processes: for Alison, the phrase '*architects are not the experts*' is inaccurate; instead, she feels that '*architects are not the experts on understanding a place*' (Clark 2010:178 after Butterworth 2007:151).

Children's involvement

Alison used disposable cameras and digital cameras as key resources for the children to convey what was important about their existing nursery and reception class spaces. These photographs were added to children's verbal descriptions and explanations arising from child-guided tours around the most important places in the vicinity of their classrooms (both indoor and outdoor), starting with where the children came into school in the morning. This resulted in co-creation of maps and books.

Alison usually carried out camera-work by focussing on one child at a time, rather than in groups. Each child took about 12 photographs. She talked with the children about their photos and then together they decided which would be placed in a book. A4 booklets were made up with 6 photos to a page, each supplemented with a caption from a child, the intended audience being the children themselves (who would further discuss and review their work), their peers, parents, practitioners in the classroom, and the architects (by the children's permission). In creating the maps, two children chose to create individual personal maps and the remaining seven, in this group, worked in pairs or threes to make shared maps.

The children's inputs contributed to the architects' designs via several approaches. First, children and architects interacted directly with each other. Lead architect, Jennifer Singer, observed and engaged with Alison in her fieldwork sessions with the children. Jennifer also directed sketch and image-based activities with the children who had many ideas and suggestions around what they wanted for their school. Second, the maps and books, which Alison had made with the children, were taken into the architects' offices at Greenhill Jenner.

During these sessions at Greenhill Jenner's offices, Alison also showed the architects storyboards compiled from her first round of data analysis; she presented the architects with slideshows of interview excerpts and images from the children's tours around the school. These meetings at the architects' offices served not only as a key resource for the architects to develop designs but also as a major source of reflective discussion around what it is to involve young children in design. It was apparent that the architects' photographs and those produced by the children differed quite notably. The former were concerned with the buildings and the latter often depicted 'spaces in between' such as sky or pathways.

Review practises are cited by Alison as a key method in which to engage children. Review (a second or third interview or discussion) provides a vital means for clarifying what the children had talked about, avoiding loss in translation, and enabling children to add further thoughts if they wish. Alison's interviews with the practitioners, and where possible the children's parents or families, helped support and endorse what the children had previously said themselves about what was important to them in their classroom spaces.

Outputs and outcomes

The nursery was built and in 2006. Alison and Jennifer revisited the school in 2010 as part of an informal post occupancy evaluation with researchers from Norway. There was opportunity to talk to older children who attended the nursery and took part in the research. Jennifer valued these follow-ups and was greatly inspired by this visit. She noticed that aspects of her own outlook, as well as the perspectives of teaching practitioners had altered as a result of intense work with children. Jennifer felt that: *'[the teacher] was saying how much it affected the way that she positions things on the walls. You know that she kind of thinks about the children's eye level now...because there's lots of decoration in there...and two days after we finished, the whole thing was plastered with images and drawings and things, but the fact is that she thinks about the way they see things now and I do the same in projects, in different ways'*.

Jennifer has taken Alison's Mosaic Approach into other design projects with older children and highly regards the attitude and methodology which the approach brings to design with young people.

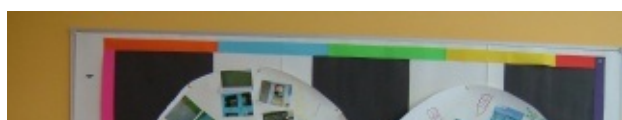
Alison Clark's book, detailing this and other studies, is an outcome which provides a hugely valuable resource to architects and a range of others who want to think about children's involvement in and communication about the spaces they use.

Resources

Clark, A. (2010) *Transforming Children's Spaces. Children's and adults' participation in designing learning environments*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Personal communication with Jennifer Singer (5 April 2013).

The Open University 'Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach'
<http://oro.open.ac.uk/17075/> (accessed 5 June 2013).





Post-occupancy review. Original members of the study review their images of the completed building Courtesy: Alison Clark (Living Spaces study)



Post-occupancy review. Original members of the study review their images of the completed building Courtesy: Alison Clark (Living Spaces study)



Pathways. Image from a child-led tour of the original site by children in the nursery Courtesy: Alison Clark (Living Spaces study)