

# **The view of the child: explorations of the visual culture of the made environment.**

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**Pupil Voice and Participation: pleasures, promises and pitfalls**

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The impact of visual culture on the rising generation of children has implications for their future and the futures of us all; all children are consumers of design and some will become designers. Children occupy and respond to designed spaces, often without choice while they are rarely involved in decision making about the visual and material conditions that surround them. In 2005, after a successful bid to the EPSRC/AHRC *Designing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* programme, a cluster of international scholars, met at a series of 'exchanges'<sup>1</sup> to explore and develop research agendas around the notion of 'the view of the child' in learning environments. We find ourselves at an interesting moment of tension in which schools and classrooms need to reinvent or redefine themselves but are not sure quite how to do this. There is an acknowledged tendency for schools to revert to the 'elementary model' of education in spite of repeated attempts to fundamentally transform its nature.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the research cluster was to explore design from the point of view of children and young people (0-18 years) in learning contexts. It brought together expertise from across academic disciplines, designers, stakeholders and users to explore existing and new material and methodologies to shape research that focuses on the relationship between the developing child, educational practise, and the implications of these factors on design.

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<sup>1</sup> We used the term exchanges to recognise the inter-disciplinarity of the overall project and the inter-activity of the meetings.

<sup>2</sup> Peacock, A. 'So have things changed? Four generations at an English primary school'. *Education 3-13*. March 2003.

The research cluster focus was on the influence of design through attention to the visual context with particular reference to the built environment, classrooms and informal or non-traditional learning spaces. The term 'visual culture' was applied to reflect our intention to explore the cumulative, tacit and specific effects of the visual foci. The overarching aim is to provide policy makers and practitioners with a basis for determining a design strategy aimed at challenging the established conventions of teaching and learning and increasing the well being of all who occupy school spaces.

Five 'exchanges' were held during the year. The first meeting was intended to open up the way that the different academic disciplines and professions interpret the view of the child as evidenced in images produced by children and young people across the UK in the 2001: 'The School I'd Like' archive.<sup>3</sup> The next event focussed on developing innovative methodologies to engage children's perspective in the planning process for Building Schools for the Future. The third and fourth exchanges involved young children; the first designing a city, the second recording the visual culture of their school environment. The final meeting allowed reflection and planning for the future.

Key questions to be considered were:

- What is the visual culture of the made educational environment of children?
- How can designers, teachers, children, parents optimise the visual environment in learning contexts towards growth of visual discrimination?
- How can designers be encouraged to recognise a view of visual culture in educational environments that incorporates values, beliefs and practices?
- What are the implications of major cultural shifts in communications and technology for the visual environments of children and young people?
- How do children 'read' their environment, visually?
- What would children recognize as an environment which recognizes and respects them?
- How can we develop research tools to reveal this and are visual methodologies using photography, drawing and art an essential element of such a strategy?

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<sup>3</sup> Six speakers presented papers. These included Bruce A. Jilk, the keynote speaker (Architect, School Designer and Education Planner) Professor Ian Grosvenor (University of Birmingham), Bob Banks (Senior Analyst, Tribal Technology) Dominic Cullinan (Architect, Cullinan and Buck Architects Ltd.) Judith Sixsmith (Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Speech Pathology, Manchester Metropolitan University) and Alison Clark (Visual Artist and Researcher, The Thomas Corum Research Unit, The Institute of Education, University of London). Each had been asked to respond to images of drawings of children from 'The School I'd Like' project and to provide some analysis in the form of questions eliciting further research.

For the purposes of this paper, the findings of two of these exchanges, which were based in urban primary schools in two different UK cities, north and south, will be presented and discussed. Both involved groups of children between the ages 7 and 12 years. One worked with children to design and model a city environment. The other gave children the opportunity to reveal to us what mattered to them and affected them in the everyday visual and material environment of their school building and grounds. The involvement of children in the research process was serious and not simply tokenistic. We were committed to illustrate the potential for innovative methodologies that could be employed in generating data highly relevant to the educational sectors as western governments re-configure and re-design learning environments for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally, the paper will review the exchanges that took place during the year and will consider how an interdisciplinary research agenda has emerged that seeks to address these current questions through a series of innovative methodologies involving all stakeholders, especially children.

### **Issues of Diversity and Holistic Design: 'Building a City'.**

The objective of this exchange, which was held at an inner-city Sheffield primary school in July 2005, was to provide a supportive framework to enable a group of children to 'build a city' in a large space in their school. We were interested to observe not only what happened but also to record how it happened. Presenting children with a challenge like this is very different from the kind of goal-driven projects that characterise the curriculum and much educational research.

Twenty-one children together with their teaching assistant, and eight students of architecture from Sheffield University worked with members of the research cluster over two days. The children had been selected by their teachers to represent a range of aptitudes, perceived abilities and levels of disaffection or engagement in school. Twenty children made the journey through the two days, one child being withdrawn by the teaching assistant as punishment for 'bad behaviour'. The class was comprised of boys and girls representing very diverse cultural backgrounds. Most were the children of immigrants, some having arrived very recently in the UK. Not all children spoke English as their primary language and a few spoke no English at all.

The children were asked to design a city and to build a three-dimensional model of their idea. An informal atmosphere was created by the adults present whereby the children were encouraged to think of themselves as experts but the team as equals - all adults and children present introduced their first names and wore the same kind of name labels. We talked about how we were going to work together over the following two days to make a city. The large group divided into seven smaller groups with three children in each and one adult helper - the task to brainstorm everything you might find or want to find in a city - each idea was written down by helper on one sheet of paper. The atmosphere was engaged and friendly. Lots of ideas were made and recorded on paper. In the initial brainstorming session personalized issues emerged: the need of an Iranian boy for security checkpoints along the 'seaside'; equality or "money for everyone"; accessibility; the possibility of "holidays for people who clean up the city"; a concern for "people with sticks". Further discussions resulted in more elaborate and creative suggestions: a school and an "unschool"; a hotel in the shape of a fish with a turf roof for football; churches; mosques; a language school; a space/time machine complete with a key to operate it; "places for fun" in the form of sweet shops and adventure parks, farms and zoos; transportation on mermaid taxis and water flume monorails. Children were clearly using their imagination not simply describing. Public, civic, and commercial buildings were included: hospitals, universal signage, trams, pubs and clubs, restaurants, car parks, limousine repair shop and toy shops. Open space was a primary concern, as were connections between and among elements of the children's design.

Some ideas were everyday and familiar such as hotels, houses, flats. Some were more like ideas for something new such as, 'a place where everyone can go and learn music and not ever fail and it is free and it takes as long as you want.' In the exercise of deciding where to site such places, a child remarked 'the important things should be in the centre, the rest around the edges.' Residential areas should be peripheral to the city, with larger houses farthest away from the city centre. Another suggested that 'school should go next to the park in case school has no playground' One child suggested voting to decide where things should go but this did not work because there were so many variables. There were many examples of definite sense of logic. A concern for adjacencies was primary, as was an effort to connect areas of the city through public transportation and pedestrian access. A child deliberately "walked" the roads adding streetlights while drawing new avenues and rights of way. One boy drew a phone box and then, recognizing the need for residents to have

access to them wandered the city locating and drawing others. Another spent the two days constructing a roller coaster rail transport system that circled the city.

There was a concern for safety and comfortable living. Children were deliberate about placing residences together rather than near open space in order "be safe" and to "have friends." A large defence area was near the sea because "those who go to the beach should be safe." Insistence on CCTV, checkpoints for certifying personal credentials, and pass keys, were personalized aspects of the city design specific to children who had been directly affected by this issue in their past, although all children expressed the need to be secure.

Public amenities were distributed with purpose and there was evidence of an overall strategy of basic zoning areas. The airport was located near a road, away from housing but with access through connections with a highway, and the availability of limousine service and a car park. Hotels were centrally located and were described by the children to be "like house(s) but more exciting." In addition, winter gardens were features available to city residences in order to experience green space while living in a more dense area of the environment. Schools were not a major design element in this design. In fact, the children were more interested in creating a neighbourhood in which they could have feel sense of community through proximity, collective activities, and visual access.

Toward the end of the 3 day exercise the children decided to give their city and name and to make a flag for it. During the ensuing conversation one child corrected another child by reminding him that he had "forgot(ten) to use the word 'our' when referring to the new city.

It was abundantly evident that the children were in charge of the city. One child was heard to say that this was a time when "adults listen to children, and children listen to children," a very liberating perspective and one which is seldom considered. This study clearly demonstrated that children are a rich resource for very sound concepts for the reconsideration of what "school." might be and how it might look and feel. Like the children who contributed ideas to the "School I'd Like" project they had a collective concern rather than an individualistic one and had a very clear vision of what the city of the future might be. The buildings were true learning environments in which they could learn together and teach each other. They were seeking to create a community.

In the world of children's design there is not only the "What" but the "How" of their work. It has been demonstrated that the view of the urban or inner-city child is unique. Studies have shown that urban children exhibit strong visual and spatial thinking skills and that their interaction with the built environment may be one reason why this is so.<sup>4</sup> A child's urban experience is one of pedestrian movement and exploration. It would then follow that a child's development would be influenced by this mode of learning. In keeping with the premise, the appropriate mode of expression and problem solving for urban children would be by imagining, drawing and building representations of visual and spatial concepts. In the case of urban design this should be even more pronounced in that, in order to address perceived problems the children are appropriating space around them, psychologically and virtually, and occupying it both in their minds' eyes as well as in a physical representation.

Earlier projects such as the *Our Town* project in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania involved a neighbourhood design problem that a group of 8 and 9 year old children were asked to solve.<sup>5</sup> The focus was on the children's own solutions and they were asked, as a group, to identify a need and address it through an "intervention" in their built environment. The project was repeated several times in a variety of locations within the City of Pittsburgh and the results were consistent with each group of children. Design solutions in the "Our Town" projects were exclusively open, with much green space, with soft surfaces and colourful elements, both natural and man made. Flowers, grass, seating, paths, and navigable terrain were all of utmost importance to the children. They designed for each other, for their families, and their friends. This was a very diverse group of children but their design was holistic in nature and did not reflect the differences among them. There was no evidence of issues of age, gender, culture, race, and ethnicity in the intervention. The children spoke of wanting their grandmothers to be able to sit there, for their younger siblings to play there, for their mothers to be able to see them there, and most of all, for their neighbours and friends to be able to enjoy the cool and quiet of their "space."

Both the UK and US projects generated consistent results. Both studies involved very diverse groups of participants, the UK children were more varied in terms of

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<sup>4</sup> Gallagher, C. (2004) "Our Town: Children as Advocates for Change in the City." Childhood. Special Issue: Children and Youth in Public Places, Geographies, and Cultural Landscapes. Trondheim, Norway. 11, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

age, ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, and personal experience. Even with these seemingly overwhelming differences, the children in both examples were linked by common desires: community, neighbourhood, safety, fun, learning, and, most importantly, multicultural and intergenerational design with access for everyone and their families. . The process of design was equally as democratic and inclusive. In the UK project, boys tended to work together, as did girls, but there was no evidence of animosity in their interaction and there was no evidence of discord or disagreement in the city plan or physical model of their "city." As in the US example, the children began to occupy their models. One boy, who was working alone, found a "voice" and a reason to communicate with others when he began to offer electricity from his power plant to his classmates. A team of Chinese girls, who spoke virtually no English, designed a language school that was to be worn on one's head in order to learn "all languages." A team of boys and a team of girls designed their own respective mosques and then negotiated in what location each should go relative to the other. There was no argument. There was, however, a lively exchange. It is common for children in such a wide range of ages to find it difficult, if not impossible, to interact as a result of the disparity of developmental levels and interests among them. Add to that the inherent issues of gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, and language and that hypothesis would likely be amplified. In this case, however, the process of design served as a vehicle for children to knit a fabric among themselves. It is clear that this group was designing for each other; they had formed a community.

Their vision is not only refreshing but valuable. This work has served to demonstrate that children can serve as informed and skilled participants in the design process and, if allowed to do so, can "own" the process and even serve as facilitators with adults. The children in these studies designed devoid of a hidden agenda, communicated effectively, designed holistically, and remained committed to a collective vision. It is highly unfortunate that they are eliminated and ignored in the process of planning and designing environments which will affect them directly.

### **Layers of spatial ownership and sediments of reordering.**

Having demonstrated how children bring with them to school a visual and spatial literacy, exchange 4, which took place over two days in Norwich, focussed on defining what we might mean by the visual culture of school and how children's view can be solicited. In defining what we meant by the visual culture of the school, we

had in mind more than its obvious materiality. What might also be considered includes ritual, arrangements of bodies in space, and choreography in classroom practise- i.e. lines, arms movements, eye movements, lining up, pairs, groupings. Eight children, each with cameras and map making equipment, worked with members of the research cluster for one morning.

'The age group we worked with was ideal. We also had a good range of different children to work with. I was particularly impressed with the way that the child with hearing problems (profoundly deaf) was able to take a full part as a researcher with the aid of his hearing equipment and his special friend.'<sup>6</sup>

The opening discussion with the eight children set the tone. We talked about research and we talked about the 17 researchers, adults and children who together would explore the classroom and school during the morning. We adopted a method employed by cluster member, Alison Clark, using child - guided tours of meaningful spaces for them in classroom, school and grounds.<sup>7</sup> Once again, attention was drawn to the children as experts of and in their school environment. Not drawing attention to the differences between child and adult seems to be important. But drawing attention to the difference in scale and size seemed useful especially so that they understood that they as children did indeed have a different 'view'.

In the images that were produced by the children through the documentation of what is visual in the classroom, notice was taken of fine details. The tiny patterns on the table tops, the colours, the texture and patterns on the bricks and on the ceilings were brought into focus. Visual representations of identity and personal space were offered as these appeared to be significant in the material arrangements of classroom and school. In one classroom there did not seem to be a personal identifiable space beyond a chair and desk and a (ill-designed and mal-functioning) drawer. A conversation with one child about a coat hook was a powerful reminder of how material objects are infused with the memory of persons and events (the child showed us and photographed the coat hook that her older brother had once used!). There were also instances that had histories that had to be told if the meaning was

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<sup>6</sup> Field notes from the research, CB,

<sup>7</sup> See Clark, A, 'Talking and listening to children' in Dudek, M. (ed.) *Landscapes of Childhood*. London. Architecture Press, 2005; Clark, A., 'Listening as a way of life: an introduction to why and how we listen to young children' London, National Children's Bureau.(2004); Clark, A., 'The Mosaic approach and research with children', in V Lewis, M Kellett, C Robinson, S Fraser, S Ding (eds.) *The Reality of Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage. (2003)

to be revealed such as the trainers lined up above the blackboard from children who had forgotten to bring things to school.

The mapping activity was revealing of perspectives, priorities and starting points. One child, when mapping his classroom space started with the sink at the edge of the classroom and carefully drew the spider in the sink while telling a detailed tale about the spider. Is this a suggestion that living things in the classroom are important for children reflecting many similar examples of this same message in the School I'd Like archive.<sup>8</sup> Our own observations mirrored this perspective.

*'The chairs and tables really dominate the classroom space. This means the edges of the classrooms become important; everything interesting happens around the perimeter. These edges are very rich, with display, interesting objects, storage cupboards, sinks, windows etc. The middle part seems boring. The tables get in the way a lot of the time too, especially when the teaching method changes. The class I was in switched a lot from working as a whole class to small groups and individuals with a teacher/teaching assistant. The table and chair arrangement does not really support any of these activities well.'*<sup>9</sup>

Our own visual record of the school building included the school wall - red bricks carved into over generations of children - leaving their mark - leaving their name in the brick - leaving their identity and the trace of themselves behind. The same wall corner was rounded, as if sandpapered smooth and was no longer sharp and right angled curved and dented at just the same height as a child's shoulder. We were later told by a child that this could be explained by the fact that it was the route to the dinner hall.

In the discussion, the children seemed uncritical, even unaware of the space. It is accepted as it is. There were only a few negative comments - no-one liked the green toilets. Green does not seem to be a popular colour - one boy thought it was a very bad choice for the new carpet in his class. He would have preferred blue. The children were consulted about the colour but their views did not prevail. Interestingly green is used a lot in the school- the outside paintwork is green and inside there is

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<sup>8</sup> See Burke, C. and Grosvenor, I. (2003) *The School I'd Like*. Children and Young People's Reflections on an Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. London. RoutledgeFalmer.

<sup>9</sup> JT Bignold Notes.

pale green gloss used below dado level. There is a lot of yellow too. (Yellow looks like green if it is not directly lit).

Reflections on the visual tour of the school included this from one of the Research Cluster members,

*'I was struck by the discrepancy in size between adults and children. In some ways the building seemed to underline this rather than diminish it. It is an adult scale building – the doors and windows are big, with ironmongery mounted at adult rather than child height, so that children can't open the windows themselves. The window calls are mostly too high to give a view out when you are sitting down'.<sup>10</sup>*

The view of the child is not usually taken into account in the design of spaces for children, either generally or specifically. Yet the children in their visual and spoken record revealed the importance of wall displays, coat hooks, secret gardens and what mattered most to them, which a designer would not normally find out about by other methods. In effect, in a very short time, it was possible to glean a series of spatial maps from the information given by the children, a reading of territories often invisible to adults and unintended by architects. We discovered that it is possible to 'read' the school in a series of applied layers that reflect spatial ownership so that for example the children's wall displays and personal territories are the result, to some extent, of their choice and intervention; the classroom as a whole reflects the teacher's choices in layout, perhaps even wall and carpet colours. A further layer concerns the question of who has which classroom in the school and who decides. Although it may not be possible for the architect to incorporate the child's layer specifically in the design, he/she can at least envisage how that contribution might be incorporated when it arrives.

The building we researched with the children is a compilation of layers in time, identifiable one by one going back to the Victorian original. As often in such cases later layers have obstructed the virtues of earlier parts, for example the daylight-driven Victorian rooms being destroyed by lowered ceilings and blacked-out or dark-glass windows, or the accidental creation of a main entrance which does not adequately declare itself as such. But the old school in its evolved and mixed-up form has two advantages: - the first is that the fabric is embedded with memories

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<sup>10</sup> RC notes

and past encounters, an accumulation of gestures which has provided continuity between generations as opposed to a tabula rasa rebuild which would express only current styles, construction techniques and educational priorities. The second is the sheer untidy complexity of the whole, which allows for all kinds of interpretation and prompts various deliberate or accidental redevelopments, as a cumulative tradition in which each generation makes its mark in turn. A new building is by contrast likely to be simple, monothematic, unambiguous, and almost devoid of memory.<sup>11</sup>

With schools like this the temptation is to declare the fabric inadequate and to destroy and rebuild, with a tendency to move fast, implementing a standardised solution which staff and pupils have to adapt themselves to, suddenly changing their ways of doing things but also losing the accumulated memory of the institution as defined in built form. If it is to be done well, there should be time for consultation, exploration, participation, both to produce an environment suited to pragmatic needs, and to get the users in tune with the idea of their new environment so that they feel empowered rather than oppressed. But if instead the old school is remade and maybe add to, it would be possible to preserve recent memories and to rediscover earlier ones: for example to restore the best parts of the Victorian buildings and their day lighting provision. Such a project could be a wonderful subject for historical research by staff and pupils into what the school had been like at various periods, and the conversion/extension could be done a wing at a time with detailed participation, allowing continuity. The complexity would be preserved, the pragmatic efficiency greatly increased, and the memories carried by the building would be selectively re-edited. "We rebuild our school" is an educational vehicle full of enticing possibilities, and if parents become involved so much the better.<sup>12</sup>

### **Insights into the view of the child**

The early years theorist, Carlina Rinaldi *suggests* that we question 'what is a school, who is the child?' and has said 'These are not definitions you can find but one you can build together.' Central to our discussions over the year has been the question not only how do children see school and bring to school a visual lexicon drawn from the landscapes in which they live and learn which may influence their notion of what

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<sup>11</sup> These remarks are taken from the notes of Cluster Member, Professor Peter Blundell-Jones. PBJ  
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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

it could or should be but also, how do these ideas fit alongside community and professional answers to these same questions.

There is an honourable history of educationalists and architects collaborating in the redesign of school buildings to realise advances in pedagogy through the material and visual environment. The cluster became more aware of this history as we progressed and the importance of underpinning or projections to the future with a sound understanding of the past. The exchanges through the year embedded the commitment to participatory research with children and young people and enabled the exploration and illumination of cross disciplinary perspectives. The significance of the visual culture of school is poorly understood and children are certainly well placed to advise. What unites the cluster is a belief in the value of listening to children and that given a chance to offer their ideas and views and tell of their experience, children can make adults think differently and see the possibilities of change. What we have learned is that in future projects we must work to involve children as active participants where we can. We must engage in action projects that bring about change, not just comment on it. We need to act educationally whatever backgrounds we bring with us to the study

Prakash Nair has noted how research consistently points to students' engagement as the most important condition for learning and notes that social and emotional skills are more important determinants for success than technical expertise.<sup>13</sup> For the future, the cluster will aim to establish research webs of linked schools who are involved in re-design or new build in the UK and abroad and using an innovative image-based action research strategy, seek to illuminate the practical realisation of children's perspectives in design.

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<sup>13</sup> Nair, Prakash (2003). Planning schools as symbols of change [Electronic Version]. *The Council of Facility Planners International's Educational Facility Planner*, 38, 1-9.

