



Right:
Martin Richman and
AHMM, main playground,
Jubilee School, Tulse
Hill, London, 2002.
Photo: Tim Soar



NAVIGATING PLACES

Back to school

Jane Watt profiles collaborations between artists and architects at two newly built schools, in the third of the six-part series 'Navigating Places'.

Facing page top:
Primary School
playground, Community
School of Auchterarder,
Perthshire 2002. Photo:
Keith Hunter
In discussion with the
architects and landscape
architects, Susie Hunter
designed the primary
school playground with
soft and hard landscaping
elements. These included
a concrete structure
which children can use to
play 'houses' or 'shops'
as well as a seating or
climbing area. She has
also incorporated rubber
covered hilltop surfaces
together with listening
and speaking tubes.

Facing page bottom:
Samantha Clark, *Lie of
the Land*, 2003.
Routed birch ply
panelling in the foyer of
the secondary school,
Community School of
Auchterarder, Perthshire.
Photo: Keith Hunter

For a number of years one of the most common commission opportunities has been for artists to produce work for new building projects. The adoption of a Percent for Art policy by the Arts Council of England in 1988 went a long way to encourage the commissioning of art in new public spaces. This pot of gold became much richer and shinier with the introduction, in 1995, of National Lottery-funded capital projects. The lottery funding criteria encouraged the integration of artists in building projects that, in turn, helped to raise the position of the artist from an add-on, or afterthought, to a design team member.

Collaboration and open dialogue across the design table – between architect, landscape designer, engineer, project manager and client – are promoted in design briefs and the aforementioned funding criteria. However, as a practitioner and researcher in this field, I know that, unfortunately, such ideals are not routinely achieved. All too often artists and architects are brought together in what the American writer and commis-

sioner Tom Finkelpearl calls 'forced marriages'¹. Although the architect may have had a glimpse of the artist's previous work at the shortlisting stage, the artist usually enters the 'marriage' semi-blind, with little knowledge of the architect's practice, or track record of relationships. Sometimes love can blossom and these relationships can produce interesting and innovative 'off-spring'. But it is a game of chance that can result in a lot of heartache for artist, architect, commissioner and ultimately the public, who are the ones who have to live with the results.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. The artist/architect group muf has circumvented this problem as they are a tried and tested collaborative team which successfully applies innovative architectural and artistic practice to a range of public projects including *Pleasure Garden of the Utilities* (1997-99) in Stoke on Trent and the *Verulamium Hypocaust Building* (2000) in St Albans. The RSA Art for Architecture scheme calls for applications from artist and architect teams for grants that will cover

the payment of an artist's fee within a collaborative building project². In this way, it requires the artist and architect to consider their potential relationship and work before the project takes place.

Two recently completed commissions in newly built schools – the Community School of Auchterarder in Perthshire and the Jubilee School in south London – have incorporated artists within design teams to work intrinsically with the form and function of the buildings. They have both encouraged exchange and collaboration across the artistic and design professions.

In Auchterarder, Anderson Bell Christie architects, Perth and Kinross Landscape Services and the public art agency PACE have worked with four artists – Susie Hunter, Samantha Clark, Lucy Richards and Gordon Young³ – on the rebuilding of a community nursery, primary and secondary school. This new building scheme is being phased in gradually over four stages requiring a long-term commitment from the artists, architects, funders and client. Each of the artists has concentrated

Right:
Samantha Clark,
Catchment, 2003.
River pattern inlaid into
flooring vinyl in the
secondary school,
Community School of
Auchterarder, Perthshire.
Photo: Keith Hunter



Below:
Martin Richman, Jubilee
School, Tulse Hill, London
2002. Photo: Tim Soar.
Richman devised a spiral
pattern which was
sandblasted onto two
sheets of glass for an
external window at the end
of the first floor corridor.
The double layered pattern
created an interlinking
screen to obscure direct
vision to nearby buildings
whilst still allowing
sunlight into the corridor.



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on a particular area of the school building and exterior: Susie Hunter worked with the landscape architects to design the primary school playground. Hunter, who originally trained as a jeweller and then moved into inflatable sculptural works, had never before worked on a project of this type. However, the selection team saw her potential and took a ‘leap of faith’. Such faith is not always present in building commissions where the temptation to play safe is strong. Often it takes a champion who has the belief in a potentially new approach, or in a new member to the team, together with the will to drive it forward⁴.

Although Hunter’s ideas differed quite radically to the landscape architect’s initial designs for the playground, they both had an openness and enthusiasm for the project and managed to work together to produce a unique, well articulated and above all, fun space for the children to play in. Samantha Clark, who worked on designs for interior spaces in the secondary school, found that the length of such a project meant that she was working with a number of different people over three years: “On such a big and lengthy project as this, I wasn’t always working with the same architect and working relationships shifted as we moved from design to pro-

curement and completion. As we got further on in the process I found myself having to find out for myself things like fire regulations and certain structural issues.” However, Clark goes on to say that “it has been amazing seeing a project of this scale develop from plans on paper to a functioning building. It has been the first time I have worked for such a long time on a project”. As she points out “it is easy to end up spending too much time on the phone and not enough at the studio, especially when there are deadlines to be met, and the long duration can mean that your thinking has moved on a lot faster than the work itself. I find the need to also work on smaller, quicker projects at the same time to keep things fresh, which can mean you end up spinning an awful lot of plates at once”.

Clark’s observations underline tensions which can occur within commissions where artists are working within complicated building contracts, procedures for which they, unlike the architects in the project, have not been trained. This requires new (to the artist) knowledge of building processes, supportive structures within the design team and a certain amount of ‘learning on the job’. It also demands different,

and sometimes protracted, working schedules and negotiations within the overall building contract; the artist’s input is usually one small part of a much larger functioning whole. Despite Clark’s fairly steep learning curve (one which is common to most artists working in this domain), the resultant works have been well received by artist, design team, commissioner and school users alike. Clark worked on a floor design – *Catchment*, depicting the map of a local river system – which links corridors throughout the ground floor of the school. *Lie of the Land* is a series of wooden panels with delicate drawings of contours of the land surrounding the school (an area renowned for its outstanding scenic beauty). She explains “there are no names on these maps and sometimes people don’t immediately realise what they are and read the marks abstractly. But when they realise what they are looking at, you can see a moment of revelation and then they start searching for places they know, trying to find where they live, recognising places and pointing them out to each other”. This type of interaction between building, artwork and user is exactly the result that the artist wished to achieve: to stimulate another type of engagement and

“This type of collaborative relationship requires willingness from both sides”



Right:
Martin Richman and AHMM, back playground, Jubilee School, Tulse Hill, London, 2002.
Photo: Matthew Chisnall

Far right:
Martin Richman and AHMM, Jubilee School, Tulse Hill, London, 2002.
Photo: Tim Soar



ownership of the building and work.

Around the same time as the Community School of Auchterarder project was developing, over four hundred miles south, artist Martin Richman and architects Allford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM) were discussing and designing the new Jubilee School in south London. Whereas the artists in Auchterarder identified and addressed specific areas such as playgrounds and corridors, Richman did not have a brief as such⁵. He was not brought in to the project for his signature light installations. Instead, his role was more holistic; he took part in discussing the overall design concepts, layout and finishes of the building. In this sense Richman does not have a strong sense of ownership to any particular element in the building (although he did instigate a spiral geometric element which recurs on the playground floors and an external window, as well as the striking Bara-guesque external wall colours). Rather, as he says, he had “a sense of engagement with the project as a whole”. This was largely thanks to Richman’s collaborative relationship with the project architects Paul Monaghan and Susi Legood: “They are inventive architects who were interested in my work. They didn’t call me in because there’s a gap in the wall

and they needed to fill it. This type of collaborative relationship requires willingness from both sides.” Richman’s comments echo the critic Jeff Kelley’s assertion that “collaboration is a process of mutual transformation in which collaborators, and thus their common work, are in some way changed. Most importantly the creative process itself is transformed in a collaboration.”⁶

Perhaps one of the most striking features of the Jubilee School is the bold use of colour. Richman’s palette of pink, magenta, aubergine and violet enliven the external spaces. Rather like a child with a colouring book, Richman has taken great pleasure in suggesting “let’s paint that wall hot pink, that one fuchsia, that one aubergine...”. He has responded to AHMM’s white walls (which are designed in a modernist geometric style and seen more often in museum buildings than primary schools) with a hop, skip and jump of joy.

These two schools are very different in location, as well as aesthetic. However, they both prove that artists can work well within building projects – if enthusiasm, empathy and trust are present between artist, architect and commissioner. If this happens then the results can be stimulating, both in practice and in the final product.

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Samantha Clark’s work can be seen at www.samanthaclark.net

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- 1 Tom Finkelpearl (2000), *Dialogues in Public Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press, p150.
- 2 See Jes Fernie’s article ‘Architectural Dialogues’, *a-n Magazine*, January 2003 for more details on this scheme.
- 3 The team are awaiting funding decisions for the go-ahead on Phase Four for which Young has proposed a Road to the Isles walkway.
- 4 The public art officer for Southampton City Council, Liz Goodhall articulated the importance of ‘championship’ in public art projects, in a paper she gave at the Public Art Forum conference Keeping it Going... Sustainable Relationships in Public Art, in Birmingham, 2000. She gave an example of this practice in Southampton and said “...very often [such] political championship crosses political boundaries and depends upon personal enthusiasm”.
- 5 Richman was the recipient of an RSA Art for Architecture Award for his involvement in the Jubilee School and this was pivotal to his inclusion in this project.
- 6 Quoted from Kelley’s essay ‘Common Work’ published in Suzanne Lacy (ed, 1995) *Mapping the Terrain: new genre public art*, Seattle, Bay Press.