



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Active art/design: case studies from collaborative public art projects *with* children in Queensland, Australia.

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Abstract: This paper will explore the author's involvement with public art projects at Queensland schools and his interaction with children in the creation of the finished works. The paper will discuss the framework for including children, the benefits of process in (re)negotiating boundaries and relationships within the school and the value of an inclusive and collaborative approach to creating meaning for children in the school environment.

Key words: Public Art, Collaborative Art, Alternative Learning Methods, Art/Design Process, Children's Art, Art and Change.

Introduction

Design as an activity is often focused on a particular outcome and involves working with the associated opportunities and constraints. Art on the other hand is more open and much less concerned with the functional and economic requirements of design. Play is often considered to share the "openness" of art and there is a long history associating play with art- as Ellen Handler Spitz writes (Spitz, 2009, P111);

.....claims about the association of play and art have occurred in such profusion that it would be daunting to make a compendium of all those who have set forth relevant ideas. A brief eclectic list of authors who have done so either explicitly or implicitly from a variety of disciplines might feature philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau, poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Baudelaire, and Rilke, the cultural historian Huizinga and art historian Gombrich, as well as literary critic Benjamin and psychoanalysts Freud, Erikson, and Winnicott, but such a list would exclude an impressive array of visual artists who have likewise made such claim.

However, what qualifies as either play or art is so broadly defined, that gambling and found objects could both be included as could sport and graffiti. Of course there are also differences between play and art but in a general sense there is a perception that the activity of making art and play both involve a type of freedom and openness to process that is not associated with the technical and scientific attitude of design. Interestingly, children often ask if they can “play” on a computer, possibly because it is enjoyable and the outcome of computer-based activities can also be open to personal exploration.

To what extent then is there a contradiction between play (art?) and design and is there necessarily a tension in this context of working with children? Design can provide the necessary structure for play, much like the rules in sport, the software on a computer or playground equipment and it would be unreasonable to expect children to incorporate practical requirements such as safety if designed by themselves. Is it possible then to include children a design process that satisfies the pragmatic requirements of a project and also reflect the desirable qualities of a contribution/participation by children?

I have been involved with a number of public art projects in Queensland that have included children in the process of creating the finished works and where I adopted a collaborative approach because I felt an authentic reflection of the children could not be *designed* by adults. Including the children also meant their participation contributed to the sense of meaning the finished artworks would have for them and their families.

Although in each case the children’s work had to be further developed to facilitate production of the physical outcome (the actual public art) the process resulted in the production of images with an expressive quality that seems more generally available to children and more difficult for adults. Perhaps this expression results from children being less self-conscious and indeed much less aware of the practical constraints relating to the physical production of work; and possibly from a naivety not yet influenced by the structure of conditioning. Whatever the reason, it seems that this “openness” is a crucial ingredient of art and importantly should be an essential element of design for children.

I want to suggest that the outcome of any art process is influenced by an awareness of the context in which the work will be shown; the physical location, such as a gallery wall and the audience, such as that in a contemporary art gallery. The romantic notion of art as a ‘free’ activity is undermined by the orthodoxy of the contemporary art world, which like any subculture requires conformity for acceptance; even if this involves appearing to be radical. With public art there is often a design element due to consideration of materials,

safety, maintenance, budget, etc and it is important that the artist is aware of the context associated with location and audience.

There is also an expectation that children will conform to expectations with regard to outcomes at school, which may be appropriate and easily defined for subjects such as mathematics, where there is a "correct" process/answer that every student needs to arrive at. However, the opposite is true for art where there is no "correct" outcome and the expectation is that each student will arrive at a different outcome; and one that is not easily measured. My experience at schools in Queensland was that students were also conscious of the teacher's expectations with regard to outcome and the need to produce something the teacher would approve/like. Indeed, it seemed that the older the student the more likely the teacher/institution would have an influence in this regard, particularly as the teacher was often required to allocate a "mark" of grade to the student's work. My own experience as a lecturer is that students who are working towards "what (they feel) is required for a good grade" are often trying to second guess my personal preference, which can act as an impediment to creativity.

One of the benefits then of the projects I have been involved with is that each provided the students (and teachers) an opportunity to produce work for a context outside that normally operating in the class room. In this sense the artist has an important role as an "outsider" (without wanting to position art in this context in relation to society) and the public artworks provide a real, tangible and different context for which students could imagine their work. This change in dynamic also needs to be seen in relation to the school's human and resource commitment to a project, which signals its importance and value to the school community and further changes the context in which the student is engaged.

At Kelvin Grove State College Junior School I was involved with the creation of a gateway to commemorate the school's 130th anniversary and the opening of a new preschool building in 2005. The school, in inner city Brisbane has approximately 250 students ranging in age from four to ten and after initial discussions with the principal and staff from the art department it was decided to involve every child in the process of creating the gate. This was a rather daunting prospect at the beginning and one that required a framework for interacting with the children at different levels and with an educational outcome for each group.



Figure.1 The finished gate at Kelvin Grove State College, Queensland

Practical considerations such as the construction schedule suggested that I create a design for the gate that could later accommodate students work and my primary task in this regard was in designing the physical context and the process through which the students could be involved. The interaction with teachers and students was of course the essential part of the project and I worked with each class, showing my work and the concept for the gate before involving students in the creation of images. Students were asked to draw a self-portrait/figure and older students were taught through a series of workshops how to achieve this using vector-based software. As it was not possible to include 250 figures on the gate we decided not to identify the students whose work was chosen, which mitigated disappointment for the younger students even if the older ones were aware of whose work was selected.

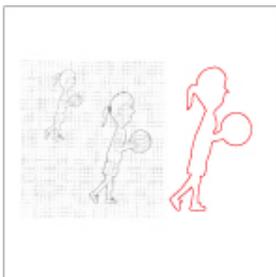


Figure.2 Child's drawing and vector adjustment for fabrication.

A second project in 2008 at Nundah Community Health Centre in suburban Brisbane also involved working with children at the local primary school. The public art at Nundah was developed using native flora as a theme, both to acknowledge the link between flowers and health and to create a connection with the local environment. The project involved the representation of flora in the form of simple line drawing, children's drawings and computer-modeled 3d flowers with the increased sophistication of representation developing as the viewer moved into and through the building. The inclusion of a playground at the centre further reinforced the need for the children's involvement, as did the desire to create a connection and sense of place for the local community. As with Kelvin Grove I found it difficult to replicate (fake?) the style and character of children's drawings and their involvement therefore contributed to the authenticity of the work.



Figure. 3 The finished Playground Panels at Nundah Community Health Centre, Queensland.

However, both projects required the initial children's drawings to be adapted for fabrication as they were to be CNC (computer-numeric-control) cut in either aluminum or timber, which involved converting many of the drawings to vector files after scanning. While some drawings did not easily lend themselves to fabrication due to issues such a complexity of detail and there was obviously a degree of subjectivity in selection, it was important to choose images that were representative of the range of ages at the schools. In this sense both projects provided an interesting range of the cognitive and representational ability of children and I was keen to represent this in the finished artworks.



Figure. 4 Drawings by five-year olds - girls sometimes produced more colourful work

It was also important to ensure that the vector files were as close as possible to the initial drawings so that the works maintained the qualities that reflected their creation by children. The figures (Kelvin Grove) and flowers (Nundah) had an abstract quality that was particularly suited to the physical limitation of the CNC process and the materials being used. In short, the images had a graphic quality that facilitated the material interface, but one which relied on the digitization of the images (the vector format); on mediation though technology. Nanyoung Kim addresses abstraction and the graphic structure in children's artworks in his paper; *Ernst H. Gombrich, Pictorial Representation, and Some Issues in Art Education* (Nanyoung Kim, 2004, P 36);

According to Gombrich, picture making does not start with the recording of a visual impression on the retina, but with constructing a graphic structure that shows our mind's basic conceptual understanding of the world. Gombrich called this structure "schema." Even though Gombrich rarely used children's drawing as an example, the presence of schema is most apparent in children's drawing.....Earlier schemata are more universal and simpler, not because younger children have more power of abstraction, but because their schemata reflect the early, less differentiated stage of their cognitive categorization.

This graphic and abstract style of the children's work also contributes to an economy of representation and an emphasis on line that fits with modernist values for drawing, which not necessarily intended by the children. In this sense some of the images "capture" or express something essential about a gesture, action or stance in the way that the reductive attitude of abstract and minimalist art sought to find some essence in an economy of representation. This is apparent in the drawings shown in Figure 5 by children aged 8.



Figure.5 Children's drawings (adjusted). Solid colour as on gate.

Interestingly, there was little difference in the style or figurative depiction along gender lines with both boys and girls showing themselves involved in various activities such as art, music or sport, although the colour preference/scheme for girls was less conservative and brighter among older children's drawing of flowers. This general lack of gender differentiation was also noted in the large multi-national project, *Twelve Visions of the World: Drawings from Young People in Different Parts of the World* that collected over sixteen-hundred drawing by 15 - 18 year olds (Torres Eca, Teresa 2009, P4);

The great majority of the drawings were figurative, although there were some abstract drawings with titles relating to feelings and emotions. We could not find significant differences between boys and girls drawings.

A project in Dublin with children aged four and five, *"A Slice of Life": The Interrelationships among Art, Play and the "Real" Life of the Young Child* found that cognitive style and gender were not connected and that around half the children produced drawing with a fantasy element (Ní Bhroin, Máire.2007, P1);

Individual differences in "cognitive style" unrelated to gender also emerged. Just over half of the children extended their actual experiences into the realm of fantasy in their art and play while the remainder tended to be factual, depicting and re-enacting "real" life events as they experienced them.

The same level of fantasy related drawings was not as apparent at Kelvin Gove, possibly because the students were asked to create a particular image; a figure/self-portrait. Nevertheless, fantasy was more apparent among the younger children, which would correlate with the findings in Dublin. Figure 6 shows drawings (from left to right) by children aged 4, 9 and 7, with the youngest child depicting himself as a Transformer - a type of action toy. The oldest child shows an awareness of the viewer and is therefore more self-conscious.



Figure.6 Children's drawings (adjusted). Solid colours as on gate.

While art is often discussed and taught with a focus on outcome (the finished product) the value of process and of art as an activity is often overlooked. At Kelvin Grove for example, a major benefit of the project was the extent to which we were able to integrate art and design with digital technologies to provide a new context for the learning experience of the older children. This approach was also used in a third project I did with adolescents at Mountain Creek State High School during 2006 when students were involved in computer workshops over a fourteen-week period and worked with local industry to design, fabricate and install a mural at the school. In this instance the age of the students meant they had a much wider envelope of responsibility for the finished work than would be possible for younger children. In this sense the artist/teacher has to reframe the relationship to the student and the work they produce and the "real" context of the public art project meant that the normal value system associated with assessment and the teacher's role in this were not appropriate. While the public art outcome is important the process of trusting students with a tangible public outcome and the responsibility associated with this is also valuable. To quote Nanyoung Kim again on the activity of drawing (Nanyoung Kim, 2004, P 42);

Therefore what is crucial for reaping those benefits of drawing is not the drawing act itself, but all the other variables and conditions that make the drawing act possible and enjoyable: all the direct or indirect experiences that children can draw from, all the re-sources and references that prompt their imagination, and all the meaningful interactions that children have with other children and teachers. If those conditions are met, there must after all be emotional and cognitive benefits.....



Figure.7 The finished mural at Mountain Creek State High School

A public art project can therefore operate to (re)negotiate the boundaries associated with the classification of activities/subjects that possibly reflect something of the typology of Western science and indeed, digital technologies have worked as both tools and media to blur these boundaries. A resulting problem for teachers and institutions can be the pace of change; for example in keeping pace with the complexity of software or in funding the equipment required to keep technology current. Teachers also need time to learn new skills and to explore and develop pedagogical frameworks for new technologies. A public art project can therefore provide an opportunity to work outside the normal, everyday context and allows teachers to explore new possibilities for learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *open* character of art and play can lead to successful project outcomes that work on multiple levels; pedagogical, artistic and community engagement for example. However, the participants and particularly the school/teachers must be willing to trust and respond to the process - a problem the teachers at the high school remarked on. The artist therefore has an important role in facilitating the process and negotiating the new context for established relationships. Of course, the artist must also trust the process and surrender to it the usual ownership of the outcome. The artist becomes the enabler rather than the creator of the artwork through the design of a process that facilitates participation by staff and students. To quote Geetha Narayanan from her paper

A Dangerous but Powerful Idea - Counter Acceleration and Speed with Slowness and Wholeness (Narayanan, G. 2006, P6);

Therefore, in contrast to conventional pedagogy, which aims to be child-centered and teacher driven, this pedagogy, is child-negotiated and teacher-framed. Beauty and rhythm, aesthetics and ethics form a core to a process of learning that is design based and project driven. Learning by and through design; using the arts as ways of seeing, looking and telling, form valuable approaches to this vision.

To me the new digital technologies are tools that allow for learners to develop their imaginations, to be able to play and to have fun, to be able to tell stories in different and exciting ways. But in order to generate value they need to be integrated into new forms and structures in an invisible and contextual manner, so that they work slowly and with great finesse to create an unquiet and critical pedagogy - one where new media arts can sustain social change.

However, this change requires a focus on process and attention to the relationships involved. Unfortunately, there is a tendency in the West at least to see education in terms of outcome; like a design process with a specific *product* in mind. Perhaps art (and play) can help reclaim the process if we are prepared to be open with regard to outcomes.

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