

Front Door Project

Eileen Adams
Pimlico School, London

163

Design Education in schools has tended to concentrate on product and graphic design, and has neglected the built environment. In recent years, geographers have given a good deal of attention to environmental education, but they have not, naturally enough, emphasised the visual and design aspects. Developing child centred approaches to the complex study of cities is difficult since few teachers have available the necessary experience of planning and architecture.

The aim of the Front Door Project has been to improve on this situation by taking the initial steps in the development of a course of design and architectural studies based on an investigation of the urban environment, bringing together teachers, as educational experts and architects, as environmental experts, in a working partnership to devise such a course. It was set up in September 1974 by the Inner London Education Authority Art Inspectorate as a two year experiment involving teachers from Pimlico School, architects from the Greater London Council Department of Architecture and Civil Design and Ken Baynes from the Royal College of Art 'Design in Education' Research Team.

Based in the art department, the work has had a strong visual bias, the emphasis being on practical, direct study, using the environment itself as a learning resource. In devising the syllabus, we have not been concerned with the transmission of a body of knowledge, and did not think we had to identify a series of examinable facts which the children had to remember to be counted a success. Instead we wished to foster direct experience, observation and active learning, and so encourage the children to look, to help them be more informed about their environment, and hopefully in the long term, to help them develop a greater concern for it and encourage their active participation in its development.

We started off with the belief that Pimlico offered a promising field for this kind of study. Though mainly residential,

the area is rich in different building styles and functions. It offers excellent opportunities for studying public buildings, etc. Our initial aim therefore was to involve children in a real experience of architecture in their own locality, and to enable them to record and interpret that experience through their art studies.

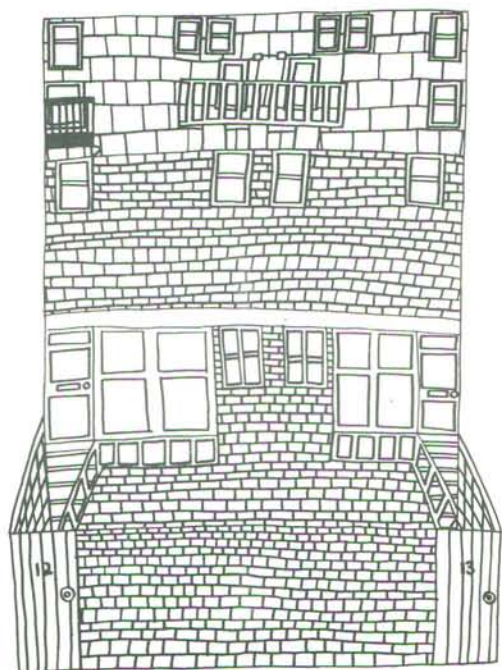
We hope that our general approach may be seen as useful by any school in any area. We have not been prescriptive, but envisage courses being evolved to suit a particular school and its situation. We have not proposed a series of courses which could be taken up entirely by another school, but suggest the local environment offers a rich area of study, that teachers should be encouraged to make greater use of it, and also of outside experts as learning resources, and that they should be actively involved in curriculum development.

Usually there is no one teacher in the school who is the expert on the urban environment, though geography and social studies courses are becoming more and more concerned with the subject. Art teachers are slow to take responsibility for environmental education, but should understand the importance of visual education in promoting an understanding of the urban environment. It is a frightening admission that in school, most pupils' visual education stops at the age of fourteen, and that many of them see the art course in terms of drawing and painting portraits and still life rather than the discovery and development of visual ideas, or as a language to increase understanding and communication.

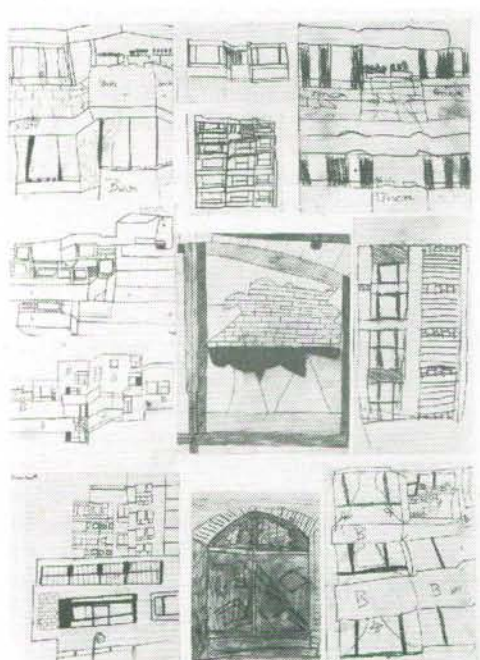
Front Door has not been an attempt to train architects, planners or designers, no more than an art course in a secondary school is geared to training painters or sculptors. The aim of the Front Door course was to help all the pupils be more responsive to the visual world, to develop the child's visual language — both in understanding and expression — and relate that language to his



1st Year Journey to School.



2nd Year Flats.



2nd Year Studies of windows.

everyday world, and thus promote a greater awareness, understanding and concern for the environment.

Teacher

In the class and street work, the role of the teacher has been to structure the opening stages of the work so that the children find themselves in a situation which catches their interest, leaving them free to behave creatively and providing them with a goal which sustains their activity over an adequate period of time. Then to work with the children during their enquiry, providing where necessary specialist skills and knowledge, and to assist the children in the analysis evaluation and presentation of the results of their investigation. A delicate balance must be struck between the children's need to explore, discover, seek out information for themselves, and the necessity for the teacher to present ideas and working methods to help the pupils explain and develop their findings. Good preparation and follow up work in the classroom were therefore vital to the study.

Architects

We identified three main areas where outside experts may be used in curriculum development schemes: in formulating projects; in the teaching situation; in a supportive role as information source, adviser. In Front Door, we used the architects in all three, and found them of value in all. Their involvement as auxiliary teachers was primarily to give them direct experience in the school situation, so that the planning of projects could be directly related to a particular age group and the limits imposed by the school organisation. They have also been involved in formulating projects in co-operation with the art teachers. Difficulties of communication were evident at first, both teacher and architect did not have a clear idea of their own or the other's possible contribution, but

through involvement in practical work with the children, an area of common ground emerged. However, the situation is more likely to exist where the teacher has worked out a course of study, does not have any thought of using architects in the classroom, but would like some support in the way of information or advice. We found them ready to help in this way, but have found their support more valuable and related to our needs when they have a more realistic view of the teacher's task after direct involvement in planning courses and working in the school.

Factors affecting the development of projects arose from the particular school situation as well as the type of contribution the architects made. In Pimlico there were difficulties inherent in the school organisation: no finance was available to start up a large curriculum development project; there was some lack of support till work/results were proved valid; there were limits imposed by the school timetable, the availability of classes and teachers; lack of time to research and prepare materials; the (imagined) threat to the autonomy of departments; mutual mistrust between departments; lack of internal communication.

Courses

In all years the emphasis has been on the visual recording, presentation of information and expression of ideas.

The first year studied the concept of neighbourhood, which involved local trails, streetwork, museum visits and follow up work in the classroom. Everything was related to the local environment or the child's own neighbourhood, and information and ideas expressed through drawing, painting and writing. The favourite studies in the scheme were an investigation of the journey to school, a Pimlico trail, necessitating a museum visit to check up on the back-

ground to the development of the area, a study of the child's own neighbourhood and home, exploring the relationship of the child to each, his views about them and ideas for improvement, with a glimpse of future possibilities. The second year scheme concentrated purely on the exploration and development of visual ideas, such as shape, colour, texture, pattern, etc. The work demanded close observation, careful visual analysis and the development of ideas in a variety of media. Both the first and second year pupils followed a Front Door course of three periods a week for a term.

Because of the school organisation it was not possible to operate a third year course.

The proposed third year scheme is based on the consideration of the environment as a changing reality, and the various human activities which affect it and have to be accommodated within it. The aim would be to discover the way in which the world of houses, shops and streets is adapted to human needs and to make some proposals about the way in which adaptation could be improved. Basic human activities which could be investigated are — playing, learning, growing up, growing old, communication, buying and selling, moving about.

The work in the fourth year continued the visual bias, but was closely related to the social environment. The choice of subjects could equally well have been made by a social studies group — housing, play provision, transport, shops, words — but the method of study and the presentation of ideas was different, stressing the importance of visual material to communicate ideas. The most satisfactory way of working seemed to be through the making of slide programmes. The pupils worked in pairs, chose their own subject for study and were asked to make a programme of thirty slides with a taped commentary, suitable for showing to other fourth year groups in social studies, or as stimulus material for the lower school groups. This approach was welcomed by the

pupils, who developed a good interest in photography.

Through this activity we were involved in making two filmstrips with the Schools Broadcasting Council: the BBC Radiovision filmstrip 'Town Centres and Shopping Areas' in the Art and Humanities series, which looks at the 'signals' transmitted to potential customers by the display of goods and design of shops, and contrasts the scale of traditional shops and shopping with supermarkets. The other filmstrip and tape is included in a Study Box 'Front Door — Broadcasting and the Architectural Environment', which is about the fourth year pupils working on their slide programmes, and is available on loan from the Schools Broadcasting Council for teacher education.

The medium of study was also that of communication — a camera to record information, to make visual statements, express opinions and ideas. The slides and photographs taken by the fourth years were used as resource material by other classes, and were available to any department who wanted to borrow them. The pupils could see their programmes being tested on second year classes as an introduction to visual study, which improved motivation and made demands on the pupils for certain standards of effort and quality of work, as they realised their work had value — for others as well as themselves. Being able to see their programme in use provided feedback which is not possible to achieve through marking an essay or grading a piece of art work.

Interdisciplinary

Architecture has traditionally been taught, if it has been taught at all, by art teachers or historians who have traced the evolution of the parish church or the country house — i.e. it has been concerned with architecture as high art or as history. What has been missing has been any attempt to come to terms with the common experience of built

do you do most of your shopping here?



forms. But which teacher in the school is competent to deal with such a subject?

Environment can be perceived, understood in a number of ways —

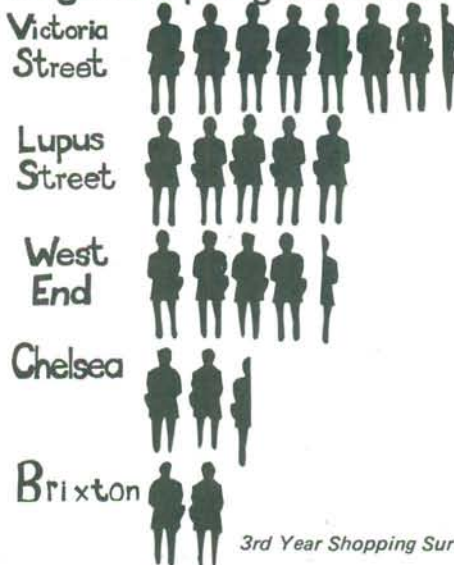
- a) as a static reality — a shape, a colour, a heap of stone, a cat on a fence;
- b) as a dynamic reality — a series of working systems, how the place is used, how it makes people behave;
- c) as a changing reality — how it was, how it is, how it might be, why it differs.

Methods of experiencing different aspects of this reality must be different. Some have a more didactic content, others relate more nearly to the academic disciplines, while others depend on more personal responses:

- a) static reality — art studies
- b) dynamic reality — urban geography, economics.
- c) changing reality — history, sociology.

All can be studied directly involving observation, recording information, interpreting data, presenting findings, ideas and opinions. The key is direct street corner observation and involvement.

do you shop anywhere else?



3rd Year Shopping Survey

Our experience in Front Door has suggested that the urban environment offers a rich field for interdisciplinary investigation, and that the appropriate departments which may be involved are art, social studies, geography, history and English. We never achieved this type of involvement at Pimlico, in a large school, organised on a departmental basis, each concerned with its own identity and autonomy, this was not necessarily an easy task. We do not suggest that all work should be on a co-operative basis, but there are occasions when it would seem necessary and appropriate to seek the support of other colleagues and the involvement of other subject disciplines. This was particularly true of the work at fourth year level when planning issues were considered.

Conclusions

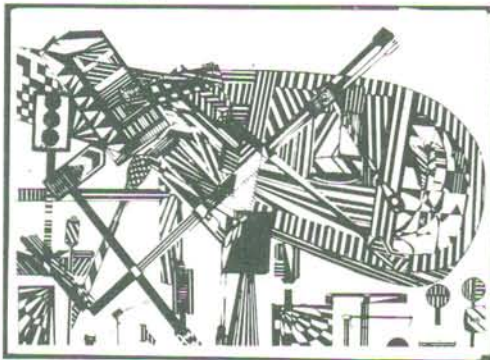
The first aim of the Front Door Project was to contribute generally to the concept of architectural education by means of practical classroom experiment. We believe that it is possible to devise forms of architectural



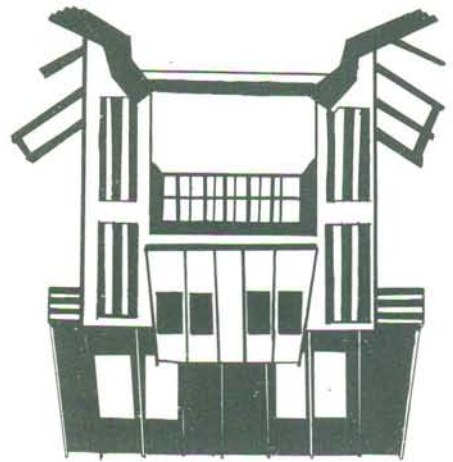
3rd Year interviewing shoppers.



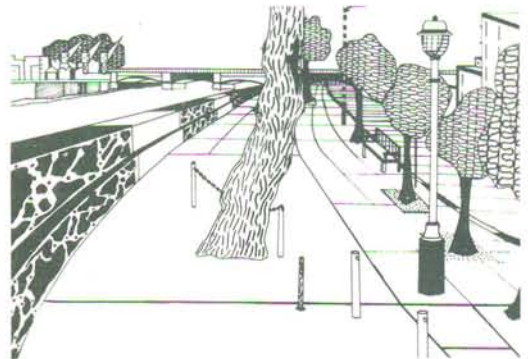
3rd Year interviewing the Shopkeeper about his pavement display.



5th Year 'street furniture'.



5th Year The School.



6th Year walk along the river.

education which are suitable for the whole range of ages and abilities found in the modern comprehensive school, and that Front Door has indicated some possible approaches.

The second aim of the Project was to assess the possible role of the local authority architects in the improvement of general architectural education. We found them to be an effective motivating force and an essential source of experience and information, particularly in course planning and contact with the teachers. We believe that in future architects can make best use of their time by working on short courses in teachers' centres or with small curriculum groups based in either single or small groups of schools.

The third aim of the Project was to prepare ground for a proposal to the Schools Council for a large scale curriculum project in general architectural education. The Schools Council is funding such a project, called 'Art and the Built Environment' 16-19, which starts in September 1976.

The fourth aim of the Front Door was to assess the specific contribution which art departments in secondary schools could make to general architectural education. We

believe that art departments have a decisive contribution not only to architectural but to environmental education as a whole. This is because art provides the primary means of recording and analysing the surroundings that man has created. It is the existence of drawing, painting and photography that makes possible the direct and practical study of buildings and places.

Behind all our work at Pimlico was the idea that such ways of learning could be taken up by any school in any area, with specific courses being evolved to suit each particular school and its situation. Visual education of the built environment is a necessity for every child, not just those who are talented in drawing and painting. People generally accept that teaching deals with abstractions such as words and numbers. We believe it should also deal with elements of visual communication such as colour, form, symbols, art works and objects in general.

A small, highly portable exhibition designed for common rooms or teachers' centres will shortly be available outlining principles and substance of the Front Door Project. Enquiries concerning 'Front Door News', the report or the exhibition should be addressed to Eileen Adams, Town and Country Planning Association, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1.