

Designing with Children

Shimoyama Elementary School

When five elementary schools in Minobu-cho, Yamanashi, Japan were to be demolished, an idea for combining them into one school came into life. The new school Shimoyama Elementary School, combining altogether 120 pupils from surrounding areas, was to be built on a sloped terrain in a mountainous village. Additionally, it was planned to be of use to the wider community, offering access to facilities including a gym, a library, and multipurpose spaces.

Motivation

As a new school was being built, the main idea was to understand the aspects of the existing schools' design that did not meet children's needs. The project was intended to evaluate how functional the existing schools were, opening a platform for debate and the exchange of ideas for an ideal school.

Children's involvement

A big orientation meeting was set up to introduce pupils of all five schools to the idea of working together on evaluating their schools and finding ideas for the new one. This meeting was also used by the lead facilitator architect, Kaname Yanagisawa, to show older children – the fifth and sixth graders (age 10 – 12) – a presentation of unique school design examples. After this common introduction to the project, pupils were engaged in various activities within their own schools for the following two months, wrapping up the process in a collective presentation and exchange of ideas at the end of the period.

Throughout the workshops, the pupils' opinions and inputs served mostly as expert knowledge from the end users, who acted as consultants for the design of the new school and in effect provided a research-base to communicate the flaws in the existing schools.

From the beginning, observation of children's behaviour and interviews with children was planned. However in each school, different methods were additionally adopted depending on age groups and themes. In the Japanese educational system, there are 6 grades in elementary schools, and these were divided into three age groups for the needs of the

What

A new school site for Shimoyama Elementary School

Where

Minobu-cho, Yamanashi, Japan

Age

First to sixth grade (6-12 years)

Group Size

Approximately 120 (all pupils from existing schools)

Project Stage

Brief

Children's Roles

Expert Consultants

Timescale

2000-2002

Partners

Kaname Yanagisawa (Architect)
Teachers and pupils of five elementary schools (Participants)

project: first and second years together (ages 6 – 8), third and fourth (ages 8 – 10), and remaining fifth and sixth years together (ages 10 - 12). Themes and methods were selected specifically for each age group, and were adopted in all five schools for the same age group in the same way.

The youngest age group was assigned the theme 'My favourite places in the school', and was asked to explore it by taking photos of their favourite spots and writing about their characteristics on a pre-formatted sheet. The third and fourth grade pupils explored the theme 'My school history: learning and life', by studying historic documents and asking an elderly member of the community. The oldest age group was in charge of finding 'My ideal future school', by studying examples of some existing schools and coming up with a design proposal for their own ideal school building.

Outputs and outcomes

The workshops generated children's ideas for the new school environment, and a list of problems and drawbacks they experienced in their existing schools. After the workshops were completed, the teachers were asked by the design facilitators to individually evaluate the workshops, the process, the methods, the main challenges and the outcomes. The design team used this as an opportunity to learn from the experience gained by running the workshops, combining teachers' opinions with their own reflections, publishing them in a paper (available at the link provided below).

One of the main challenges for the teachers was that they were asked to include the design workshops into the curriculum after the school year had already begun. They suggested that it would have been easier if they had been included in planning meetings with architects, ideally a year earlier, allowing them to incorporate the activities into syllabus requirements. At the end of the process, the design team had not had the opportunity to show the project outcomes to the teachers and people involved in school planning and construction, which was identified as something not to be repeated in future projects. A need for a further workshop has also been recognised, to take the design process further and discuss the design proposal and school models in collaboration with children.

Resources

Kaname YanagisawaResearch http://www.yanagisawa.archi.ta.chiba-u.jp/English/Research_Projects.html (accessed 23 July 2013).

Yanagisawa, K. (2007) 'School Planning and Design with Children's Participation – A Case Study of Shimoyama Elementary School'. *Children Youth and Environments* 17 (1). Online. Available: http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/17_1/17_1_21_Shimoyama.pdf (accessed 23 July 2013).





Children's models for Shimoyama Elementary School.
Courtesy: Kaname Yanagisawa



Design workshop for Shimoyama Elementary School.
Courtesy: Kaname Yanagisawa



Design workshop for Shimoyama Elementary School.
Courtesy: Kaname Yanagisawa