‘Together’ in Creative Process
Alternative making of values with children


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Abstract
Supported by a Leverhulme Trust fund, a research project exploring creative interactions and dialogue between children and spatial designers in the design process becomes the platform for challenging conventional environments of knowledge making and exploring alternative topoi for shaping research cultures and values through a dialogical, transversal approach. This provocation paper problematizes the politics and structures of architectural research councils and funding bodies, whose efficiency-driven monoculture arguably spills over onto research approaches, the establishment of (design practice) values and the appropriation of knowledge. Findings of our Leverhulme-funded research propose ‘acting otherwise’ (Petrescu 2012), ‘acting together’ (Sennett 2012) in the creative design process, valuing difference and diversity in lay (children’s) and expert (design professionals’) exchanges and thus offering the conditions for reciprocal learning and cooperative ‘worlding’.

Keywords: research funding culture, child-designer collaboration, worlding, together, design practice values
Research funding bodies as value setters
When exploring the focus of research funding available to architectural research in the UK, it becomes clear that there is much interest in considering the nation’s place in a competitive global economy. The mood is one of competition and the hope sustains Britain’s neo-colonial traditions to strive to be the ‘best’ or ‘better’ than other countries. Creativity is deemed necessary for innovation and innovation can boost an economy, so the rhetoric goes. One example lies in the case of the Arts and Humanities Research Council which, after commissioning a research programme scoping study, has a strategic research priority, between 2013-2018, for continued partnership with the Design Council. The commissioned report (Research Programme Scoping study report for the AHRC/Design Council 2012) recommended that

...more research is needed on whether and how design adds value at an individual business level, beyond that of supporting a product development role, and further to this research that better understands the contribution that design makes to the UK economy, and how this compares to economies across the world. Any further work in this territory could most appropriately be approached by a combination of designers, economists and business practitioners.

An animation explaining the partnership between the AHRC and the Design Council goes on to cement the emphasis upon the economy whilst presumably persuading the individual businessman or woman - for whom the video reads as promotional material - of the impact of the AHRC and Design Council partnership: ‘Every £1 spend on Design can give you over £20 in increased revenue and £4 in increased profit and if you want to sell to new markets, that same £1 can turn into £5 in increased exports. It’s no surprise that UK businesses spend £33 billion on design every year’.

The ESRC (Engineering, and Physical Sciences Research Council), as a UK governmental agency for funding and training in Engineering and the Physical Sciences is another significant source of financial support, and therefore value-setter for architectural research. It is an organisation whose vision ‘is to be the most dynamic and stimulating environment in which to engage in research and innovation’. Whilst recognising ‘that with rising international research competition and expertise, the UK must perform ever more effectively in order to maintain its research standing let alone further improve it’, the research council’s Strategic Plan for 2015 is peppered with celebrations of rankings, investment figures, spin off companies, awards made, research centres established, numbers of people employed and doctoral places created.

Similarly, the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) in the UK sets a competitive tone, with international acclaim at the forefront of the research council’s values. The ESRC states that it ‘offers’ a three pronged service: Quality, Impact and Independence. ‘Quality’ is here underpinned by evaluation and standards:

All ESRC research awards are made in open competition, subject to transparent peer assessment at the outset and evaluation upon completion. Rigorous standards are applied to all the training we support. Our research often involves multidisciplinary teams, collaboration with other councils, and frequently takes a long term view. Our datasets, longitudinal and panel studies are internationally acclaimed resources.

Clearly, the ethos of discovery and exploration is accompanied by considerable disposition towards the need to report measurable achievement.
It would be a mistake to think that university research culture and architectural practice are casual bystanders to this kind of worlding because both are value-setters in themselves. The architectural or design competition, for example, is a long-standing means of selecting who will design, make and shape a new building or place and is critical to our understanding of the way cooperation may be (under)valued. The RIBA in the UK celebrates the key roles it plays in RIBA Competitions as it ‘delivers choice, inspiration and value to clients through expertly run architectural competitions and competitive selection processes’. One question raised by design competition is the extent to which juries of such schemes are qualified, or not, to judge what is ‘best’ (Verderber et al 2014, Nassar 1999). The lack of involvement of the lay person within such architectural decision-making and values-construction is an important theme to be returned to later in this paper.

The state of universities within well-established positional hierarchies driven by competitiveness is well documented (Marginson 2006). Relationships across higher education are structured and characterised by rivalry and competition rather than cooperation:

*Global higher education is produced and consumed within a world-wide university hierarchy in which inequality between research universities, and between nations - and the often uni-directional flows of people, capital and knowledge associated with those inequalities - are necessary to global competition.* (Marginson 2006:2).

While such stories act as an important backdrop to understanding the messy field of power and decision making influencing research, Marginson (2006) points out, however, that this global competition is not needed for research collaboration and - we extrapolate - neither is it needed for broader exchange of knowledges. Marginson hints that there are newly-forming fissures in the English-speaking hegemony of University education and research, which are created as nations from the global south build their higher education programmes and research schemes. There is, on a global scale, some potential for change around who gets to set the rules. There is uncertainty about the scale of this change for, as Appadurai (2012:638) notes, the drive for economic stability and workforce creation is more influential than the need for creative education or revolutionary research.

Returning to the potential for change, at a scale which is detectible, this paper asks: what then of an alternative stance for funded architectural research? Is there an opportunity to move away from the preoccupation with competitiveness of nations and of organisations? One such unorthodox position, which leaves the economic standard-setting aside, is offered via the involvement of research support from non-government bodies. An example in the UK is The Leverhulme Trust which funds work from a range of disciplines, and potentially with international partners. The Leverhulme Trust is a charitable organisation and asks for the research it funds to:

- Reflect an individual’s personal vision, aspiration, or intellectual curiosity;
- Take appropriate risks in setting and pursuing research objectives;
- Enable a refreshing departure from established patterns of working – either for the individual, or for the discipline, and;
- Transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Such an approach is quite radical in its emphasis. The scholar is, from the outset, invited to think differently. Through these kinds of research prerequisites, a new set of conditions is created, which resists reductive cultures of measurement and instead supports ‘cooperative environments of knowledge, of creation and invention’. This *a priori* opening of alternative values enables a more empowering approach to architectural research, both for researchers and participants: an arguably ‘U-topic’ framework highly conducive to an alternative making of values.
In search of alternative values: exploring processes

Encouraged and enabled by the Leverhulme Trust to explore the creative dialogue between children and spatial designers in ‘live’ design projects, our own three-year research project, *Designing with Children*, opened up a framework for exploring and valuing difference, and building understanding of diverse values through a focus on the design process.

The proposal reflected a personal vision, controversial within architectural design, that lay people might ‘co-design’ in dialogue with professionals and thus transform the design process. The research project, which started in January 2013, focuses on lay people who are children – a group traditionally marginalised from built environment design – but from whom it is suggested we might learn a great deal about the opportunity for ‘non-experts’ to bring imagination and playful engagement to co-design. The research proposal was initially supported by anecdotal evidence which suggests that children’s cultures and ‘ways of being’ might be particularly conducive to creative exchange with designers (Parnell 2011:298; Parnell and Patsarika 2011). Given that design embraces visual modes of representation, reference to personal experience and sensation, imaginative and creative language, it can provide what Clark (2011) refers to as a potential ‘bridge’ between design professionals and children, such that dialogue because possible. It is a world which both designers and children can potentially access, contribute to and – crucially – one in which they can understand each other.

In order to better understand this bridge, and the ensuing design conversation, the Designing with Children project involved two phases: first interviews with spatial designers, in which we asked questions about their experiences of creative process, the design process and working with children. Second, four ‘live’ case studies (two in UK, one in Germany and one in Greece) in which architects communicate directly with children during the design of different settings (2 schools, 1 restaurant, 1 woodland shelter). Two of these cases saw the architects working in relatively conventional commercial settings: commissions for refurbishment of school grounds and a child-centred restaurant area; one case was characterised by pro bono work, borne out of connections with creative and committed school teachers; the other was motivated by a radical approach to building-focused intergenerational living. The live case studies involved researchers situating themselves in the design conversation settings using a range of methodological techniques including document analysis, research field diaries, filming live design activity, researcher/participant photography and interviews incorporating visual methods as prompts and vehicles for reflection. The observed design activity with children varied from relatively brief 90 minute sessions to 3 mornings of design and/or building. Each of the overall processes involved hands-on making of some kind – either model making or 1:1 building with children between the ages of 5 and 11 years.

When a research project is supported, by its funders, to focus upon the details and minutiae of a process, for scholarly sake, rather than seeking measurable change, or economically relevant output, it is then that discernible transformations and changes in culture may make themselves known.

Together: designers and children shaping identities and values

In his book *Together. The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation* (2012), Richard Sennett makes a crucial distinction between dialectic and dialogic conversations. The first type of conversation, more of a ‘feel-good’ expression of sympathy towards one another, aims to achieve consensus on a given goal and a common understanding with people who are potentially different from me. The dialogic exchange, on the contrary, is sustained by curiosity, leaving space for difference and empathy to forge creative and complex associations between me and others, often blurring role boundaries, communication conventions and opening up alternative perspectives for what follows next. We have seen both kinds of dialogue in the designer-child interactions – for
example, when a designer offers interpretations of children’s understandings that make sense to her own designerly thinking (dialectic) or, when triggered by sheer curiosity and playfulness children explore cardboard tubes, blow through them, use them to amplify their voices to a deafening level and as fighting swords, i.e. seeing them first to have multiple other uses other than plain building materials, as instructed by the designer (dialogic). Regardless of the type of conversation, dialogue was identified in designer-child interactions as a critical tool to negotiate and forge togetherness in their process of shaping values and identities.

This creative dialogue was expressed by a sense of accommodating and understanding the Others – making space for their voices to be heard – and, on the part of the designer, giving up control to allow children to contribute meaningfully; to have an understanding that they are doing the ‘real thing’, as this boy explained:

*I think he does incorporate children’s ideas really well and lets us do the job, and unlike most activities where the children do a tiny part, so like painting a log or something like that, I think they really do get involved, because I’ve been cutting down the spikes that really actually are going to stick in the ground rather than doing something I could practice and to do the real thing.*

In this light, children’s and designers’ sense of togetherness was embodied in an active sense of care and reciprocity and a sense of mutual respect towards one another. Here is what one girl said about her collaboration with her friends in the design process (names changed to keep the anonymity they signed up to):

*I found it interesting, because I thought it was cool that Eli and Zoe were working, were helping each other to carry a thing. They were helping each other to do something. And I thought that looked quite like, again like teamwork, just working together and getting on.*

In Fig. 1, a space to engage with the ‘real’ thing, in togetherness, children’s and designers’ sense of togetherness was embodied in an active sense of care and reciprocity and a sense of mutual respect towards one another.

In Fig. 2, working together and getting on.
Children’s and designers’ co-creative ventures were permeated by a sense of responsibility towards one another. Children took their role in the design process very seriously, with a sense of accountability for the rest of the team and, in some cases, for the community of students they were ‘representing’. A key concern was to ‘get it right’, because one’s individual input and action may have an impact on the collective effort. One girl accordingly offered the following advice to children who would like to work with designers:

*I’d say just be quite careful and make sure you know what you’re doing, because you’re going to feel really bad if it all flops and it’s going to be a shame for you and everyone, I think. And also to make sure you don’t go ‘Oh, I want to do this’, and like get an adult and say ‘Please can you help with this?’ Because you could, like, break something, like the holdy thing that I held up like that, I couldn’t figure how to do it, but if I had carried on pushing the pedal and doing that I would have completely broken it probably* (laughs).

Rather than showing lack of trust in children’s own abilities, these words evoke a strong sense of accountability and interdependency, which is appreciated by a participating designer as an empowering approach to enabling authorship in children’s identity and value formation and ‘wolrding’ processes: *[…] it’s not that they [children] need to be stamping their foot and deciding everything but they need to be around people who can make decisions, [then] they can feel empowered.* This resonates with Fielding’s (2008: 219) understanding of ‘radical collegiality’ between students and teachers, but also, we find, echoes Kolbe’s (1993) subtle critique of an equally monocultural child-centred and child-led perspective in engagement with arts, crafts and, in our case, design activities, proposing a role of a ‘craftsperson’ and a ‘co-artist’ (1993:77-78) for adults in the co-poiesis process with children.

For architects, responsibility meant getting it right for the children, wanting to meet their expectations and trust in them by engaging them in an authentic participatory process, in the case of this architect below, one which is based on dialogue rather than dialectics:

*I feel more responsible, I don’t want to design something and have to convince you that the pool needs to be inside the living room, for example, I want to understand exactly what you want and make it happen in a creative way.*

This is about striving to understand what a person who is different from me needs and wants; a personal responsibility of care that is founded on the awareness that ‘[…] “I” exists only as a member of the “You” and “I”. The self only exists in the communion of selves’ (Macmurray 1933:137, cited in Fielding 2006:301), which opens up space for scholars and practitioners to conceive of difference in different ways. Children’s accounts pointed, indeed, towards an encated politics of mutual care; a 9 year-old thus advises designers who want to collaborate with children in design processes: ‘Make sure you explain everything well, because unlike quite a few adults, children can’t always know what adults mean right away’. In a similar vein, a 12- year-old boy advises designers to:

*be incredibly patient, incorporate their ideas, […] not neglect them […] and sort of make them your friends. If you’re the enemies then it’s a lot harder to be really nice and sort of get them involved and get them actually doing things.*

The collaboration between children and architects that we observed and heard about thus came with a recognition that adults and children were sometimes similar to each other; sometimes different. Both difference and similarity, however, were accommodated by the acknowledgement of the potential for different values and identities to co-exist. As a designer, for example, is drawing the plan of the structure on the blackboard, a 5 year-old girl playfully grabs the chalk out of his hands and sketches out the outline of a child, in what momentarily distracts the orchestrated design activity; where a group of children is supposed to be weaving baskets out of wood carvings and using them purposefully, a girl uses it as a skipping rope making her friend laugh; or, where others are working on the last details of the built structure, a boy prefers to step
back and observe from above (Fig. 3). These ‘interruptions’, however, were not observed to result in rupture; as difference is valued, skills for understanding are sharpened – understanding the value of unexpected turns in interactions with people different from you, appreciating everyone’s input, no matter how small or big it is, and tolerating one’s limits.

Fig. 3: Stepping back to observe

In the case study settings children had the freedom to opt out of the activities, if they wanted to, and contribute to the extent that they felt most comfortable with. This, we argue, is reflected in Fielding’s (2008:131) understanding of tolerating distinction and difference, being ‘respectful and acknowledging the legitimacy of those differences’.

The above conceptualisations point to an understanding of togetherness as a meeting of cultures, an overall sense of the children meeting the architects’ ways and vice versa. This is encapsulated in what Fielding (2008:131) calls ‘transversal politics’, drawing on the work on Cockburn and Hunter (1999), an approach that opens up possibilities for reciprocal learning and a sense of togetherness embodied in people’s interactions, relationships, meaning making processes and understanding of the world. To put it in the words of a designer, ‘one has to really understand the needs and desires of the people that they are working with in order to co-create meaningfully’. Reflecting back on the mixing up of cultures – whether children’s or other adult clients’ juxtaposed with design professionals’ – another participating architect took three or four books and laid them very close together arguing that ‘this is what is normally understood by collaboration’. He then piled the books all on top of each other, not neatly, saying that this is his kind of collaboration. We find Edmiston’s (2010) understanding of ‘co-authoring identities’ particularly relevant in this light: as an authoring self, though unique, is answerable for one’s actions and evaluates them from the standpoint of the Other, opportunities for co-creation, negotiation of values and, potentially, transformation arise.

The crucible for such alternative ‘making and thinking’, for more relational and diverse environments of cooperation is the everyday. Here there is unending potential for the negotiation of values, and differences can be seen to complement our practices. Participation – a traditionally rights-based field – is increasingly being framed as a relational process for adults (e.g. Petrescu 2012) and children (Mannion 2010; Percy-Smith and Malone 2001:4) alike. Here one of our participant architects articulates his understanding of togetherness as an everyday condition of being – as a way of being:

A lot of people, I think, feel like they can’t do a job properly unless setting certain conditions – you know, I need to have all of this equipment, I need to have no noise and I need distractions out of the way, I can’t have people talking […] while I’m trying to do this […] Just hang out with the kids while you [do] that job, which is always invigorating rather than just get it done in this dry way […] I love that approach. I just think a quite useful way to look at lots of things is, ‘why can’t I do this with a child’?
Rather than a prescribed set of processes and procedures, participation – or being and acting together – therefore becomes a way of perceiving ourselves ‘in mutuality as persons, not as role occupants’ (Fielding 2000:401).

Conclusions
The research methodology adopted in this project crucially facilitated a shift in architects’ positioning as expert professionals and children’s understandings of their creative inputs to the design process. The invitation to engage with multimodal research techniques, for example, enabled children to articulate their views and ways of doing design through symbolic and playful expressions (Mackey 2011). What has become apparent through initial interviews with designers, focussed ethnographies and follow up interviews within the case studies, is that interaction between children and designers includes reciprocal learning (Day et al 2011:50) and the importance of being and doing together is strikingly meaningful to both groups.

That the values of the funding body allowed this particular research project to pause in the process rather than forging ahead to measure discernable impacts on products, for example, has presented time to explore and understand how and what ‘alternative’ values it is possible to co-create. These values might then be given due weight so that they can be articulated and in themselves, valued. In this way, we argue that the research might draw attention to the usually tacit and anecdotal, allowing these aspects to be defined and hence leading to a situation in which new co-created values are less likely to be swept away and discounted by dominant rhetoric.

Indeed, dominant rhetoric might instead be challenged and potentially listen to alternative underpinning values, even directing activities towards similar ends, but via more authentic and – in this case – empathic paths which embrace diversity and interruption.

We draw here on Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of ‘heteroglossia’ (mentioned also in Edmiston 2010), which suggests that alternative worlding processes call for the encouragement and mingling of different voices, perspectives, methodologies, different ‘languages’ to meet, with an emerging ‘multilingualism’ (Cockburn and Hunter 1999:91) thus becoming a value infusing research processes and a necessary condition for research funding bodies if the goal is to support ‘cooperative environments of knowledge, of creation and invention’. In this research we have seen designers open up to ‘occupy multiple subject positions and shift, manoeuvre and negotiate within and across [discursive frames].’ (Dent and Whitehead 2002:10) In this context designers can become ‘worldmakers’, in the sense of constructing meanings and relationships (Goodman 1978), both sympathetically and empathically cooperating with children as they continue in their journey as ‘world-weavers’ (Cohen and MacKeith 1991; Wood and Atttfield 2005:84).

References


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