

Shelter from the storm

An art project by a London children's centre aims to send reassurance to children in Japan. Lead artist *Rosie Potter* explains how it evolved

Later this year, Japanese windsocks, created by the children at Greenfields Children's Centre in Southall, London, will feature in the Fukushima Fine Art Biennale 2012. Along with the windsocks will be the children's words and photographs documenting a project that stemmed from the children's fascination with the story of 'The Three Little Pigs' and evolved into an exploration of the Fukushima tidal wave and its aftermath.

Called 'Shelter from the Storm – A Message of Hope for Children in Japan', the Greenfields project has already been exhibited at the Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art.

The 'journey' started last summer when artist Kirstie Reid and I were again invited to take part in a creative awareness project at Greenfields. Initially, we visited the Centre to meet and observe the children and talk to staff to find out about the children's current interests and activities.

We learned that they had become fascinated by the story of 'The Three Little Pigs', and particularly the ways in which the pigs had built houses of different materials to try to protect themselves from harm.

The children had already developed this interest with one of the key staff members, practitioner Magda Melo, by building a composite house from straw, sticks and hand-made bricks in the form of a maquette (scale model).



From this we understood that the children were interested in 3D construction and in creating objects linked to favourite stories, as they would retell the story around the maquette and made frequent references to it.

Outdoors, the children were also experimenting with ideas of 'enclosure' and ways in which to establish a personal space within a more communal or public area.

SCALE AND SURFACE

The following week, we returned with a selection of materials suitable for building shelters on a larger scale, as



The children flying their koi carp windsocks during their day at the beach, where their shelters stood up to the strong winds

the children clearly enjoyed inhabiting their own den-like spaces.

This experimental play took into account aspects of the materials such as scale, surface, weight and stability, with improvised roofs and walls of cardboard, foam and fabric frequently collapsing in a heap around the inhabitants. This was enormous fun.

Over the next few weeks, we examined materials more closely for their suitability and took three simple geometric shapes – circle, square and triangle – as the basis for our experimental structures. These shapes can be seen in many everyday objects and

buildings and often in 3D forms – cylinder/sphere, cube and cone.

The children were interested to look at these design aspects more closely in their philosophy groups with practitioner Raksha Savidia. Making reference to images in Tana Hoban's *Cubes, Cones, Cylinders and Spheres*, she encouraged the children to make their own empirical observations and comparisons.

Next, the children moved on to using hand tools, such as screwdriv-

ers, saw, drills and hammers – a source of great excitement for many and a positive obsession for some! They came to understand how the tools should sound when used correctly. For example, together we would vocalise the sound of sawing properly and drilling at a steady pace, rather than fast. (This way of learning re-emerged while stencilling, when one child, Abdullah, made a tapping sound to emulate applying evenly the fabric paints to the silk. The other

children involved in the process then adopted this sound.)

Out in the garden, the children also explored natural materials suitable for building, such as palm leaves and bamboo canes. One of the children's earliest constructions, a semi-cylindrical structure, was continually reworked throughout the project. Practitioner Adrian McHugh encouraged the children to weave a range of materials into the 'warp' of the basic framework, forming a rich tapestry of man-made/found, recyclable fabrics blended with natural resources.

The children's building work progressed well. Through their constructions, the children were developing transferable skills, increasing their technical vocabulary and understanding of processes, making design decisions and assessing practicalities – for example, using sandbags, filled from the sandpit, to hold down the lighter structures, particularly necessary on windy days.

At this stage, parents and grandparents were generous with their time, often visiting to contribute skills and offer advice. A series of temporary shelters began to take shape.

The fairly wet summer meant rain became ever more of a consideration in assessing the durability of the children's structures. So, in the philosophy group we introduced photographs of extreme weather conditions across the world. Then everyone began to contribute current images and cuttings to the pinboard, showing ways in which some global communities were trying to deal with often life-threatening weather conditions. It was around this time that the devastating earthquake and tsunami hit the east coast of Japan.

THE HUGE WAVE

The children thought a lot about the disaster and talked of ways in which they might help the Japanese children who had lost homes and families 'when the huge wave came'.

At first they suggested giving the children new houses, kitchens, pots and pans. But when reminded of the distance between our communities and the practicalities of sending things, they began to think more philosophically. Next, they suggested sending small things that were special to them – a favourite blanket, a toy – then drawings. Finally, Andrew said, 'We could send them our smiles.' ➤

We focused on sending messages of comfort to a community similar to ours

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT CREATIVITY

This led us all into the second part of the project, in which we focused on ways to send positive messages of comfort to a community which was similar to our own, but was suffering great hardship.

While continuing our work on the shelters, we also researched together the traditional Japanese custom of flying koinobori – koi carp windsocks – outside homes on and around 5 May, Japan's National Children's Day.

The fish represent the family; the father, the largest, is black or indigo; the medium-sized fish, the mother, is a pinkish red; the children are blue, green and purple. The fish are flown to wish future health and success to the young children in the family.

The children and families at Greenfields saw this tradition as a means by which they could extend a hand of friendship and reassure the families in Japan that other communities around the world were thinking of them.

At this point one of the parents at Greenfields, Laura Spencer, offered her invaluable skills as a pattern cutter and professional textile designer. Working with the artists on the

project, she helped create an original koinobori pattern in three sizes and cut out the basic forms and stencils for the fish. We bought coloured silks, in the traditional koinobori colours, and the children pinned out their flattened fish shapes on to large cork boards and got to work with water-based fabric paints in black, white and gold.

They began by stencilling in the head of the fish and working free-hand on the bodies and tails, using bottle tops, sponges and brushes to create beautiful, individual fish scale effects in producing the final results. Mothers and grandmothers provided

MORE INFORMATION

Cubes, Cones, Cylinders and Spheres by Tana Hoban (William Morrow) – a wordless exploration of shapes, which we see all around us but rarely look at closely until encouraged by someone with a keen eye

the finishing touches by sewing the bodies and attaching wires inside the mouths of the fish.

As a grand finale to our project, 150 Greenfields children, parents and staff boarded three coaches and headed for Littlehampton on the West Sussex coast, taking the koinobori and small 'village' of shelters with them.

Waiting for them on the beach were artists Kirstie Reid, Patricia Ayre and me. The wind was fierce but the shelters held up, well anchored with sand and pebbles. The koinobori flew high on white poles, held tight by the children until their strength ran out and they became too tired. Then the koinobori were strapped to the wooden breakers, where they continued to fly until it was time for everyone to return home. ■

With special thanks to Greenfields Children's Centre headteacher June McHugh, staff, children and parents; to support artists Laura Spencer (parent) and Patricia Ayre (Kingston University); to cultural liaison adviser Shoko Shinya, and to our host in Japan, Koichi Watanabe (research scholar at the University of Fukushima)



Constructing dens and shelters at the children's centre gave children useful skills for the project