

Building huts - Children creating spaces and places of their own

by Jaana Räsänen



It was in 1994 that I first started with children and architecture. A real 'kick' to architectural education was when I graduated in 1998. In my graduation work I searched for a theoretical basis and practical guidelines for my work as an architectural educator. The theoretical basis turned out to be a sort of ethical basis as well. It emerged from Heidegger's thoughts about being in the world as dwellers, from Norberg-Schulz's thoughts about creating places to dwell respecting the genius loci and from Dewey's thoughts about learning by doing being a natural way of learning for children. The practical guidelines emerged mostly from various workshop experiences. Studies of environmental education with Veresov's "We are earthlings" curriculum that saw both nature and the built environment as a common home for mankind that joined theory and practice together.

During my years arranging workshops and teaching architecture I have seen children: observing and documenting the living environment, visiting architectural exhibitions and architects at work, telling stories and having opinions, discussing architecture, using their endless imagination to make

paintings, drawings and many kind of plans or designs, making models from many different materials ranging from very small details to large imaginary worlds, and finally building something at their own scale. These are all important parts of architectural education. Perhaps closest to my heart is the last one: building a space or place of your own, a place you can go into and 'live' in. Such places I simply call huts.

Building huts as part of architectural education is very important in many ways. Building is a natural activity for children. They build their imaginary worlds and destroy them and build again all the time. During the building process, children also learn in a natural way, by doing. They can be taught many kinds of practical skills such as using tools, tying knots and handling different kind of building materials. It is also easier to talk about place, space, structures, light, shapes, entrances, the view from the window etc.

When you have just finished a building process and are sitting in a building you have constructed yourself - it easily demonstrates all the important aspects of architecture. Building huts is a way of realising both the importance of nature and the importance of the built environment. A good, respectful and balanced relationship with our environment cannot result just from admiring nature. It is also necessary to see the built environment as meaningful. Finally building huts is also a way of influencing the environment. The everyday environments that children use should give them a chance to enjoy this kind of natural creative influence.

Working as an architectural educator has aroused an interest in studying the relationship between children and architecture more closely. Children's opportunities of influencing their own environment in a positive way makes up, perhaps, the most interesting topic for me at the moment. Should children somehow participate in interactive design processes on adults' terms or should they be given a chance to influence things in ways that are closer to their everyday lives?



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