

Schools Council Project Art and the Built Environment 16-19

The Schools Council Project 'Art and the Built Environment' is a research project to consider the role of the art teacher in environmental education. The study is concerned with the development of environmental perception, discriminative skills and critical appraisal of the built environment. Its aims are: to enlarge students' environmental perception and enable them to develop a feel for the built environment; to enhance their capacity for discrimination and their competence in the visual appraisal of the built environment; to evolve generally applicable techniques and materials for achieving these aims; and to disseminate these in a form suitable for teacher training and guidance.¹

The Project is directed by Colin Ward, the Education Officer of the Town and County Planning Association. The Project Team will report to the Schools Council Art Committee in September 1979 after a three year research period. Although the study brief is primarily concerned with the 16-19 age range, our view is that the ideas are relevant for all ages, though the balance and bias of the studies might change with different age groups because of differences in levels of perception. The Project findings will therefore be of interest to teachers in secondary schools, and not just those who teach at 6th form level.

Environmental Education

Present environmental education programmes in schools are dominated by objective, scientific, sociological, statistical, academic approaches to study. For many pupils, environmental education is pollution, shopping surveys, traffic counts, the collection of facts and figures. You've got to look it up in Kelly's Directory, plot it on a graph or check it in a table of statistics. The validity of direct experience and personal values is negated. The contribution of subject disciplines such as geography and social studies is well known, but perhaps the objective study of towns has been promoted at the expense of the subjective, affective response. 'The city as we know it, the soft city of illusion, myth and nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and architecture'.²

Art Education

In the ABE Project, we are primarily concerned with the role of the art teacher in environmental education, as it was thought that the Project's aims, concerned with encouraging a subjective response and the development of critical skills were central to the aims of art education, where teachers stress the importance of sensory experience, emotional response and discriminatory skills — as well of course, as presenting students with an alternative means of perception.

Art is one of the few subjects in the school curriculum where an affective, subjective approach to study is valued, and the relationship of the world of the self with the world of objects is continually explored. 'Art education is concerned with the

development of the immediate sensuousness as our way of receiving the world, and the processes we use to symbolise, externalise, understand, order, express, communicate and solve its problems. It is located in the belief that visual/tactile ways of knowing/thinking/feeling are one of the most important ways of receiving, organising, understanding and transmitting impulses, feelings and ideas. It is essentially affective and concerned with the development of visual/tactile values as a means of developing perception'.³

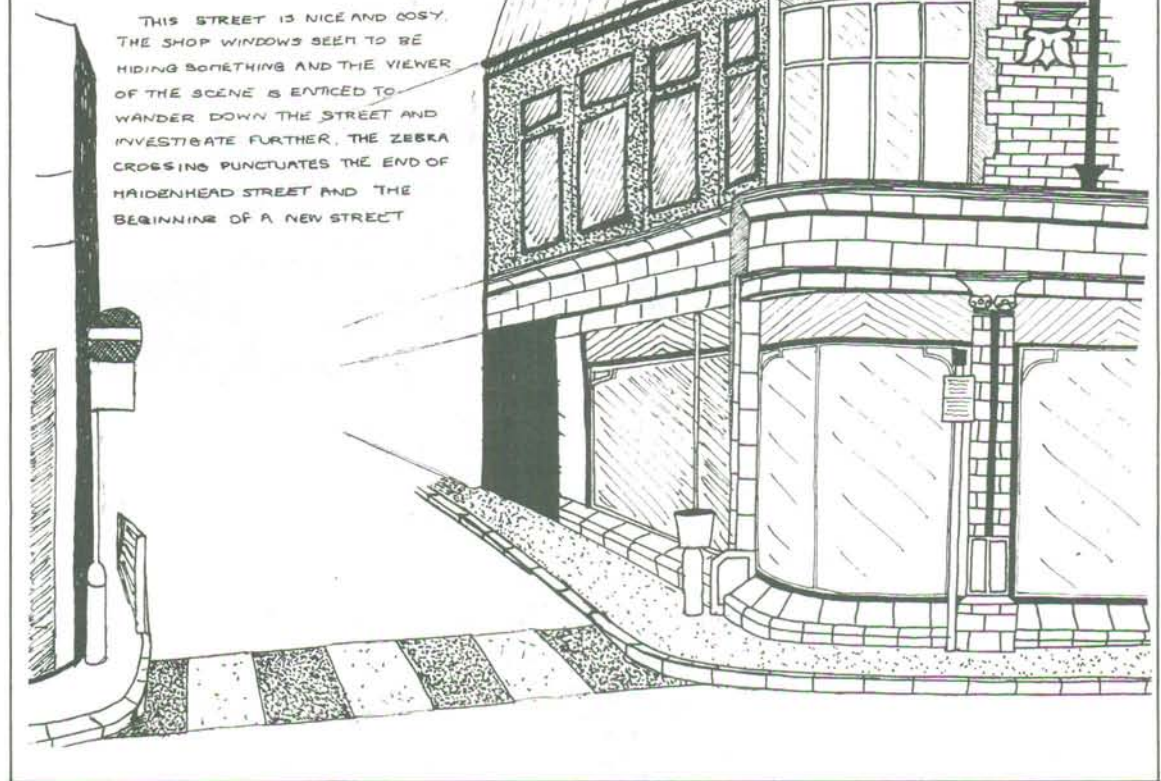
I am concerned that art should be considered not as a frill, an extra, a recreational, civilising or therapeutic activity or as a subject more suitable for the 'practical' or less-able child. Neither should it be seen as a precious and specialist study for the gifted few who have demonstrated some facility in the making of art products — the esoteric nature of art has very little relevance in the school situation. It should be a necessary and important part of everyone's education.

Design Education

Our impression is that design education in schools continues to emphasise graphic and product design, the making of artefacts, and the environment is merely seen as the sum total of these. The view that regards design as a hotch potch of the 'practical' subjects concerned with 'making things' reinforces this view, but does not make adequate provision for environmental design or systems design, which do not have similar outcomes.

Bruce Archer describes design as 'that area of human experience, skill and knowledge that reflects man's concern with the appreciation and adaptation of his surroundings in the light of his material and spiritual needs. In particular, it relates with configuration, composition, meaning, value and purpose, in man-made phenomena'.⁴ In terms of exploring our critical response to the environment, it would seem that the aims of the ABE Project are

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central to the practice of art teachers involved in design education. The Project work is firmly based on sensory experience and visual/tactile approaches to study. We are concerned with how people respond to the built environment, what their feelings are about it, what their attitudes are towards it, and how they evaluate it. These are very much related to the development of design awareness, with which many teachers involved in design education are constantly concerned.

As an art teacher my first experience of design education was through an involvement in environmental study. This was the Front Door Project⁵ at Pimlico School, which was a two-year pilot scheme involving art teachers from the school and architects from the Greater London Council in a working partnership to devise a course of architecture and design studies based on an investigation of the local area. This gave us some experience of the possible contribution art teachers could make to a study of the environment, but also indicated the limitations of subject specialists tackling certain aspects of design education on their own. In environmental design, there are many areas of study where interaction between specialists is required, so that we found ourselves working as members of a design education team – which could be made up of teachers from a number of disciplines – or perhaps more usefully in this particular context, teachers, architects and planners.

ABE Project

The ABE Research Team has been working with art teachers in a number of trial schools in England and Wales to determine appropriate approaches to study and working methods. Schools have been selected on a basis of variety. Different kinds of study environment – a dying village, a new town, suburbia, a housing estate. Different kinds of schools – sixth form college, comprehensives, further education college. Also different kinds of art departments –

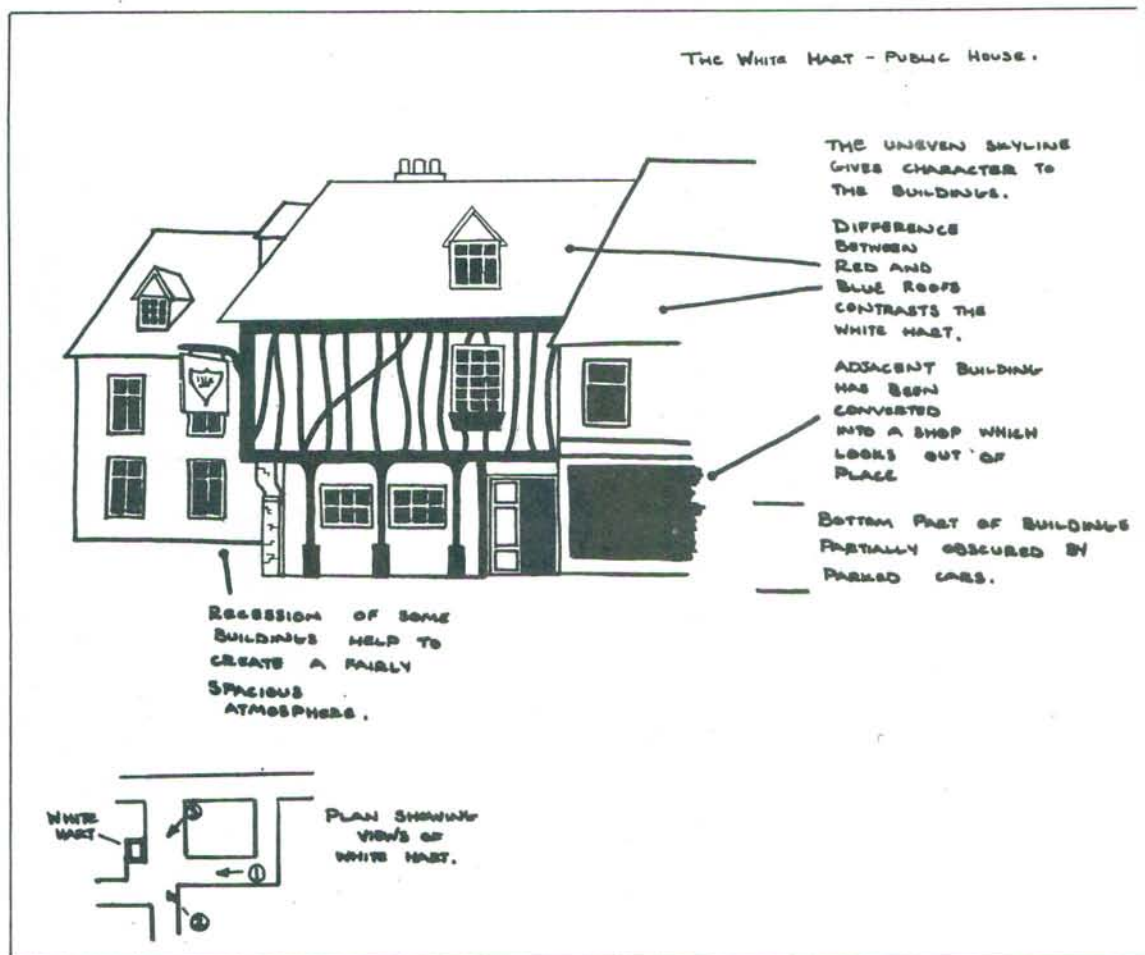
within a design faculty, a creative arts faculty or a distinct subject department.

In the first year of the Project much of the work produced was based on environmental reference. If considered as a realisation of impulses, feelings and ideas gained from direct sensory experience of the environment, this may be seen as achieving our first aim of promoting an enlarged subjective, affective response to the environment. This is also evident in much excellent work based on environmental exploration, involving a lot of observational drawing and photographic recording, which indicates an increase in sensitivity and awareness.

But in this final year of the Project, we have concentrated on our second aim of developing discriminative and critical skills. Teachers rightly inform us that students are involved in developing discriminatory and critical skills in making art products of artefacts. However, these are usually related to the manipulation of expressive media or involvement in product design, and are not necessarily transferrable – particularly to townscape. Brian Allison points out that 'the assumption that aesthetic sensibilities are developed as a consequence of art making activities has for a long time been a mainstay of art education thinking – presumably its occurrence being seen to be due to some kind of osmosis'.⁶

Critical Appraisal

Art teachers are used to looking at the environment as artists, drawing from it ideas for their own art work. We are very familiar with this approach, and it has long been established in schools – though not necessarily as fully exploited as it might be. Using environmental experience as a basis of expression is well documented in Malcolm Ross, 'The Creative Arts'⁷ which offers a lengthy explanation and justification for this type of approach. Teachers involved in design education tend to regard the environment as the sum total of an infinite number



of artefacts, rather than consider the interaction between people, systems and products. Many teachers find difficulty in viewing the environment as critics, and it is in this area of critical evaluation, the ability to make informed judgements, that we have been concentrating our attention in this final year of the Project.

The most promising work on critical appraisal at sixth form level has been with the general studies groups – whereas the A-level courses, heavily biased towards the manipulation of expressive media and the acquisition of craft skills, are still resistant to the necessity of incorporating a critical study of townscape. (This is evident too in many of the design syllabuses where an end product is either demanded or implied.) ‘Making and Doing’ are still given priority over ‘feeling and thinking’ aspects of the work.

Brian Allison suggests that art education should be concerned with the following areas: the expressive domain; the perceptual domain; the analytical/critical domain; and the historical/cultural domain. His view is that the artist as model for art education has unnecessarily emphasised the importance of the expressive domain at the expense of the other areas. The demands of the ABE Project on the other hand have emphasised the analytical/critical domain, and it is clear that art teachers have real difficulties in reconsidering their role and the extent of their professional responsibilities to encompass all the areas Allison describes.

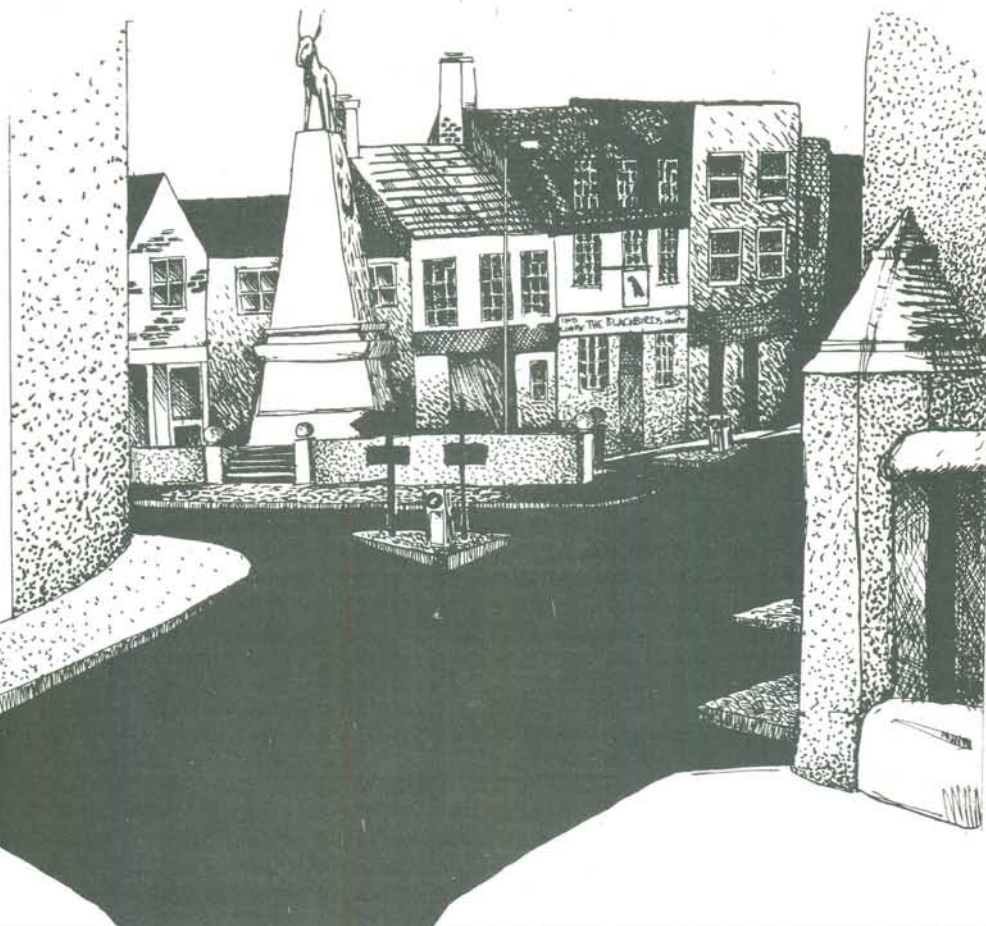
In fact the work of the Project may be seen in relation to all four areas: Our first aim of eliciting enlarged subjective, affective response to townscape and of communicating that response may be seen as concerned with the capacities connected with the perceptual and expressive domains. The development of critical and discriminatory skills of course are related to the analytical/critical domain: and if students are to fully comprehend the implications

of townscape, should also encompass the historical/cultural domain.

The ABE Project is interested in our critical response to townscape. What properties do particular townscapes possess which contribute to a particular quality of place? How might they be described? How might they be assessed? What critical appraisal can be made of the place? Why do I feel the way I do? What is the basis for my judgements? How can explain them? We have noticed that although people may be capable of making aesthetic choices or judgements they are reluctant to question, explain or justify them. The Project is interested in how we form judgements, what criteria we base them on and how we communicate them.

Teachers rightly inform us that students are involved in discriminatory and critical skills in making art products. However, these are usually related to the manipulation of expressive media and are not necessarily transferrable, particularly to townscape. Therefore we would ask teachers to relate such skills more specifically and explicitly to the critical evaluation of the built environment. To explore, observe, analyse and study it not merely as a basis for image making, but as a critical study in its own right. This would involve personal research, observations, comparisons, explanations and conclusions which communicate a considered, personal, critical response. We may approach a critical study of the environment in much the same way as we would anything else – a book, a play or a painting. Criticism of these does not take the form of yet another book, play or painting, but necessitates a different kind of statement, which explains our responses, justifies opinions, maybe notes sources, makes comparisons, establishes relationships, maybe offers alternatives and indicates a personal viewpoint. Altogether gives us a considered critical appraisal of the thing itself, giving reasons for particular judgements.

The reason I chose this view was, that I thought that the actual view was aesthetically interesting and would have been very intimate and cosy but for the wideness of the road. I feel this is destructive to the overall image. This leaves the eyes being assaulted by a monotonous blandness which is uncharacteristic for the style of buildings.



As far as the ABE work is concerned, we assume this will involve visual/tactile language modes in terms of understanding the experience of townscape. But a successful explanation or appraisal will also involve written or spoken language too, for it is clear that the language of criticism is not restricted, but can employ a number of modes. In relation to townscape, the artist and the critic both respond to sensory experience, they are both involved in the observation and understanding of that experience, in making judgements about it. The artist works through visual imagery, and is not required to explain his judgements, whereas the critic is bound to offer explanation, which is where the use of other language forms is necessary.

It is necessary also to remember that perception is a creative act. The modes adopted by the artist and the critic may be quite different – or they may subtly interact – but both involve a creative response. In neither case is this mere absorption and regurgitation of information. Both involve highly complex acts of scanning, selecting, observing, analysing, categorising, comparing, establishing relationships between the familiar and the unfamiliar. There is no absolute reality to which we respond. All the time we are projecting feelings, ideas, values onto the environment, as well as receiving sensations and messages from it. We are all the time creating and recreating our own reality.

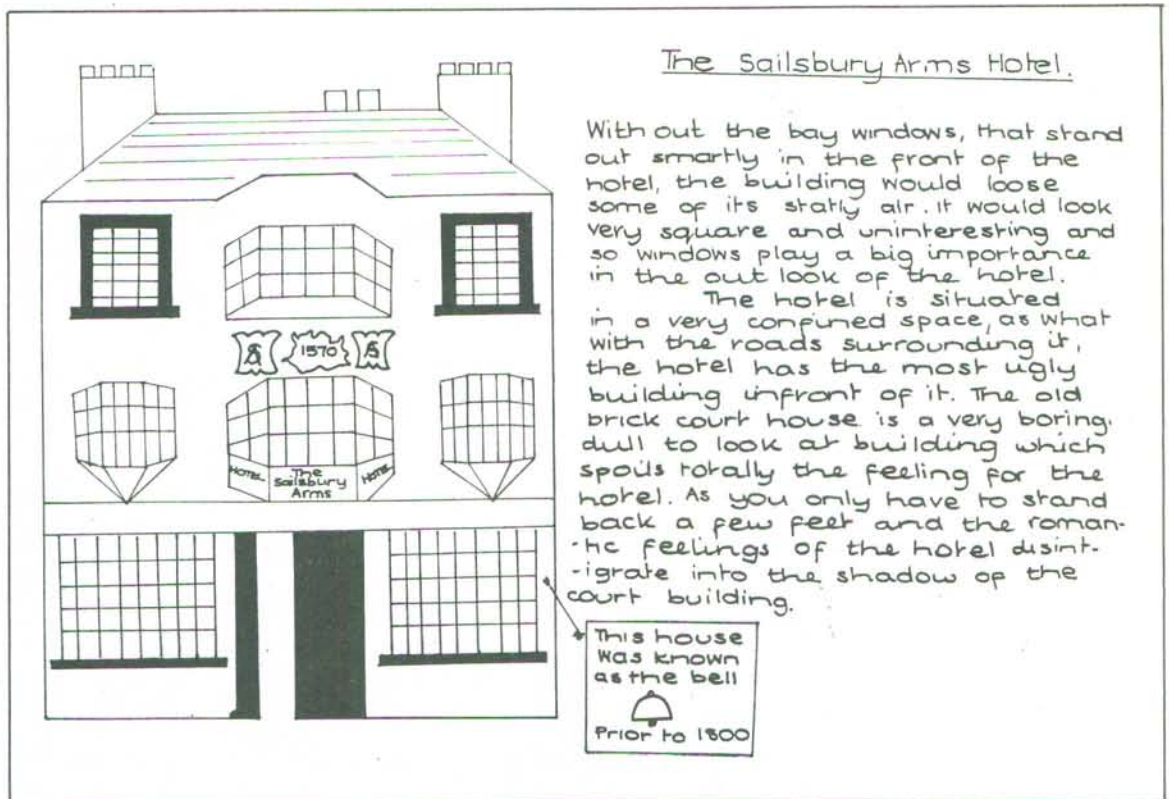
There are various ways of perceiving, which can encompass a whole range of interpretations, opinions and points of view. (The school curriculum is an excellent example of this). It should be emphasised that in comparing the view of the artist with that of the critic, we are not saying that one is subjective and the other objective. In the context of the ABE Project, they are both subjective responses, realised in different ways. We are merely asking for an honest, considered response to townscape, and would welcome one which demonstrates discriminatory and critical skills.

Art Teacher's Role

The ABE Project does not suggest that teachers involved in art, design or environmental education should suddenly stop what they have been doing for years and adopt ABE work as their only approach to study. Our aim is not to modify or replace existing courses, but to enlarge and develop the scope of art/design/environmental education. We are asking art teachers to reconsider the range and extent of their responsibilities and activities to encompass areas other than the expressive domain, which has been promoted at the expense of other areas of concern. The bias of art teachers towards production skills, and their relative neglect of perceptual, conceptual and critical skills serves to inhibit the development of ABE work in schools.

Naturally in asking art teachers to expand their role, we have met with some resistance – particularly in relation to the critical aspects of the ABE work. These are related to teachers' attitudes – about their role in the school, about criticism and critical studies, about the built environment and shaping the environment – as evidenced in architecture and planning. These are affected by their professional training, and their self-concepts; the degree to which they consider themselves educationists – as opposed to artists working with children; the degree of personal interest and involvement in environmental concerns; together with personal qualities of confidence, security, self assurance they bring to the job.

People make judgements all the time within the limits of their personal experience and ability. However, this is not a fixed capacity, but is liable to modification, and merits direct intervention by the teacher to extend and develop their pupils' perceptual capabilities. In their Discussion Papers 11-16 the HMIs emphasise the importance of critical skills: ...'the essence of the contribution which art makes here lies in judgement and decision ...'. 'The forming and informing of these judgements by



practice and enrichment is a principle aim of art in schools'. 'Pupils might be expected to have a critical awareness of their environment, its quality and style (or lack of it) ... and of how things might be improved ...'. 'The principle skills developed by the practices of art lie in the ability to communicate visually and the power of discrimination – the recognition that as the Newsom Report put it, 'Pupils are people who have a capacity to form a right judgement'. 'Tradition and precedent is less useful now as a guide in a situation of accelerating change, and therefore there is more need for an enhanced constructive sense of judgement. Whether we respond for example to new consumer products, to fresh artistic manifestations or to change in the environment with concern, self confidence, and good judgement, or on the contrary with a vulnerable lack of awareness, depends in part on the quality of the educational process'.

In many Schools Council Research Projects, the team has seen their prime function as devising and testing out learning materials for pupils. Trial materials are developed by the team, tested in schools by willing teachers eager to be involved in curriculum development exercises, and their use monitored. Books, kits, packs and programmes are thus developed and made available for use by other schools. However, we felt that this was not the most appropriate way for the ABE Project to operate. Art teachers are unlikely to do an exercise from a 'how to do it' book (or if they do, are not going to tell anybody). They are not likely to work from somebody else's schemes. It is difficult to assess how art teachers select and develop ideas for study. They are more self reliant, though perhaps more vulnerable than many other teachers, as they are more likely to rely on their own personal resources and work from their own experiences. The danger is that art syllabuses may be based on their personal preferences and prejudices rather than a proper consideration of the educational needs of their pupils.

Therefore the ABE Project felt it necessary to affect teachers' attitudes than to provide a how to do it manual. It is necessary to establish the why to do it and what to do before thinking about the how. In any case, teachers should know their own pupils'

interests, capabilities, capacities and potential and should be able to devise appropriate learning strategies to promote their development, though admittedly we can learn a lot from colleagues working in similar areas. The ABE Project Report therefore will comment on the experiences of a number of art teachers who have attempted to relate art education to a study of the environment. It will describe the work they have undertaken with their students, and discuss the outcomes of this. It is not likely the Report will be generally available till 1980 but an exhibition and three filmstrip/tapes will be obtainable for in-service education and teacher training in the Autumn 1979. In the meantime, ideas and information about the Project are available through Project Newsletters and certain issues of BEE (Bulletin of Environmental Education). (From Town & Country Planning Association, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1.)

Experiencing Townscape – BEE 68 December 1976

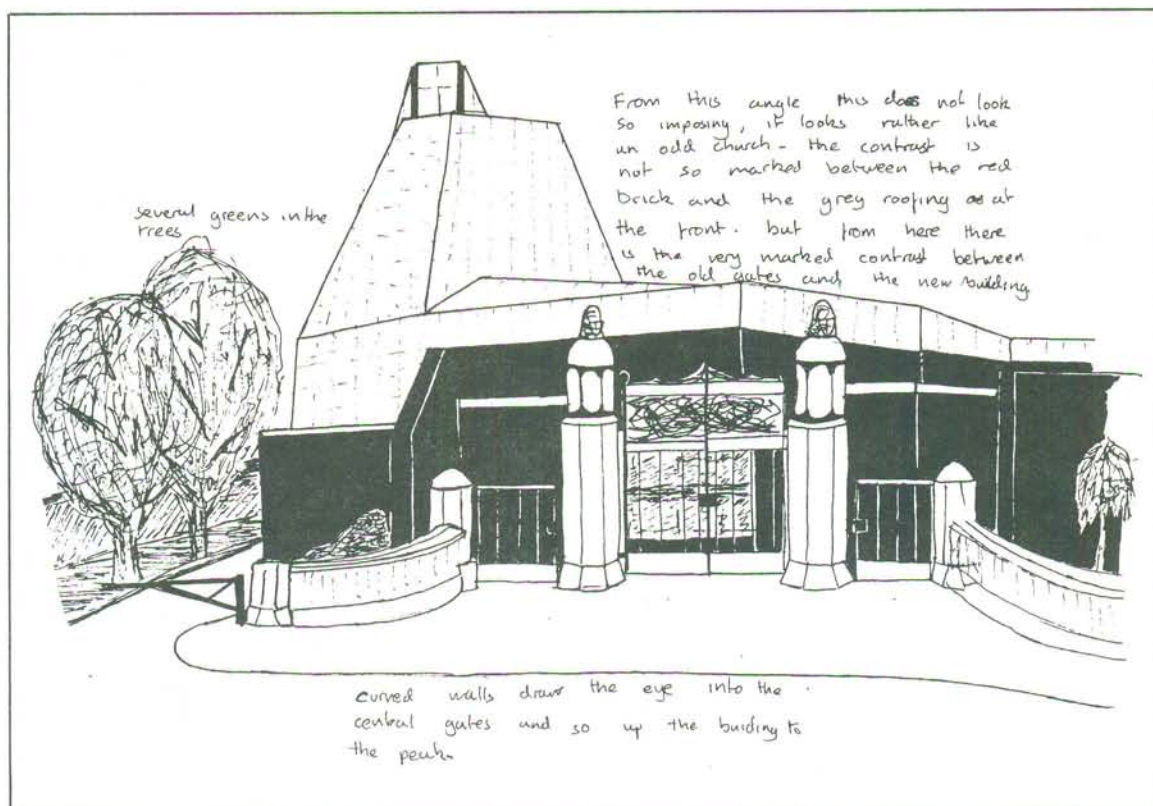
Prepared by Keith Wheeler, a lecturer in the geography department of Leicester Polytechnic, and a well-known figure in environmental education, this BEE attempts to provide a language which may be used by pupils in schools to articulate a critical response to townscape. It is based on the ideas of Gordon Cullen, a familiar figure in the architectural world, but virtually unknown to teachers.

Sensing the Environment – BEE 72 April 1977

This BEE, prepared by Brian Goodey, a lecturer in urban design at Oxford Polytechnic, is concerned with developing sensory awareness, and draws on the ideas of Lawrence Halprin in the USA. 'The sensory walk offers a format for experiencing an environment as a foundation to descriptive, analytical or experimental activity'.

Appraisal of Buildings – BEE 73 May 1977

This BEE was prepared by Jeff Bishop of the School of Advanced Urban Studies in Bristol. He has been involved in environmental education with many age groups and is currently involved in organising



courses for lay people involved in planning issues. The BEE is an attempt to provide a means of critically appraising buildings, both existing and planned, and their contribution to the urban scene.

Art and the Built Environment – BEE 78
October 1977

This BEE is an informal account of the first year's work and has been prepared by the art teachers involved in the Project. It indicates the type of work currently undertaken by art departments in relation to environmental study. It also includes a paper by Eileen Adams setting the work in the context of contemporary theories of art education.

ABE – A Student's Guide – BEE 83
March 1978

This BEE includes ideas for study and working methods which have been used in the trial schools, together with a breakdown of the study methods described in the other BEEs for use by students.

The House that Jack Built – BEE 88/89
August/September 1978

This BEE prepared by Colin Ward, considers how art has affected our perceptions of the built environment and seeks to explore the townscape facilities of the picturesque.

Lymington – BEE 94
February 1979

This BEE is based on the work of a group of Hampshire teachers on a weekend ABE course. It contains many of their annotated sketches, which were used to record, organise and communicate ideas and information gained from their investigation of Lymington. It also reports on some of the work of the Hampshire Association for Art Education in the field of curriculum development.

Front Door Re-Opened – BEE 96
April 1979

Front Door was a two-year project at Pimlico School in London, involving teachers from the art department and architects from the Greater London Council in a working partnership to devise a course of design and architectural studies based on an investigation of the local area. This issue of BEE

re-examines Front Door and considers what progress has been made since then.

Buxton – BEE 98
June 1979

Buxton – or 'A Rainy Day in Derbyshire' – is based on the work of a group of Derbyshire art teachers on a weekend ABE course. It is concerned with critical appraisal of the built environment, and provides evidence of a number of graphic techniques which permit information to be recorded quickly and economically, and ideas to be communicated effectively.

References

1. ABE Newsletter 1, BEE 58, February 1976.
2. Jonathan Raban: *Soft City*.
3. Robert Witkin: *Intelligence of Feeling*.
4. Bruce Archer: Summer School Report. *Design in General Education*, RCA 1975.
5. Front Door – see *Studies in Design Education & Craft*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1976.
6. Brian Allison: Rolle College Lecture, 1972. *NSAE Journal*, October 1978.
7. Malcolm Ross: *The Creative Arts*.