

Design is the difference

Phil Wyatt of mor and **Claire Brown** of Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change argue the case for a greater role for spatial design in play area consultation and design

CREATIVE PRACTITIONERS HAVE been challenging the perceptions and requirements of play for years. Although these discussions have been instrumental in our understanding of play, it is essential that a format is developed that gives control to the design process so that these thought-provoking play spaces can actually be implemented.

We now need to question whether we are fulfilling the true aims of play within a specific site context. It has become apparent that in the majority of cases, standard play equipment companies are still able to sell their proposals from a visual that is free of charge. Though this is convenient, it does not engage the community in the inspiring process of developing unique ideas for their spaces.

There is a strong argument for people to understand the investment of using a spatial designer as they can be instrumental in inspiring and educating an audience to begin to look at ways of developing strong ideas with the community, which inevitably results in creating areas that people feel they own and have contributed towards.

The added value of this investment is threefold. Firstly, the process of developing a play space is so important in building meaning for the people that use the space. A sense of belonging and ownership will only grow out of a process that has really engaged with its community. Consultations should be seen as an opportunity to explore the

meaning of design and not just a talk shop for the sake of it. Investment in the process means putting more time aside and structuring the budget to give more emphasis to the development of ideas.

An example is the Penhaligon Star sculpture, celebrating the legacy of local MP David Penhaligon, at a school for children with learning difficulties near Truro. At the initial art workshop, it was only when the students' drawings and models started flowing that the project really gained energy. Now that the sculpture is finished the students have a unique connection with it.

Likewise, the process doesn't need to stop at the initial project development for it to be meaningful. Implementation can involve local makers and craftsmen and the community can work alongside them, enabling people to have been involved from start to finish.

Secondly, spatial designers can be influential when challenging perceptions and empowering the group through the use of fresh and inspiring ideas. One starting point with the Penhaligon Star was the use of a poem

that held meaning for those involved. This had a tremendous influence on the subsequent design process and as expected, the children who participated in the workshop eagerly embraced quite a literal translation of the poem.

Thirdly, designers can be inspirational in challenging the status quo when local authority leaders can often be hindered by political or personal agendas. Health and safety can co-exist with creative solutions and it is the role of the facilitator to provide imaginative solutions.

Our design solution for the Penhaligon Star became a focal point for more imaginative and creative play opportunities, in a way that a more conventional piece of equipment would fail to do so: a star to sit in and on; a conversation bowl; a catwalk; a shelter with a sense of enclosure; a frame to enhance views into the garden; at night it takes on a whole new sculptural form and focal point

There is real strength in design to challenge perceptions and to empower and engage the community. It is crucial that more resources are made available for the process to be valued just as much as the end result. But a change in attitude is vital; inspiration and facilitation are key to the design process. The energy that goes into a project at the design stage is repaid many times in terms of the success of the end result ■
Visit: www.mor-design.co.uk and www.cn4c.org.uk

Above and below: Engaging children from the beginning in the design process for the Penhaligon star has led to their unique connection with the completed sculpture

Philip Wyatt works as a spatial designer for mor in Cornwall, delivering public art and furniture projects. mor's ambition is to enhance peoples' lives with the use of meaningful design and construction. Claire Brown is neighbourhood environment coordinator at Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change, a charity and social enterprise whose mission is to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Cornwall by building bridges between people, places and their communities with the resources, opportunities and choices for all.

