THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

LEARNING THROUGH THE LOCAL BUILT ENVIRONMENT

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO :

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

BY

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INTRODUCTION

My attitude to living has been shaped by where I have lived, what I have seen, done and read, those people to whom I have listened and with whom I have exchanged thoughts, ideas and beliefs and how I have assimilated all these influences and experiences to form values that determine what I say and do. Many of my beliefs, however, only surface when I am confronted with situations that demand that I should take particular stands. Therefore, unless I am spurred to react, in whatever area of life my role in their determination is, quite often, passive.

Yet, when confronted with situations that deal primarily with the shape of my local built environment, wherever I am living but especially that of my home town (Birr, Co. Offaly), my concern and curiosity is immediately aroused. Because of my art education I have come to appreciate, love and be proud of the aesthetic character and plan of Birr. Consequently I am unwilling to allow others to take steps, when renovating constructing or re-constructing, which I believe make little allowance for aesthetic factors and which therefore fall short of due design considerations. Thankfully the people of Birr (as is later verified) are generally a discerning, civic-minded group who care for, preserve and actively participate in upholding this character. Unfortunately these people are an exception to an all-to-common rule of passivity that pervades and breeds in our present society. As the German art critic Max Friedlander once said :

> "Mankind has become more tolerant, but not so much because it is more discerning rather because it has become more skeptical and indifferent." (9, P.4)

Too many people are willing to sit back and let others make decisions and create circumstances that affect us all. Far too often, this means that the majority succumb to the wishes of the few. If the few have a conscious responsibility to the needs and wishes of the rest and act accordingly, positive change can take place. However, if this responsibility is not their primary concern the way is left open for potential disaster.

There is a need therefore for people to actively participate in the determination of the quality of their surroundings and consequently their lifestyle. If we are to live in environments that are shaped by others we must ensure that their shapes are such that we feel good when surrounded by them. To become aware of our feelings we must participate in activites that demand from us an articulation of them. Art activities, by their nature make such demands.

In this thesis I am arguing that we must educate pupils, who are, after all, tomorrow's arbitars of taste, to become more aware of the aesthetic quality of their local townscape and how it, directly or indirectly affects their lives.

By carrying out a project with a first year class (from the Marist Convent Crumlin), on the design of houses in the local area, I hope to promote in them a heightened awareness of the aesthetic quality of their immediate environment and to bring them to an understanding that art elements are encountered daily and are used to effect in shaping our surroundings. In so doing, I hope that the pupils come to terms with their immediate surroundings, through the elements of art and that in turn these elements

are seen to be real, relevant and interesting and are thereby better and more easily understood.

Such an aesthetic appreciation brought about by seeing the built environment as aesthetic form would develop in pupil's a concern for the shape and appearance of their surroundings. If tomorrow's generation is more environmentally perceptive than the present, we should all benefit from an environmental planning system that would consider our aesthetic as well as our physical and functional needs.

In the following chapters, I propose to establish why a place for visual enquiries into the local built environment should be found in every art syllabus and justify the proceedings of such work. Firstly, I will outline in a contextual survey the impact which the built environment has on each one of us and thereby justify the need for education, and in particular art education, to relate to our urban environments. I will proceed to outline the educational benefits of pursuing such environmental projects and finally analyze through case studies, the practical application of such projects and determine the subsequent outcomes.

CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF ART AND ITS ROLE IN EDUCATION

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Worried about the future prospects of non-academic children, parents are often advised that each has some talent which, sooner or later, is exposed and can, if encouraged and developed become the basis of a satisfying and fruitful way of life. This talent is man's ability to (so) understand and be 'in tune with' the nature of an operation, whether playing football or telling a joke, that in any given situation he instinctively responds to the problem in such an imaginative or'artistic' manner, that witnesses to the feat stand in awe and appreciation for his achievement. How many times have we heard the saying "He's a true artist" where people are not even referring to the fine arts. What is meant by this saying is that the creator (artist) has produced an effect of unity to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away. He has done it with a sense of form. The ability to create and respond to creation is known as the aesthetic capacity and since it can be applied to any human activity, this capacity is widely distributed and is not as was formally believed, the exclusive possession of a limited few. Lowenfeld has said:

"Every child is born creative". (15, p 63)

Practically everybody therefore is or might be an artist in some medium or other, because the sense of form, though it needs cultivating is practically universal. The aesthetic impulse, that is the desire to create form, is a constant of human nature.

Since creativity is thus a basic incredient of our make-up, students should be given the opportunity to exercise and satisfy their creative

side. The aim of education should always be to develop the whole person - one's personality and individual capacities. Consequently, for learning situations to be of most benefit, it should be demanded of the individual to call not only on his intellectual abilities, as is the routine practice of our present educational system, but also those imaginative, observational, emotional and manipulative abillities which we all have but seldom fully exploit. Art activities provide opportunities to do just that. Here more than in any other curricular 'subject', one can and is encouraged to respond subjectively (as well as objectively), and according to the degree of response, reflect one's whole personality. One essentially transposes oneself into a situation so that one empathizes with what's going on. Frederick Frank aptly demonstrated this point when he said:

"to draw a horse ... (you must) become a horse ...
until you feel the tense curving of its neck
in your own neck". (7, P.55)

The drawing is an attempt to express aesthetically an experience of the horse. The nature of the exercise is such that the individual in attempting to concretize his idea, draws on his whole personality. The form created does not take place absolutely by conscious reasoning on the part of the creator; it happens, rather automatically as a result of his complete surrender to the task. He says, in effect, "This is what I feel about it", feeling itself being a response of the whole organism as distinct from a critical judgment of the mind.

Within each act of drawing, painting or modelling lies a learning experience since the individual must, in the doing, attempt to come to terms with aesthetic considerations. The process thus, by its action,

helps to cultivate the individual's sense of form.

It is the process of attempting to understand and relate experiences that is all important to the individual. It is the act of doing, of trying to make sense of and organize experience in concrete form that makes the achievement so meaningful. This attempt is all the more challenging in that its realization is seldom if ever fully realized. Perfect expression is unattainable. Nobody has ever completely expressed what was initially perceived. Rather they may have captured an element of a perception which suggests its essence.

However, it is man's search for true expression that gives meaning to his work. It was Alexander Pope who said:

"The joy is in the doing, the rapture
of pursuing is the prize".

Essentially we use the creative act as a chance to experience what it means to be alive.

However, the employment of the creative sense is just one factor in the role of art activities. In fact product making is not, as some would lead us to believe, the 'be all and end all'of art activities. Creativity is important but it is not the exclusive preserve of the art class. What is important as Hirst has stated is the development of the mind, not a study of forms in themselves.(17, P.119). Consequently the aim of any particular study ought to seek, not a mastery of the topic concerned, but rather sufficient knowledge of its qualities for one to appreciate its character and employ its major elements that have an application within the context of everyday living. In short we must promote in students a deeper perception of the character of art through a study of its elements

and look more clearly at how its qualities may be applied to where and how we live. By listening to the observations of others and looking at their consequent visual structures, pupils may be led, in the art class, to what Dick Field has called:

> "a growing realization of the mechanism of perception".(6, P.68)

that is, to an understanding of the fact that individual perceptions may differ and a grasp of the factors that cause differences. It is through the whole move from seeing and experiencing to judgment and action that real learning takes place. Education is, above all, a matter of realising values. Students should always be encouraged to articulate their observations and justify their actions. Prescribed and isolated picture and form-making has little educational value if students fail to understand the thinking around and behind what they do. The way we learn is just as important as what we learn, thus the process of making and the end product cannot be separated.

The kind of people we as educators wish to promote are confident creative individuals eager to express their thoughts, sensitive to people and things around them and active in life. Such balanced and productive personalities can only be promoted by a system of education whereby the individual can project and integrate experience into concrete form.

Rudolf Arnheim has said that art goes beyond the making of pictures and statues, symphonies and dances and warns that art education should go beyond the classes in which these subjects are taught, he goes on to say:

"Art is the quality that makes the difference between merely witnessing and performing things and being touched by them, shaken by them, changed by the forces that are inherent in everything we give and receive." (2, p. 97)

The shortcomings of our present educational system are thus exposed in that it has almost wholly failed to recognize the importance of feeling to the art of learning. The concern has been with imposing an accumulation of facts and "tip bits" which, when resought, are regurgitated onto exam sheets. Herbert Read referred to the rational bias in education as involving:

"a suppression of the instinctual and emotional components of the human personality". (22, p. 34)

But knowledge and the development of learning must be kept in proper proportion to the other capacities. Art activities provide the opportunity for the expression of these capacities and accordingly for growth in ways that other subject matter areas fail.

Contrary to the learning systems of other subjects the raw material for experience and understanding is not distinguished in the art room. Here we have no readers telling us what and how we must learn. No, we can call on first hand experience of the classroom, the schoolyard, the park and the street or we can summon the second hand experiences of our imagination. Picasso has said:

"The artist is the receptacle of emotions from no matter where ... from the earth, a piece of paper ... there is no rank among them ... one must take ones good where one finds it. (6, p. 58)

Thankfully this broad based approach provides the facility for all of us

to release the best within, i.e., our latent imaginative and highly creative impulses, and to channel this energy and feeling into production which might otherwise find its frustrated expression in destructive violent activities.

The art class therefore provides situations where students can integrate and express in public visual form both external and internal experiences; it promotes creativity and more importantly perception and as such provides opportunities for all to develop and accept a more balanced view of themselves and the environment.

CHAPTER 11

THE IMPACT OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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The built environment affects us all by the direct physical impact it has on us. Its streets and townscapes create the very conditions in which human senses flourish and develop and in which action takes place. Kurt Rowland goes as far as to say that:

> "For most of us, it is the most powerful of the influences that shape our lives".(19,P.5)

Bad planning often touches the citizen at his most sensitive point because, in the words of Romeiss:

> "it is daily and palpably manifest to him"(21,P.115)

outside the very door of his house, on his way to work, or in his leisure time activities. Therefore any mistake in its design is not only difficult and often impossible to eradicate but may create problems for a generation or more.

Presently environmental design is in a vulnerable and precarious position since a great deal of our physical surroundings owes its form and character less to the need of people than to the demands of technology and commerce. The aesthetics of our buildings and streetscapes are being ignored with a resulting dehumanization of our man-made surroundings.

Despite the apparent disregard for the human factor in the planning of our environment, most of us exert little direct say in its physical and visual determination. Frank McDonald, summing up his series on the processes involved in drafting the Dublin Development Plan said that:

> "most of Dublin's 1 million inhabitants are unaware of what is being done in their name",(27, Oct.28, 1982).

- he could well have added "and they care less". The general public has always been split in the argument whether to conserve or to replace. One might easily be led to believe that it thus follows there exists among us a strong, healthy concern for the physical determination of our surroundings. This however, is disproved when ultimately the pressure comes on and action must take place, it does so according to the dictates of the powers that be - planners and politicians.

But established democratic mechanisms have shown themselves to be incapable of genuinely representing one genuine citizen, Joe Soap. What with party squabbling and unfulfilled election time promises, Joe is beginning to lose faith in his local representative. McDonald has referred to the action of Dublin County Councillors regarding a decision to rezone 150 acres of land near Brittas as being:

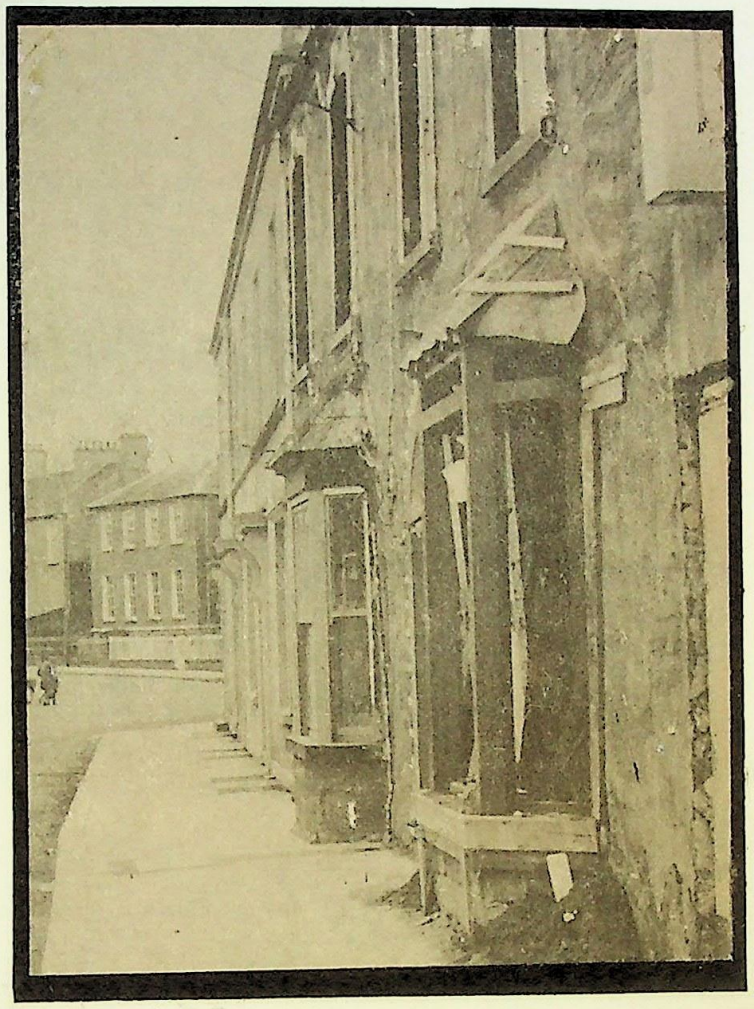
"totally random in nature, unrelated to the real needs
of the area and curtly dismissive of the advice
of their own planning officials" (27, Sept.27th '82)

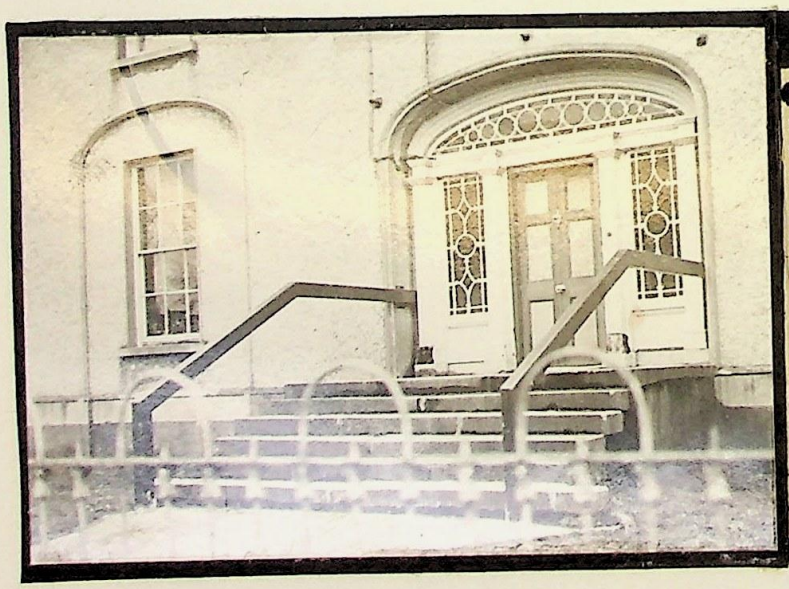
Such revelations are making Joe sit up and for once begin to question his relationship with his environment. Every week we see in the newspapers cases where local people are unwilling to accept the decisions of their respective planning authority. Recently, in my home town of Birr, there was uproar when a metal handrail was erected by an agricultural credit body on the front of the premises which they are soon to inhabit. The rail is totally out of character and proportion to the early 19th century style of house. These "new-in-town" businessmen didn't realise the trouble they were letting themselves in for. Straightaway local people took it upon themselves to complain to the new owners. Not only that, the matter was raised by the local press (see dia.) and by local councillors at their

The Right Way

Two major renovation and reconstruction jobs are under way in premises that are subject to preservation orders issued by Birr Urban Council and whose protection is vital to the retention of the Georgian Architecture for which Birr is justly famous.

The top picture shows work in progress on the reconstructed bay window in the extended offices of the law firm, D.A. Houlihan & Son, at John's Place and note the careful replacement of the old window with a hand-crafted identical replacement of the window so thoughtlessly removed over a generation ago.





And The Wrong Way

Below is a picture of the reconstructed entrance of the new ACOT Centre at the east end of Oxmantown Mall the former St. Brendan's College housed in one of the most important of all Birr's Georgian buildings.

It's a perfect example of how NOT to do the job. The former light iron handrail each side of the limestone steps, which complemented the front railings, has been removed and replaced by a monstrous metal handrail totally out of proportion to its surroundings and completely destroying the effect of one of the finest doorways in the country. It takes the eye from the delicate tracery of the fanlight and side windows.

Happily, following criticism by the local ACOT staff who had also received complaints from local people . . . the offending handrail is to be removed.

monthly meetings. Some weeks later, when the fuss had receded and the rail remained, the local Chamber of Commerce wrote an open letter to the owners, complaining about the inactive manner of their proceedings and demanding the immediate removal of the rail. It says a lot for the discrimination of the people of Birr, when in the same critical newspaper article, a restoration job which was also being carried out locally received a rave, comparative review.

Consequently, where up to now Joe Soap has been content to sit back and let planning decisions be taken for him, he is now beginning to realize that the output and appearance of his own area must not be left in the hands of planners and politicians alone - he too ought to have a powerful and effective voice in shaping and preserving the shape of his surroundings. (The reason for his change of attitude may lie in the new awareness since the 60's of our civil rights and the subsequent strength of the "peoples" voice in getting things done). When earlier this year, the Director General of the Construction Industry, Mr. Tom Reynolds, accused some elements of the media of fostering an anti-developer attitude, which he feels is quickly spreading,an Irish Independent Reporter retaliated by declaring:

> "that it is the public which has started to take
> notice of its surroundings and which is
> objecting to developments which it believes
> will affect the quality of those surroundings".
>
> (26, Jan. 5th, 1983)

So the question, now that Joe is becoming more political in declaring his ideas on environmental planning, is how should society promote in him a realization of his visual and spatial needs. Many believe that the

educational system has surely some role to play here, but this role has not as yet been defined. A cynic might well argue that recent generations have received more education than their predecessors and yet it is to the past that we still look for exemplary environmental design, (such is the lack of confidence we have in whatever we build today). What role therefore should education play now when we seemingly did very well with-it in the past?

To such an argument I would say that there was no need for the man in the street to then have an environmental education or worry about the ever changing shape of his surroundings. Planning, during the 18th and 19th centuries, was carried out by a very capable and considerate process.

During the great period of the development of Irish towns, from the 1780s to the 1850s, the bureaucracy of the planning system was simpler and easier to control than the complicated state that persists today. Until the formation of the local town commissioners, in the late 1820s, the Landlord, or his personally appointed Architect, was for the most part the planner of the town. These men cherished their local community and wished to develop the appearance and layout of its buildings.

Later, with the introduction of town commissioner bodies, though the over-seeing of planning developments spread to a number of people, great deliberations were still taken before any decisions were made. Commissioners were local people, who were daily in contact with the feelings of the townspeople and who acted with a respect for and pride in the community that they represented. The point I wish to make is that then, unlike now, those people with the power to plan townscapes, did their job well since they themselves had to live with the consequences of their

decisions and, quite naturally, they therefore wished to remain proud of their environmental achievements.

Today, however, final planning decisions lie with people who don't have an inbred feeling for the environment whose layout is the focus of their attention. These are the County Managers and quite often, the County Engineers - men who, firstly are rarely locals and as such can have little local pride; who secondly hold positions where they are regularly moved to other places and thereby most likely have only short-term aims in mind, and who thirdly, have many considerations at hand at any one time. In the case of large towns and cities the system becomes even more impersonal - the Housing Department are not aware of the plans of the Traffic Department and they, in turn, don't know what the Waterworks are doing, etc., etc. Unfortunately, we readily accept the impersonality, inadequacy and inoperativeness of the whole planning system.

Consequently, therefore where in the past, our friend, Joe Soap's apathy survived in relative anonymity - since planning was well controlled,having less complex considerations to deal with and, anyway Joe was often merely a tenant, a subject who had no vote - today's householder is being exposed for having failed to foresee or do anything about our every-growing environmental mess.

It would be a mistake to suppose that art education should carry the responsibility for this unhappy state of affairs. Such an idea would demean the educative enlightment and effectiveness of other subjects and practices. Reparation is the business of many groups working together. Yet, the art educator should ensure that today's children - tomorrow's arbitrars of taste - should leave school with a clear and powerful

understanding of the role of art in our built environment. To do this, he must stimulate in his students an active interest in the design of all aspects of their physical surroundings and promote in them a deeper and broader understanding of how man has planned and created the built environment. Man, as Romeiss has said (21, P.115) can only feel at home in an environment he understands. Similarly, people can only come to love their surroundings when they see themselves reflected in it and not merely some anonymous urban council. So, if tomorrow's generation is more environmentally perceptive than the present individual, collective needs and interest would be satisfied by a more demanding public. Joe Soap would have a greater opportunity to live a more pleasant and fuller life in an accommodating and satisfying built environment.

What then is environmental education? What have schools in general and art activities in particular to offer in this regard? How do students benefit from its study and how should we as educators promote learning through the environment? These are questions that now emerge and which I will try to come to terms with in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 111

LEARNING THROUGH THE ENVIRONMENT

LEARNING THROUGH THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment encompasses everything concerned with seeing, hearing, touching and feeling in a very direct and intelligible way. It is with us all our waking hours, we cannot escape from it. Consequently engagement with the environment is a primary mode of human life. It offers the human psyche all those images of perceivable things which its conscious and unconscious powers interpret and shape into experiences of human thought and feeling. Environmental education is, therefore, teaching students to see, explore, examine and evaluate the many physical aspects of their surroundings, that may be daily encountered.

Schools are increasingly situated in an urban environment yet often very little use is made of it as a teaching resource. The Primary curriculum teachers' handbook says that "the child's environment provides the most congenial ground in which the seeds of knowledge may be grown and its organic growth fostered (18, P.14)". At second level, the Intermediate geography syllabus aims "to give the pupils an appreciation of the interaction of man and the environment". In reference to the content of the art curriculum, D.G. Mulcahy argues that we should relate the aesthetic to the matter of everyday living - to our public places:

> "filthy streets, dirty and unsightly buildings and the so-called development plans are never considered in the context of aesthetic education". (17, P.56)

These educational objectives are clear evidence of the wish of educationalists to encourage teachers to open the school doors and provide learning experiences that will make their students more aware of the kind of place in which they live.

In referring to environmental projects the first distinction that must be made is between learning about the environment and learning from it.

Learning about the environment involves wanting to know more about a neighbourhood for its own sake. Learning from the environment means using the neighbourhood for a purpose other than knowledge of the neighbourhood. Since earlier we have stated that our essential objective as educators is understanding, not attainment, and as in art education we wish to promote the relevance of art to life,our concern would tend to focus on the latter approach, that is, learning from the environment.

However, before noting how we interact with it (by concretely responding to our observations), we must first of all go out, observe and learn about our surroundings. It is by trying, through doing, to evaluate our responses to what we have seen and felt, that leads us to develop and promote our sense of form and which provides the opportunity for applied learning (in our case, the role of art in life) to take place.

Looking at the works of Flora Mitchell, Jonathan Wade, Patrick Collins, Patrick Kavanagh and Paul Durkan may lead some to the often heard argument that such people were masters of the forms of art and poetry before turning to the environment for their subjects . It may, however, be contended that their formal education could hardly be said to have initiated them into these forms. On the contrary, their mastery of form arose from an overwhelming desire to clarify and structure their environment.

For environmental projects, through art,we therefore learn both about and

from our surroundings. Our knowledge of its functioning acts as a springboard for broader concerns and our attempts to express in concrete form our interaction with it, enables us to cultivate our aesthetic capacities.

The present chapter in dealing with learning, through, about and from the environment needs to focus especially on its efficacy as a method. We are concerned with learning processes that underpin environmental projects and in particular the motivational, intellectual and special factors involved.

MOTIVATIONAL

Many students do not seem to realize that art is a very real activity, a part of everyday living and that they involve themselves in art activities every day of the week. For them school is an artificial place, a game which can be played and if you are clever won; sometimes exciting, but not real. Instead the 'real' world remains the concrete environment of the terraced house, Superquinn and the disco-hall. It is clear therefore that here lies an open opportunity for the art teacher to break down the prevailing ivory tower concept of art by providing instances where students can go out, look, see, make and evaluate and thus learn from topics that are already of interest and which, in the case of students, are most relevant to their development than any stimuli 'brought into' the classroom.

Second level students are very opinionated and highly critical of situations in which they daily find themselves. Where education has traditionally been based on objective facts, environmental projects reverse that trend, opting moreover for a subjective response. Feelings as well

as thoughts are given due consideration in the constant encounter with outdoor studies. Adolescents may thus feel at home in such openly expressive situations.

Environmental projects have the added educational advantage in that their topics start from the same point of view as the problem of adult life and work. In a given situation the following questions may be asked:

What means can we use to record it?

What techniques are necessary to analyze it?

What information would contribute to understanding it?

How is the situation developing?

How could we contribute to that development if we had the opportunity?

How can we communicate the results of our enquiry?

The approach is similar whether it is a study of shopfronts, traffic congestion, housing or street advertising.

INTELLECTUAL

By going out and directly observing, drawing and experiencing a particular focus of interest, situations are concretized. Primary sources are used. Subjects are studied in context and are thus seen to be part of life. Accordingly we learn, not by depending on second hand references, but by doing things on the spot. Expression is thus improved.

No matter what nature of study is, we must refer to and use varied sources of information and material in order to achieve an integrated and rounded experience of the topic. Among the activities which arise naturally are careful and often detailed observation, both individually and in groups;

the students asking questions and giving information, both to the teacher and among themselves; discussion and debate on matters of disagreement and lectures to the group by those who are knowledgable on the topic; the answering of field questionnaires and programmes; visual, verbal and numerical recording; estimating, measuring and calculating; practice of craft skills and ordinary school techniques which can be used in the project; the use of libraries and other reference collections such as record offices, galleries and design and creation of display material.

SOCIAL

By their very make, environmental projects provide situations which demand students to take the initiative and do things which require self-confidence, self-reliance and/or poise. Such socialisation also encourages students to think broadly about the consequences of their actions on others, all of which furthers the development of the self-concept.

By doing things together we help exchange ideas and influence each other. The opportunities thus arise for the development of group spirit and comradeship in out-of-school situations and the learning of social roles.

New demands are made of teachers and students alike; they see each other operating in different and apparently unusual contexts. The chance of stronger student/teacher interaction is enhanced by the better understanding they thus gain of each other.

How then should we promote learning through the environment ?

First of all we should help students to see, explore and examine the many

aspects of their immediate surroundings so that, by studying a familiar environment with new eyes, they may realize and understand more fully the make-up of the place in which they live. Accordingly the students would develop within themselves a heightened sense of the richness which their environment has to offer as well as a deeper awareness of the banal and often ugly surroundings in which too many of them live.

Such greater understanding cannot be achieved, however, by merely looking and seeing Students must also learn to judge and discriminate what they have experienced. Just as we cannot stop reading the environment all the time, even when bored by our experience, so we cannot stop evaluating it. Much of what exists often fails to register with us consciously, though it may well act on our inner psyche.

Whatever does register, we like or dislike, respect or feel indifferent to. This process of continual evaluation ought to be encouraged and promoted so that students may develop their individual capacities to act as responsible and active agents in determination of their surroundings.

Should not a primary aim of environmental projects therefore be to help the students to understand the processes which shape their surroundings and thereby instill in them a pride in their own area so that they do not remain passive, and somewhat bewildered, spectators of their environment, with the confidence that comes from understanding?

Having discussed the 'what' and the 'why' of carrying out art programmes related to the local built environment, it is necessary to conduct and evaluate the enquiries, working methods and findings of such a programme

through the action of a case study. Since my home town is in Birr, Co. Offaly this project was carried out by a first year class (S1) of the Marist Convent, Crumlin along Sundrive Road and Lower Kimmage Road and by myself along John's Mall in Birr. The following chapter therefore deals firstly with the class project and secondly with my own personal project.

CHAPTER IV

SECTION 1 A CLASS PROJECT

THE QUALITY OF HOUSE DESIGN IN WEST CRUMLIN

THE QUALITY OF HOUSE DESIGN IN WEST CRUMLIN

The planning of an environmental art programme like that of any other school 'subject' requires first the consideration of objectives, structure and concept and only secondarily that of methods.

Since the school (Marist Convent, Crumlin) is situated on the fringe of an enormous Corporation-built, residential estate and draws the bulk of its students from that area, I chose to look at and examine the aesthetic quality of the estate. To my surprise I found it a boring accumulation of terraced (and the odd semi-detached) houses that covered an area of about one square mile. This opinion was later echoed by Mr. Dardis, the Chief Architect of Dublin Corporation, who described it as 'ugly', when I went into his Department looking for visual information about the estate. I thought therefore that it would be interesting to discover to what degree the students are aware of living in such a visually boring environment. Never was it felt that I should impose my views on them but rather expose them through various activities to the repetitive and dull design of the area.

The idea of the project was therefore that the students should go out and visually explore the external design structures of local houses and later to visually structure their feelings and findings by making a village of model houses in ceramics.

The aim was to enlarge their capacities to respond to the design of houses through direct experience, to explore and amplify such responses, to evaluate and hence to criticize the appearance of houses in the area and

to discover the processes which have shaped and are currently shaping our environment.

The Four Stages

I decided to carry out the project in four stages: firstly, a wide ranging background research programme; secondly a visual enquiry through a field trip; thirdly a collation of information to establish individual group plans and finally an application of these plans to create the ceramic model houses.

As preliminary research I chose to visit some Corporation Departments, An Foras Forbartha and An Taisce to see what visual and other information I could get to stimulate and motivate the students.

A poster of a typical Irish village by William Garner was obtained at An Foras Forbartha and introduced in the first stage of the project. An Taisce could provide no environmental information of educational value. Ordnance Survey maps were given to me at the Planning Department of the Corporation in Capel Street and their Housing Department provided photo-copied elevation plans of local buildings. However, the latter Department would not loan to me some of their wooden model houses as, seemingly, they are very expensive structures and my attempts to substitute by getting a model from R.T.E. failed also. I acquired some photographs of various styles of houses from Sherry and Fitzgerald, Auctioneers, but when I tried to get a photograph screened by R.T.E., of the buildings of the Crumlin estates in 1939, I failed again because Crampton builders wouldn't release the copyright. Finally some prints were obtained at the Library of N.C.A.D. and I collected some maps and images in magazines etc.

Stage 1 Background Research Programme

The objectives for this stage were to motivate interest by encouraging the class to assist in establishing an approach to the project, to get them to conduct a contextual survey of house styles and building materials and to provide an opportunity to learn skills that would be later of use in the enquiry stage.

The project was begun by a slide presentation of houses in the area and after the initial surprise of seeing familiar homes on screen some comments regarding the similarity of house design were made. In attempting to expand on these comments I asked whether they were familiar with any other type of house designs and it was pointed out that there is a terrace of old bricked two-storey houses at the other end of the park. No other distinctions were made.

Having briefly discussed the purposes and benefits of carrying out a project based on local houses,great excitement and interest spread throughout the class when it was revealed that field work would be necessary and that there was some possibility that clay might later be used to visually structure and present our findings.

Following a discussion on the needs for and type of background research it was decided that the pupils should research various designs of houses that existed in Ireland years ago, the materials that were used to build them and two girls offered to investigate what artist, if any, painted houses.

The following lesson drew attention to the different features of houses i.e doors, windows, roofs the materials used, the textures and patterns given

off by these materials and how the design of these features may change from house to house.

Having agreed that these topics should be investigated during the project the pupils accepted my suggestion that they might need some preliminary field-work to learn the skills involved in making such enquiries. Demonstrations were given and problems presented on how such things as taking rubbings and drawing windows might be achieved.

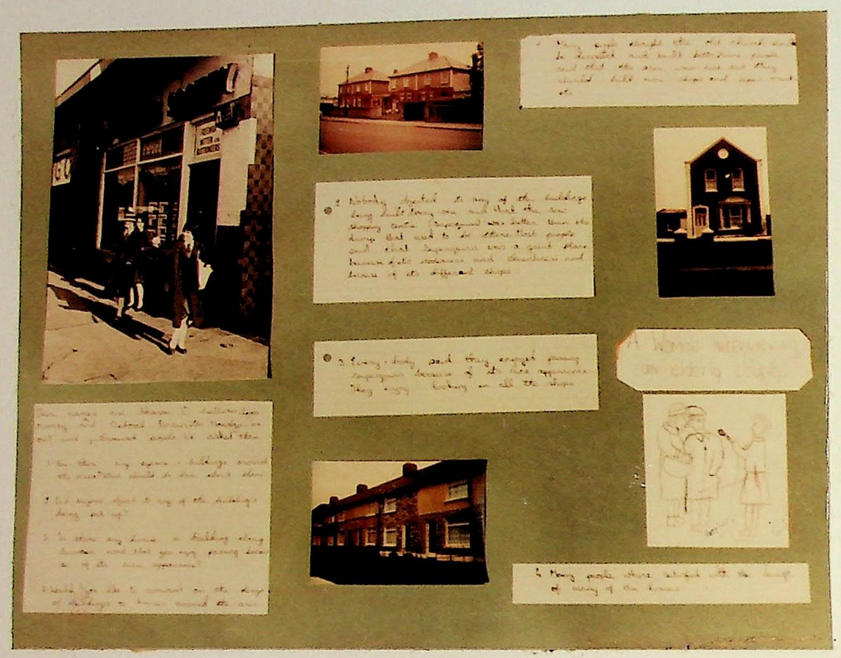
By encouraging them to think about how an overall effective response to the design of local houses could be acquired, we decided that some pupils should carry out interviews with housewives and pedestrians regarding the appearance and history of houses in the area. Another topic for investigation, that of vandalism to buildings was suggested by one girl and accepted by me.

Groups were formed that would eventually come together from the enquiry, planning and making stage and these were then interchanged for the preliminary field work to ensure that the various skills needed for later work would be interspersed among each grouping.

The organisation of these groupings was easy once it was established for what purposes they were being formed - seven groups of four were appointed. Some didn't want to work with others because of personality clashes and these differences were resolved by quick reorganizations. One girl was rejected by many others before being accepted into a warm, chatty crowd that included a set of twins.

Three interviewing groups were set up and tape-recorders were provided for

← INTERVIEWING
AND
↓ SKETCHING



STORYBOARD ON INTERVIEW FINDINGS.

two the following week. The third made use, like the rest of the class, of paper with cardboard support and clips and the appropriate materials, such as biros, pencils and wax crayons.

All the groups were then alloted worksheets with regard to their respective enquiries and were sent off on the instructions to mind the traffic and be back at a specific time.

To prepare a valid questionaire for the vandalism topic, I went to the Crumlin Garda Station to make enquiries about what sort of information they had available and which they would be willing to offer. An assurance was given that someone would relate verbal information to two pupils at an appointed time but this wasn't met when they turned up, as the Gardai said they were too busy to accommodate them. However, the improvising pupils approached a Garda on the street and obtained suitable information from him.

The preliminary field work proved a success as most groups worked well and collected a lot of interesting information. The group, however, appointed to research the various types of rooftops failed in this regard for two reasons - firstly, the group lacked a personality with a daring initiative in the open spaces ; secondly, they said they were looking for a variety of structures but couldn't find any since many of the local houses looked much the same. One group chose windows instead of doors as they found it difficult to remain outside or confront doorways, again largely because of inhibitions.

Consequently while collating our findings and presenting them as story-boards in the following lesson, I recalled the general approach necessary for the following enquiry stage and tackled the problem of shyness. We

discussed the aspect of seeking permission from the householder to carry out the investigations. It was decided to explain who we were, the nature of the project and the type of work which we would like to carry out. One girl raised the matter of getting round the sides and to the backs of houses and it was resolved that an analysis of the front and sides would suffice. For those that couldn't deal, for various reasons (terraced, closed) with the side, comparative guesses would have to do.

Stage 11 : Visual Enquiries

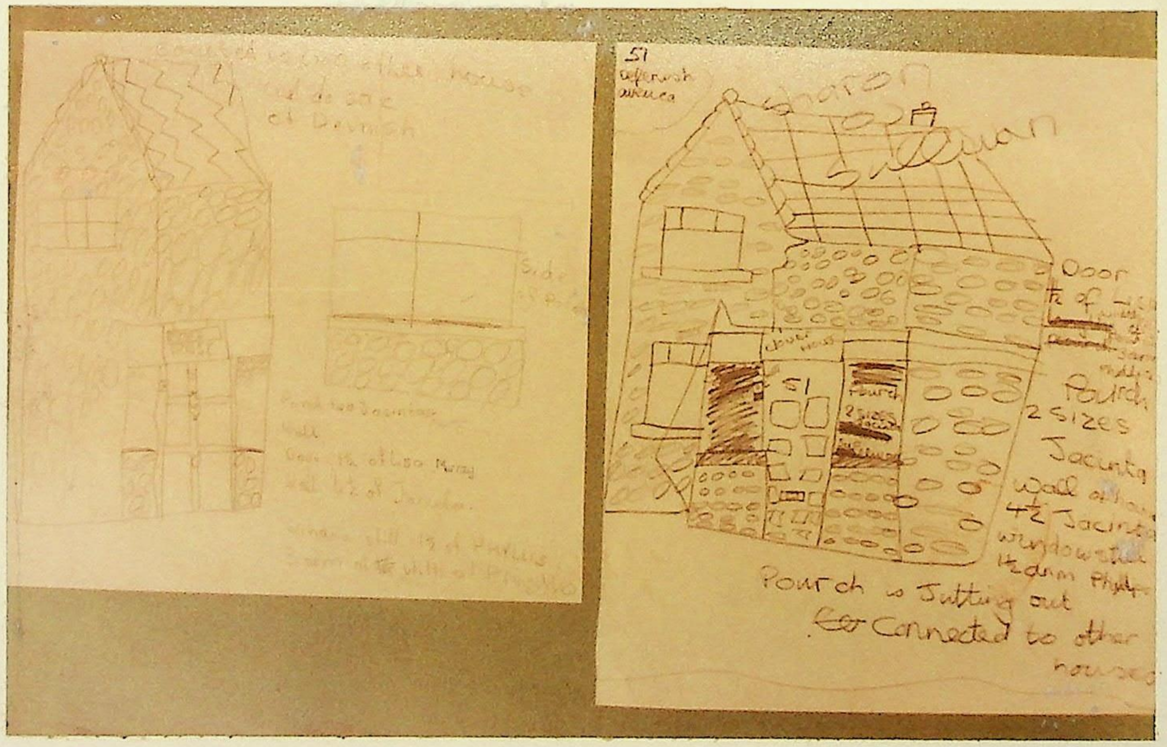
This stage only involved one class as the energy and interest generated by the initial field-trip enabled the pupils to carry out an immense amount of work within a short space of time.

The objective was to promote an appreciation and understanding of the singular physical make-up of a self (group) chosen building by an in depth visual analysis of its structure.

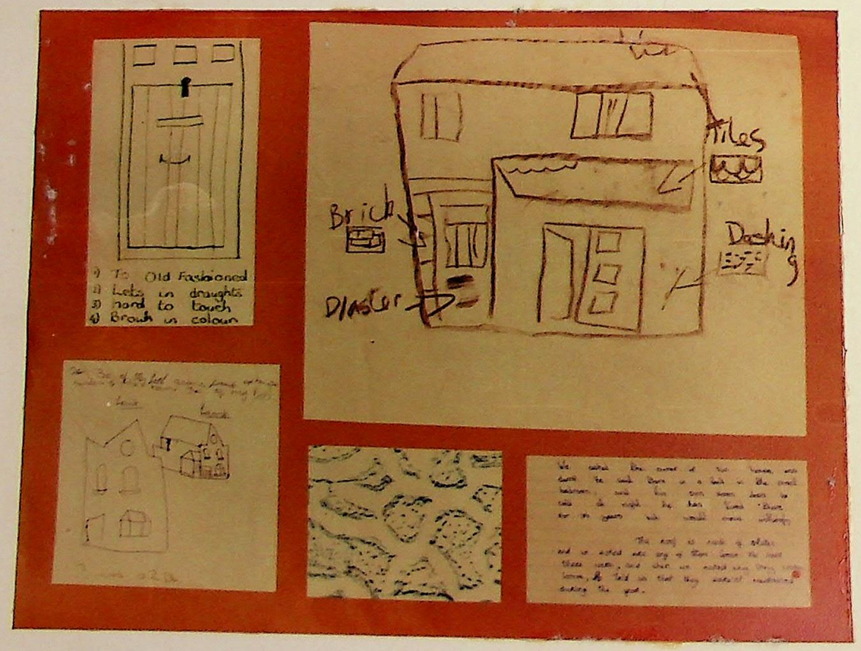
This time the necessary enquiry tasks were quickly recalled and demonstrations given by volunteers; worksheets were handed out and the field-trip began.

A noticeable and significant change immediately took place in that most of the pupils headed off immediately for the Kimmage end of Sundrive Road. Upon enquiry afterwards, it was pointed out that they had seen more interesting houses down that direction during the week and had therefore made up their minds to look for an interesting house down there.

Each group had to draw the structure (front, side and three-quarter angled



Sharon
Sullivan
2 sizes
Pourch is Jutting out
Connected to other houses



drawings) of the chosen house, measure its scale - by pacing the front and sides and calculating its height - and draw the design of doors and windows, the pattern created by the arrangement of materials upon the facades, as well as taking rubbings of whatever textures they chose.

Again results proving surprisingly good. On going around to see what problems were arising I found most around doorways, in gardens, taking rubbings, drawings and interviewing people.

One particular group of which I was suspicious because of the trouble they generally tend to create, were actively engaged in conducting a whole-hearted investigation of a semi-detached house. It turned out that the owner was constructing a new bedroom over the playroom, at the side of the house and he gave the group the Architect's plans (which were later used to illustrate the planning process), as well as telling them all sorts of information about the history of the house.

Another group also conducted a background enquiry with the owner (this time a woman). She told them that she moved in when the houses were just built in 1941, the rent she then had to pay, the extent of the estate at that time etc., etc. Some weeks later the same group approached me to relate how the lady had since put in weather-glazed windows to replace the old wooden ones.

One group chose to draw a shop unit in the Superquin Shopping Complex as they found its design more interesting than that of the houses since glass and steel were used.

Upon returning to class the various experiences and stories were quickly

and eagerly told and many were enquiring as to what the following class held in store!

Stage III : The Planning Process

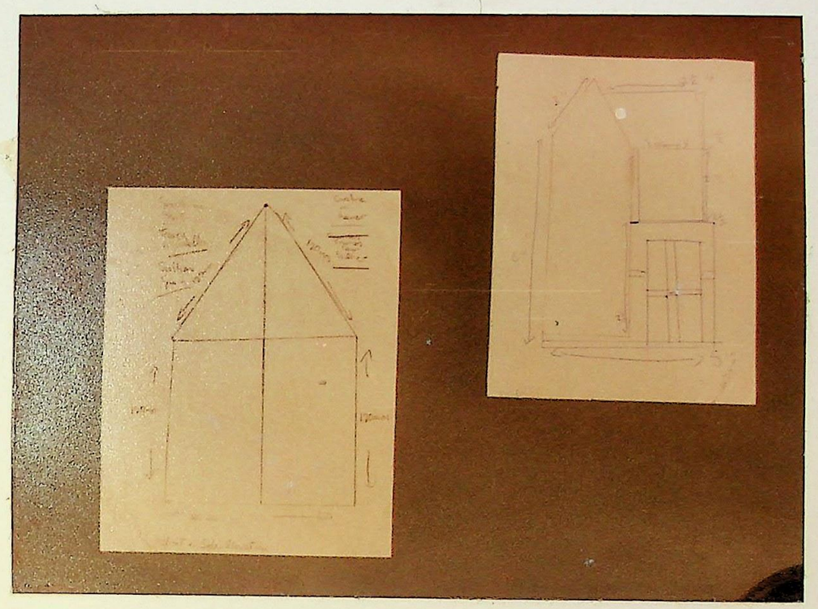
The objective here was to promote an understanding of the considerations and processes which a Designer must acknowledge and according to which he must act. The idea was to draw up elevation drawings for the proposed models and to experiment in cardboard form with possible structures to see what could and could not be attempted.

Since a model could not be obtained from either the Corporation or R.T.E. we used the Architect's plans which were given to the group referred to above.

The need for a common scale was accepted in theory, but when it came around to making the cardboard structures shoeboxes were provided as starting points but the material and scale were consequently rejected by three groups as they felt their respective models would then be too small. This consideration was acknowledged and corrugated cardboard provided so that the preferred sizes could be more acceptably accommodated.

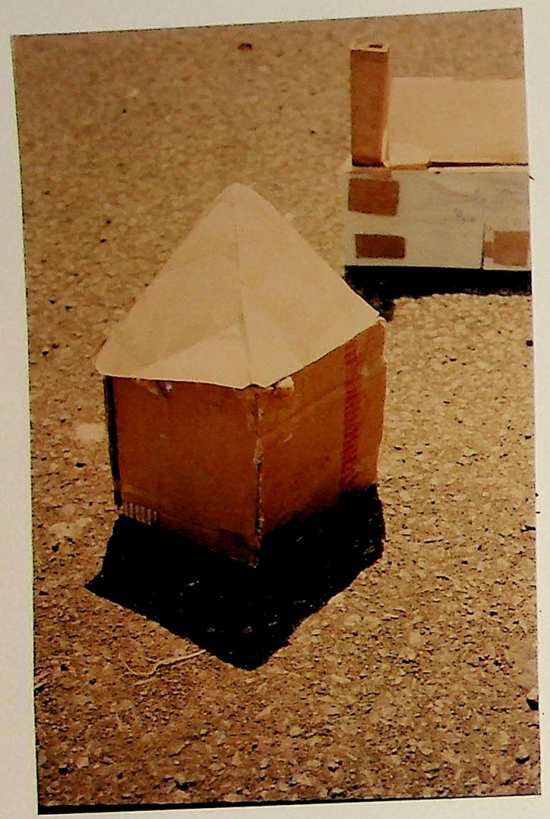
One of these groups then attempted to construct a bay-window and though they had difficulty realising it in cardboard, they later produced a fine interpretation in clay form.

Not surprisingly a couple of groups completely rejected their initial drawings and plans and chose to experiment with the cardboard in order to arrive at a suitable structure. The reason for this change of mind was



PLANS

MODELS



that all found, in the act of realizing, in three dimensions the form of their proposed plan, that the structure, particularly that of the roof took precedence over the layout of doors and windows.

It took two sessios to complete these cardboard structures as the products almost became ends in themselves, rather than experimental structures.

My proposition and afore-made plan to then dismantle and use the sides of these structures as templates when cutting clay slabs was objected to and rejected by the class and so the sanctity of the product was upheld.

Stage 1V — The Making

In this final stage the objectives were obvious: to develop in the pupils an understanding, through the familiarity of experience, of the nature, possibilities and working methods of clay; to promote in them an appreciation of the transformation of clay into ceramic ware through the process of biscuit and glaze firings and to evaluate the outcomes and overall success of the project.

Since most had no previous experience of clay, it was necessary for them to experience the whole process of working with the material from rolling out the slabs and watching for air bubbles to glazing the biscuit ware. It would have caused less organizational problems and saved time if I prepared the slabs, but the students needed to experience the pliable quality of clay by changing, rolling and cutting it themselves. Unfortunately it wasn't possible forthem to experience the initial kneading stage because of the light structure of their desks.

Initially we discussed the nature of clay, its origins etc., and examined

CERAMIC MODEL HOUSES

various products that are made from the material. Having demonstrated the process of cutting slabs (and later discussed alternative uses and possibilities of clab slabs) the students proceeded to cut them out using prepared paper templates and were encouraged to wrap and preserve their slabs well at the end of each session.

Later the textural qualities that may be applied to the material were demonstrated using various materials. The pupils proceeded to experiment in creating textures using the excess clay which had been cut away and preserved. Having decided on their respective textures, they began to apply them using such accessories as a house-key, the end of spoons, corn-seeds, sugar and the texture of hessian. Some chose to scratch the clay using craft knives and one group added small pellets of clay as roof tiles. The latter wouldn't, however, apply these pellets to the dormer windows since these, they said, were renovations to the original structure.

The assembly of slabs caused some problems as roofs proved difficult to make and needed support. Unfortunately one group wouldn't touch their slabs in the following session because fungus had grown on their corn seeds - they began again. After much trial and error and, in some cases, restarts, seven structures were finally made.

In the touching-up process of attaching window sills and scraping out doors and windows I observed a variety of attitudes among the groups. Some were very patient and in the case of those who had to make a bay window, persevered until they achieved what they set out to do. Others just wanted to be finished first and in their anxiety and, perhaps true to their characters, gave their models a rough looking finish.

Amazingly one of the structures was damaged on its rear wall as perhaps there was a personality clash among some of the individuals concerned.

However, only one structure, the shop of all things, cracked during the biscuit firing which took place at the N.C.A.D. since the permanent art teacher was then using the kiln for senior student work. Consequently, I made use of the opportunity to bring out some oxides and glazes from the College, as the school had a limited supply and the glazing process went ahead.

As was to be expected, again some people in their anxiety overglazed their structures causing them to lose some details in the process. All, however, were satisfied with their results and want them back next year.

The Class Evaluation

In evaluating the project, some proposed that there really was no need to do the preliminary drawings since they created the structures themselves using their imagination. Others recollected that, though they made little use of their drawings of doorways they are now beginning to notice the variety of door designs. A couple remarked that the taking of rubbings and the interviewing acts were the most enjoyable aspects and all agreed that more classes should be based on outdoor work as they found it very interesting and can now see how such things as textures and patterns make the fabric of our surroundings more pleasing to observe. Four people had no interest in the project but enjoyed working with clay.

When asked what they now thought of the design of houses in the area, most declared that it was "boring" because "there are too many houses that all

look alike".

One couple, who had commented in their storyboard of interview-findings, that they believed people should look after their own houses and "not bother about what other people's houses look like", admitted that they had "changed their minds". They now believe that if nobody objected to what or how people build "the place would look an awful mess." They agreed that the authorities should enforce and uphold strict planning laws.

Many expressed the opinion that they would "prefer to live over in Kimmage" because there are a greater variety of house designs along Kimmage Road and because "the old red bricked houses (over there) have well designed fronts".

As is to be expected, a few "couldn't care less" where they live "so long as there is a disco hall nearby."

My Evaluation

The particular aim of the project, of promoting in the pupils an awareness of the quality of their physical surroundings, was realized and articulated in their expression that they found the area aesthetically boring in which to live and in their preference of the quality of streetscape along Kimmage Road. They realized that we are all responsible in one way or another for the appearance of our surroundings and they came to understand from their various experiences the processes and considerations of designing. Unquestionably learning about the elements of art took place in that their function and application were more readily understood in the context of an environmental project than would have happened within the walls of a class-

room. Such terms as structure, shape, pattern and texture have become familiar words and their meanings distinguished and understood.

Many of the pupils, however, did not directly refer to their exploratory working drawings in the application of door and window designs. The reason for this may be that they are still at the stage where schemes are being unconsciously modified with new experiences and the organization of acquired information with previous knowledge is not as yet consciously recognized as a means of structuring expression. More time should therefore be spent in developing their concepts of what is daily to be seen.

The pupils surprised me in that they automatically integrated background research with visual enquiry. For example some asked householders the history of the house and one even enquired about leaks in the roof.

The attitude of local people was very encouraging in that some went out of their way to help the pupils with their enquiries. Such attitudes promote the planning of further projects on the quality of the environmental design.

In practical terms therefore I would eliminate the need to measure the sizes of doors and windows, yet retain the need to consider their designs. Such a full scale investigation into the shape and size of doors and windows would be required as the foundation for another project, perhaps with the intention of applying the collected information in the design of lino-cut images. Because of the sanctity of the product which they assigned to the cardboard structures, I would be at pains to point out the frame of reference in which structures are made.

I would ensure that each group is provided with a large tin box to preserve

the moisture and form of clay slabs and forewarn the pupils of the consequences of their applying such ingredients as corn seeds to texture their slabs. Furthermore I would keep a supply of slabs in reserve so that time would not be wasted in re-kneading and re-rolling the clay.

SECTION TWO MY PERSONAL PROJECT

As a teacher who needs to realize the visual potential of whatever topic, in any given situation, is seen to be worth an enquiry; as a citizen who chooses to care for the appearance of my local surroundings; as a creative person who wishes to come to terms with the physical and emotional aspects of those surroundings and as an individual who wishes to experience the joys of living, it is important that I carry out a similar project as that of my pupils, so that I may empathize with and thereby understand whatever problems pupils may be likely to confront, determine just what aspects of my surroundings are worth upholding, visually express my feelings in relation to those surroundings and experience what it means to be alive.

Because I have already investigated the design elements of houses and similarly expressed my findings in ceramic slab form, it was important that I therefore proceeded along new lines of enquiry, so that other physical elements may be seen as having visual and according stimulus for creative potential and that new modes of expression may be realized and understood.

For my own work then I felt that like my pupils, my understanding of myself the environment and the principles of art would be broadened and deepened by a visual enquiry based around a local area at home. This idea was encouraged by the "unreal" fact that I had never previously had the opportunity to carry out such an enquiry, as my school days were spent in boarding schools and so whatever environmental visual studies I did carry out, emerged, developed and concluded there.

Choosing the Site

To begin the visual enquiry I needed a site. Two areas came to mind as

both their plans reflect those long lost years (1746 - 1886) when Birr exemplified in its new streets the nature of good town planning. The first, an early 19th century street, known as Oxmantown Mall, is lined on one side by a row of sixteen Georgian type houses and on the other by a tree lined walk; the second a spacious mid 19th century street called John's Mall is lined on both sides by houses and is centred on a bronze statue which is surrounded by ornamental grass plots.

I set off in the beginning to Oxmantown Mall and began making preliminary sketches. However, I soon changed to the other area. My reasons, and they were many, lay with both internal and external factors.

Firstly, I felt that the range of visual images that might be offered to me and which I would find interesting, would be greater in John's Mall as a direct consequence to the form of their mutual plans. Here I would have more room for physical manouver and the range of visual material to be extracted from it would be greater therein. As well as the equivalent houses fronted by iron railings, trees and public buildings, there were the three grass plots with their heavy surrounding chains and iron posts, the four, now defunct gas lamps, and the bronze statue of the 2nd Earl of Rosse. It was therefore the greater range of street furniture that can be seen in John's Mall that swung this, the material factor.

Secondly, the narrow, imposing plan of Oxmantown Mall lined, as it is, with tall houses and high trees and blocked on both ends by a stone ediface - the Protestant Church and Castle gates respectively - gave off a claustrophobic effect to which the open expanse of John's Mall contravenes in its bright and inviting spaciousness.

Thirdly, the mood of the former remains as that for which it was built,

namely that of a quiet residential area off the main traffic routes. John's Mall on the other hand lies in an area where four roads converge and through which people and traffic continually pass. The peace and, in my case, disturbing quietness was rejected for the hustle and bustle of town life which was never too far away.

Finally and perhaps more importantly in that it contains all the other reasons, I felt more "at home" there, as I lived nearby for twenty-two years. I knew it better than Oxmantown Mall where at all times I had felt strange, a voyeur to a place I didn't belong. I knew (albeit superficially) what was to be found there, what it had to offer in visual terms, the spaces with which I would have to contend and its mood with which I was at one. This pleasant relationship between myself and the streetscape, which afforded opportunities to stimulate rather than confront my temperament, should, I felt, be investigated and defined.

The First Look

I began by walking the area, to feel its spaces, to touch its forms and surfaces and to look at its shapes and colours. After pulling my fingers along the abounding rows of iron railings, after climbing into the ornamental plots to experience the feelings of grass under the soles of my rubber shoes and to look at and feel the spaces from unusual angles and after having looked more intently at the design of the street's architecture and street furniture, I realized that here is a place, unique in its planned form, that has unlimited potential for visual enquiries.

The awareness,directly initiated by my coming to terms with such a suitable site, the appreciation of the overall plan and subsequent mood of John's

Mall and the heightened knowledge of how pleasant I felt these to be, encouraged me to set about researching the historical development of the street's architectural plan, while simultaneously carrying out a visual enquiry. The following is an account of what I discovered.

* *

THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF JOHN'S MALL

John's Mall has been described by Michael Byrne (4 p.50) as an architectural triumph. Those people who have passed through it would undoubtedly agree that here is one of the most pleasantly designed streetscapes in rural Ireland. It consists of houses, which are mostly Georgian and fronted by railing bordered lawns, three ornamental grass plots - with trees, railings and a statue - a neo-classic town hall and a library built as a Presbyterian church.

The people of Birr are directly and indirectly indebted to the Parsons family for the wide acclaim the area has been given down through the years. Indirectly, in the sense that it was to commemorate the lives of two of the family, brothers John and William, that caused the area to take its present shape and directly, in that Laurence, their father, was the initial planner of the street and his grandson (and second heir) contributed handsomely to the cost of its eventual completion.

The Planner

Like many contemporary landlords, Laurence Parsons (2nd Earl of Rosse) was an amateur Architect who preferred to directly shape his manor to his personal whims and ideas than employ an Architect to oversee the work.

John Johnson, an Architect who did some work for Laurence but of whom nothing outside Birr is known, has been credited with designing the Protestant Church. However,since the English historian Mark Girouard found numerous notebooks of Laurence's designs on a visit to the castle in 1965, it has been put forward that Johnson acted as a mere draughtsman and technical expert for his employer's ideas.

Laurence's aim was to add to Birr's already established air of neatness and orderly appearance, by making it into one of the most pleasing residential centres in Ireland. It was with external appearances therefore, that he was primarily concerned and so he made no efforts, as did other landlords, to promote local industries.

JOHN'S HALL

In 1828 John Clere Parsons, son of Laurence, died of fever. His father decided to raise a building to his memory. No doubt Laurence,who had already completed several major building projects, had in mind some great plan for this area. Nine years previously he had given John Compton, a local contractor, leases and financial assistance to build a row of cottages, 200 yards due east of the then town boundary, thus creating a notable site in the intervening space.

Work began in 1829 and was finished about four years later. The sympathy of the local community on the tragic death was reflected in their financial assistance as Lacy mentions that it was they who paid for it(13 P.162). It cost £1,100, almost double the original estimate, owing to the insulation required.

Laurence drew up a plan whereby the new structure would lie on the northern, higher side of the road in such a central position that it was immediately

flanked by two rows of Georgian houses. This site was particularly chosen because of the fashion for buildings of architectural merit,i.e., churches, town halls and courthouses, to be placed in positions where they were not only seen to advantage but where they added to the whole appearance of a street or 'place' - as in Nenagh, Carlow, Ennis and Banagher. It's situation on high ground complimented this policy, as natural physical features - ground - slopes, undulations and waterways etc., - were fully exploited for siting.

It's design, that of a Greek Ionic temple was 'lifted' from one of those voluminous architectural books on neo-classic and neo-Gothic designs, that abounded at that time. Laurence's original idea was to erect a very simple building with windows just along the eastern side. However, his change of mind produced a very refined structure. It lies on a raised platform and has a front portico with four Ionic columns, cut-stone facing and tall windows on either side. The whole building is surrounded by a massive entablature with a pediment towards the front.

The flanking houses were all of three bay and two stories over a basement. All have good doorcases and a grass front enclosed within neat iron railings. Private well-to-do-families lived here with the single exception of the Provincial Bank (B.P.162). These were listed as gentry by Slater in 1856 and they included Robert Chadwicke Esq., Samuel Gordon Esq., Alfred Kelly Esq., two clergymen, the Rev. John Egan P.P. and William Henry McCausland and two attorneys Adam Mitchell and John Smith. This housing development became known as St. John's Terrace but was later encapsulated under St. John's Place, a name given to all the immediate area due east of the Square. No further building developments took place here for another thirty years.

The Rosse Memorial

Arising out of the death of William (3rd Earl of Rosse) a world famous Astronomer, in 1867, a meeting was held in March the following Spring with the express purpose of raising a public monument in his honour. Such actions became common practice after 1850, e.g., the de Vesci monument in Abbeyleix and that of the King Harmans in Kenagh, Co. Longford. Their erection coincides with the gradual decline in power of the landlords throughout the country. So much money was immediately subscribed in Birr that it was decided to commission J.H. Foley, then Ireland's foremost Sculptor, to carry out the work.

Two years later, Foley visited the town to select the most appropriate site for his statue. He decided that from an artistic point of view Oxmantown Mall (at another end of town) would best suit the purpose. The Town Commissioners - first elected in Birr in 1852 to promote and supervise the upkeep of the town - however, had different ideas, as had the townspeople. Mr. Mitchell, the Chairman, called for a meeting of the subscribers. He also went to the trouble himself of measuring Oxmantown Mall at the place where it was proposed to place the statue and he duly came to the decision that it would "look to much disadvantage". Oct. 2,1871). At the following monthly Commissioners' meeting it was unanimously resolved that John's Place was preferable for many reasons. Here it would have more space, would be in keeping with John's Mall and would be more public, enabling strangers coming and going to see it.

John's Place Development Fund

It had already been decided that should such an agreement scheme take place changes would have to be made to make the place worthy of its reception.

On May 23rd, 1872 motions were passed to remove the unsightly wall opposite the Provincial bank, to widen the road and carry out improvements therein and to open a subscription list for the proposed development. The scheme was called the John's Place Development Fund and proceeds were to be lodged in the Provincial bank, the first of which amounted to £15.15.0d for the sale of the above mentioned wall (28, June 10th, 1872).

A committee was set up on February 3rd, 1873 to arrange all matters in connection with the proper arrangement of the place for the memorial. This improvement, it was said, would help the labouring classes who were idle for want of work. A groundplan was forwarded by Foley in February, 1873 to the Commissioners so that the foundations and levelling of the Memorial site could be proceeded with. He recommended the square space immediately surrounding the statue to be enclosed by posts and chains or railings for protection. Wooden pallisading was proposed to enclose the plots of ground on either side of this area. Though wood was objected to on the grounds that it would be devoid of artistic appearance, coupled with the fact that it would need replacing every three years, it was deemed the most appropriate solution under the circumstances. The Chairman explained that they could only afford £200, the estimated cost of the wooden structure, and this only after Lord Rosse had agreed to meet the sum of £100 which they had set aside for the improvement of waste ground (28, Dec. 4th, 1873).

Further disagreement arose between Foley and the Commissioners in regard to the type of stone to be used for the pedestal. Since Foley couldn't obtain a sufficiently large block of Ballintemple stone, his ideal proposal he recommended Aberdeen granite as an alternative. The Commissioners stone from an Irish quarry, however; so it was finally agreed to use small plain blocks of limestone from the Ballintemple Quarries, Co. Cork (28, March 21st, 1876).

On a wet, windy, biting March day the statue was unveiled by the Countess of Rosse (March 21st, 1976) before 3000 cheering spectators. Among those who paid tribute to the late Earl were Colonel Bernard, the Lieutenant of King's County (who directed the proceedings), the Rev. Dr. Lloyd, Provost of Trinity College, Rev. Dr. O'Mealley P.P. Nenagh and Laurence the fourth Earl, his son and successor.

Further Improvements To John's Place

A further Improvement Committee had by now been set up to establish an appropriate plan for improving the area even further. This opportunity was afforded to them by the balance of £306 leftover from the initial Memorial subscription. The committee was composed of partly country and partly town subscribers so that all shades of opinion would be represented to secure the best and nicest design. As a result of their deliberations, with the town Engineer, John Sanders a plan was forwarded for the consideration of the Commissioners on July 6th, 1876.

Their proposal was to remove the railings in front of John's Mall and to enclose in a semi-circular sweep (with railings) all the surrounding ground outwards to the front of the statue. An objection by Commissioner Kelly, a local resident, who declared that all the traffic would be diverted to his side of the Mall and who proposed the setting up of a Residents' Committee, was over-ruled by the Chairman, Mr. Mitchell who said he should be sorry to let private considerations outweigh public improvements and that it was the subscribers to the Rosse Memorial that ought to be pleased, not the residents of John's Mall.

The plan was put on view in the Town Hall so that those who objected

could prepare a plan of their own. No concrete response followed and after much discussion it was decided to carry out Commissioner Storey's proposal to enclose the grounds around the statue within a nice oval plot, using a heavy spiked chain supported by ornamental pillars. This area was to run beyond the large ash tree and another was to be planted at the far end to make it look uniform (29, Aug. 25th, 1876). The work was eventually completed by August 1878, necessitating as it did an oval plot at either side of the Monument enclosure because of objections to joining them up.

More Houses

During the 1860s the terraced houses built under Laurence Parsons were extended to Compton's Row. These were of regency style. Those on the southern side i.e., the four from the present P.P.'s house to Wilmer Road were built probably at the end of that decade.

Lord Rosse promised to replace the "present unsightly cabins" (29, May 11th, 1876), that probably ran from Dr. Buglar's house (the present Parish Priest's house) towards Newbridge Street by a row of uniform houses and at the same time to widen the road to give "perfect uniformity" to John's Place.

Their removal made way for the siting of a new Presbyterian Church, the present Library, and its foundation stone was laid in 1885. It was completed the same year.

Mr. William Paxham sought permission from the Commissioners for building projecting bay-windows similar to the ones adjoining as he was about to remodel two cottages also in John's Place (29, Feb. 1st, 1886).

* *

2 VIEWS OF JOHN'S MALL

THE LAMP

The Visual Enquiry

First I conducted a general enquiry of the area through drawings. These early drawings dealt with street scenes, doorways and a study of the Rosse statue. Later I began to focus on the feet and caps of the iron railings that abound there. The reason for taking such a focal point was that I generally prefer forms that exude and flow with organic shapes, whose surfaces twist and curve in spiral-like rhythms, than those shapes that have "suffered" the vertical, horizontal and diagonal fate of mathematics. the organic forms were found therein.

The Gas Lamp

The enquiry led me to conduct a study of the moulded frame of a 19th century iron gas lamp. Though its structure is basically vertical and geometric forms have largely been used, the frame bleeds with arabesques. From the floral leaves and fruit that surround the base of each light to the rings that intermittently break the strong, central, vertical flow of the structure the form is overflowing with twists and turns - leading a fan like myself, of Art Nouveau qualities to sit and look and draw for hours on end.

While drawing the lamp from various angles and positions I gradually began to echo the directions of the lamp's forms, as seen in my sketches, with the silhouettes of the ash tree behind. Lamp and tree were fused in charcoal and I then believed this fusion might later be a concern for work in either ceramics or lino-cutting.

Two sections of the lamp in particular caught my attention: one, the

vase-shaped form that is to be seen at the base of the central pillar; the other, a floral type motif that culminates the inner sides of both projecting curved wings. Consequently I took sectional moulds of both these areas

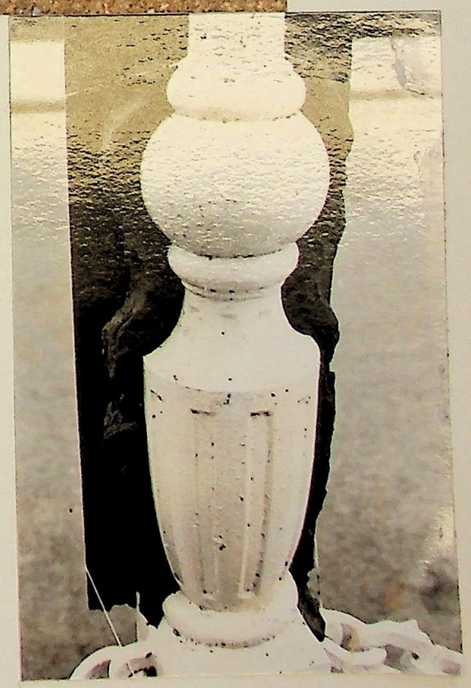
Designing and Creating Ceramic Forms

After initial problems of deciding what type of clay forms or structures I would create, whose designs would be based on my visual studies, I eventually decided to design and make a decorative wall plaque and a functional vase. A further consideration was to explore the possibilities of designing a tile for external mural display.

The Vase

I began by using the large sectional mould to form the basis of the proposed vase form. The idea, mentioned above, of fusing the surface qualities of the tree trunk with the basic geometric structure, taken from the lamp, proved fruitful, as I set about injecting the lumps and bumps as seen on trunks to the surface of the moulded form.

While working at the rhythm of these lumps,I discovered that I was thinking in terms of a relief design. Once the silhouettes and the central rhythmical interaction of bumps and hollows were resolved, I was reasonably happy. However, a twenty degree turn on the wheel, my problems began again, and most likely caused me to alter my previous achievements. I undertook to consider these lumps as indigenous to the core of the form and not as superficial (plantings). Consequently the dynamics took on a greater breadth across the form and by observing the silhouette in continuous movement I soon arrived at a design with which I was to remain satisfied.



The Wall Plaque

A disc shape seemed most appropriate to form the basis of this design since the spiral dynamics, demanded by such a shape, would echo its dynamics on the lamp. This time I chose the floral motif as the focal point of the design, since having formed the basis of many exploratory drawings it should I felt be given new importance in the context of different media.

In considering the spiral dynamics, I researched Celtic designs to come to terms with possible arrangements. After much modelling, carving and switching about of balls of clay, a suitable design was eventually achieved from which a mould was taken and a grogged clay disc cast (see ill.).

The process of its creation emphasized to me how adaptable clay is to use - one can change ones mind over and over again without dire consequences - and how with any visual statement one must strive again and again to reach that state of design where space, form and dynamics are interlinked and all are unified to produce an acceptable, easy to perceive whole.

The Tile

Again the motif lent itself as a suitable basis for the design. The intricate designs of the Celts were again researched and I sought to create a relief form that would reflect, in its repeating dynamics an interlaced Celtic design. The contrasting textures of the tree and lamp that I perceived while drawing prompted me to produce similar contrasting effects in clay.

Wood and Lino Cutting Images

Dynamics were also a consideration in the design of lino-cut images but with this craft I was concerned with retaining the pictorial images of my drawings.

Because of the nature of the lino-cut, one must think in terms of bold simple shapes of contrasting light and dark qualities. I consequently chose to preserve the silhouettes of some exploratory drawings and use the cutting marks to suggest form. While working in the craft I explored the various possibilities, i.e., besides the cutting effect, how the lino can be etched or ink applied lightly to attain monoprint effects.

Three satisfactory images were printed but I feel more work could be done to fully realize the pictorial potential of the lamp as it relates to this craft.

An Evaluation

The benefits of pursuing this personal enquiry have been many and relate to my understanding of myself, of people from another age, of materials - their working methods and potentials of the principles of art and how these relate to the shape of the environment and finally, how all these should be promoted and be seen to relate in any teaching situation.

By creating images and forms from the enquiry stage right through to working with the crafts,I have come more to terms with my stage of creative development, that is, how I approach my work, the marks that I like to make and the artistic directions in which I would like to explore from here.

The background research has led me to further enquire from local people about the appearance of the street years ago and to tell others about what I have learnt. While sketching the lamp I could tell friends who stopped for a chat and strangers who stopped to look when particular features were erected, why they were built, by whom and even how much the erection had cost. By a provision of much information and a heightening of their interest, by observing me draw, their appreciation of the area has unquestionably improved.

The field work had the added benefit in that by drawing attention through sketching, taking moulds and talking with whosoever chose to stop, to the design of the lamp and its aesthetic value to the place, the local Chamber of Commerce have just lately decided to restore fanlights to the structure and introduce electricity so as to make the long defunct lamp shine again. Thus, they were one step ahead of the County Engineer, who after I had suggested to a local Councillor to instigate similar action, had brought the case to the man in question who duly promised to deal with the matter forthwith.

The research aspect has also given me an insight to a social factor which I believe, has lately been lost and for which it is a purpose of art education to lay foundations - that is, the willingness of individuals from different walks of life to work co-operatively for the benefit of the local environment, in particular, its visual appearance. The social structure of the 19th century was such it seems that even at a local level, with respect to design, aesthetics and function were considered with equal regard. Such a laudable attitude is often nowadays over-riden by the dominance of economic and technological factors.

As a teacher, having conducted an in-depth enquiry into the working methods,

possibilities and limitations - of two crafts I have come to a greater realization of how any one craft may be used and interpreted in various ways. Such an awareness is a prerequisite for the introduction of any material into the art-room, where individual perceptions and forms of expression are all important.

Through my visual enquiries I have seen and interpreted the local built environment as aesthetic form. The joy of seeing my local surroundings thus, has added to my enjoyment of living there and that manner of perceiving the environment is continually being applied to whatever surroundings in which I find myself.

CONCLUSION

If you choose bad environmental design, posterity will have to suffer for it. It is important therefore to choose well. To choose well, one must be able to say not merely "I like this", but "this is good". To acquire that much certainty one needs a little knowledge, for judgment requires that one should know something of the Designer's problems and alternatives. This knowledge may be attained by following a course in art education that provides opportunities for students to study the visual quality of their surroundings.

Such courses expose them to experiences which demand that they come to terms with the principles of art and how these are related to the shaping of the environment, as well as broadening their concept of the local surroundings.

My study of the lamp has not only re-enforced my pride in the visual appearance of Birr, but has also been responsible for making others more aware of the quality of their surroundings, so much so, that action - the restoration of light to the structures - is consequently taking place. My pupils have articulated their conception of their area in declaring that the overall planning of house design was aesthetically boring.

By thus developing a discriminatory 'feel' for the local built environment through practical experience and by promoting a broader outlook on the use of materials and techniques so that students may discover ways of making personal statements in public, visual form, the capacities of local people to make their own statements on the quality of their surroundings are enhanced. Feelings of pride or disgust thus generated, may, in some cases,

be exposed and expressed through local action which in turn often helps to solve wider problems.

The hope that the present predominance of social passivity in respect to environmental planning can and will give way to discerning responsive action, should be fostered through art education to ensure that progress in urban growth can be made without offending or destroying.

This project on seeing the local built environment as aesthetic form, has only just begun. The scope for making pupils more aware of how the visual quality of their surroundings directly or indirectly affects their lives, is everywhere lying dormant, waiting to be used. Such features as street advertisements, traffic, open and closed spaces, buildings and street furniture are everywhere in sight and are open for continuous exploration and endless interpretation. For example, students can, by realising how architectural and ornamental features contribute to the individual 'feel' of a particular street or area, come to terms with the identifying factors of all built environments.

We, as art educators, should therefore provide opportunities and instigate experiences for our pupils to observe and assess the many aspects of their built environment. By including learning situations that deal with environmental fac tors in the art curriculum, our educational system can produce school leavers who respect their architectural heritage, are sensitive to new environmental design concepts and are enthusiastic about preserving and maintaining those aspects of their surroundings which are seen to be culturally important. Though the right answers will not always be implemented such is the nature of social systems, an environmentally perceptive generation would ensure great hope for the future shape of our surroundings.

APPENDIX

This consists of four sample lesson plans, one from each stage of the project. It includes the workcards used in the field-work. For further lesson evaluation, please refer to my lesson notebook.

CLASS S1 — Monday 21st February

Ability Average — 11.10 - 12.30

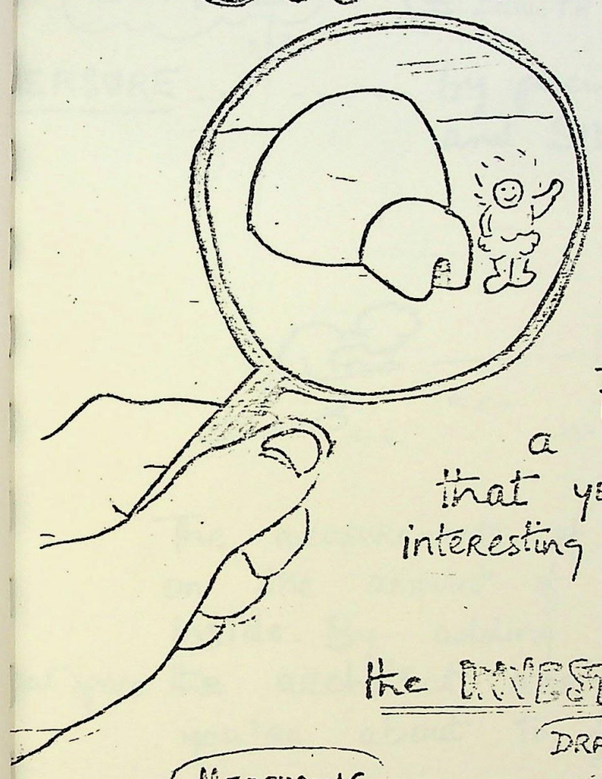
Learning Objective:	To promote consideration and understanding of the approaches necessary to research the design of local houses.
Process:	Discussion and demonstrations.
Materials:	Notepaper and biros.
Introduction:	Audio Visual Presentation - the History of Settlements - Emphasis on materials and structure. Discussion - the design of local houses.
Problem:	(1) What external features of a house should we examine? (11) How should we examine them? Demonstrations of possible approaches.
Motivation:	Self-determination of Research Programme
Evaluation:	What features of a house will we be examining? Why are we examining them? How will we examine them? How would you measure its height? Why must we ask permission before interviewing people or drawing their house? Who is going to bring in tape recorders and cameras next week?
Expanding Possibilities	Group explorations of individual architectural features.

CLASS S1 — Monday 14th March

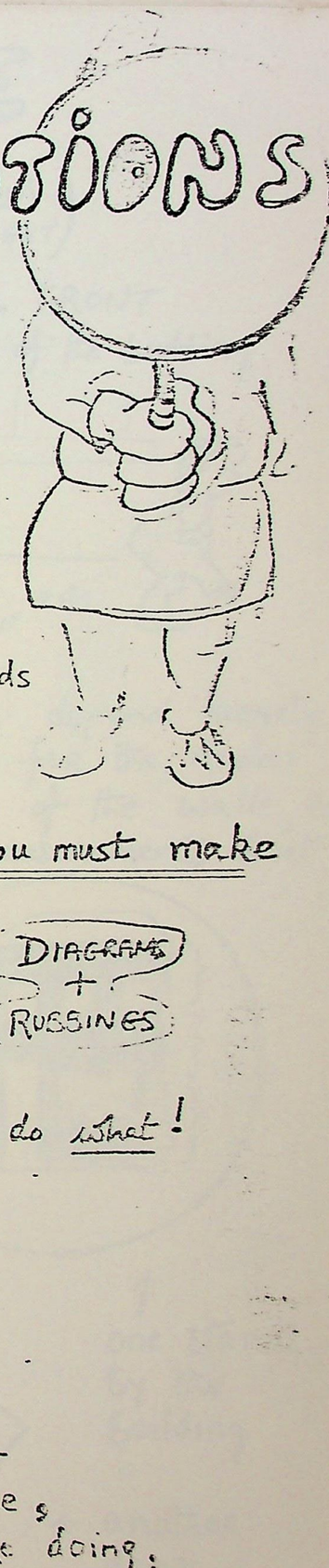
Ability Average — 11.10 - 12.30

Learning Objective:	To promote an awareness of the singular physical make-up of a self (group) chosen house by an in-depth visual analysis of its structure.
Process:	Field Work: Drawing, measuring, calculating, taking rubbings.
Materials:	Paper, cardboard supports, blue-tac, wax crayons, biros, pencils.
Introduction:	Distribution of Workcards to individual groups. (1) Brief read through field-work activities (11) Recall through demonstrations of enquiry methods.
Problem:	To attain the visual and numerical information outlined on workcards.
Brief:	Choose any house which you, as a group, find interesting and get all the information listed on your cards - where possible.
Motivation:	Social interaction outside school environs.
Evaluation:	Describe how the front of your house was decorated? Of what materials did you take rubbings? Whose house had an unusually shaped roof? Why did you draw the house from three different angles? What height was your house?
Expanding possibilities:	Using acquired information to create cardboard scale models of the houses.

PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS



PICK
a house
that your group finds
interesting to look at.



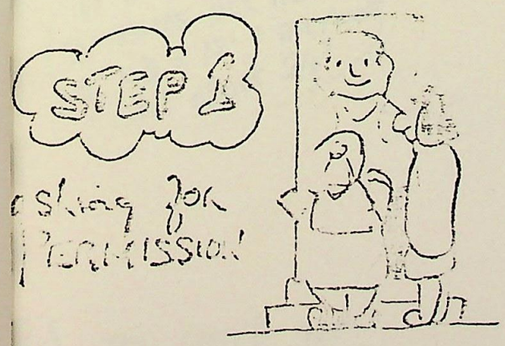
The INVESTIGATIONS you must make

MEASURING
Pacing & Writing & Drawing

DRAWING
Distant & Close-ups

DIAGRAMS + RUBBINGS

Decide among yourselves <u>who's</u> going to do <u>what</u>!



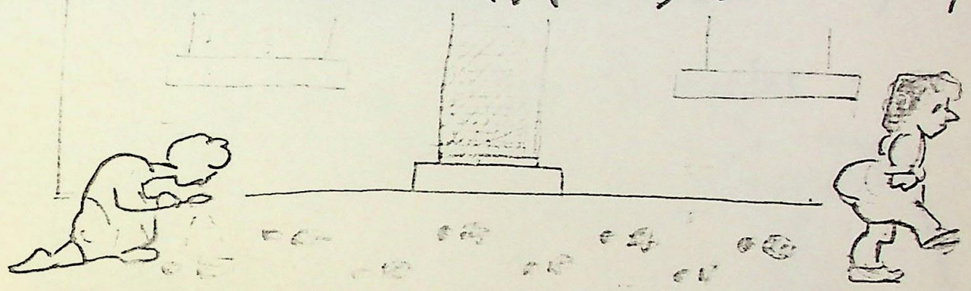
<u>Explain</u>
to the owner
WHO you are,
WHAT you are doing,
and ask does he/she mind if you draw & trace the
outside of it.

How to find its SCALE

(SCALE means its PROPORTIONS
= LENGTH × BREADTH × HEIGHT)

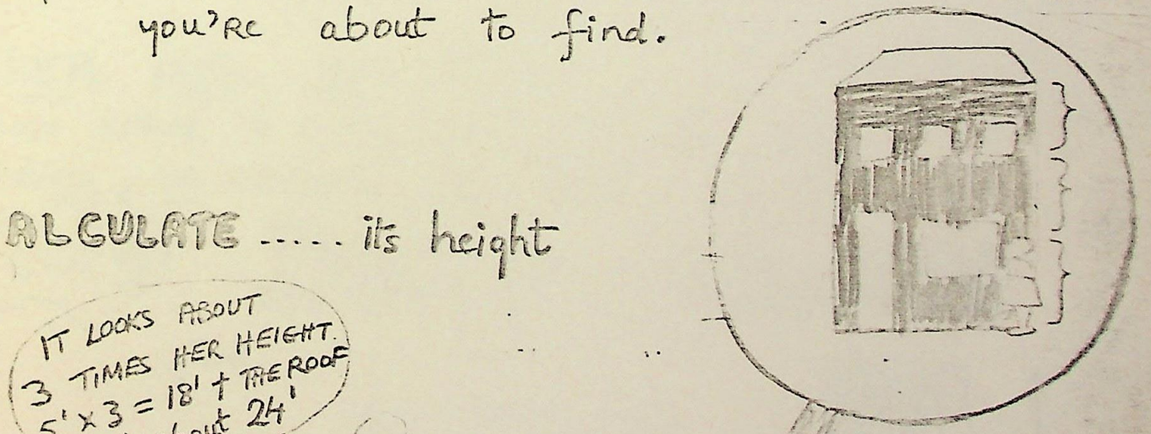
STEP 2

MEASURE ..... by pacing it out, the FRONT and SIDE (if possible) of the building



The measurements of all buildings depend largely on the amount of space needed for the rooms inside. By adding the thickness of the walls, etc that space the architect arrived at the measurements that you're about to find.

CALCULATE ..... its height



If you can't get around the side, guess its measurements by comparing

one stands by the building

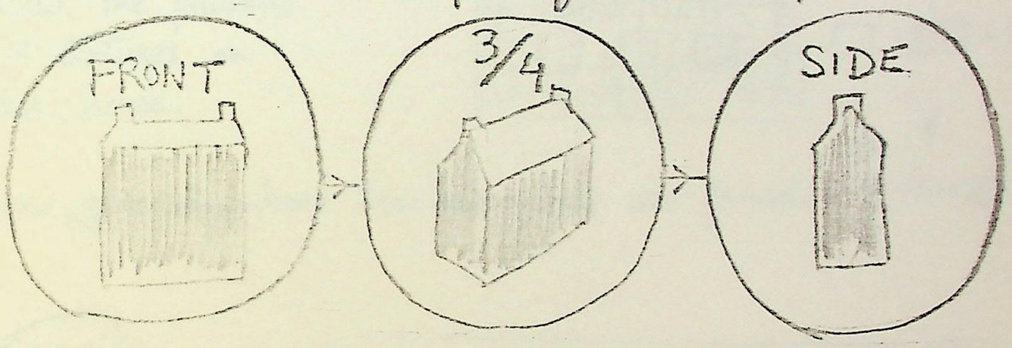
another draws a diagram

You'll notice in your travels that almost all the buildings around here have 1 thing common in their structure — they're nearly all 2 storeys high. Many houses and shops are terraced and some are semi-detached. However there is a great variety in the shapes (structures) of the roofs

STEP 3

Draw its STRUCTURE by

sketching it from 3 angles



OTHER INFO. YOU NEED

Choose either to draw them from the same building, OR another OR a few others.

STEP 4

DOORS & WINDOWS

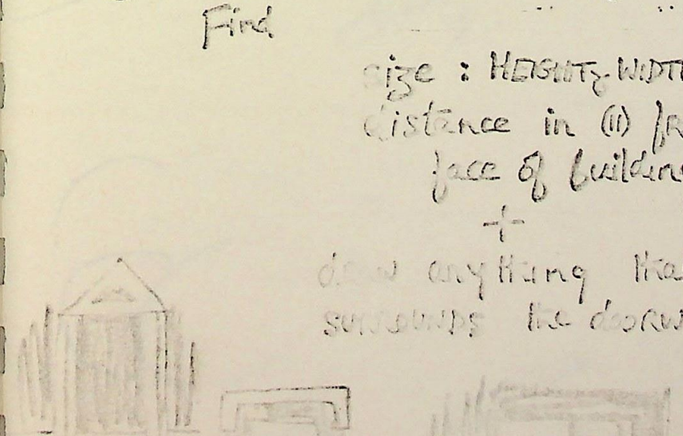
Find

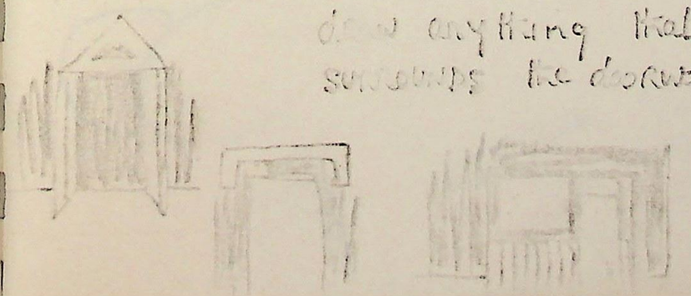
size : HEIGHT & WIDTH

distance in (ii) from face of building

+

draw anything that surrounds the doorway





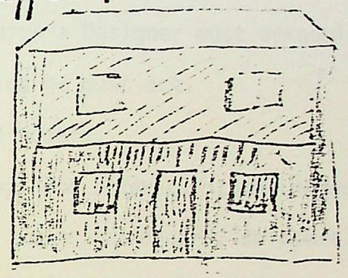
STEP 5

DECORATION

PATTERNS & TEXTURES

Most buildings have some decoration as this makes the building more pleasant to look at. Often a pattern is created by BRICK or stonework. The texture of plasterwork also gives a pleasant effect.

Look for and draw the patterns and textures on your house.



= = BRICK

= = PLASTER

EXAMPLE

Show, generally, where these decorations are found.

CLASS S1 — Monday 24th March

Ability Average — 11.10 - 12.10

Learning Objective:	To promote an understanding of the considerations and processes which a Designer must acknowledge and according to which he must act.
Process:	Making Cardboard Models.
Materials:	Collected drawings and other (written) information, rulers, pencils, paper, cardboard, scissors, masking tape.
Introduction:	Slide of an architectural model - who makes them? for what? - our reasons for making them. - need for a common scale 5' : 1". Presentation of a cardboard construction to illustrate and demonstrate structural possibilities and cutting skills.
Problem:	To make cardboard models of their houses using collected visual and numerical information.
Brief:	Study the drawings and information collected by your group and - (1) Decide on the shape of your structure. (11) Work out the measurements for the height and width of the front and side walls. (111) Build it in cardboard and add the roof.
Motivation:	Realising their ideas in 3D.
Evaluation:	Why are we making these models? What measurements had we do figure out? Why do we need a common scale? When an Architect is building a new house in an old street, what kind of things must he consider?

Expanding Possibilities: Experimenting with clay and slab building.

CLASS S1 — Monday 18th April

Ability Average — 11.10 - 12.30

Learning Objective:	To promote an understanding of the nature of clay by discussion and by handling, rolling and cutting the clay.
Process:	(1) Drawing and cutting paper templates measured from house plans. (11) Rolling and cutting out clay slabs.
Materials:	Clay lumps, hessian and tacks, newspaper, plastic bags, craft knives, rags, rollers, wire, batens, cardboard.
Introduction:	Discussion on the Nature of Clay - origins - types - cleansing process - plasticity - using suitable objects to illustrate its various stages. Presentation of and discussion on household and garden objects made from clay. Demonstration of slab-making process.
Problem:	To make clay slabs for their proposed structures according to the measurements of their group-plans.
Brief:	(1) Make paper templates for your walls, roof and base according to the measurements of your plans. (11) After rolling out large slabs, cut to measurements you need, using the templates as guides.
Motivation:	New experience - discovery process.
Evaluation:	If we had no money to buy clay where might we get some? What property is in clay that makes it possible for us to twist, bend, push and pull it? How do we keep the moisture in clay? What type of clay have we been using today?

Expanding	Exploring the textural qualities of clay
Possibilities:	by stamping and marking it with various implemenmts.

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