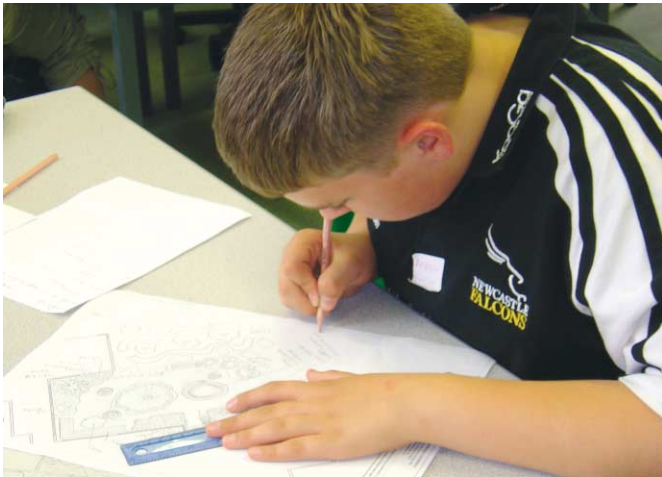


Potential through participation



GIVING CHILDREN A VOICE IS A CRUCIAL PART OF THE DESIGN PROCESS FOR SCHOOL GROUNDS. LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT IAN SIMKINS OUTLINES THE FINDINGS FROM HIS EXPERIENCES OF SUCH CONSULTATION

DQI for Schools

The Design Quality Indicator (DQI) for Schools, launched in December 2005, was developed in partnership by the Construction Industry Council and the Department for Education and Skills. It is a tool which provides a framework for the assessment of school design and is used to assist teachers, parents, school governors, pupils, people from the community, clients and building professionals achieve design excellence in new school buildings and grounds. In the initial stage it is used to help form a consensus about priorities and ambitions for the new or refurbished school building.

During the design phase, the DQI for Schools is used to assess how well the plans for the new building meet the objectives that were set out in the initial stages. Then, once the building is completed and in use, the DQI for Schools tool is used to assess how well it functions in relation to the ambitions of users that were set out at the start of the process.

The DQI for Schools tool is made up of a number of specific statements about school design which address how well the buildings and grounds function, their build quality and their impact on users and the community. Examples of issues the tool covers include:

- Do the school grounds provide a safe and stimulating environment for children?
- Is there adequate space to allow for all the functions required for good school grounds, both now and in the future?
- Does the design of the grounds provide for the whole of the formal and informal curriculum? (The informal curriculum is the time spent at school, but not in the classroom, and includes play and break-times.)

William Hawkins, policy and operations manager, design quality, Construction Industry Council

Visit: www.dqi.org.uk/schools and www.cic.org.uk

THE EVERYDAY 'LOCAL environment' routinely encountered by children is increasingly highlighted as an important contributor to their social development and general health and well-being. Evidence suggests that there is significant loss of connection between children and outdoor settings and that this may have long-term implications. Author and environmentalist Ken Worpole has highlighted this, placing importance on providing for, and giving voice to, children in policy, planning, design and management of public open space within the urban renaissance agenda (see *No Particular Place to Go: children, young people and public space*, Groundwork UK, 2003).

One important issue is that the voices of children must play a pivotal role in the arrangement and content of places they routinely encounter. Thus, ways to understand their notions of place, as an essential component of individual and social development, are required. In practice, it is evident that children's participative techniques exist, however they often focus on aesthetics, technical resolution and physical features, and are frequently tokenistic. What is lacking is sufficient consideration of aspects of children's experience of place that can promote positive behaviour, place attachment and a sense of well-being.

Research findings

A research project that I am currently working on is attempting to address these issues, as well as discovering how to effectively translate experiential aspects into a form amenable to spatial design disciplines. There can be significant differences in the place

perception of adults and children and, in particular, 'professionals' involved in the design of places to be used by and inhabited by children. There have been numerous occasions encountered in research and practice when this has become apparent. During a project to improve environmental quality at a primary school, for example, the 'professional' perception of the existing site concluded that it was a two-dimensional, characterless space of 'tarmac-savannah' bounded by a low metal fence with no apparent aesthetic qualities or redeeming features. This was identified as an obvious site for improvement and proposals were required to replace the fence with one to be erected in a straight line to match the other boundaries and relate better with the building.

Workshops with the children, however, revealed this as one of the only significant external 'places' in the otherwise bland playground. This was because, due to a previous use, the fence deviated to produce a 'corral' effect open on one side. This was routinely used as a gathering point, a place to shelter from a stray football, and, above all and most significantly, as a point of social interaction with siblings, since the fence was low enough to allow children to engage with younger brothers and sisters in the neighbouring infant playground. Replacing the fence would have risked removing these opportunities.

On another occasion, a fence was also described as a favourite place during interviews with children. This was a plain, galvanised, unpainted, 1.8m-high security fence with spikes on top and, again, something regarded by

“It is evident that children’s participative techniques exist, however they often focus on aesthetics, technical resolution and physical features and are frequently tokenistic”

However, we can only learn the real significance of place attachment and social activity associated with location if we adopt appropriate methods to engage with children. These must be capable of revealing the subtlety involved in how children assign meaning to place through informal and sometimes clandestine social activity that is frequently overlooked by conventional methods.

Part of our response to this has been to concentrate on trying to reveal the collective personality of a place and then to have this reflected in the design. What this means is that anywhere used as intensively as a school will have the habits and activities, personal preferences, meanings and associations, of all its users – adult as well as children – projected into the physical surroundings.

These places are as much the product of mind as they are material fabric and if this can be imbued into the way improvements are conducted, then a greater sense of place attachment and ownership should be generated. In other words, the resulting scheme means more because it resonates better with the collective personality already there. ▶



All images (unless otherwise stated): Ian Simkins and Kevin Thwaites

professional inspection as a problem to solve. To the children, however, this was the place where they went to find spiders.

Appropriate methods

Not only do these examples illustrate that places significant in the routine lives of young children do not always correspond with conventional professional priorities, but also that there is a risk of loss rather than gain if this fails to emerge during site and user surveys. We do not assert that these places should necessarily always be preserved, or that beneficial opportunities for the children might not arise from the proposed improvements.

We will need!

Logs, trees, flowers, a path, some benches, a pond with a net over the pond, a bird table and a patio tree bench.

What we feel like!

Chilled, relaxed, having fun, warm, charm, fresh, like everything is new born, crisp and everything is a live.

What everything look likes!

Colourful, alive, cheerful, happy, fresh and relaxed.

Above: The use of word pictures is used as a means of revealing experiential meanings of place – children describe the quality of sensations and experience that they would like a place to have before thinking about the space itself

LTL initiatives

School grounds currently make up 63 per cent of all school estate and are places where children spend up to 25 per cent of their school day. Yet, for the majority, these places are unstimulating and unwelcoming. Learning through Landscapes (LTL), the national school grounds charity, believes that children and young people are entitled to well-designed and managed grounds and has spent the past 15 years advocating, championing and working in partnership with others to realise this vision.

Emerging trends

Children seem to be at the very heart of the current Government agenda that includes: an ambitious capital investment programme in schools; the ‘Extended school’ initiative to place schools at the heart of communities; and a new priority for children’s health and play through new Big Lottery Fund programmes. LTL is seeking to influence these and other agenda through effective partnerships and programme delivery.

Building Schools for the Future (BSF)

The Government’s £7bn investment into schools is long overdue but, unfortunately, school grounds are all too often the last aspect of school design to be thought of, and the first element to be cut when budgets are strained. To combat this, LTL has been working with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to manage a BSF pilot programme to develop exemplar approaches to school grounds design, use and management. LTL is also working with DfES to produce *Schools for the Future: Designing School Grounds* – a new publication as part of the existing DfES build design series. The publication draws on the pilot and highlights how well-designed school grounds can have a massive impact on children’s development. It will be published in spring 2006.

Play in educational settings

LTL has joined forces with a number of partners from the play sector to organise ‘Play in educational settings’ – a consultation about the importance of play in schools, children’s centres and other educational establishments. LTL hopes to use this to lobby Government on the importance of play in schools and to influence the allocation of some of the £155m Big Lottery funding for children’s play into school grounds.

WORKOUT in school grounds

WORKOUT is the latest new toolkit from LTL that is aimed at secondary schools. The toolkit encourages students, teachers and practitioners to get out and be actively involved with improving the use, design and management of secondary school grounds.

Gary Burn, director, programmes and partnerships, LTL

Visit: www.ltl.org.uk

◀ Part of this process resides with the act of participation itself. It has long been recognised by some scholars involved in place theory research that a sense of place is often more robustly embedded when there has been collective and cooperative effort involved in its creation or re-creation. In response, participative processes have been developed to bring out the 'personality' of place. Part of this

Right: Two-dimensional, characterless spaces of 'tarmacadam-savannah' perhaps, but even such spaces can hold special significance for children that is only revealed



in workshops



involves the use of word pictures as a means of revealing experiential meanings of place. Children describe something of the quality of sensations and experience that they would like a place to have before thinking about objects and spaces. The idea is to heighten awareness of sensations and feelings that they value about the school now, and to think about others they would like to have.

The word picture has proved very effective with schoolchildren who are used to being asked to express their feelings through poems and prose. It often produces more profound ideas, expressed in greater detail, than is often the case when using other techniques. One Year 8 student (13 years old) described her aspirations for her school's grounds: 'What we will feel like! Chilled, relaxed, having fun, warm, charm, fresh, like everything is new born, crisp and everything is alive'.

The 'essence' of what makes a place special is, by implication, place specific and, at one school, this became related to psychological associations of 'security' ▶

School grounds design: case study

Insite Environments is a Newcastle and North Yorkshire-based landscape practice. Formed in 1992, the company employs 27 people on projects across the UK and overseas. Currently, the team has around five school commissions on the go, and has completed more than 20 education projects, ranging from small schemes for individual schools to

participation in multi-million pound Private Finance Initiative and Public Private Partnership (PFI/PPP) and Building Schools for the Future (BSF) projects.

The team looks at the qualities of each site and school population, and tailors the solution accordingly. If there can be said to be any over-riding design ethos emerging from this, it would be a general belief that learning environments should provide vibrant, functional and sustainable spaces, supporting the activities and needs of school and community through innovative use of space, materials and physical features. A good level of consultation with the school is essential, ideally extending to representatives from the surrounding community. Awareness of a fourth dimension in school design is also paramount – the school grounds must be capable of evolving and adapting as the school's needs change.

Insite may become involved in school projects at various stages and in differing roles. In an ideal scenario, this can be as early as helping to formulate the brief, prioritising features to be preserved or new elements to be introduced. Engaging with the school, local education authority and local community – and with all the other key disciplines of planning, architecture and engineering – is always of benefit to achieving consensus in the final proposals.

One example of this approach, which we found particularly enjoyable, was a two-day design festival organised by School Works for the City of Sunderland and the DfES. As external design facilitators, we ran workshops to engage a range of people who would eventually teach, learn, play and socialise in the new schools. The pupils' enthusiasm in brainstorming ideas for playgrounds, courtyards and habitat areas, and communicating these effectively through



Insite Environments

collages and presentations was inspiring, affirming our view that we should have more confidence in pupils contributing intuitive and original design ideas for their school environment.

When it comes to working on a PFI/BSF bid, the company inevitably finds itself alongside several design, technical, construction and facilities management professionals. This helps achieve an integrated solution, eliminating design faults before they turn into operational problems. This is a challenging role and bidding consortia require well resourced, experienced landscape teams with an ability to form dynamic relationships between other team members and the school community.

Bid periods usually run for three to four months and, on average, include three to six schools (although on one occasion we tackled 16 schools within the one project!). The practice typically offers a core team for each project with additional services, such as 3D graphics, available to help visualise the proposals. PFI/BSF projects often require long hours and may carry a significant element of financial risk, but the work is rewarding and creates a real buzz around the office.

The BSF programme is well placed to pick up on the trend to combine young and adult education, library, sporting and leisure facilities at the hub of regenerating communities. If developed correctly – as in well designed, drawing on input from both the school and its local community – school grounds can: become an inspiring extension to the public realm; pick up on local distinctiveness; and offer much more flexibility to respond to changing school, curricula and community needs than traditional high streets, parks and other adopted environments.

Jon Eachus, senior landscape architect, Insite Environments Visit: www.insite-e.co.uk

CABE's role

CABE's enabling programme aims to provide support to clients, in order to ensure that the building projects they are trying to deliver match their aspirations in terms of design quality, function and affordability. The enabling staff manage the programme and provide technical assistance. In addition, there are over 100 leading professionals on the enabling panel. These professionals, referred to as enablers, are individuals who are appointed to work on behalf of CABE to assist client organisations.

Support for Building Schools for the Future (BSF)

CABE appoints enablers to provide strategic design advice to the local authorities at the forefront of BSF. Working closely with the local education authority and the local authority teams, CABE enablers are promoting the value of good design and suggesting a range of practical measures for local education authorities to adopt as their projects progress.

RIBA client design advisor

CABE and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) are working together to offer further, more hands-on advice on design to clients. They have produced an accredited list of RIBA members who have the skills necessary to advise clients on the design issues within complex building projects.

Visit: www.architecture.com.

Picturing school design: A visual guide to secondary school buildings and their surroundings using the DQI for Schools



Picturing school design, published in December 2005, illustrates various approaches to key design issues within the school site and building. Aimed at head teachers, teachers, management staff, pupils, governors and all stakeholders in schools, this new CABE publication will stimulate discussion, while passing on best practice through clear examples, to those involved in design of schools. The booklet is available from the CABE website.

Mima Bone, enabling programme officer
Visit: www.cabe.org.uk

◀ that children projected onto the geometric form of a circle. The importance of the circle became apparent in workshops as a shape that held strong associations with the certain time of day they engaged in 'circle time'. During this time, they got together as a class with the teacher, sitting on the floor in a circle, to openly discuss issues that troubled them, including issues of bullying and other 'social' problems. The circle seemed to be a recurring theme associated with social significance, sharing and mutual support to the children. So the subsequent design for the landscape used the circle as a way of subliminally engendering this same sense of 'safety' and familiarity. It was also a place that could be used for circle time as an alternative to the classroom.

Beyond the classroom

The experiential qualities of the school grounds are only one facet of the design process. It is equally important to make sure that they are seen (and used) as a learning opportunity, where both formal curriculum-based learning can be extended from the classroom environment, and that opportunities for informal learning through play and social interaction are embraced.

Extending beyond the classroom can also involve perceptions of place attachment in the wider neighbourhood – a realm which is equally important in the spatial repertoire of children, but often overlooked. In an attempt to address some of these issues, our study now focuses on the 'school run'. The Department for Education and Skills has highlighted the importance of enhancing the potential of the school run to promote positive behaviour and choice by giving children a say on improving school journeys.

Our study has evolved through practice-based field work over a number of years and augmented by a wider research project about the experiential dimensions of place experience. Early studies developed and refined a multi-method approach, employing various qualitative participative techniques. The current research employs a range of these, designed to access different facets of children's place perceptions. These include semi-structured interviewing, which uses predetermined themes to guide conversation. Themes are categorised into three areas of interest:



Left: Children's special places include areas with 'loads of trees that are really huddly, which cover you'

"Findings from interviews have highlighted the often-poetic nature of children's place experiences"

physical objects and features; human experience; and place making.

Three primary schools are involved in the study, which focuses on engaging with children from Years 3 and 6 (seven to eight, and ten to 11 years) at each school. The first phase of interviews has now been completed and preliminary observations have proved to reveal a rich source of data for informing design decision-making processes.

In general, this is reinforcing our belief that we should not ignore the effect or significance of the everyday environment and its impact on children's behaviour and well-being. Findings from the interviews to date have highlighted the often-poetic nature of children's place experiences. They report, for example, the pleasure of watching 'long grass swaying' on a windy day, to driving through 'a long arch of trees' that on a sunny day is fun, 'like an electric light going on and off'; or having a favourite place to go such as the 'flower beds, with loads of flowers and lots of colours' and 'the feeling of hope you get from them, even when there are no flowers on them, because you know they will come again'. Another seven-year-old girl's favourite place was described as: 'the prairie, it's got loads of trees that are really huddly, which cover you'. It may be significant that many of these comments appear to allude to pleasurable, comforting feelings, often related to a sense of enclosure, and to familiar objects and experiences.

Research into the wider spatial implications of these findings and their potential relevance to design processes involving children continues. ■



Ian Simkins, a chartered landscape architect and freelance landscape consultant, is co-founder with Kevin Thwaites (department of landscape, University of Sheffield) of *elp:rdu* – a research facility. Simkins also lectures on urban design and is an active member of Urban Sustainability through Environmental Design – an international network of sustainable urban design, with special emphasis on public space.
Visit: www.elp.rdu.com and www.usted-urbandesign.org