



The woodland building site: a parallel dimension

Working in woods, with wood, to make a beautiful and useful building can be a positive experience for the whole family. Emily Charkin, tells how she and her family led on the building of a round-wood chestnut shelter in Dorset.

Dan was disillusioned. He was working as a professional architect and becoming further and further removed from the building process which he loved and which was why he became an architect. Dan Morrish is an architect who also builds. Dan was inspired by Ben Law's building approach in Sussex, using round-wood timber and working with volunteers. As our eldest son started school, we both became increasingly convinced that children should spend less time in classrooms with professional teachers and more time outdoors with opportunities to observe and participate in different types of adult work. So we left London to find projects where Dan

could design and build, and where our family (three children now aged 9, 7 and 4), and other families, could get actively involved. Dan's sister lured us to her home-patch in Dorset and we started sending our children to a local woodland kindergarten. The woman who led the kindergarten had, for a long time, wanted to renovate a derelict game-keeper's hut on the edge of the site so that the children could be in the woods even when the weather was inhospitable. The land-owner was enthusiastic too so we jumped at the opportunity to try out our ideas.

The programme of building works focused around thirteen family weekends, between May 2012 and May 2013, and involved 150 volunteers between the ages of 1 and 85, coming from as near as the local

village and as far as Australia. We recruited volunteers by advertising in local school newsletters, word-of-mouth, local press and national sustainability press^[1]. The people ranged from having absolutely no previous experience to the finest carpenters in the land. Children and teenagers worked along-side adults de-barking, chiselling joints, laying floors, shingling the roof, digging foundations and raising the frame. They also helped with jobs around the edge of the building site: preparing lunch and washing up, serving tea, keeping the fire going and keeping an eye on younger children.

The space created in and around the building site on these working weekends offered, what one parent called, a 'parallel dimension' where children could participate in a real work project on a building site, where the space was neither child-centred (like a play-ground or a school) nor

"If children are not allowed to mix work and play, they soon forget how to do both"

John Holt

adult-centred (like an office or a restaurant or a university), where the space was neither public nor private but somewhere in-between, where the rules and hierarchy of the space were neither pre-determined nor fixed. Adults and children flourished in this quasi-anarchic outdoor space. The adults remarked, with surprise, how much they enjoyed working with their own and other people's children - it no longer seemed like 'child-care'. And the children learned new skills and took great pride in the project. A girl (aged 9) whispered to her father who was speaking on the phone to her mother, "Tell Mum we raised four frames."

Playing or working?

It wasn't all work. There was also plenty of time for conversation around the fire and playing around the building site or deep in the woods. The on-going beat of the adult work and the resulting lack of focus on the children seemed to create a good atmosphere in which younger children felt safe and happy to play close by, and from which older children could branch out. Sometimes the children played on the building site, for example, sliding down a pile of materials covered in a tarpaulin, balancing on planks, chasing each other in the building sand. Sometimes, they played further a-field, although still within shouting distance: swinging, climbing, ball games, drawing, making up fantasy games on their own or in small groups. The children often played games which imitated the adult work going on, such as digging, wheelbarrowing, building camps, building bike ramps. In fact, it was often hard to tell whether the children were 'playing' or 'working' - their absorption and concentration were the same for both activities - perhaps adults can learn a lesson from children on that.

The children also enjoyed watching the adults working. There is a fallen tree near the building site and, particularly the younger children, liked to sit there and watch the work going on. Through this visible building process the children could,

as the American de-schooler John Holt argued for, "get some sense of the processes by which good work is done" ^[2]. This opportunity for children to watch adults is in stark contrast to the situation in most nurseries and schools (even woodland ones) in which the adults' job is to constantly watch and assess the children. In the woodland building site, the adults and children did not see their roles in this way. The adults kept an eye on the children and were willing to involve them in the work, but were mainly focused on their own activities.

The children were, therefore, left to their own devices in their play, which was mostly happy, inventive, absorbed and independent. Paradoxically, the children seemed to experienced much higher levels of freedom and self-determination than they would in an environment set up specifically for play or education, and they moved between play, work and observation spontaneously. For example, when the footings were being dug, younger children started off by helping the adults with the digging, but then started digging for their own entertainment. Even when they didn't help very much, they were busy having fun and their parents were able to get on with the essential digging.

Of course, it wasn't all fun - de-barking when your hands are numb with cold, installing windows in a blizzard, persuading a moaning child to help you with the drying up. And there were some restrictions on the children related to the necessary discipline of a building site. For example, on the day when the four heavy timber frames were raised, all the children were needed to pull on the ropes, literally and metaphorically and complete silence was required, leading to a three-year old boy asking, "When can we be noisy?"

But the challenges were all part of the experience. And on the whole, the mood in the camp remained buoyant. One parent remarked that the children stuck with it even when they were bored because they "knew it was their job." And all the hard work paid off. On 5 May 2013, there was a big opening party during which we handed the beautiful building over to the woodland kindergarten and the local village. All the volunteers and

locals were invited for a barn-dance, tea-party, paella feast and bonfire. The party was in the same spirit as the build - offering inspiration that adults and children can work and have fun along-side each other.

References

- ¹ <http://www.permaculture.co.uk/news/1104121611/volunteers-young-old-needed-roundwood-shelter-build>
² Holt, J., 1989. *Learning all the time* (p130), USA: Da Capo. ISBN-13: 978-0-201-55091-7

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Opposite, left to right: Kirsteen leads the raising of the frame; Sammy chiseling. This page, top to bottom: The raise team; Working in the rafters; Nearly finished.