

Building Wonderwall

Children in London learned how to make bricks and much more while creating a community wall, writes **Rosie Potter**

Greenfields Nursery School and Children's Centre in Southall is at the heart of a vast regeneration project, involving the large-scale building of community housing. Children pass these sites daily on their way to and from the nursery and are fascinated by the construction. So, this year they began thinking about walls and the roles they play in our society.

As a result of this interest, the children, working with artists from Wimbledon College of Arts, UAL, explored images of historic walls, including the Walls of Troy, the Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall, as well as the techniques of dry-stone walling, cave painting, contemporary street art and graffiti.

They were then eager to test for themselves the ancient skills of brick-making and bricklaying. They used raw garden clay, breaking it up, removing sticks and stones, mixing it with water and sieving it to form a fine slip that was then reformed in wooden moulds into bricks.

All the research and practice

encouraged the children to consider building their own wall and this led to the ambitious proposal of building 'Wonderwall', a freestanding brick sculpture on the site of the Children's Sculpture Garden beside the Grand Union Canal at Bixley Triangle.

BRICK BY BRICK

The children began by building a full-scale model wall, then measuring and plotting the scale of the actual wall and the number of bricks required on a large drawing and discussing their plans with the site manager.

The next stage of the project took several weeks and involved the children cleaning, priming and decorating 160 donated bricks. Through this work, they explored colour and experimented with a range of mark-making techniques; applying paint in thin layers, sponging, dripping, splashing and stippling, working directly onto the individual bricks.

Slowly, the bricks began to form an especially colourful and patterned mosaic. The joy that the children found in the materials and

Professional bricklayers and builders constructed the wall, watched and helped by the children

Mark-making on the bricks (left) to create a mosaic (right)



act of drawing onto the bricks was palpable across their conversations:

- 'I was painting a blue sun.'
- 'I painted a lion brick.'
- 'I did a splash, splashy splashy rainbow colours.'
- 'I had to paint the bricks with yellow dots because we were making a Wonderwall.'

BRICKS AND MORTAR

Then came the building of the actual wall. Early one morning, the decorated bricks were loaded onto a canal barge and transported to the Sculpture Garden with children and teachers walking alongside.

The materials, site and method of transport were all appropriate for this work, as the Grand Union Canal was the main artery for transporting building materials between London and Birmingham during the Industrial Revolution.

Children were met at the site by professional bricklayers and



builders and given hard hats, goggles, gloves and high-visibility jackets to comply with safety standards. They then observed the digging and pouring of the foundations and helped build a free-standing wall encompassing their painted bricks.

They were especially excited to see the huge yellow dumper and forklift trucks delivering wet concrete and more bricks before completing the final stages of 'Wonderwall'.

BRIGHTENING LIVES

The overarching aspiration was that this would be a wall that could be enjoyed by the whole community; a playful wall, richly decorated with children's vibrant artwork, one that would not present a barrier but would allow free passage from side to side, encouraging people of different ages, backgrounds and cultures to engage with each other

in a spirit of hope and optimism for shared communities in the future.

During construction, one child suggested painting 'a rainbow wall' as 'it would make us feel surprised and happy and we would be together'. Another added, 'Our bricks for the Sculpture Garden are for all the people who have no toys nor nothing, so they can have something to brighten their lives.'

The Wonderwall project was made possible in large part by the generous support and participation of our partners, Catalyst, Bouygues and the Canals and Rivers Trust. This enthusiastic engagement was an inspiring and authentic learning experience for very young children and for all those involved.

Creating and building relationships of trust and value with expert partners, through knowledge exchange, increases children's confidence outside the nursery setting. This, in turn, has the



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potential to enhance their future outcomes and effect positive social impact on the wider community, and we trust that this new installation will encourage more people to visit, use and enjoy the open spaces along the canal.

We celebrated the building of 'Wonderwall' with children, teachers, parents, builders, artists and partners at a sunny and joyful picnic on Bixley Field in late July. We now look forward to a planting event with children in the company of our local park ranger, scheduled to take place at the site in the autumn. This will further integrate the sculpture into the natural environment. ■

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