

The Junk Palace

The area assumed the look of a council refuse tip.

You could not call it art.

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This is an account of the introduction of an idea into a school curriculum, its problems, success and eventual development. The idea was to make a building, a process which might have the effect of integrating such things as art, music, drama, philosophy—the possibilities in such an open-ended situation being endless—a building constructed by pupils into and through which they could develop over the two summers of 1969/70.

The school is a co-educational comprehensive unit of 1300 pupils. The school has no 6th Form, students continuing their education do so at the 6th Form College or College of Technology. It does, however, have a 'non-academic' 6th Form made up of students gaining further qualifications, the 6th Form college of the comprehensive system being selective at 4 'O' Levels; some of these students took an active part in this work. The fully comprehensive stream had during 1969/70 risen to only the 3rd Form of the school, the 4th and 5th and 6th years were still classified as "secondary modern".

There were many tensions. The headmaster, a 'disciplinarian', was retiring. There was a complex system of options in the upper school, putting heavy burdens on an over-crowded and sprawling building. Communication and order was maintained through a system of memoranda and rigidly applied school discipline. The staff were divided over attempts to introduce new ideas into an academic curriculum.

The early summer of 1969 brought certain pressures to provide a post-examination timetable for those 5th and 6th year students who did not wish to leave and yet could not continue with their ordinary lessons. Staff were asked to offer unusual subjects that they considered would profitably fill the time before the summer holiday. Their normal lessons would in turn be taken by teachers whose examination classes had terminated. After much discussion and considerable arguments:

"It will never work"

"They are finished with school—send them away"

"Why should we be bothered with them now"

some subjects were offered, amongst which were Motor Mechanics for Girls, Cookery for Boys, Typewriting, Painting and Pottery, and, for want of a better title, 'Junk Art'.

It had been hoped throughout the year to build an area for improvised drama in the open air and 'Junk Art' proved to be the stimulus that had been required for the development of a big 'walk-in' construction out of scrap. This came to be called the 'Junk Palace'.

The Junk Palace

Work began with a more or less formal lecture into which were introduced various ideas thought about throughout the year: DaDa poetry, Absurd Drama, improvisation surrealism in art and poetry. Slides were introduced giving a brief history of DaDa and constructionalist ideas and aims. This was related to society and aesthetics, the whole session culminating in the suggestion that perhaps junk had a primitive aesthetic quality and that a *merzbild* along the lines of Kurt Schwitters might be built. By the end of the same afternoon students had taken the initiative and begun to lay the foundations of the Junk Palace from rusty metal throw-aways discovered on an adjacent common.

Response

The phenomenon produced discussion; a good deal of this can only be described as severe criticism from the vocal members of the school staff who were hostile: many of the staff were apathetic. Grounds presented for the objections included:

The area chosen had assumed the look of a council refuse tip.

The Palace was a sort of refugee shack.

It was an eyesore.

Athletes were likely to get metal pieces in their feet.

And, more seriously:

You couldn't call it art.

The staff room atmosphere became so strained that no meaningful or serious dialogue on the Junk Palace could be conducted without it degenerating into personal abuse. The situation became so tense within the school that the staff and students engaged on the project discussed and then prepared and duplicated an 'Apologia' which was posted throughout the school. This broadsheet caused much interest and cooled the atmosphere a little: this means of communication was noted for use if necessary the following year.

Included in the sheet was a comment by one student who came up with the idea that the Junk Palace could be called a 'House of Dialectic': it changed day by day as people added or deducted pieces, it was the result of constant dialogue, its form was not dictated by an external authority (teacher), it was organic and grew out of nothing.

Statement

The member of staff developing the project has written:

"To begin with the students interpreted the venture in the spirit of the game or joke aspect of DaDa, and the improvised drama which was evolved using the Junk Palace and its environs as a setting continued in this vein. (I had talked to them about the Theatre of the Absurd and they acted *through* the principle perhaps not understanding it intellectually but capturing its spirit intuitively). But whilst the whole thing remained very enjoyable ("can't be education if they're enjoying themselves . . .") the aesthetics of junk were beginning to be discussed, the students were beginning to develop an attitude towards texture and design, they were internalising a concern

which I, as a teacher, already possessed but felt impotent to explain in words—you can only say ‘Look’ and hope, but it is always open to them to reply ‘So what?’—a good answer!

When students begin to ask to continue to work on a project till 10 o’clock at night, and develop an autonomous group discussion, something momentous and important is taking place. We sat inside our palace till 11.30 one night and contemplated the miracle shapes of junk mobiles against a sky lit by a full moon. Small wonder that the venture produced poetry.

“They” say it’s a mess in the corner,

We care not what they say.

“They” say take it down

We care not what they say.

To us it’s a palace,

We care not what they say.

To us it’s life,

We care not what they say.

To us it’s a crystal ball,

We care not what they say . . .

And when ‘the Palace’ was deliberately burnt down at the end of term another student with a typewriter in the middle of the sportsfield was moved to write:

memories remain

in those that came

and sunk the junk

to charred remain

Building such an environment can lead to many empirical discoveries: for example, one afternoon the potentialities of the material of the walls of the junk palace as a walk-in musical instrument were suddenly realised. The percussive qualities of bedsteads, car springs, petrol tanks, metal pipes and rusty wire were explored to the full.”

For the year 1969/70 the organisation of an end of year timetable was left till much later in the summer term. It did not begin to function before 29th June despite a general acceptance that the previous year had been successful.

Long before any formal planning began the idea of building a maze was sown throughout the school, the idea being advertised to likely students of all ages as a follow-up to the junk palace. The somewhat mechanical, artificial business of having a “follow-up” to something that was so unique posed a problem. One of the most sensitive of the students involved in building the Junk Palace said he originally decided he wouldn’t participate in the Maze because we were merely trying to repeat the “success” of the previous year. The problem then was how to maintain original developments coming organically out of the Junk Palace tradition without the new idea becoming stereotyped. The problem was how to plan for ‘organicity’—a contradiction in terms.

For a term before the maze was put up students were asked to collect anything made of wood from tips and back gardens or wherever; donations of half-empty cans of paint from parents' sheds were forthcoming—about 30 cans. One parent donated a hammer! One pound's worth of nails were bought out of school funds which proved to be the total cost of the whole project.

Walls made from the sides of car packing cases were erected to create an enclosed area approximately 25' x 15'. This was between 6' and 8' tall. Some sixth form boys who had finished exams and who had experienced the junk palace gave much of their time to erect a complex of walls and compartments inside the enclosure. They also began to work on wood constructions and paintings on the walls; significant that their approach this year was entirely 'serious'. Junk was no joke. This attitude was crucial to the development of the maze.

They complained bitterly about some first year pupils who delighted in splashing paint about in imitation, as they thought, of Jackson Pollock. The conversation went as follows:

"You thought the junk palace was a joke to begin with, didn't you—you've got to allow people to play themselves into it."

"We weren't as bad as this, surely?"

"Oh yes, I can remember thinking to myself, God, what a waste of material when you simply stacked things up haphazardly without regard for what I understand as design."

"Why didn't you tell us then?"

"You don't imagine that my telling you would have meant anything to you, do you?"

"No!"

"But by the end of the summer you seemed to me to be collecting bits of junk for their own sake, and to be as sold on their organisation as I was."

"Yes, but we'd like to stop them messing the maze up."

"The only rule is that nobody does anything to what someone else is obviously working on; let's leave it at that and see what happens."

"We'd still like to stop them though—it's frustrating."

The younger pupils did in fact very rapidly get over the 'joke' stage and though their work didn't reach the controlled individual sensitivity of the older students it nevertheless grew in concern and interest as a result of discussion with others involved.

Colin Blundell, working on the maze, said:

"As far as I was concerned I was merely a participant in a joint venture and the dialogue was being actively resumed precisely at the point it was left off the previous year.

"As the maze developed it became for me an analogue of the process of education; you start with discrete bits and pieces and by discussion and open ended argument build them into a construction which becomes 'uncannily harmonious'; this is how education should be. The students produced a similar thesis which I hope genuinely came from their own personal thinking. They said:

"By its nature the maze will never be finished. It started from nothing and will



palace labour force



details of the palace walls

constantly change defining itself as it goes along . . . ”

During its development there was less open acrimony partly because the new headmaster positively supported the scheme and had personally selected the site for its construction. Other teachers shrugged their shoulders—“here we go again”—some were apathetic and a few who had organised opposition the previous year were as openly hostile. But one departmental head who had been reasonably critical of the Junk Palace, questioning the motives of those who initiated the project, suspecting that they were climbing on some kind of band wagon, found the maze immediately attractive, referring to it in the jargon of his own discipline as “organic”.

Several classes were let loose in the maze under supervision of art teachers; when their responses were at all vocal they for the most part faithfully reflected the sneering attitudes of some of their elders. Opportunities were taken to talk to various groups about the nature of art and searching questions with suggestive answers were thrown backwards and forwards.

Frequent comments were:

“It must be fun to work on this; but what’s the point of it?”

“It’s just a pile of junk.”

It was impossible to let that one go—“How can you say it’s just a pile of junk when it’s obviously been *worked on*—piles are just thrown together. Take a pile of junk and do something to it and you have created what could be called a work of art . . . ” Or just don’t use the concept of “Art” at all . . .

A group of children who were discovered destroying parts of the maze were, ‘punished’ by being asked to stay behind after school to work on it. “You’ve enjoyed destruction—now enjoy creation.” At the end of their ‘detention’ their response was “That was great: can we do it tomorrow?”

Criticism erupted when the work was connected with sound—musical—word expression in the form of a concert given in the maze by “The People Band” and a poet.

Concert

The concert which was to form a climax in the development of the project lasted for a whole afternoon—fortunately a very sunny one—and was attended by several authorised classes and miscellaneous ‘Bunkers’. The concert began as the Band began to unpack and start playing; just related noises across the maze. The pupils were encouraged to sit around but were allowed to wander if they chose.

Soon the concert was in full swing with the musicians setting up their instruments inside the various compartments. At first the whole scene was almost formal—then things began to happen. The improvised music became very noisy and the children were asked to join it. They played trombones, drums, xylophones, recorders, cymbals and flutes alongside the band. The whole scene erupted, in a mass of colour, excitement, noise and enjoyment. The only ‘misbehaviour’ was on the part of a press cameraman clambering over the building to get better pictures. Two hours later the music ended with the players wandering around an open area of grass and playing

whilst running—jumping—and leaping. The music had such ‘continuity’ that the poet who was to speak between ‘numbers’ refused to interrupt the ‘blow’ and instead took a small group of students to one side where he gave them material to read. This was then discussed.

To some teachers this was deemed to be a strictly ‘non-educational’ event. After all “the instrumentalists clearly couldn’t play, the whole thing was rubbish and futile”. In a staffroom attack a head of department said “Why do you make children begin everything afresh? School is to teach them to do things properly; you keep asking them to bang nails in and saw bits of wood and paint, and play musical instruments as though they were learning everything for the first time. This is what they do in infant schools, why don’t you go and teach in an infant school; this sort of thing would be all right there?”

Some answers, mentally rehearsed, but unspoken were:

“Probably these children were never allowed this freedom of experimentation earlier therefore they are revelling in it now.”

“Picasso says that creation is a constant ‘playing about’ with materials of diverse nature.”

“Only through free experimentation can we get on the inside of what it is to make a work of art whether it be painting, music, poetry or construction.”

“Beginning afresh in whatever kind of art form you like is important in itself. The subject matter of education is then not ‘inert’ (A. N. Whitehead) it has to become personally alive—alive for the self—and through such experimentation perhaps there comes a parallel development in the identification of the self.”

In Art, English and Music at least there would seem to be a need for a “wholly new start”

“Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.”

T. S. ELLIOT, *East Coker*, pp. 176-182

The colour booms out
You become lost in thought
Your mind spins
You lose your senses
as brilliant colour blinds you
The peace prevails
Amidst the wood construction
And you stand spellbound

Trying to understand
 everything around you
The Maze!

Kim Hall (13)

Genuinely creative work would seem to come from this kind of 'raid' or attempt to conquer new ideas using novel approaches.

Enough has been said already perhaps to demonstrate the integrative possibilities of this kind of scheme. The junk palace was a place to play in, to live in, to dramatise, to mythologise about, a womb, security; the maze could have contained minotaurs and more modern Beasts, it could have stood for the maze of the human mind and so on, but term ran out before the dramatic possibilities could be formally exploited. The reaction and development among the participating students was, however, as enthusiastic as before and is being carried into the academic year 1970/71.

Like the stab of a car headlight
that catches you dreaming on a
 darkened road
and pins you to a long legged shadow
while words roar like the
 hearing motor
and pass you by and leave you
 dark again
and searching for a speck of reflected
 glare
to light your brain again
inspiration dead
a void of wordlessness

Like a jar of sawn up trees
and a coloured carnival mask
it stood and stands and
 grew and changes
 still
a solid tangible extension
 of many minds
uncannily harmonious
in planes of tone and texture feel
 it move
and move across its face
 and see
a dream come true in wood and nails
the amazing maze.

Martin Green (17)