

Designing with Children

Wilderness Wood outdoor play kitchen

Wilderness Wood, Hadlow Down, East Sussex, UK, is 62 acres of public-access woodland space; it is home to a handful of small enterprises: a forest café, a forest school; and a woodland product business, led by Dan Morrish, who likes to involve young people in this work. Dan has been building all his life. His formal architecture training and practice changed direction in 2008 when he left London to spend less time in front of a computer and more time with building materials and people. He now runs Building for Families at Wilderness Wood. Previous building projects for Dan include co-housing, a holiday home, a garden studio and a tree house, plus a woodland shelter in Dorset for use by the local kindergarden and community, which included significant building input by children.

The project described here – the design and build of an outdoor play kitchen in Wilderness Wood – is one of the four case studies that informed the Leverhulme-funded research project ‘Creative encounters with children: Children transforming spatial design.’

Motivation

Dan and Emily are passionate about enabling children and adults to be together in their day to day lives. The ethos of Wilderness Wood and of Building for Families is very much one of joining children and adults together in making. The building of this play kitchen would have gone ahead regardless of any involvement of the Leverhulme project, yet it is important to mention that our research project did have an impact upon the way the day was set up. As is often the case with research, the timing of the session was such that it responded to a call by the researchers to find case studies of design with children. There was a sense of ‘why not do this now’ and it fitted with the recent dismantling of a previous play area.

By their own admission, Dan and Emily had not previously involved children directly in *design*;

What

Design and build for an outdoor play kitchen

Where

Wilderness Wood, Hadlow Down, East Sussex, United Kingdom

Age

5-12

Group Size

11 children and two sets of parents

Project Stage

Concept, Construction

Children's Roles

Builders

Timescale

1 full day of design and build, May 2014

Partners

Dan Morrish (Architect, running Building for Families)

Emily Charkin (Educational researcher and historian, running Building for Families)

Lucy Clark (Leading Lucy's Little Forest School, facilitator)

Ed Heusser (Youth worker, facilitator)

Greg Heusser (Carpenter working at Wilderness Wood, facilitator)

11 children and families (Participants)

their usual way of doing things would be to involve children in making and building only. Aligning closely with Emily's research and personal interests around alternative education and children's participation, she and Dan wished to experiment with a new and additional element of involving children in design stages of their work about the timber. The night before the session, the day was predicted by Dan and Emily to be *experimental* and potentially *chaotic*.

The children's motivations to participate were, in each case, based around their personal connections to the timber and to the Morrish family. A number of children were home-schooled so a day like this formed part of their educational activities.

Children's involvement

The architect, together with children, parents, a forest schools leader and trained carpenters, thought through and designed an outdoor play kitchen or 'mud kitchen', built from timber, which young children could use whilst their families used the café. The day took place outside in the open and in a partially canvas covered workshop area with the timber to hand.

The session began with Emily introducing the idea of the mud kitchen to all the parents and children and with introducing everyone to each other. Dan then ran a discussion, or what he called a 'chalk and talk' session, to outline what materials are available and the limitations they must factor in. He made a point of using 'proper' language such as: 'tenon drill', 'processed timber', 'cantilever', and explaining them clearly. The children openly asked and answered questions, drawing on the blackboard, around which everyone was huddled. About an hour was spent on discussion and drawing.

The next phase was a preparation of building materials. Children often worked in pairs or small groups, initially supervised by an adult on tasks such as: using draw knives for pole-peeling; using saws for cutting the timber to length; basic round-timber jointing; square lashing, component assembly and finally structure erection towards the end of the day. Overall, most of the children, both at young and older ages (i.e. from 6-12 years old), engaged with a range of hand and power tools for timber, such as saws, planes, chisels, drills, draw knives, hammers, clamps, etc.

In the meantime, Lucy introduced a narrative for the building of a young children's play kitchen. Helping the children who had come for the day imagine how other children would use the play kitchen in the future, Lucy read a piece from a book: *Mud pies and other recipes* by Marjorie Winslow.

Everyone took a long break for a cooked lunch together. Children took themselves off for short breaks and for interviews with researchers. All 6 children in the study were involved for the whole day. Children worked in self-selected pairs or small groups together and often with an adult guiding that group or helping an individual child. Groups and pairings were fluid and children moved from activity to activity and from tool to tool as they pleased.

Outputs and outcomes

The idea for the day was introduced by Dan as creation of a play kitchen or mud kitchen but it was described with a sense of openness, in that it had potential to end up as something else. It did indeed end up as the framework for a timber pole mud kitchen, with a roof for weather protection.

Resources

Wilderness Wood www.wildernesswood.org (accessed 23 February 2016)

Building for Families <http://buildingforfamilies.org/about/> (accessed 23 February 2016)

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.

Winslow, M. (1961) *Mud pies and other recipes*. New York, The New York Review of Books.



Co-creative thinking and designing.



A laborious day needs spells of breaks.



Final touches to the play kitchen.



The mud kitchen ready.