

OPINION

Building engagement

In terms of early architectural education, Finland can teach the UK a thing or two, explains Fiona MacDonald



ABOVE In Finland, Arkki teaches children creative skills through hands-on architecture projects

IN FINLAND, ARCHITECTURE holds an important place in school-age education. The subject was put on the after-school curriculum as early as 1993 – the same year that Finnish architecture education organisation, Arkki, was founded. In 2007, the Finnish government made the trailblazing move to place architecture on the national curriculum, as a compulsory subject. Although it has since been moved to sit within the broader arts curriculum, it continues to be highly valued and taught through government-subsidised after-school clubs. This value is no doubt influenced by the groundbreaking work of Arkki, which has led the way in innovating and developing the pedagogy for this teaching for almost 30 years.

Arkki's work demonstrates the joy and importance of learning about architecture: its aim is not to impart a body of factual information, but to pique a confident curiosity in children and young people. What's more, the Arkki approach shows how direct experience of different types of good design raises awareness and aspirations: it is often through our own sensorial experience that we form views on what we like and dislike, and what we want in our own lives and communities.

Arkki's work actively imparts agency to young people: analytical and communication skills are coupled with activities to promote visual literacy, dexterity and making skills, all with the aim of giving children the right to imagine an alternative future. Collaboration, open-ended problem solving, exploration and two-way dialogue sit in stark opposition to traditional didactic education.

MATT+FIONA, the organisation I founded with architect Matthew Springett in 2016 to involve and empower young people in the built environment, is one of a handful of grassroots organisations that would like to see Finland's educational approach replicated here in the UK. We see architecture and our built environment as fundamentally intrinsic to the cultural life and discourse of children and young people.

Learning through and from the built environment can help children have a voice in how the world around them develops. It can also encourage a built environment that supports our physical and mental wellbeing, education, the health of our economy and environment. As former Arkki director Pihla Meskanen says: 'Architecture education for young people helps us create a deeper understanding of our surroundings and a demand for a better ►



ABOVE For Made in Oakfield (2017), MATT+FIONA worked with young people to design and create their own social shed

environment in the future.'

Already, more than 80% of people in the UK live in urban areas and are affected first hand by the quality of their built surroundings. Typically the built environment, and how it is created and shaped, might have been explored within art and design education in schools. But these subjects are on the sharp decline (the number of Design & Technology GCSEs taken by students decreased by 67% between 2010 and 2020). Meanwhile in 2021, the government quietly revoked its pledge to 'fund enriching activities for all pupils' through its new arts fund, a prior commitment to spend £90m a year.

So MATT+FIONA is developing an alternative model of architecture education: hands-on 'Build' projects. The organisation – built on a pedagogical model similar to Arkki – has now enabled nearly 3,000 young people to design and build their own spaces and places.

In 2017, we were invited to support students excluded from mainstream school to design and create their own shed on an allotment in Hull. Fuelled by a UK survey stating that 89% of young people in the UK are never asked what they think of their built environment, we were keen to make no assumptions. Instead of taking the brief as a given, we asked the young people

what they thought; in place of a house for tools, they called for a place that could act as home for young people living in an institutionalised environment. The project clearly demonstrated the value of trusting young people to know their needs best and to design with social and environmental justice at the core. 'It was just a great experience to be able to go from the stages of looking at it on paper, to actually then seeing it being built at the allotment,' said Dan, one of the students involved. 'A group of 11 young people had come together and just put our designs on paper. You do get a lot out of it.'

Of course good built environment education does not need to actively include co-design. But as Finland shows us, it must be built on the principles of open-ended, learner-led exploration. As the world is facing yet more unprecedented challenges – with, as yet, no known answers – the UK's obsession with academic attainment, judged through exam grades, seems to completely miss the mark. The case for creativity and confident curiosity has never been stronger. Let's build! ♦

Fiona MacDonald is co-founder of MATT+FIONA. In 2021, the Thornton Education Trust (TET) gave Inspiring Future Generations awards to Arkki and MATT+FIONA