

## METROPOLIS: A Learning Experience

**A total experience in art and design in a Bedfordshire school that became a total experience in living**

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In a large comprehensive school in Bedfordshire it has become established practice that the post-examination summer period would be filled with a special timetable in which new experimental approaches are explored with the students. An important part of this programme has become the core work in art and the central motivating activities springing from this core in previous years have already been described in *Studies in Design Education and Craft* (Volume 3 No.1).

This year two members of the art and design team, in consultation with colleagues and students, introduced the idea of Metropolis as a work starter and the original film *Metropolis* was hired and shown to as wide an audience as possible. They hoped that as many students as were interested would come along and help, once the timetabled groups had begun.

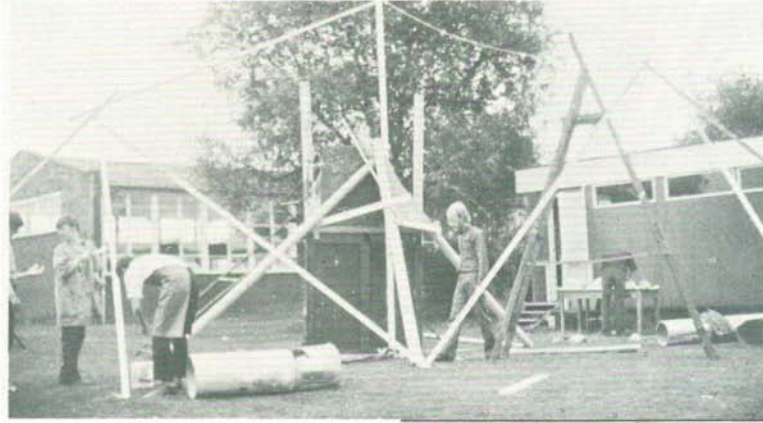
In preliminary discussions one of the teachers attempted to explain his ideas in this way: "I came to teaching from industry where I was a graphic designer. I felt I had something to offer to children, that I could help them question and come to satisfactory discoveries and realisations about themselves, about their own personalities, in relation to each other. I found when I came into teaching that I was expected to behave in certain well-defined ways towards children, to dominate, to criticise, to tell them what was right and wrong and for my ideals to be accepted as absolute and unquestionable. Both staff and children had been conditioned to believe that anything else was not conducive to producing work. The children were very wary of the idea that I expected them to be themselves, to think and have opinions that were theirs and not the views expected of them. They suspected my motives in wanting them to be truthful. However, I found that where a teacher attempts to change the set relationships he becomes very vulnerable because the children want to test him. But I felt I had to do this – even if I was to be the loser."

Metropolis was to be one of the major testing points for this approach.

Some preliminary materials for construction were amassed – long cardboard tubes, wood, nails and string. A large space was made available outside the senior common room and the first lesson arrived, and with it two boys – but nothing happened. Perhaps this was the result of trying to timetable spontaneity!

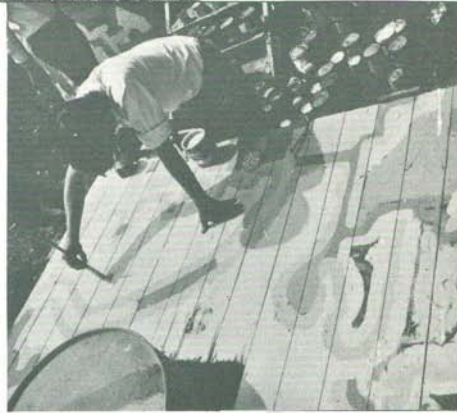
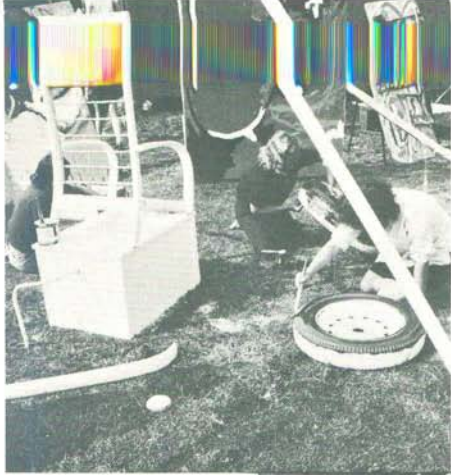
The teachers began – and with the boys built a teepee-like construction. This was done partly out of the fear that nothing would happen at all, partly because they wanted to do it themselves, and partly because of their 'role expectancy' and, after all, domination was easy.

More general interest was aroused and children of all ages and abilities came along to

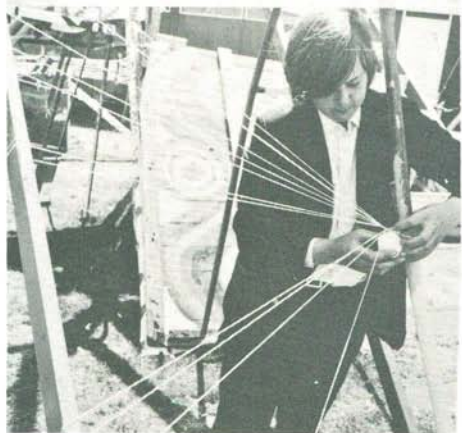


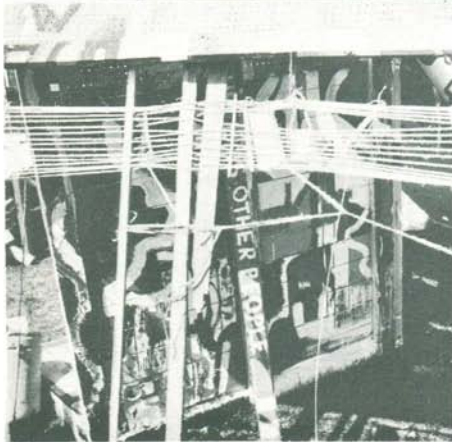
Metropolis  
begins



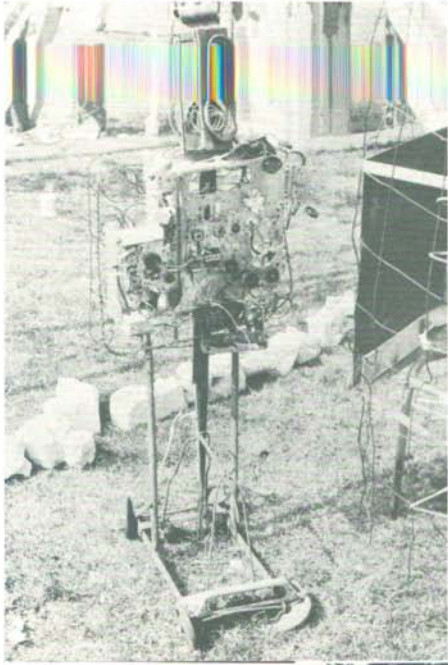


**The labour  
gang**

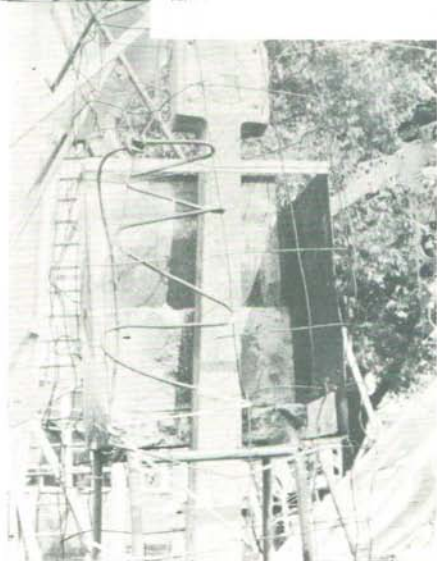




The scene  
emerges



Inhabitants  
human and  
otherwise



look and comment; some joined the work. New building developed, areas were constructed, some removed and replaced, and the whole area began to fill. One of the teachers decided he would like to decorate a surface and he began painting. A girl worked beside him on her own piece of work and surfaces suddenly became important as patterns. Older students, 15 and 16 years, supervised the more heavy construction including the building of a stage, whilst others collected and added on a smaller scale.

A plaster elephant was discovered in the art room and, in a blaze of popularity, was painted pink and given red spots. It remained a companion to the workers of all ages and abilities as the city spread during the first week.

A smaller group of children became very conscious of the spatial qualities in the work and looked for other means to describe the surrounding area in relation to the construction. They did this by painting leaves on nearby trees and marking symbols on the grass. One boy painted a symbol resembling a swastika beneath the wooden framework and presented the teachers with their first real dilemma. They already faced some opposition from colleagues about their motives and justification for allowing the work to continue and this would surely add fuel to the fire of discontent. One teacher decided to intervene and asked the boy what he was intending to do. "Was this a suitable symbol to mark the school grounds with?" "This is only the starting point of a large circle that will be a definition of space to be broken by people moving within it as they wish" said the boy. The teacher knew that his intervention was wrong; the narrow undefined line of sympathy that grows between student and teacher had been broken by an intervention based on the teacher's personal fears for his own situation, in doing so he had interrupted the development in the student's own experience. At what points in such an experience can the teacher offer advice, point to alternatives, and direct vision?

Quite soon a large number of students – perhaps fifty – came to be working on the city at every spare moment, and until late at night, and this seemed to prove that enthusiasm and involvement were available in plenty, but social pressures were also building up, people were destroying the work of others to replace it with their own, many could not understand a situation in which they were not told what to do. A climax arose when the Pink Elephant was placed on a nearby roof and joined to the construction. A taut wire and a windy night resulted in it lying in pieces on the ground below the following morning.

All work stopped and nothing happened for four days. The teachers worried and talked as to how things could start again, how the relationships could be re-established. The city had become important to the students, they talked about it, and gave their time freely to it; what was it about the situation that had turned sour.

A morning was set aside and the teachers invited all those who had worked on Metropolis to come along and discuss its future. They showed some slides of its development and asked the group what they would wish to do. Eleven and twelve-year old 'remedial' children were as vocal as sixteen-year old 'academics' in expressing their ideas. Some suggested that a house committee should be set up through which plans for changes would be passed but this did not receive a very sympathetic hearing from the majority. In the end it was agreed that all work would be respected and left untouched unless the producer gave consent for change whilst the role of the teachers would be

advisory. They could produce their own work around the site as could any other individual but would observe the same courtesies.

A period in the organic development of the city was over and work began again the same afternoon. Metropolis grew for a further two weeks during which time it was used from early morning when drama, music and painting activities took place, until late at night when the staff would sit amongst the shapes till the early hours discussing changes and relationships which had been established.

After a teacher had produced some free weaving on an area, string was suddenly everywhere, forming surfaces which were in some cases rough, in others delicate. The children had once again extended their own experience by observing the teacher and extracting from his knowledge the information and technique that they could adapt to their own conceptions. Whether this could have been capitalised upon further by pointing out other resource material is arguable but discoveries and realisations were being made very fully and personal questioning and argument was much in evidence.

A 13 year old girl said: "It's just something you work on – isn't it? I've learnt a lot of practical things; you feel disheartened at times, it knocks you back a bit, but it's colourful and it cheers you up."

The head of music said: "It's a great worry to me; I don't understand anything about it. It changes every day, I notice that; the people work industriously around it and I just don't know what it's all about. I would love to know."

A discussion document on Metropolis will form part of the published materials of Schools Council Art and Craft Education 8–13 Curriculum Study©Schools Council.



The last victim