

Designing with Children

Renaissance Kids

Since June 2008 Professor Mark Moreno has directed and run an architecture summer camp in his home town Berien Springs, Michigan. Based in Andrews University, a Seventh Day Adventist institution in Michigan, the summer camp is open to 5-16 year olds. Each year there are five week-long half-day camps, which are open to different age groups: 5-6 year olds; 7-9 year olds and 10-12 year olds. During July, there is also a two week camp for older children between 12 and 16 who engage in full scale construction of some sort. Mark runs the camp with the help of his wife Laurie Moreno, a Montessori teacher, assisted by University Architecture students and various community member volunteers including high school students. The camp and the constructions that always culminate from the older students' work at the end of the summer are funded by the camp fees paid by parents, by Andrews University and through community and local business donations. In July 2012, the older children helped design, build and embellish a social seating area and walkway on Andrews Campus which would be used by University students.

Motivation

The summer camp is underpinned by architecture education and the provision of out of school activities to a community where child-care is desired or required during summer holidays. The camp has a mission which outlines the aims of the projects each year:

'Renaissance Kids aspires to provide a fun array of creative hands-on projects through which children learn together about the architecture of cities, buildings and places. All activities center on gaining understanding of people, history, culture, sustainability, design concepts, the architect's tools, construction, materials and more'.

All this is set within a context of developing notions of citizenship: one of Moreno's chief motivations is his urge to create a sense of community among young people locally as well as adults which he feels may be getting lost in today's towns. He finds that the summer camp is an excellent way to do this, helping locals to recognise that their community is enhanced

What

Outdoor social area and walkway

Where

Berien Springs, United States

Age

5-16 (12-16 only in construction group)

Group Size

Approximately 100

Project Stage

Construction, Design Development, Technical Design

Children's Roles

Builders, Creative Inspirers, Trailblazers

Timescale

July 2012

Partners

Mark Moreno (Designer, facilitator)
St Andrews University (Facilitation)
Laurie Moreno (Facilitation)
Local high school students (Volunteers)
Summer camp children (Participants)

through cooperation and mutual learning. Participants in 2012 – a great many from the local academic community – served to show the children that there are often many people who must cooperate to realise a full scale design construction project. Those involved included the University's Offices of Plant Administration, Plant Services, Grounds/Arboretum and Transportation services as well as the Architecture department's neighbouring Art and Design department. A local construction company, 20 architecture students from the university as well as a number of high school students also volunteered with final construction work.

Children's involvement

Whilst there is a considerable amount of planning involved in crafting (often themed) architecture sessions for new children and returners to the camp, there is some flexibility and a sense that children can follow their own interests during the workshops. During studio time, the children and facilitator together let themes unfold: *'They established the theme for rest of the weeks (of camp)'* Moreno says. *'The campers talked about ideas, design and creativity, then decided what to do and just did it'*. A 13 year old girl who has attended a number of camps describes her experience: *'I'm excited each time I've been here. It's fun to build things I normally wouldn't get to and if the whole group agrees, you get to build what you want.'*

In studio sessions or construction sessions, children have engaged in a variety of activities, for example:

- building foundations for a bike rack that has a birdhouse at each end;
- designing a landscape screen for installation around an unsightly dumpster area;
- creating a 'whispering wall' and decorative pillars at the Curious Kids Museum, St Joseph;
- painting and glazing bricks;
- firing mosaics at a local glass works;
- designing and building small scale rollercoaster tracks, making miniature bridges from ice lolly sticks; and
- designing and drawing a building façade, learning about principles of perspective and proportion and researching what makes a good façade.

Children take on roles of creative inspirers and builders. A third year architecture student volunteer, who has helped on a number of programmes across the year, alludes to children's roles as creative inspirers. She says of the children: *'I've been really excited to see their creativity. It's not even something that architectural students have'*.

The taking on of a building role is something which is particularly available to those older 12-16 year olds who attend the two week camp in July when they construct something at full scale: *'The cool thing about this session is the actual building of something permanent'* (Moreno).

Outputs and outcomes

The 2012 project was concluded by the constructing of seven masonry 7-foot pillars along a path leading to a fire pit, also built by the participants. This was designed as an area for students to socialise on campus. A builder from a local construction company Exquisite Homes worked with the young people during this period. He was keen that one outcome would be to demonstrate the craftsmanship behind bricklaying and so show *'that blue collars are worthwhile'*. According to one 13 year old boy, he learned that the skill most needed for building skills is: patience.

The final building work was celebrated some months after its completion when the young builders brought their families for a party in November, to see their creation. They put it to use, lighting a fire in the fire pit, admiring their artwork set within the pillars and enjoying use of the seating areas.

In 2012 as in other years, the project was celebrated in local press releases and children often go on to repeat the camp in subsequent years.

One of the perhaps hidden outcomes of this 2012 and earlier projects seems to be the mutual realisation (and re-realisation) of the creative potential of both children and facilitator. Speaking of Moreno, a volunteer architecture student praises him for taking *'ideas that make no sense and actually make them into something you would not expect. It's magic'*.

Resources

Andrews University 'Renaissance Kids build at Andrews

https://www.andrews.edu/news/2012/11/renaissance_kids.html (accessed 30 September 2013).

Renaissance Kids 'Summer Architecture Camp' <http://renaissancekids.weebly.com/> (accessed 30 September 2013).

Renaissance Kids 'Architecture Camp on Facebook'

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Renaissance-Kids-Architecture-Camp/149461435174505> (accessed 30 September 2013).

Van Arsdall, S. (2011) 'Andrews camp turns kids on to architecture' *SouthBendTribune.com*, July 13 2011. Online. Available: http://articles.southbendtribune.com/2011-07-13/news/29771687_1_campers-architecture-renaissance-kids (accessed 30 September 2013).





*Fire Circle and Masonry Sculpture. Courtesy: IMC
photographer Joshua Martin*



*Miniature brick tower team competition. Courtesy:
Renaissance Kids assistant Sienna Moreno*



*Pier detail. Ceramic art in architecture. Courtesy: IMC
photographer Joshua Martin*