From Alley to Garden:

Co-Creating Spaces Through a Build-Design Process

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From Alley to Garden: Co-Creating Spaces Through a Build-Design Process

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The transient visual aesthetics of the DIY has become apparent in the contemporary city. Public spaces that are created from simple "at-hand" materials have a different expression from the more permanent city. But these instant hand-made spaces are made in stark contrast to how public sites are usually planned, designed and build. They allow for a whole different way of engaging users in not only the design but also the construction phase of a project. Thus the phenomenon of co-creating environments by hand from available resources has emerged in urban design as a potential way to involve citizens in the creation of space in 1:1 (Oswalt 2013).

At the University of Copenhagen we have explored methods of facilitating a process of constructing outdoor spaces with children through an on-site building process. The aim of this practice based experimental research project was to test methods of engagement and to examine if the involvement had any impact on the following practices and use of the space. We also wanted to examine how these methods could be understood, compared to more traditional planning, design and production processes and typical representational post-it user involvement.

The project involved children and staff from the youth club Klokkergården situated in a multicultural district of Copenhagen. The area is quite challenged with vandalism and social problems. For many of these kids the youth club constituted a second home supported by a highly committed staff. Therefore a more immediate aim was to help the club transform a site adjacent to their club house from abandoned unpleasant alley into a lush lounge garden atmosphere.

Engaging the kids in a representational design process revealed very open and simple site ambitions. Planting beds, a place to be outside on ones own terms and a fire place were the most immediate needs. They had a dream of having their own green space where kids (and locals) could hang out and learn about growing vegetables. The research team sketched out a rough design and a process where as many of the building activities could include kids and staff. We designed a series of modular elements that could be moved around along with some more unique and site specific features: Seven planting beds in two different heights tinted black to add depth, five wooden benches, a terrace floor to break the monotony of the asphalt surface and a fireplace encircled by some big logs for seating. The aim was to create a flexible but still robust space scaled down into several niches and hang out spots. With the involving building process we hoped would enhance the children's connection to the space and thereby bridge the gap between use and care of the garden.

FIGURE 1. Collecting wood in the forest for the building process.

FIGURE 2. Wood is being assembled into terrace floors.

The Making

Together we began the process of transforming the alley into an urban garden organized around building activities. Children and youth participated in collecting wood, creating the terrace floors, assembling and painting the planting beds and making moss graffiti. Some of the more energized kids were instructed in taking down trees and using chain saws. It might seem reckless to invite exactly these kids into this kind of activity but it turned out to make sense to funnel their enormous energy into handling and cutting timber. The release of energy also enhanced their commitment to the process. The demanding physical activity like moving gravel and stumping the wood floor gave a great sense of accomplishment that was later confirmed in interviews to build from wood that they had participated in harvesting (Lamm, Wagner, Skaarup 2013).

It was a joint build process where kids, staff and researchers co-created the space united by a common goal. Organizing participation possibilities for the kids in the building process turned out to be a valuable experience for everyone. But the kids needed specific tangible tasks that yield immediate results and this required a strong facilitation. It helped the process when we organized building around social activities like making hot coco over the bonfire. Using wood made it possible to adapt design solutions on site.

The method had some interesting implications for the design process and particularly for learning about space through the act of hand crafting it. The making itself seemed to embed spatial knowledge and commitment to the new garden into the children on a much deeper level than had we only involved them through representational methods. Bench heights were tested and defined on site and mended together with hand held tools that the children could also manage. These small-scale hand crafted spaces point towards alternative design process and production methods through which we can learn about space itself. It also empowers and suggests that the definition of the public spaces is not only an authoritative gesture but something that we as citizens can take into our own hands – literally.

Several of the staff members of the youth club had craftsman skills that were instrumental for the construction phase. One introduced a historic building technique into the process by using dowels as an alternative to screws. The collaborative process we learned had been a valuable experience for everyone where children, staff and researchers worked together united by a common goal. The process had strong social value as everyone was learning about people and place making beyond social categories driven by a mutual goal.

This phenomenon of embodied learning is backed up by the anthropologist Tim Ingolds and his theories around "thinking through making". As Ingolds states "in the art of inquiry, the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answers to, the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work [….]. Here, every work is an experiment: not in a natural scientific sense of testing a preconceived hypothesis, or of engineering a confrontation between ideas "in the head" and facts "on the ground", but in the sense of prising an opening and following where it leads" (Ingolds 2013). The materials lead the way and the interaction with them enhances our awareness of our self and our environment.

The outcome was a robust and well composed garden space where the wood added warmth and a strong sent of forest to a rather unappealing urban site. At the opening in December 2012 the locals were invited for soup, movies and music in the garden.

After Instalment

The Youth club organized excursions to organic farms to learn about growing vegetables so they could apply the learnings in their own space. At a harvest party kids prepared vegetables over the bonfire and gained attention from the mayor who opened the event. Each event and experience has been a success, but it has been difficult for the club to keep the continuity of managing the garden. There was no one to water the planting beds over the summer and a renovation process of the adjacent building made access to the alley difficult.

FIGURE 3. Kids are learning about using tools.

FIGURE 4. The final garden space in winter.

In the following months we discovered that the youth club had started adapting and changing other areas around their location. They had experienced first-hand how simple it was to create useful spaces. A green patch was furnished with benches, flowers were planted by the entrance and a large asphalt area was marked with line for soccer. It seemed that the process of design building their garden had opened the possibility that space can be used and changed through own initiatives.

The garden is in an area of vandalism and at the beginning many anticipate that the wood would be torched. So far the site has been treated with respect, the fact that the kids have gained ownership through their active involvement we believe played a significant role in the garden remaining un-vandalised. Later we learned from the municipality of Copenhagen that other social initiatives have been unable to reach these kids. Therefore we were contacted by the municipality who wanted to learn how a co-creative building process can also create meaning, learning experiences and possibly social changes.

Potential of Hand-Made Spaces

Traditional methods of creating urban public outdoor spaces usually entail an extended and complex process of planning, programming, designing and constructing distributed out between many different professionals. The youth club project transformed an abandoned site suggesting alternative methods for utilizing places for communal use. The drafting table was replaced by a strong presence on site developing projects in a hand crafted process that allowed for adaptions to be made in the moment and facilitate a continuous process from initial idea to completed garden space.

Creating small scale public spaces that are instantly usable through enacting unused sites and local resources can act as a potent driver of not only place making but can also be a social driver of change. Through relatively low budgets and simple physical alterations we can transform sites and redirect the discourse of a place by involving people in making it. It can perhaps also support establishing resilient neighbourhoods through the engagement of local community in a co-creative process.

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