

“Daisies make me smile”

How do children see the world?

Peter Owens describes a photo competition that aimed to answer that question

Playing with Space is an initiative from Colour Urban Design Limited – a competition and subsequent exhibition during Architecture Week. The aim was to promote better outdoor space in schools through working on creativity by building confidence and self-esteem in the early years of education.

The competition invited nursery and primary age children to photograph their favourite space and describe why they liked it. Three sub-regional winners and one technical winner were awarded digital cameras and a large format image for their school. More than £560 was raised from an auction of images, plus complimentary design advice. The overall winner, D-Jay from Crook (aged five) was rewarded by our design practice for enhancement of his school grounds.

The concept for the competition evolved from two key stimuli, one personal and one professional. First of all, my eldest son started in reception class at primary school in September 2005, aged four and a half years. At his first parents' evening after three weeks, my wife and I were solemnly told that there was a real danger that he would be badly left behind if he didn't improve his recognition of letters. In most of Europe children don't start to read to the age of seven!

The same teacher thought it quite normal for a previously imaginative and fun-loving child to be creating and taking home pictures smeared only in black paint.

Shackled by the rigidity and obsessive assessments of the National Curriculum, real creativity and problem-solving is difficult to promote in schools – both in children and teachers.

The second stimulus was the mounting evidence of educational benefits from the work of Colour Urban Design Limited. In particular, one of our first responses to any schools brief is talking to pupils – we find out how they use outdoor spaces, what they like about them, what they don't like, why, and thus understand and engage the imaginative mindset more. The key is not to patronise – through giving pupils a meaningful stake in the design process.

Children find wonder in nature, but also valuable physical, creative and social developmental experiences through abstract design. This makes the design process multilayered and fascinating, and the results profoundly rewarding – patterns of interaction, play, exercise and language all can be manipulated.

A great example is Newburn Manor Nursery School in Newcastle. Head teacher Celia Skillbeck describes our work together: “We have designed a playground that does not dictate to children how they should or should not play – it engages their imaginations.”

The competition attracted more than 350 photographs of which 30 were exhibited with support from Northern Architecture, Creative Partnerships, Colorworld (one of the North's largest photography labs) and prizes donated by Kodak.

Of the competition Laura Broderick of Northern Architecture, said: “Children constantly use their imaginations to change spaces as they play. This competition provides a simple way to harness that and encourage children to look further, question and think creatively about their environments. It is hoped that the process of taking and selecting the photographs, and the conversations around them, will provide schools with an important understanding of spaces for play in the school grounds. This comes at a crucial time as schools are being remodelled and rebuilt *en masse* and they should provide appropriate and high-quality spaces for children's physical and mental stimulation.”

This initiative has only reinforced our educational design philosophy. It is intended to send out a strong message to all who have enjoyed the photographs – a powerful reminder of the world through a child's eyes. A grassy bank was once our universe, trolls lived under bridges and daisies made us smile.

Peter Owens is creative director of Colour Urban Design Limited www.colour-udl.com

Declaration

There has been no digital manipulation of images. No photographs were taken by adults. All images were taken by nursery and primary school children across north-east England



“This is my favourite place sitting on the King's throne.”

D-Jay (class one), Peases West

WINNER



“I like to watch and feed the birds in this space.”

Hammaad (age five), Portobello Primary

Sally (reception), Downhill

“Daisies make me smile.”



“I like my picture about what I took is because I like the clouds in the background and the trees at the side.”

Lewis (class four), Whitemere Community