

# The Spacemakers Project

## The Architecture Centre Bristol

### Summary

The Architecture Centre Bristol is an independent organisation dedicated to the promotion and exploration of excellence in all aspects of the built environment.

The Centre's programme includes exhibitions, guided tours, visits, discussions, workshops and lectures. The Architecture Centre Bristol runs a diverse and exciting education programme in Bristol and across the South West region involving schools, youth and community groups, teachers and families.

Spacemakers was a two-year project that ran from September 2002 to November 2004 in which young people, who were aged thirteen when the project started, designed a public space within their own community in the Hartcliffe and Withywood area of Bristol. The Spacemakers project was supported by The Architecture Centre Bristol, The Glasshouse Trust, Bristol City Council and Hartcliffe Community Campus and two local artists.

The key objectives of the Spacemakers project were:

- to involve disenfranchised youth in shaping their environment;
- to create a sense of ownership, and develop feelings of community;
- to improve the young people's feelings of self worth and career prospects

The first phase of the project concentrated on education and training. The young Spacemakers were introduced to many issues relating to the design and use of public buildings. This was achieved through a series of visits and practical workshops with a strong emphasis on enjoyment whilst learning.

After an initial visit to the centre of Bristol to view the harbour side and public spaces, as well as buildings, the Spacemakers started the project with a three day residential visit to Trafford Hall, the National Tenant's Resource Centre in Manchester. They took part in a specially designed course relating to the design of public spaces.



The Spacemakers then went on to take part in a variety of site visits and workshops in Glasgow, London, Westonbirt Arboretum and Cornwall. On each visit to a public space a similar format was followed. The young people were firstly asked to explore the space and to take notes of what they saw and then share their observations and ideas about the public park space. The adult members of the team used these sessions to draw out the young people's ideas and to demonstrate that it was their ideas and perceptions that were the important ones, not necessarily what the adults thought. In all processes the young people made the key creative decisions throughout the project.



Over time this process of analysing the public park spaces enabled the group to develop a framework of ideas of what for them made for a 'successful' public park space. Culmination of this phase ended with a visit to Holland where Spacemakers were able to experience work by public artists, communities and architects in the design of public spaces.



With an overall understanding of the broader issues relating to the design of public space the project focussed on the locality of Hartcliffe and Withywood.

In February and March 2003, the Spacemakers staff group identified ten local open space sites available for development and which would be suitable for the Spacemakers to consider.

The Spacemakers visited each site in turn and used the knowledge gained on all their other visits to collectively analyse the plus and minus points of each site. This involved consideration of the size of the space, its location within the community, current usage, pathways, other local facilities nearby, potential for vandalism, ease of management and oversight as well as their own local knowledge of the specific site.



Their final choice, by vote, was a prominent site in part of Wilmott Park, opposite one of the local youth centres and near to roads and a shopping centre. What proved a crucial factor to the choice of the site, however, was the presence of a group of mature oak trees, which they wanted their scheme to celebrate.

The young people then worked with the artist Kathrin Böhm creating a temporary timber shelter and a painted concrete plinth. This work helped the Spacemakers understand the design and construction process, and developed their understanding of the site, and was a crucial part of the process of developing the brief.

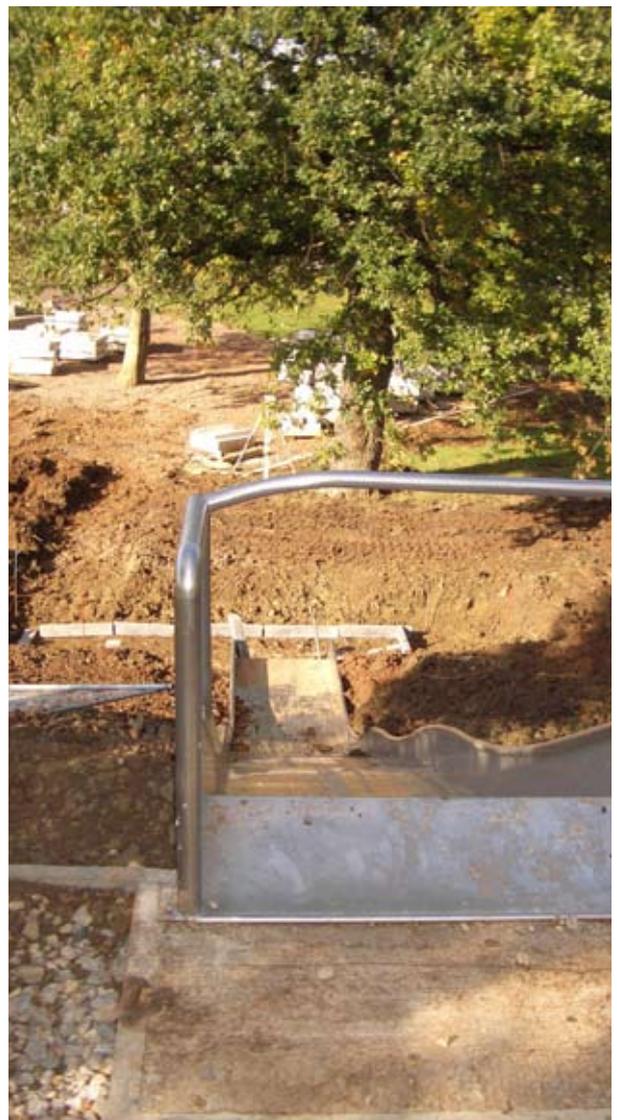
As a complementary activity to the project, artist Cleo Broda produced a set of postcards about the everyday life of Hartcliffe and Withywood.

The next priority was to appoint a landscape architect. An advertisement was placed in Building Design, to which seventeen landscape architects responded. Responses were received from one Bristol based practice; one from Germany and the rest were from other parts of the UK.

The Spacemakers developed a set of criteria to judge the applications and short-listed three landscape architects. They were quite clear that the principles that guided the project to date, namely that the development of ideas were young person led and adult supported should inform the selection process and working relationship with the chosen landscape architect.

The Spacemakers were supported in developing a presentation to give to each of the candidates. This presentation set out the aims and objectives of the project and the priorities of the young people. Three sets of young Spacemakers made the presentations and then interviewed the landscape architects with a set of their prepared questions. The Spacemakers were present during the interviews, which were conducted by the steering group. The Spacemakers made the final decision to appoint Greg White of Loci Design as he most closely fitted the criteria that they had determined. The Spacemakers worked on design ideas with Greg White over a period of about three months.

The young people created a 'wish list' that included a shelter, a stream and a bridge as well as an aerial walkway between the trees. They were aware that some of their ideas might be too expensive or impractical at the outset and so they refined their ideas over time.



Workshops were held which explored each of the elements they wanted, as well as the park as a whole. They did a lot of sketching and made a series of plasticine models. The young people said that each time they presented a new set of ideas to the landscape architect; Greg then went away and came back with a possible solution.

They consulted disability access advisers and also considered the safety and maintenance of their designs. The Spacemakers had particularly strong views about materials. This had developed over the course of their visits to other public spaces. They were concerned about vandalism and in particular, arson. No timber was to be used, and everything was designed to be as indestructible as possible. They were also faced with hard choices when the price of steel suddenly doubled and they were forced to rethink elements of the scheme.

During the course of developing ideas for the site an unexpected discovery of was made of moving water 2.5m beneath ground level under manhole covers at the site. The water was tested and proved to be clean, and the Engineers ARUP were appointed to devise a way of bringing the water to surface level without the use of pumps to create a watercourse through the site.

Much of the practical work was undertaken by the Project Manager and Landscape Architect, including fundraising and hiring contractors, however the Spacemakers took on key roles throughout the realisation of the project.

The work of Spacemakers became widely known by other young people through the natural networking of the young people across the local area. Some Spacemakers made a particular effort to share knowledge of the development. The Spacemakers created 'flyers' describing the intentions for the park. They then distributed these to householders in the immediate vicinity.

The project staff supported the young people in developing the presentation skills of talking to others about the project. The Spacemakers prepared and gave a presentation to fifty members of the local community, including some of those residents close to the proposed park as well as local representatives of key organisations. For this presentation the Spacemakers prepared models, plans, and displays as well as giving a verbal presentation. On separate occasions the Spacemakers made presentations to fund holders including Bristol City Council officers and elected members.

It was important that the local community were kept informed about the development throughout the project once work was to commence on site. This was partly achieved by the Spacemakers who were interviewed on a weekly basis by local radio and TV during the construction of the public space and its launch in November 2004.

From the moment that the work on site started and the young people were involved in telling TV and radio presenters of progress the Spacemakers realised that their project was for real. The project staff saw this as a significant moment for the young people and they saw the young people grow further in personal stature at this point of the project.

This publicity and local consultation over the proposals helped the wider community to take greater "ownership" of the project and as a result the development of the park was largely unhindered by vandalism and theft during its build phase.

The opening day that was attended by 150 people, many local, but also senior representatives from local and city organisations the Spacemakers had been in conversation with.

Spacemakers project led to the creation of an impressive public space that includes a futuristic looking shelter, a slide, a water channel and hard surfaces and benches on different levels.

## Partners

- The Architecture Centre, Bristol: Lead Partner
- Bristol City Council
- Spacemakers group of young people: once the project was underway, the young people participating in Spacemakers were considered as project partners.
- The Glass-House: is a registered charity that supports and encourages better working partnerships between communities and professionals who are working together to improve the quality of a neighbourhood. The Glass-House works nationally, offering design advice, training and project support to projects focussing on neighbourhoods, housing, public space, community buildings, play areas and facilities for young people.
- Hartcliffe Community Campus: comprises several educational establishments sited on extensive but largely underused green space in south Bristol.



## Participants

A group of 16 young people from the Bristol area aged 13 – 15 from a range of backgrounds, and an equal mix of boys and girls. Over the duration of the project this reduced to ten young people. Adult representatives from the schools and youth locality team that had helped recruit the group became part of the project team:

- Mark Rooney - Project Manager
- Paul Spatchurst – senior assistant youth worker at Hareclive Youth Centre
- Mike Snow - mentor at Withywood Secondary School
- Claire Warren - mentor at Withywood Secondary School



## Creative Consultants

- Kathrin Böhm, artist
- Cleo Broda, artist
- Greg White, Landscape Architect, Loci Design

## Outputs

A new public space in an area of Wilmott Park, Bristol

## Project duration

Spacemakers was a two-year project that ran from September 2002 to November 2004

## Contact

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