

Unpublished Talk¹ entitled 'Building and Learning: exploring the fundamentals of radical education and child-care'

For the child-care history network conference to celebrate the centenary of Homer Lane's Little Commonwealth: *Radical Then, Radical Now: care and education in communities*.

November 9th 2013 at Hilfield Friary, West Dorset.

Introduction

This talk explores the relationship between the *physical* act of building and the *intellectual* traditions of radical education and social anarchism. I have been reflecting on these ideas in my head for some years. It's useful to have the chance to air these ideas to a group who are so well placed to help me develop them with other examples and connections. On the screen is a slide show of places in which children, students, teachers have built their own spaces. The majority of the images are taken from John Walmsley's collection of photos of Summerhill, the Pett's collection of photos of Wennington and Shotton School, my own photos of projects which my husband and I have led as buildingforfamilies.org projects. They should offer the same argument - in visuals - which I will flesh out in words in the next 15 minutes.

We are here today because of the work of Homer Lane (1875-1925). And my story starts with an article by Antony Weaver, teacher and radical, published in a special edition about Homer Lane in the anarchist monthly journal *Anarchy* in 1964.² It is an important article because it attempts to explore the 'chief ingredients' of not only what he calls 'Lane's success' but also characteristics across a 'variety of establishments' from the Little Commonwealth to Steiner to Summerhill to schools and hostels for mal-adjusted children. The 'chief ingredient' which I want to pick up on here is the role of physical 'work' – and in particular building work. Weaver argues that work was an 'important feature' of the Little Commonwealth and he traces this tradition to Makarenko's colony in Russia, progressive schools such as Bedales and Gordonstoun and Henrietta Szold's children's villages. This talk builds on Weaver's analysis by exploring how self-build and DIY were manifested at the Little Commonwealth and in subsequent radical schools and communities, why it has been important and what it might mean in the contemporary context.

Homer Lane, David Wills and the Gryth Fyrd movement

We are sitting today in the original 'school room' at the **Little Commonwealth** which along with many other buildings in this experimental colony, was physically co-constructed with the young people who came to live and learn here, as described vividly in Judith Stinton's talk and tour this morning. In Maurice Bridgeland's seminal

¹ Some references need attention.

² Weaver, A. (1964) 'The Little Commonwealth in Time' in *Anarchy*, 4 (5), 147-149.

book *Pioneer Work with Maladjusted Children* (1971), he describes how Homer Lane spent his time making things as well as talking about things. He writes that Homer Lane was a skilled carpenter and that his first job in education was as a vacation teacher of woodwork at the Pennsylvania State Reformatory in Huntingdon.³ According to this account, Homer Lane believed strongly in the benefits of craftsmanship and manual labour. He worked alongside the young people whose work was also rewarded economically according to the Little Commonwealth's own system of currency. Bazeley, who worked at the Little Commonwealth, believed that this aspect of the Little Commonwealth was fundamental to its success. She wrote in purple prose that 'the inventive and masterly doing of things in the workshop and in the open air, exact things with exact and rich results seemed to me to be the noblest accompaniment in the major key to the profound music of his work with human souls'.⁴

One of the most significant advocates of Lane's approach, David Wills, also recognised the importance of woodwork and building in his creation of camps and hostels for mal-adjusted children: 'activities in which the children do something'.⁵ In the *Barns Experiment* he wrote that he came to see it as pointless if he did a chore without using it as an opportunity to involve a child.⁶ DIY was not just a means to an end but an end in itself: for example, here is an account of the Q Camp: 'It would have saved us some real hardship and have sometimes been cheaper to buy doors, windows and other joinery ready-made or ready-milled. We did not do so even though this meant our working in the midst of winter covered only by a roof in a shelter with neither walls nor solid floor which it was impossible to warm because we wanted to build the camp *as nearly unaided as we could*'.⁷

This emphasis on the inherent value of self-reliance was also a strong theme in community camp building initiatives at the time such as the Grith Fyrd movement for unemployed young men in which, for example, in March 1932 six young unemployed men set about building a log cabin in Godshill in the New Forest - 'after chopping down, thirty pine trees, they achieved their task in a week and were joined by twenty more young men before building a second bunkhouse'.⁸

DIY Schools

The importance of manual crafts and building is a recurring theme in accounts of progressive, radical and anarchist schools through the 20C. For example, at **Summerhill**, A.S. Neill was a keen carpenter and DIYer; the workshop was an important space and camps and tree-house building were popular activities. At Aitkenhead's progressive school **Kilquhanity**, according to an account again in the journal *Anarchy*, the 'junior common room is a log cabin in the trees near the house

³ Bridgeland, M. (1971) *Pioneer Work with Maladjusted Children – a study of the development of therapeutic education*, London: Staples Press, 98.

⁴ Bazeley, E.T. (1928) *Homer Lane and the Little Commonwealth*, London: Allen and Unwin, 85.

⁵ **The Barns Experiment, 98**

⁶ **The Barns Experiment, p.90. INSERT QUOTATION INTO MAIN TEXT.**

⁷ A.T. Barron about Q Camp in Bridgeland (1971), 186.

⁸ Field, J. (2012) 'An Anti-Urban Education? Work Camps and Ideals of the Land in Interwar Britain', in *Rural History* 23 (2) 213-228, 218.

and was built by the kids and a teacher who had had experience of cabin-building in Russia. It is a finer affair, not skimmed with windows, properly pitched roof and pot-bellied stove. An enormous amount of gear at Kilquhanity is built by the staff and kids and is of a surprisingly high standard. The design too, is often remarkably original and effective.⁹ Similarly, at **Wennington** in the 1950s and 60s, children were involved in building staff houses, tennis courts, stages for productions and even a new sewage system.

And it was not just in private progressive schools such as these, O'Neill in Lancashire was head of what he called a 'do-it-yourself' state school in Prestolee, 1919-1952. He was a practical man and a radical educator. The children made their own desks, cages for school pets, a milk bar, an outdoor stage, illuminations for the whole school, flower trellises and vegetable patches, several towers and a working windmill containing several rooms that stood thirty feet high, garden pools including one for swimming, a roundabout combining frame, several bridges spanning gardens and ponds and a goat house.¹⁰ They had magazines such as *Woodworker* and *The Illustrated Carpenter* donated by the publisher. O'Neill bought materials in the local area rather than requisitioning them so that neighbourhood and the school became familiar to each other and involved with each other.¹¹ They had little in the way of formal instruction and there was very little paper planning of the constructions. One ex-pupil recalled 'planning of constructions? no, no - never planned but I can build anything, a greenhouse, I can build a house, me!'.¹²

And building has not just been an ingredient in rural contexts. The **White Lion free school** in central London in the 1970s recruited staff and pupils in the process of rehabilitating the premises: the historian, Wright, describes how 'in 1972, children wandered in to see what was going on and were encouraged to join in with the work. In time the parents of these children were contacted and informed of the planned school - this was how it enrolled its first children.'¹³ Similarly an ex-teacher walking past the building-site with her 4-year old in a push-chair, was intrigued by the building work going on. She asked what was going on. And before she knew it was involved as an art-teacher for the next 10 years. Or Olive Kendon's Children's Houses in inner city areas in which children - with a bit of help from adults - took on neglected spaces and re-built them as their own.¹⁴

And it is not just in spaces specifically for children which this 'ingredient' of self-build emerges as an educational process. I have recently been writing about the anarchist colony, Whiteway, in Gloucestershire based on life history interviews with people who grew up there in the 1930s. An important theme of the colonists' testimony is memories of homes and shared spaces, such as the colony hall, being built around them and with their involvement. A pioneer colonist called Nellie Shaw wrote that 'in

⁹ Bartholomew, M. (1968) 'A Visit to Kilquhanity House School', *Anarchy* 92 (8) 10, 310-311.

¹⁰ Burke, C. and Dudek, M. (2010) 'Experiences of Learning within a Twentieth-Century Radical Experiment in Education: Prestolee School, 1919-1952', *Oxford Review of Education*, 36 (2), 203-18.

¹¹ Berg (1972) p.16.

¹² Burke and Dudek, (2010) 212.

¹³ Wright, N. (1989) *Free School - the White Lion Experience*, London: Libertarian Education.

¹⁴ Add reference - book by Olive Kendon.

building our own houses every brick, every board and every nail means something. The atmosphere of such a place is quite different from that of a house made by a builder'.¹⁵

I am currently researching children's experiences in the 1930s in Spain in which people spoke about 'building the new society'- manifested in physical structures such as libraries, cultural centres, new schools as well as social and economic changes. We could also look at radical self-build projects such as described in Christopher Alexander's *Production of Houses* - an account of a self-build housing project in 1970s Mexico in which the workshop became the heart and soul of the community. Or Hubner's student hostals in Stuttgart built by students in the 1970s which are still the most popular accommodation on the site, are still being 'rebuilt' by the students and is according to architectural historian Peter Blundell Jones 'the best architectural education ever'¹⁶

But I think what emerges from these examples of children and adults participating in the building of their own spaces is much more important than just an education or training in architecture or building skills. It is true that as one ex-Wennington student put it, young people, who have this experience may become 'the best DIYers in the world'.¹⁷ But that's not all. They did not just learn how to use a hammer and saw. They learnt how to shape their own environment – with the people around them. And in this sense, the practice of DIY and self-build is closely related to anarchist values of self-reliance and community. Perhaps the empowerment of being involved in the building of your own space is a physical corollary of the self-government which Michael Fielding has been speaking about. Building creates a sense of ownership and responsibility which cannot be substituted by the academic exercise of consultation. Building is visible and public work - it can draw adults and children in - at first as spectators but then as participants. Building is a process as well as a finished product and as such fits with anarchist view of education, as 'one of the many arenas of human relations in which we constantly experiment with our ends, our goals'.¹⁸ John Holt when asked by architecture students about a good school building said that the 'ideal school would never be finished so that the children could keep redesigning and rebuilding it'.¹⁹

School as building site, building site as school

It's not usually considered a good thing to say that a school is a building site. But maybe we need to challenge this assumption. Maybe something of the spirit of a good building site is exactly what we need - unfinished, creative, collaborative, necessarily out-ward looking (because, by definition, you don't have everything you need yet!) and in the 21st Century refreshingly real, rather than virtual. In my own school, I remember that the porter-cabins were considered a bit of a disgrace - a bit cold, a bit scruffy, a bit temporary. But in retrospect, I wonder if we had more

¹⁵ Shaw, N. (1935) *Whiteway - a colony on the Cotswolds*, London: C.W. Daniel Company, 225.

¹⁶ Blundell Jones speaking at Nottingham childhood conference 2013. tighten up reference.

¹⁷ Sam

¹⁸ Suissa, J. (2009) 'The space now possible: anarchist education as utopian hope', in L. David and R. Kinna (eds.) *Anarchism and Utopianism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 241-56, 254.

¹⁹ Holt, J. (2004) (1st pub. 1975) *Instead of Education*, Boulton: First Sentient Publications, 126.

interesting lessons there - a bit freer, a bit more independent, a bit more awake! Similarly the anarchist, Colin Ward wrote that 'it is possible to meet distinguished scientists in their new and expensively equipped departments and laboratories who recall with nostalgia the sheds and converted warehouses in which the really important discoveries which made their institutes famous took place'.²⁰

If this is true, I think we could start to argue that the spirit of a good 'building site' should be added to Weaver's work on 'ingredients' and Michael Fielding's more recent work developing a radical nexus of 'rules of thumb' for those who follow in the radical tradition.²¹ Perhaps when we say that radical schools succeeded *in spite of* their scruffy, unfinished, uncomfortable premises, we should recognise that in fact, this apparent problem was paradoxically an ingredient for their success.

And could it be that not only the school should be a kind of 'building site' but also the 'building site' could be a kind of school? Dan Morrish, my husband, and I have tried out this idea on the grounds of a tolerant land-lady in Dorset. We explored turning her woodland kindergarten into a mixed-age anarchist building site. The aim was to create a round-wood timber shelter for the kindergarten to use when the weather was bad. The team was made up of skilled and un-skilled volunteers between the ages of 3 and 85 - who came on a series of volunteer working weekends. The space created in and around the building site on these working weekends were anarchist in the following ways: that children could participate in a real work project on a building site, that the space was neither child-centred (like a play-ground or a school) nor adult-centred (like an office or a restaurant or a university), that the space was neither public nor private but somewhere in-between, that the rules and hierarchy of the space were not pre-determined or fixed; that it was a place to learn but with no formal instruction or pedagogy or certificates. And I think it was a good thing. A beautiful and useful building was built. And the adults and children worked, played and learnt a lot along-side each other.

Implications for the Present

So what are the implications for the present? Michael Fielding has spoken about 'a public education in ruins'.²² I agree. But I have started to believe that it would be better if this was not just a metaphor. Because in reality, our schools are not in 'ruins' at all. Take a look at these examples of gleaming, shiny state-of-the-art academies in inner city London. And many good people argue that the children are proud of these new buildings - that they deserve these buildings. But I think that what the children and adults in these communities deserve is to have a hand in the shaping of the spaces around them with the people around them. And this shaping might help them achieve another kind of pride which can't be substituted by the provision of a shiny glass walkway, which they are probably not allowed on anyway.

²⁰ Ward, C. *Talking Schools* p104.

²¹ Fielding, September 2008, University of Gothenburg - *radical student engagement: the pioneering work of Alex Bloom*.

²² Fielding, M. and Moss, P. *Radical Democratic Education* submission to American Sociological Association 2012 annual meeting.

And so I say let's acknowledge that our schools are 'ruins'. And like the Spanish anarchist leader Durruti, let's say that 'we are not in the least afraid of ruins'.²³ Because if we are not afraid, then we can set about re-building. In fact, we should be more afraid of the shiny, finished buildings which conceal the fact that they are inimical to human flourishing. And we would not have the support of government-sponsored 'building schools for the future' or private-sector sponsored academy buildings. So instead, we would have to look to the community and the materials to hand, and in that challenging process we might find out something very important about what makes a good education and a good community.

²³ quoted in Morrow, F. (1938) *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Spain*, Pathfinder's Press.