

These patterns and textures are part of my childhood.

Frances Bossom

Introduction

In 1978 when I was about 5 or 6 years old I remember getting lost in the patterns and textures of the semi-detached 1930's house where I lived with my family. It sat on the outskirts of small market town. The front garden and driveway were marked with a cherry tree and opened out onto a busy main road with a transport lorry depot opposite. Behind the back garden a ditch separated us from green moors dotted with dairy cows that stretched out for miles towards the Mendip Hills.

During long weekend afternoons I would sit at the top of the stairs listening to muffled activity below and stare through the large sliver and green geometric wallpaper patterns next to me. This became an adventure in which I hopped over the shifting forms like rock pools. The large orange, yellow and brown petals on dining room curtains morphed into huge, chunky chips or bananas when tea was late. The time at which the curtains were drawn marked the passing of the seasons. In winter the chunky chips would be in full view by five o'clock. In summer I resented going to bed when the evenings were light. Sleep seemed impossible so I lay staring at the ceiling made up of polystyrene tiles pressed with a crazy paving pattern. The abstract shapes formed dragons, knights and mountains that folded and overlapped into each other. When I couldn't sleep I searched for them.

Process

Underpinning my practice is the desire to unlock habitual assumptions and stimulate original, inventive thinking. Through sculpture, interventions and participatory projects I aim to question and look at everyday things or situations in new ways, from all angles. By disrupting expectations it can be possible to view what already exists with a fresh eye and so make space for thinking in new and different ways.

Last year Ikon Gallery's education department invited me to contribute to their offsite programme at Four Dwellings High School, Quinton, Birmingham. On reflection the residency can be divided into three distinct phases. Firstly observation, research and planning, secondly a weeklong project *Consultation Studio* and lastly the development of the final commission *Four Dwellings Farm Wallpaper*. This text documents how the residency emerged out of and in response to conversations between Ikon Gallery, the school community and myself along with a range of other influences. I was very fortunate that both Nikki Shaw from Ikon and the school were willing to enter into this journey with me without needing to know where we were going or what the outcomes would be. As the residency was funded by Creative Partnerships there were a number of features I needed to weave into my plans. For example I needed to work with young people for a certain number of days, devise a cross curriculum approach, visit Ikon Gallery and respond to the programme in some way. Nikki allowed me to be creative about how we fulfilled this criteria and was careful to question at each stage that what I was proposing truly connected to my practice as an artist.

Observation, Research and Planning

Before I began working with students it was important for me to immerse myself in the school community and surrounding area. After an initial visit and planning meeting with the school's art department it soon became apparent there was unease amongst staff about the architects' plans for the impending redevelopment of the school's buildings and grounds. There seemed to be a feeling that the plans were formulaic and did not take into account the young people's needs. However I was struck by how imaginatively the school was already using the school environment with a fishpond in the foyer and an allotment (with ducks) in a courtyard. At this point we decided to link the project with geography which connects neatly with my interest in contemporary archaeology and the built environment.

In order to gain a greater insight into what it was like to inhabit Four Dwellings I asked to observe the school for a day. I was able to independently wander around the buildings and grounds taking photographs whilst opening up informal conversations and chance encounters with a range of staff. This observation was complemented by making contact with staff at Birmingham City Archives in order to research local history.

Pastoral Setting

The school sits on the site of Four Dwellings Farm. Before World War Two Quinton was a rural farming community in Warwickshire. Since then it has evolved into a sprawling suburb of housing estates that has become absorbed into a much expanded Birmingham. The school is overlooked by the Worcestershire hills. As well as functioning as a high school there is *Quinzone*, which caters for post 16 and adult education (the oldest student being 90 years old). The building opens seven days a week and even functions as a church on Sundays. It has become a community centre, a meeting point and also a social space. *Family learning* and the utopian vision of *learning villages* were referred to by the Headmaster. I learnt that in the future young people may learn at a combination of different locations and virtually via the internet. At present young people are sent to *Four Dwellings High School* from all over Birmingham by parents who perhaps believe they will receive a better education in a school overlooked by rolling countryside hills.

During my observation day at the school I found the school's maintenance team's office. This group of people nurture and care for an out of date building that is crumbling and falling apart. Inside their windowless office someone has carefully cut out and sellotaped up glossy pictures of mountains and hills. I was struck by how this small gesture modestly aspires to transform this space into a different, better place.

Asking Questions and Actively Listening

In response to this period of observation, research and planning I opened a *Consultation Studio* in the school and worked with a core team of 12 students to research the qualities and features they would like a new build to retain. I wanted the studio to be experimental, democratic and enable everyone involved to contribute to a discursive and open ended exploration of their immediate surroundings. In addition to capturing the young people's complex relationship to their built environment I wanted to ask questions about how places and communities are planned and developed.

The *Consultation Team* focused on observing and collecting a range of data about everyday life at *Four Dwellings* including personal behaviours and movement around the site (e.g. casual encounters, habits, rituals, anecdotal myths and stories). They also met with staff and adults who work and learn at the school. This research informed the *Consultation Team's* architectural models for a future school. At the end of the week they presented their proposals to other students and Headmaster. The consultation week was very intense and full of discussion, orientations and negotiations. In some ways it was a journey into the familiar made unfamiliar. I felt my job was to listen very carefully and reflect back key questions or points.

Overlooked Landscapes and Hidden Utopias

On the very last day of the project the young people took us on a tour of the school and revealed the spaces that meant the most to them. They referred one of them as *The Hill*. It was the only current feature of the school the *Consultation Team* wanted to retain. They expressed an emotional and nostalgic attachment to this small patch of grass with an oak tree and spoke about how it was 'like family' to them as it had 'been there forever'. It emerged from our conversations that it was a space where they met each other and played games they invented outside of adult intervention. The *Consultation Team* also took me to a series of often overlooked spaces around the grounds and inside the building that were of similar importance to them. I find it incredibly ironic that the young people use one of the only scraps of pastoral landscape left at *Four Dwellings* as the hub of their informal encounters with each other, whilst the future plans for the school involve students learning virtually and across several sites as opposed to one.

Whilst I acknowledge how important it is to create spaces for a community of all ages it is also important to plan interior and exterior spaces beyond classrooms and other functional facilities for young people to encounter each other on their own terms. In the future where will they invent games, chat and meet each other? Where will their village green be? How do you plan for these informal encounters and exchanges? What is in danger of being overlooked and abandoned as *Four Dwellings* develops in the future?

Beginning With Collage

Once the consultation week was over I needed some time away from the project to allow myself to process everything. As I mentioned before I was fortunate that Ikon Gallery and the School did not put any pressure on me to communicate what I was going to do. I began by collaging constructed landscapes, communities and interiors from pages torn from books about historic English houses and landscapes combined with images of international landscapes from travel books and brochures and old photographs and maps of Quinton. Whilst I did not use images of the students' work or processes directly, what I was doing was firmly grounded in my encounters with students and staff at the school.

After 6 – 8 weeks I visited Ikon Gallery and met with Education Staff and a Curator to discuss the work in progress and gain critical feedback. We talked about how the collages referenced faraway places, exoticism and escapism. Rather than framing the collages traditionally I wanted to find a way of positioning or embedding them in the fabric of the school so they had some agency and were in some way surprising and unexpected. We talked about how the existing work could be reproduced as dioramas with spyholes, enlarged as wallpaper friezes or as billboards on temporary hoardings. As miniature dioramas in light boxes they could be positioned in corridors and act as imaginary spaces or hidden worlds. An enlarged wallpaper frieze would be rather more dramatic and perhaps create a backdrop for encounters and daydreams. On the same day I returned to Four Dwellings to show the students the collages. They were curious about them and took me on a tour of the school building to find potential sites where they could be sited as wallpaper or dioramas. We looked at gaps next to the lockers opposite the chickens, outside the deputy head's office and even submerged in the school pond.

Walls and Windows

Back in Bristol I began researching the social and economic origins and development of wallpaper and decoupage along with the practical technicalities and costs involved in finding a way of installing my hidden worlds within Four Dwellings. It was also important to me that the finished art work could be read or have meaning for those not involved directly in the consultation process.

Fragments of imitation wooden panelling, hunting scenes and embroidery patterns survive today in a range of 16th century European houses, castles, churches and even nunneries. Over time manufacturing developments meant more complex and luxurious papers could be produced. By the late 19th century papers were becoming cheaper and more widely available which in turn introduced the problem of taste.

I became particularly interested in how decorative wallpapers have the potential to disrupt or challenge our experience of architectural space in a variety of ways. For example through creating windows out onto another possibility, inviting contemplation, bringing the outside – inside and even dissolving walls all together. Odile Nouvel-Kammerer reminds us of the variety of roles wall play in the lives of people living within them.

'At the most basic level walls are the framework of a dwelling, the boundaries of a space, the guardians of an individuals' privacy. But beyond that delimiting function, language enters in... The wall becomes a site of discourse, whether consciously or unconsciously.'

P94, *The Papered Wall*

Whilst reading this I was reminded of the teachers' concerns about how the architect's worked with formulas to calculate the total area they could work with according to a preset amount of space per child. I felt there was the opportunity to work with wallpaper to explore the function and language of walls within Four Dwellings and the school community's relationship to their exterior and interior surroundings that were revealed during the research and consultation.

Meanwhile conversations with print manufacturers soon revealed that there wasn't the budget to reproduce my art work as large scale wall friezes. The budget allowed 10m x 10m of original art work to be scanned, printed and installed, which was not enough to cover the walls we wanted to work with. I also came to the conclusion that in order to make and permanently secure dioramas in light boxes around the school would take a great deal of time and expense to do properly. Nikki also suggested reproducing the collages onto transparent film and applying it to selected upstairs windows so the work could only be viewed from the outside of the building – thus transforming it into a light box. Whilst I liked this idea the viewer would never be able to see the art work close enough to read it properly.

Bespoke Wallpaper

Conceptually it made sense to create a wallpaper. However how could it be installed so it transformed the space around it? How would it relate to the students' consultation work? I began work on a new repeat pattern of rolling hills that could be printed and cut to fit a site of the right size. In January 2007 I visited the school one more time and spent the day with the Maintenance Team and Art Department to consider where to install the wallpaper. We travelled the length and breadth of the school, measuring and discussing the pros and cons of classrooms, offices, corridors and even the library. We worked with black and white photocopies of the repeat pattern to consider how the work would be viewed in each space. Finally we settled on the wooden panels overlooking the criss-cross stairs above the fishpond where you can hear the bubbling water and see views of hills in the distance. The steps provide the opportunity to view the work from a distance and close up.

February 2007 I worked with the School's Maintenance Manager to install the wallpaper. During the launch event students' responses included:

'It's full of patterns and swirls... I think Quinton influenced it with all the houses'

'It makes a change from boring white walls.'

Hannah Dawes

'It looks like a forest, with lots of houses in the middle of nowhere'

Shanise Higley

'The work is based on the countryside and places that are unspoilt'

'It looks real'

Nathan Payne

'I remember going to Wales once, driving through some beautiful hilly landscapes, very similar to Fran's collage. I think Fran's work is influenced by something like that.'

'I like the work firstly because of how complex it looks, but also how simple it is.'

Joshua Philpott

'The work is influenced by what Four Dwellings used to look like before it became a school.'

Kayleigh Goldsby

Conclusion

Today my home town has changed. Housing developments threaten to swallow up the precious fields behind my house. A ring road now slices through the moors on what used to be a railway track. There is even a new hospital at the end of the road. Between my house, my friend's houses, schools and shops there used to be a series of gaps formed from walls, fences, hedges and trees. These secret nooks and crannies were meeting places for me and my friends. Our shared knowledge of their existence allowed us to escape together. Whole new worlds opened up. Some of these spaces still exist today – hemmed in by an ever-expanding urban sprawl. Others have been swallowed up and destroyed forever. Places change but our basic need of space and time to meet, escape, dream and belong never do.