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Rosie Parnell

SERIOUS PLAY IN DESIGN: STUDENTS AND CHILDREN EXPLORING ARCHITECTURE

Education for the profession

Architecture and the education that feeds the profession have become increasingly criticised for their isolation from the public and everyday concerns. Central to this article is the need to challenge this position and promote dialogue in processes related to the built environment. There is much debate about the nature of power in such dialogue: can it really ever be equally distributed between professional and non-professional, designer and user, educator and learner? Power conceived as "power over" others would suggest not, tending to infer "a zero-sum game wherein every loss in power is another's gain"[1]However, if power is instead taken to mean capacity, or "power to" act[2], then there is at least potential for every party to play a different yet *valuable* **role in the process.**

Proponents and critics of participatory design processes have adopted different positions regarding power, some believing (others berating) the idea that architects should give up their power and become technical facilitators, so giving power to users; others recognising a potential power to *form* **and** *transform* **knowledge through user-professional interaction. Here I propose that including opportunities for user-student dialogue in architectural education might similarly have transformative potential. If done well, such interaction could help students build an understanding of the social**

Students facilitating a post-occupancy evaluation of a new classroom by Sheffield primary school pupils, using tools they have designed.
PLAYCE-facilitated workshops exploring wellbeing and the school environment at a Sheffield secondary school.

context and implications of their ideas, support the development of relevant skills and could potentially foster positive attitudes to interaction with users later in professional life. Among these built environment users are the frequently overlooked and marginalised group "children"[3], who, I suggest, can offer a particular transformative capacity to the process.

Children as a catalyst to dialogue

Many designers, including architects, have found particular benefits of working with children through the design process. While it is important to acknowledge differences in ability, the recognised aptitude of children to engage in creative processes and to play could be a factor in these positive experiences. Research suggests that play activities facilitate various areas of cognitive development in children, including learning strategies for problem solving, developing divergent thinking abilities and a flexibility in shifting between different types of thought (narrative and logical). These abilities accord with the characteristics of creative processes. The idea of "playing at design" is one which I suggest might provide a way to creatively engage architects and non-architects in collaborative design processes. To use the term "play" is not to belittle the idea. However, since play is often considered (incorrectly) to be the opposite of work and the realm of children, the concept of "serious play" has been introduced. It has been proposed that "serious play" is a suitable goal for learning situations for both children and adults, or for any situation in which people are required to engage in creative higher-order thinking coupled with intense personal commitment and involvement[4]. It is now relatively commonplace to find play principles driving the management strategies of large organisations. Since children tend to be more practised and adept than adults at play, adult processes have much to learn from them. The interaction between children and built environment professionals or students, therefore, brings its own particular transformative potential. On this basis, I propose that collaborative serious play by architecture students and children could strengthen the education of student architects, as well as bringing benefits to the younger participants. The next section proposes a framework for such collaboration within which effective practices can be developed.

Students and pupils building a temporary shelter and seating area to highlight the pupils'
need for such spaces in the environment of this Sheffield secondary school.

Learning together: children meet student architects

A framework for development and action

This framework builds on literature and draws on my own reflections on relevant projects at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture and projects carried out with PLAYCE. As well as recognising its transformative potential for the profession and the discipline of architecture, work which familiarises children with architecture through active engagement with higher education students, also contributes to the outreach work which is now becoming mainstream in UK universities. This is particularly important in countries such as the UK & USA where the architecture profession is far from representative of the diverse populations.

Roles and power-relations

The general benefits for children of such engagement in architecture –related activities have been detailed elsewhere in this book. However, for all participants, the particular benefits of interaction will largely be determined by the particular scenario adopted and the role that each is expected to take within that scenario. Clarifying roles (and hence power-relations) is one of the most important and often overlooked first steps in supporting such an interaction. Only by doing this will participants be able to take full responsibility for their role in the process, strive for competence and hence seek and develop the required knowledge, skills and understanding. Scenarios such as those below suggest different power-relations, which in turn infer different priorities in terms of learning. It is therefore important to consider what the learning priorities of the activity are, so that an appropriate scenario is used. It should be noted that while the scenarios infer particular strengths (and weaknesses), these do not automatically result; the associated learning approach and environment also need to be supportive.

Children act as clients for the student design team

Experience suggests that this approach has particular potential to raise the confidence & self-esteem of children, providing they are taken seriously by the design team and listened to. Children's role in formulating a brief provides a rich opportunity for reflection on experience of the built environment. The role of the client as

a communicator, in a group – potentially also communicating the developing design to others they are representing, as well as communicating with the design team – can support development of communication and interpersonal skills. Children are also encouraged to develop their critical skills which form the basis of dialogue and communication. The requirement for the client group to agree upon the course that the design should take, infers that the children need to develop empathy and tolerance where views might differ. Clearly this scenario is not appropriate if the intention is for children to learn through their own direct exploration of the design process. However, the role of "informed critic" that the client necessarily assumes, coupled with a certain distance from the design process, can serve to concentrate development of observation, reflection and critical skills.

Students are the tutors and set activities for the children

In this scenario, roles are distinct. In order to effectively design the activities for the children, the students have to reflect on their own experiences of learning, which in turn supports them in learning more themselves. It is often said that the best way to learn is to teach. As tutors, the students' own understanding will be challenged by the children, providing a learner-centred – rather than a didactic – approach is taken. However, there could be a tendency for students to have power *over* children within this scenario, mirroring a traditional teacher-learner relationship. If this is the case, children could lack motivation, taking little responsibility for their learning. This approach could also potentially marginalise the value of the children's own experiences of the built environment unless proactively countered. Lack of emphasis on collaboration between students and children is likely to reduce transformative potential and the development of associated skills. However, observation could effectively inform students' processes if reflection is embedded in the event.

Students, children, tutors and teachers are all learners and part of a design/learner team

Here power-relations are subverted and the knowledge of all parties is acknowledged. There is particular potential for the participants to learn from each other, including tutors and students learning from the children. The idea of the tutor or teacher as the holder of knowledge and the "right answer" is challenged. It should be recognised this scenario is likely to result in over-dominance by tutors and students, which could marginalise the children's voices. The fact that students and

tutors have a role in the design process means that they potentially lead the children, and the educational benefits of exploring and discovering for themselves will be lacking. This is not to suggest that their power should be given up, but that the activities themselves and means of expression should be chosen carefully to enable all different participants to have power to act. For example, if the group is taking part in a design process and expressing ideas through detailed line drawing, the tutors and students have greater power due to their experience and are likely to be perceived by the children to hold the knowledge and skills , thereby inhibiting or disempowering them. Alternative means of expression might redress the balance in this case. Equality of power among participants also rests on the event being designed by an outside party, which might not be feasible. Alternatively, all group members could play a role in suggesting, leading and designing the events.

Children are part of a design/learner team with the students

This scenario shares many of the traits and challenges of the previous. The value of children's knowledge, skills and agency is again acknowledged, but over-dominance by students can result if it is not proactively countered. In a more positive light, the students' role alongside the children can provide demonstration and widen the scope of possibility. Where students themselves lack experience, they can tend to devalue their own skills and understanding and so lack confidence to engage in meaningful dialogue, instead being led by the children. There is a difficult balance to strike here, which is perhaps more easily achieved with more experienced students: being clearer about their own skills and understanding, these students are more likely to recognise the value that lies in the difference between their own and the children's positions. A traditional power-relationship with tutors and teachers is likely to remain if they design and then closely guide the event, although this can be countered through the design of a more student-led framework if desired.

Students (and tutors) are supporters/technical facilitators in projects set for the children

Power-relations appear relatively clear in this scenario, with the children defining the direction of exploration and learning from their direct experience within a framework set-up by a third party. Children's existing views can therefore emerge relatively clearly and are supported by the skills and technique of the supporters. The scenario

suggests that the supporters should not over- or mis-interpret what the children ask of them, however, a dialogue will develop and the students (or tutors) will influence the outputs. Some prior input is advisable to help the students support the children without dominating or changing the agenda. The learner-led approach could result in a lack of aspirational and inspirational input related to the built environment, limiting the scope of exploration. This is simply due to the children's likely limited experience of good design and of what the built environment can be, rather than any shortfall in their abilities. Similarly, the lack of input by tutor/student means that there is no learning from demonstration (other than technical skills). However, this approach is appropriate when seeking to discover the existing perspective of participating children – their responses and aspirations – within existing conditions.

Final thoughts

In summary, it is important to ensure the primary purpose of the activity is decided in order to design it effectively. Is it to discover what is? What could be? What might be? To teach, or to learn? That is not to say that the purpose and the scenario cannot change through the project, but it is important that participants' roles are clear and communicated at each stage. The level and experience of the students should be considered in choosing which type of scenario is most appropriate, according to both the students' and the children's learning needs. Students will need to be made aware of a set of principles for the support of learning to help them be effective in supporting the children. This might require some focused input and development. In particular, I would advocate raising awareness of learner-centred education principles and also avoidance of what Amabile calls "creativity killers", so that the students are better equipped to support the children, whether this be as "fellow team members" or "pupils".

The presented framework has attempted to show that in the context of education there is no correct scenario – simply different approaches which bring a different focus and support different approaches to learning. This is not the case in the context of design participation, I suggest, where, for example, to deny one's knowledge is arguably irresponsible. This distinction between participation and education is an important one to make. Despite the fact that participation can be inherently educational, the primary goals of each differ. This article proposes the interaction of student architects

with children, as a means to challenge and transform architectural knowledge and practice. The framework argues that dialogue and the notion of serious play should be central to student-child educational activities, in order to fully engage children and to support the transformative potential of the interaction.

[1] Dovey, K (1999). Framing places: mediating power in built form. London: Routledge. Page 10

[2] ibid: Page 9

[3] The United Nations' definition of a child is used in this article to refer to all people up to and including the age of 18.

[4] Rieber, L. P. Smith, L. Noah, D. (1998) The Value of Serious Play. Educational Technology 38 (6) 29-37.