

The history of the Building Experiences Trust (BET) and the contribution that the Trust has made to built environment education (BEE) in schools

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Early years: RIBA and Workshops

In the 1970s the Royal Institute of British Architects, and some of the RIBA Regions, were developing Built Environment Education for Schools: to help young people to be aware of their built surroundings and to offer encouragement to teachers to use the built environment as a rich resource for learning across the whole spectrum of the curriculum. Lesley Rock (nee Murray), who was responsible for Events at the RIBA, intended "to expand the traditional Christmas Children's Lectures to be more hands on with real experiences of the built environment".

Initially, children, with their parents, guardians or teachers, were invited into the RIBA building in London where a team of architect volunteers worked with them : to "walk around the block"; to talk about buildings and the spaces between them; to "make space" with junk material; to experience the whole process of brief making, design and construction, using the space created for play or somewhere to eat lunch.

Bob Smart remembers a 10 year old sitting on his 'terrace' (sheets of white paper) in front of his 'cave' (a large cardboard box) and staring at a blank wall eating his lunch. When asked if all was OK he replied, "can't you see the view...the sun shining on the sea and that sailing boat ?"

Architecture Workshops became active in Manchester, Yorkshire, Birmingham, Cardiff, Gloucestershire, Cleveland, Hull, Cambridgeshire, Stevenage, Canterbury, Glasgow, and Newcastle as well as London.

Gerry Metcalf, based in Birmingham, who had been principal organiser of the RIBA Architecture Workshops, resigned in 1984, and the RIBA Environmental Education / Architecture Workshop Development Group began to meet under the chairmanship of Jake Brown, architect. On the group were educators, including Eileen Adams and Jeff Bishop and planners Joan Kean and Phil Turner.

Nigel Frost, a teacher in design education and formerly of the Cambridgeshire Architecture Workshop, was appointed full-time as co-ordinator at the RIBA.

At St Catherine's College, Oxford (designed by Danish architect, Arne Jacobsen) an RIBA Architecture in Schools Seminar was held June of 1989. Many classroom exercises were demonstrated, designing a variety of structures from everyday materials. The potential of one element, the tetrahedron, comprising four equilateral triangles, and made from six canes and four rubber bands, became the inspiration for many initiatives in the next decade and beyond.

Birth of BET

In January of the previous year, architects Richard Rogers, Jake Brown, Bob Smart, Terry and Sue Farrell, and Fred Roche discussed the need for an independent source of support for Built Environment Education in all schools. A formal launch of the Building Experiences Trust in January 1989 was chaired by Philip Jordan, with a programme to inform all 32,700 schools in the UK.

In October 1989 the Trust was founded as a charity with Nigel Frost as Director (initially provided by the RIBA) supported by Trustees, volunteers and amateurs to take the workshops out into schools.

Founder Trustees, under the chairmanship of Richard Rogers, included Brian Craig (developer), Andrew Marr (training manager in the building industry), Zeev Aram (furniture designer), architects Bob Smart, Ted Cullinan, Philip Jordan (Vice-Chairman), Jake Brown (Secretary) and Phil Turner, teachers David Tuck, Sandra Morgan and Adrian Wills. Christopher Pratt, Bursar of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, joined them as treasurer of the Trust the following month.

The Mission Statement was '*to advance the education of young people about Architecture and its related disciplines.*'

with the objectives:

To encourage the development of awareness of the built environment amongst young people through the involvement of all areas of the construction industry

To generate projects with young people that draw attention to the social, economic and visual consequences of the environment

To produce and disseminate knowledgeable works that help young people to understand and utilise the built environment in studies

To provide information in response to requests from young people, schools and other educational establishments on the subject of the built environment

To pursue these ends by means of information to all schools by providing information services to individuals and schools, publications, exhibitions, lectures, conferences and other forms of instructions and schemes of a charitable nature

A first newsletter emerged in May 1991, and was sent free of charge to every primary, middle and secondary school in the UK and throughout the construction industry. It described the opportunities for learning about the built environment offered by the statutory guidelines for 'Technology' in the newly targeted National Curriculum. Projects and collaborations of BET were described in Cambridgeshire, Humberside, Birmingham and Norfolk.

The Trust extends

By then the number of trustees had grown to include, among others, overseas trustees and architects Rolaine Copeland and Neils Wamberg; Edward Coe, quantity surveyor; Jim Edwards, building materials supplier; Stephen Moon, Building Employers Confederation; Ian Record, Cambridgeshire LEA and architect Gordon Young.

Meanwhile the RIBA began to withdraw from funding the post of Director, with the prospect of reducing his involvement to one day a week from the subsequent year.

Also in 1991, Adrian Wills, representing the Trust, worked with teachers and young people at a seminar of the Academy of Architects Foundation at Krakow, Poland.

During Environment week that year, Trustees spent a day in Peterborough under canvas in the city centre, discussing and creating, with young people and passers by, a Green City model of boxes and packing cases on a large map base of the historic town and its suburbs.

Some very innovative workshops have been developed:

- using construction kits to build tetrahedrons, domes and bridges
- exploring places: 'my space', 'our street', 'our town'
- understanding the history of architecture from the Egyptians to the present day
- competitions using Lego to build to a theme against the clock
- always developing skills of language, examining different perceptions, design concepts, structure and built form

The Building Experiences Trust has linked with international groups with similar involvement in BEE and hosted an International Conference at Homerton College, Cambridge in 1992.

Martin Laing, builder, became Deputy Chairman, Sir Jack Zunz, engineer, and architects Don Gray and Bryan Jefferson became trustees (in 1992). Nick Davis, quantity surveyor, Gay Jones, educator, Adrian Smith and Dame Elizabeth Esteve-Coll joined the Trustees (in 1993)

Lord Palumbo joined the trustees in 1994 and in 1996 took on the mantle of Chairman from Sir Richard Rogers. Richard, now Lord Rogers, stood down as a trustee, but has always given the Trust active and influential support, whilst initiating the Architecture Foundation and heading up the government Urban Task Force policy thrust.

A Curriculum Workshop base, in Islington next door to Ted Cullinan's practice office, was opened by the Trust in 1994 and used for exhibitions of the work of architects, summer school workshops for post 16 participants and as a venue for work with visiting school groups.

By 1995 the number of pupils experiencing the Schools Workshop Programme had increased to 39,060, and an estimated total of 82,000 since the programme began.

A Built Environment Education Co-ordinated Network (BEECON) was formed to train volunteers as animateurs to use and develop learning activities for young people in their local communities across the country.

The Trust was registered as a company limited by guarantee on 28 April 1995.

Adrian Wills resigned as a Trustee to pursue a Masters Degree and teacher Lesley Cooper joined the Trustees.

An era of change and renaissance

Nigel Frost resigned as Director in 1997 and Philip Jordan, who had chaired the executive / management meetings, stood down temporarily as a trustee in order to take on that role in a consultant capacity until funding and a new appointment could be secured. Don Gray took on responsibility as chair of the management committee of the Trust.

The Primary Schools' Workshop Programme was relaunched and a conference held on 'Education and the Built Environment' at the London Oratory School, addressed by Mark Fisher MP, Shadow Minister for the Arts.

Later in 1997, Adrian Wills left his teaching post in Cirencester to become the new Trust Director full time. In the following year new Trustees joined: Roger Whiteman (architect), Joanna Kennedy (engineer) and Graham Powell (headteacher).

BET collaborated with the Architecture Foundation in work with schools and colleges in the East End of London and Adrian ran Summer School design workshops for senior pupils.

In 2000, Lord Palumbo retired as Trust Chairman for personal reasons, and much of the leadership role fell upon Don Gray,

supported by Chris Pratt (Secretary) and Nick Davis in the demanding role of Treasurer.

The value of the Trust's activities

Recent work has included developing the nature and scope of The Trust's workshop approach and identifying strategic partners and complementary networks. Each year since 1997 the Trust has worked with roughly 5,000 schoolchildren and adults in different parts of the country. Participants have ranged from representatives of the professions, schoolchildren and students across the whole age and ability range, to teachers and other adults who provide support in a careers or mentoring capacity.

Many seeds have been sown in schools, among enthusiastic teachers and pupils, in rural and urban localities, in education partnerships from Cornwall to Tower Hamlets, among ethnic communities and with pupils with special needs and physical disabilities.

They have built experiences, and have experienced buildings, places and structures. They have explored spaces and places, developed design skills as well as an understanding of the roles of professionals in the construction industry: from structural engineering and project management to town planning, architecture and interior and landscape design.

Techniques piloted by the Trust, from tetrahedrons to three dimensional models of building rehabilitation, from ideas for urban regeneration to green building design and the creation of sustainable places, have been made freely available for teachers to replicate and develop further.

2002 : Major Changes

The Trust has now reached a turning point, necessitated by the lack of responses to requests for core funding, and Adrian Wills has left the post of Trust Director to carry on the work with schools on a free-lance consultancy basis which is titled "Building Experiences" with the agreement of the Trustees.

Building Experiences will continue working in the field and will seek ways of making the ideas and approaches accessible to as great a number as possible. To this end, Building Experiences is currently working closely with the Construction Industries Training Board (CITB) and the national Ambassadors in Schools initiative.

Building Experiences may be contacted through the website address, www.buildingexperiences.org.uk which will also provide the viewer with further insights and information.

The Trustees confirmed this new arrangement on 26th February 2002. At that Extraordinary General Meeting, rather than wind up the

Charity due to reduced activity, it was resolved that the Trust would cease to be known as The Building Experiences Trust and would transfer its operation to Cambridge, where the steering group of the Architecture Centre (CAC) had been offered substantial funding from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).

Whilst Chris Pratt and Nick Davis will continue, it was resolved that the majority of Trustees (including Lord Palumbo and Graham Powell) would resign in order to facilitate the appointment of successors intent on the formation of a trust at CAC to carry out work in the field of Built Environment Education, with the condition that the new title of the Trust will include the words BUILT ENVIRONMENT EDUCATION.

BEE lives on

These actions have been taken in the sure knowledge that the work will continue in many and various ways wherever the need (and potential) for BEE is recognised and where there are enthusiasts prepared to contribute to its development.

*Phil Turner
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and*

*based on a format by Bob Smart
with assistance from Chris Pratt
Adrian Wills*