

Designing with Children

Unicorn Theatre

The Unicorn Theatre is the first purpose built professional theatre for children and young people from 2-21 in the UK. Located near London Bridge, the venue provides a 350 seat theatre, a theatre studio, education, teaching and rehearsal spaces and a public cafe. The construction lasted from 2001 until 2005, with a budget of £13 million from the Pool of London Partnership, and the theatre was opened on 1st December 2005 by Lord Attenborough. The Theatre claims to offer the most inclusive educational and theatrical services in the UK. Besides being a theatre dedicated to children's theatrical education and entertainment, children themselves played an active role in its design process.

Motivation

The Unicorn Theatre was founded as a children's theatre by Caryl Jenner in 1947. It was named after a unicorn because it is an exciting, legendary figure, 'intangible and untouchable' (Downing, 2007, p. 32) and, therefore, a stimulating idea for children. The Unicorn Theatre artistic director Tony Graham, Jane Shallice, Project Leader and Keith Williams Architects chose to involve around 30 Year 4 children (aged 8-9), from the local Tower Bridge Primary School, in the design process through the 'Keep Dreaming' engagement project – the underlying rationale being that children's involvement would both make the theatre tailored to their needs and generate their interest in engagement with the arts. This is connected with a much wider international shift towards drawing children's perspectives as a 'critical growth' approach to making theatre. This involves a commitment to exploring children's often hidden perspectives and allowing their voices to inform the development of design proposals.

Children's engagement

The 'young consultants', as they were dubbed, were involved over three years with the aim of informing all stages of the project. Tower Bridge Primary School was selected as the participating school as it was the closest school to the site of the new theatre. Many of the

What

Children's Theatre

Where

London, United Kingdom

Age

8-9 years old

Group Size

Approximately 30

Project Stage

Brief

Children's Roles

(Co) Designers, Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants

Timescale

2001-2005

Partners

Keith Williams Architects (Architect)
Arup (Construction)
South Bank University (Student Architects)
Tony Graham and Jane Shallice, Unicorn Theatre (Facilitation)
Tower Bridge Primary (Young Consultants)

young participants had not been to the theatre. Therefore, one of the goals of the project was to develop their understanding of what theatre is through their participation in the design process of the new building.

Their ongoing engagement involved conversations with the architect and sessions with various artists creating poems and stories about the Unicorn, art for the hoardings and the production of 'Transformations' – a film describing their work on the design project shown as part of the opening events at the new theatre. Part of the process included inspirational visits to London Design Museum and various theatres in London; the latter also allowing the architect to find out what worked and what didn't work for children spatially. The children were directly involved in designing seating for the foyer and they helped to select one of the public artists for the theatre. Finally, children worked alongside architecture students from South Bank University to make models of the Unicorn's foyer.

The process involved 38 interactive sessions at the children's school with the Unicorn team. Children worked on a 3D design and construction project to develop ideas for the theatre's foyer space. Prior to this, the children had participated in a visualisation workshop where they imagined the sights, sounds and feelings of a journey into and around the theatre and how these would affect the visitor experience. This work was split into three areas: entering and exiting (doorways); circulation (staircases, lifts etc.); and seating (seating areas, furniture etc.) The children made 3D models and 2D designs, drawings, lists, reflective and creative writing, instructions and thus built up a portfolio of the team's work.

The children were kept informed of the project progress through meetings with stakeholders. At one stage in the process, the building development froze due to lack of funding, Tony Graham spoke to them about the situation through a formal meeting. The young consultants showed concern that their theatre might not happen and suggested ways of fund-raising, which were received respectfully.

The architecture students played a crucial role in the process. They shared their own work, ideas and portfolios with the children. In addition, they provided technical support to the children when they were making things in the 3D design and construction project. Their involvement provided a high adult-child ratio, which meant that a lot of individual attention could be given to the young participants.

The following quote gives an idea of children's experiences in the 'Keep Dreaming' project:

'We've done a lot of talking, about how the theatre's going to be, about the doors and the foyer and chairs. We've been involved in talking about design. It's not just the clever ones who get to do the talking, like it used to be. Now all of us have had the opportunity and we can join in' (Erden, 8).

Outputs and outcomes

In addition to being a unique learning experience for the children involved, their input directly fed into the design process of the Unicorn Theatre. The young consultants' artwork was displayed on the hoardings around the construction site, and the video "Transformations" was produced to showcase their work on the design project. The children read their poems at an assembly, which was attended by the architect Keith Williams. This was followed by a meeting between him and the children, where they were encouraged to think about themselves as architects and use this knowledge to direct their conversation with Keith. The

classroom teacher supported the children in preparing for the assembly and the meeting.

The quotes below show how the project was received by the different parties involved.

'We were asked to write poems about sounds connected with the new theatre and then read it out loud to the whole school. It's got to be serious if you do something in front of lots of people in a public place' (Sabeena, 8).

'When the Unicorn had no money or ran out of money, that brought it home that in the real world you need money for these things. Possibly, until then they never appreciated that it might never happen... It never occurred to them that it (the new Unicorn) might not have happened, that it might not get built' (Class Teacher).

'For many of the children working with us, it was their first exposure to theatre and they were hugely enthusiastic. We were able to harness their energy and sense of wonder through dialogue and creative activities that linked in with schoolwork and directly helped us in forming the design for the new Unicorn Theatre' (Tony Graham, artistic director at the Unicorn Theatre, in Downing, 2007, p. 33).

'Now we've got confidence in our own ideas, and the confidence to express them' (Dominique, Unicorn Theatre consultant, in Downing, 2007, p. 33).

'The architect [Keith Williams] wanted a place of our minds about what we like as well. He wanted to blend his ideas and ours' (Cleo, Unicorn Theatre consultant, Tower Bridge Primary School, in Kallaway, n.d.).

Resources

Downing, A. (2007) 'Child's play - Building theatres for children – new UK venues, the Egg and the Unicorn, show the way forward ', Auditoria, May 2007. Online. Available: [http://www.theatreprojects.com/files/pdf/projects_unicorn01_Childs%20play%20\(Auditoria\).pdf](http://www.theatreprojects.com/files/pdf/projects_unicorn01_Childs%20play%20(Auditoria).pdf) (accessed 3 December 2013).

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http://mediacentre.kallaway.co.uk/pdf/Consultation_Report.pdf (accessed 14 November 2013).

Unicorn Theatre, Tooley Street, London.
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The hoardings around the theatre's construction site exhibiting children's artwork. Courtesy: Bonnie Smith (photographer Patrick Baldwin)



Keith Williams, Unicorn theatre's architect, with four of Unicorn's Young Consultants. Courtesy: Bonnie Smith (photographer Susan Barnes)



Young Consultants at the launch of Architecture Week 2004 at the Unicorn Theatre construction site. Courtesy: Bonnie Smith



Unicorn Young Consultants with their artwork on the hoardings around the construction site. The artwork explored what theatre meant to the children. Courtesy: Bonnie Smith (photographer Patrick Baldwin)