

# Operation Treasure Hunt - Interim Observations and Evaluation Imperial Avenue Infant School and City Gallery Leicester Agent – Frances Bossom

**Observation Days: 2, 3 October 2007**

**Mapping Days 17 – 19 October 2007**

**Imperial a.** of or characteristic of an empire or similar sovereign State; of an empire; majestic: (of weights or measures) used (now or formerly) by statute in UK.

## **Shifting, Rolling and Moving Territories**

The school is constantly re-imagined, altered, adapted and shifted by everyone who inhabits it. The buildings, grounds, systems, staff and students are in a state of perpetual change through growth, reduction and the subsequent reordering, transference, mending and rebuilding that this entails. On the one hand this creativity promotes spontaneity, problem solving, inventiveness and a feeling that anything is possible. On the other hand it can help create an atmosphere of uncertainty, confusion and mess – which threatens to overwhelm an everyday sense of progress, order and calm. In the midst of these constantly transforming landscapes the other artists and I explored creativity in the school. My response has been to collect a series of conversations, observed moments and actions with teachers, staff and children. In return I invited them to view how they perceive their surroundings with fresh eyes. I began a series of collages and films in response to these encounters that I have been working on ever since. This document outlines my experience of being at Imperial Avenue, something about the school's history, my process and thinking for the future.

## **Making a Base**

During the *Observation Days* myself and the other artists hid in the school hall along with piles of musical instruments, PE equipment, story-books, toys and furniture. All of this stuff had been shifted out of a classroom that was being transformed into an IT suite. There was so much stuff that the hall was temporarily unable to operate as a container for school assemblies, Music and P.E. lessons. When we returned for the *Mapping Days* the hall was still being used as a holding room for things with nowhere to go. It was no longer possible for us to use it as a bolt hole. The school lent us *The Little School* instead, which we adapted into a temporary studio. This space was redesigned and furnished to support children who find school difficult for a variety of reasons. A side effect of our appropriation or commandeering of *The Little School* was that some teaching assistants and children were temporarily displaced from their usual space. I'm not sure what happened to the majority of them however there were moments when I was making collage whilst a child's reading age was being tested in the other half of the room. Although we were made to feel welcome by everyone we met it was a little as though we were surprise guests who had turned up on the doorstep at an awkward moment. This was exacerbated by the very recent bombshell from the headmistress that she intends to retire at the beginning of 2008.

## **Adjustment and Displacement**

Whilst we were working at the school, the staff were adjusting to not being able to use the hall whilst slowly working their way through the boxes to figure out what they wanted to salvage from the lost classroom. At the same time other spaces in the school were being updated and transformed for new purposes. For example some old classrooms were undergoing radical building work in order to become a new children's centre. Consequently the Premises Manager had lost his office. The children's kitchen was now temporarily his base. His walky-talky and tool box sat amongst the kitchen units and posters about washing your hands before cooking. In recent years the school playground had moved from the front of the school building to the back. In the old playground the car parking spaces were painted over hopscotches. The new playground occupies a patch of ground that used to be a paddling pool. There were spaces within the school that had the appearance of remaining untouched for years like a store room hardly anyone seemed to know about. Throughout the school there are traces of the past including cupboards, paintings, banisters and a fireplace from the 1930's that have all survived over seventy years of upgrades and replacement.

## Architectural Ideals

Imperial Avenue dates back to 1933 and it may well have been part of a new wave of nursery schools built across England that were shaped by radical new educational theorists such as Froebel and Montessori. The school buildings and grounds feel as though they were lovingly and carefully conceived to suit the purpose of nurturing and educating very young children. When I first visited Imperial Avenue and looked back at it from the edges of the playing fields I imagined it as a comfortable 1930's middle class country home with beautifully landscaped gardens.

*The 1930's saw strides made in the movement to bring freshness, life and autonomy to teaching of the youngest children. It was in this decade that the English nursery and infant schools came into maturity and began after long neglect to gain admirers. Having emerged in alliance, however fitful and uneasy, with the state system of education, this movement furnished a channel through which 'child centred' thinking could filter into local authority teaching.*

Page 44, Andrew Saint , 'Towards a Social Architecture – The Role of School Buildings in Post War England', Yale University Press 1987

Andrew Saint talks about how the 1930's saw the emergence of the '*the belief that buildings must be at the service of the child, must not overawe or inhibit or distract*'. The school buildings were planned to facilitate children's independent and open ended enquiry. At Imperial Avenue the classrooms are lofty, airy spaces with large windows and easy access to the outside and plenty of healthy, fresh air. The quads provided a safe, enclosed open air play area. The archive photographs of the school from the 1960's conjure up what appears to be a safe, idyllic, halcyon era in the school's history. Subsequent initiatives such as enclosing the corridors appear to have disrupted or thwarted the way adults and children engage with the space. The accumulated clutter of modern school life such as books, toys and art materials clog up every available nook and cranny in the school. However it would be naive to assume the school used to be the perfect place to work and learn in. For example a conversation with a long serving teaching assistant revealed that the open corridors meant walking from one classroom to another meant you got extremely cold in winter.

## Transformation and Invention

The observation and mapping days enabled me to begin conversations with staff and children about their perceptions and relationship to Imperial Avenue (the *Diary of Participants* lists those I encountered and a brief description of what happened). In response to these encounters or in order to remake or manifest what participants were describing to me I began combining my own photographs with photocopied images from the school library. I was drawn to moments or situations where participants imagined the school building and grounds somewhere else. For example a teacher told me about how the school corridor became a bird watching hide where her class tracked wildlife through binoculars made from cardboard loo rolls. Another teacher spoke about how she regularly transformed a small annex in her classroom using simple, inexpensive props such as coloured paper and unwanted telephones. The changing environments have included an airport, a hospital and a beach. She brushed this aside as unremarkable because it was something she and other teachers do all the time. I observed another class singing a song about counting apples on a tree whilst the teacher moved red wooden balls along an abacus. The group colluded in the pretense that the wooden balls were juicy apples hanging from a tree. One lunch time a small group of boys showed me brick wall in the playground that they were using as a bed. Time and time again Imperial Avenue transforms and adapts.

Problem solving happens at break neck speed in a school. I arrived early one morning before the children. A teacher was having a mental block about a classroom display she would be making with her class that day. Other teachers rallied round spontaneously suggesting a number of different materials or approaches. On the other hand the Premises Manager has gradually, over a long period of time; developed a series of practical systems and routines that ensure the school and all its occupants continue to operate amid everyday activity and organizational change. He is there to open up the gates first thing in the morning and shut them last thing at night. Each lock in the school is carefully coloured coded with sticky dots according to the type of key needed to unlock it. Methodically he moves materials, equipment, food, drinks, toilet roll around the school. Along with a team of cleaners he cleans the same building and grounds day after day. As each season changes he is presented with a series of new challenges from ice to fallen leaves, muddy footprints and long grass.

## **Mini Break**

Whenever I asked staff or the children where their favorite or creative place in the school was they always answered by talking about the Quad. This is a courtyard garden surrounded and overlooked by a corridor. I never saw anyone go into it or even look at it in my entire time in the school. Their relationship to this space reminded me of the way my Grandparents kept a front room for best – dressing it with the best furniture but only using it on Sundays and special occasions. I wanted to know more about the spaces and things that people used everyday like the corridor bird hides and brick wall beds. In order to unearth or delve deeper into these imaginary territories I introduced small model figures to Office staff, Dinner Ladies, Teaching Assistants and Premises Manager. I told them they were visiting school on a mini break and needed to be shown around. I invited them to take responsibility for them. When I collected the figures twenty-four hours later their guides told me the figures had walked along cliffs; picnicked on meadows; overlooked the Grand Canyon; taken a trip to New York and a ride on a space ship. At first the office staff were a little unsure of how to react to me – however as time went on they '*joined in*' and appeared to grow quite attached to their temporary companions. One teacher imagined her figure as a helper that came out in the middle of the night and tidied up. The Head chose workmen that sat on her desk and finished the delayed building work. Apparently one teacher returned to her classroom and found her figure had been the subject of a horrific airplane crash, lying in a body bag on the floor. Rumor has it the accident was staged by another teacher who held a grudge about not being in receipt of a visiting figure herself.

I involved children too. Before taking a figure for a walk I introduced them to a map or plan of their school. They recognized the maps as maps but couldn't read them correctly and at times their interpretations completely skewed and merged different scales with real and fantasy interior and exterior environments. For example one group read the plan as containing a railway, a factory and their house. I invited them to imagine they were the size of the model figure and search for different landscapes within their school buildings and grounds. They found train stations, volcanoes and the seas.

## **Absorbing and Responding**

It is unusual for me to be in a position of being invited into school without the expectation that I will be planning and delivering creative learning sessions or child centred learning in collaboration with teachers. With previous Creative Partnerships projects I have been brought in to 'open up new models of learning' or 'strengthen links between a cultural organization and a school'. Whilst the latter may also apply to this situation it was both liberating and confusing to be offered an open brief framed only by the idea of supporting the school in their creativity audit. Being in the school at the same time as Glenn, Francis and Ellie reminded me to step back and not fall into the traditional role of artist educator. The Observation and Mapping days were an opportunity for me to orientate myself around the school and consider what I could offer them. I felt I had permission to sit back, absorb and respond through making art work. Like Ellie I view this situation as an opportunity for me to examine and redirect my practice.

## **Questions**

The development of this text and new work has been framed by further questions that have arisen through email conversations with Ellie Harrison:

### **Working Through Change**

- How effective is it to bring a group of disparate artists into a school at the point at which it is going through tremendous physical change and internal reorganization?
- How fair is this to the school?
- What opportunities does working in a school at such an open and vulnerable point in it's history present?
- What do staff, children and the wider school community really need?

### **Audience**

- Who is/are our audience/s?
- Who are we making this work for?
- On what levels are these audiences going notice or engage the work we develop?
- What audiences might we have overlooked?

### **Political Position**

- How should artists respond to being the tools or facilitators of government agendas?
- How can I as an artist develop my own practice within this situation?

### **Legacy and Value**

- What should or could the legacy of this project be?
- How acceptable is it to create a momentary intervention that only last fleetingly?

### **Perception, Invention, Magic and De-cluttering**

- How can I avoid making something that demands too much from the school or adds more clutter?
- How can I create something that invites the school community to view itself and it's everyday life from a fresh perspective?
- How can I encourage them to value themselves and their imagination more?
- How can I elevate, acknowledge and/or pay tribute to their everyday inventiveness that they themselves take for granted?
- How can I show them how magical they are?

### **Capturing and Interrupting the Imagination or Offering a Service**

- What temporary transformation could I introduce into the school that interrupts or captures the imagination?
- How can I do this through offering the school a service?

### **Connecting the School and Gallery**

- How could I develop or reference a connection between the school and the gallery?
- Why is it appropriate or relevant to show art work or outcomes in the gallery?
- Why The City Gallery? Why any gallery?

### **Travel**

- What is the connection between travel and my discoveries?
- Why do I want to make this work?

### **Work In Progress**

During and since the observation and mapping days I produced:

1. Collages overlapping or collapsing parts of the school with representations or responses as to how staff and children have re-imagined their surroundings
2. Series of maps with notes relating to the different landscapes and environments imagined by staff and children.
3. Photographs of the model figures on their mini breaks.
4. Map showing the caretaker's daily routine.
5. Films showing views of the school with moving landscapes through the buildings.
6. Films showing a stack of blue school chairs flying over landscapes from *Britain in Colour*.
7. Simple dioramas constructed from second hand books and photographs of the school.
8. Experimental films with travel slides.

### **Future Potential**

Rather than completed work or a developed proposal I offer the thoughts, questions and starting points outlined in this report. Over the following months I intend to rigorously test out and research these ideas. I hope to have the opportunity to return to the school as part of this process to research further.

Guided Tours: Engage a professional tour guide to deliver a series of guided tours around the school grounds and buildings based on my research with staff and pupils. For example the guide could draw tourists attention to imagined train station, giraffes and volcanoes as we walk through the school.

**Tourist Postcards:** Work with a postcard manufacturer and photographer to document the empty school grounds and buildings. Produce a series of multi image postcards in the format of traditional holiday souvenirs and caption the different images as imagined landscapes such as Grand Canyon, caves and so on. The postcards could be sold through Leicester Tourist Information.

**De-cluttering Service:** Identify one or two cluttered places within the school or one or two carefully selected teachers who would be open to working with me to sort out or rationalize unnecessary things they have been hoarding. I would also spend time with the caretaker in order to sort through and package up the unwanted stuff and take it to City Gallery. At the gallery I would sift through the clutter and make a series of landscapes inhabited by model figures. Ideally these landscapes would leak out of the gallery spaces into corridors, doorways and so on. I view this work as being made intensively over the period of a week.

**Furniture Projections:** Arrange to temporarily move some original 1930's cupboards from the school to the gallery and project a series of travel slides inside them using a carousel projector.

**Chair Films** I would also like to consider the possibility of developing the 'chair' films further. It might be possible to involve *Picture This* – meeting with them later this week.

### **Related Artists and Projects**

Lucy Pedlar

Neil Cummings

John Stezaker

Esra Ersen

Andrea Fraser:

Olli Keranen

Ian Kiaer:

Becky Shaw: