

The Spinney

The Spinney is an adventure playground in Wisbech, located near the centre of the Fenland Georgian town. The Spinney is an extraordinary place. It is a space that is core to the lives of the people who use it, yet shrugs off clichéd labels and definitions. It is a playground, but one that challenges tidy and neat notions of play. It is about adventure, but adventure in the sense of finding your way through the wilderness of growing up. It is a place that seeks to facilitate core values of neighbourliness, well-being, and creative play, and yet is constantly under threat in all these respects.

The Spinney was built in the face of hostility from the local residents, despite the fact that the Green had always been earmarked for public use. The wealthy landowning Prinz family bequeathed the land for the use of the people. Rather than keep it as the domain of dog walkers, a brave and visionary decision was made to install an adventure playground, filled with structures not found in ordinary playgrounds. Speed, height, dexterity, challenge and joy of mastery of the physical self - this is the name of the game at the Spinney.

CCI was asked to devise and deliver a project with the Spinney play workers to find ways of enhancing the playground environment, facilitating creativity, shifting relations with resident neighbours, encouraging the kids to develop a sense of ownership and pride in their playground, and finally, facilitating connections with potential new users of the playground.

Gates and Cameras.

The first thing one notices coming into the Spinney is the all surround fence and CCTV cameras pointed into and around the playground. Four gates, all bare, no notices or signs advertising what you are coming into – or what might happen there – very much a functional boundary. A frame that belies the actual richness of what happens at the Spinney. On weekends, holidays and after school, the Spinney is occupied with children from toddlers to teenagers, and young adults. It is occupied by children playing hard, playing wildly, imaginatively inventive; their lives in all complexity being played out.

The Kids

There are not many adults about – younger children are brought by parents, or grandparents, but the majority of the young people are unchaperoned. They spend long feral days at the Spinney, coming in and out of the playground, in and out of games and groups. After school we watch the kids rush in, immersed in letting off steam, releasing the constrictions of school, and reconfiguring themselves amongst their peers and friends. This is the second thing we notice about the Spinney – the sheer energy of the kids, and their risk-taking, powerful and exciting physical play. It is not often that one sees phones or tablets being focused on at the Spinney – apart from calls to establish dates or play music, mostly phones are pocketed. Partly because they will walk if left unattended but really because there is too much to be getting on with.

Sometimes the playground is filled with kids. Sometimes it is empty – small clusters of older children sheltering from rain. Some days there are more families, some afternoons it seems to be brimming with teenager antics. There isn't always rhyme and reason as to when people come. Many different groups of children use the Spinney. The children who live in the immediate vicinity. The local school brings their Year 5 children on a weekly basis. The

local pupil referral unit brings young teenagers to the space to engage in projects. Nursery groups walk their toddlers to the Spinney.

The Play Workers

The Spinney is staffed by play workers who know these kids well; some have seen them grow up over the years. We are told, and all too quickly see and learn for ourselves, that many of the young people are living lives that defy the usual rights of children to safety, reason, protection, guidance and good health and well-being. They have had to grow up to look out for themselves, to form bonds of companionship and protection within clusters of kin and other kids – not quite gangs, but with the gang-like distrust of 'the others'. They are living within a political culture created by powerless adults who too easily denounce others from different countries with different cultures. Attitudes of prejudice that the children mimic and parrot. Accordingly, they bring attitudes of toughness and hostility to the playground.

The third thing we notice is the genial attitude of easy and calm compassion of the play workers in light of this loose culture of toughness. They patiently keep the background of these kids in mind, yet don't waste time on blame or punishment. They hold the conviction that encouragement and positive attention are the true enablers. They hold this adventure play ground space for the kids, and crucially provide elements of order, trust and guidance that some of these kids lack elsewhere. Without the play workers, the space would be crushingly lawless and unsafe.

We watch as the kids arrive, always checking in with the play workers – they have to sign in - but more than that they are recounting how their day has been, what they're up to, how they are...they slouch about in mock boredom, or banter challenges and easy insults – you can see they are coming into relationships they trust and enjoy. In talking with individual children we find out just how protective the children are about the play workers – to hurt or insult them would be a really wrong thing to do. There is a constant calling – for help, attention, for mediation, to hear injustices, to alleviate boredom. The play workers are non-stop busy, spinning off in all different directions.

Creativity & Play

The fourth thing we notice is just how creative and interested these kids are. Our arts activities can jostle and vie for attention among all the other totally necessary things that need to be played out in the space. But again and again, defying low thresholds of expectation – theirs, not ours – they respond to our invitations and dare to make. Their default position is that they are 'crap' at it all, and can't do it. And yet despite this, they have the curiosity and courage to give it a go, and slowly over time, find a less disparaging relationship with 'being Arty'.

When we and the play workers begin to work on something, there is much coming over – “What are you doing? What's being made? Can I have a go? What can I do?” At its best, our collaborations with the play workers provide hubs of energy and focused making that attracts like bees to honey. Engrossed, they make, build, decorate, embellish, offer ideas, reflect and enjoy. Some stay for a long long time, others 'do, leave and return' – repeated cycles through the day. We notice just how much more we can achieve when the play

workers are alongside us – the best moments have come when we have a strong integrated group working together, flexibly and inclusively.

There can be a tension between engaging with fresh & sparky projects – “Lets improvise a wheelchair out of found and recycled bits!” – and the more long term projects we have introduced to the Spinney. Although attention can be focused, it is also easily distracted, and the habit is to fly to the newest and brightest activity. This is something that can have an impact on the longevity and upkeep of structures and ideas created and made in the Spinney.

Magpies and Vandalism

Sometimes what gets made is too beautiful to resist the temptation to want to take it home to be kept safe. We have found it feels right to call this the 'Magpie-ing'. Wanting to take something beautiful you've made home comes from the repeated experience that if left at the playground overnight, it will get destroyed. This is the narrative and the prejudice of the Spinney. This, it turns out, is a key reason for the discord with neighbours. Time has revealed that in actuality it is the second and nocturnal wave of Spinney visitors who do real damage, who seem beyond caring about their environment, who choose vandalism to express their frustration and sense of disconnection. And yet, even this level of vandalism comes within the benign attitude of the play workers, who patiently and simply keep rebuilding and rethinking what is destroyed until attention moves elsewhere.

Vandalism is the Spinner's very own devil. Feared and perceived too pervasively. And yet, as we have learnt to notice more wisely and more broadly, vandalism is a wide label that belies what's really going on. We see that things are taken home to be treasured safely, not stolen. We see that materials are restructured, rather than destroyed. We see that boisterous play does mean that some things get squashed and distorted – not an act of destruction. A ceremonial burning of a communally made willow character is an event, not an incident. We see that actually all the things that have been made together with the play workers and kids are still there – used and played in, with, and on, but still there. We see that crucially, as long as the playground exists, the children will not need to become vandals.

Community, Adventure & Playfulness

Together we have managed to create welcoming gates. We have created dens that encourage sitting together with people, conversation, and further making. We have created flags that celebrate all the different kids who use the Spinney. We have documented and made visible the beautiful creative work of the local school kids, and the big kids who Parkour so daringly and skilfully across the structures. We have enjoyed conversations from passing dog walkers who have called out their admiration for the different things being made. We have collected stories from the kids that directly express just how full of complexity their lives are, and how ready they are to communicate and to be heard. We feel ready to put our heads and hearts together into thinking about how some of this good work and these good moments might be continued.

We see that the play workers have themselves a long and ongoing rich adventure, working with this Fenland community, and its young people. Essentially the play workers are the

custodians of play, adventure, creativity and a sense of belonging. We feel lucky and touched to have been involved in this very real part of the world. We remember our first day of the project - we arrived early in the blue-skied morning, and quite randomly fell into conversation with an elderly Dutch born Wisbech raconteur, who gave us a wonderful perspective of the history of the Spinney. Shortly after that, to our bemusement, we saw children arrive at the Spinney, still in their pyjamas, ready to begin the day, cheerfully and busily picking the overnight litter. Each day of the project has held this magical and compelling collage made up from the real, surreal, historical, poignant, saddening, uplifting and unflinching reality.

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Based on thoughts and reflections between Filipa and Debbie Hall

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