Dartmoor Prison: Transforming Culture through Experience.

In 2018/19 Students from Schumacher College’s Ecological Design Thinking programme completed a ‘live’ project at Dartmoor Prison as part of their module: Transforming the Story of Place. The brief was to see if it was possible to improve the visitor experience to try to make it less stressful as security requirements can be frustrating and time consuming, especially for children. Being ecological designers, students undertook the project with open hearts, eager to learn and explore opportunities, and to engage meaningfully with an area none of the group had previous experience of. Working from principles developed during the course: to work with, rather than for, people; adopting a systems-perspective; enhancing nature connection and working ecologically for social transformation, students began work with the prisoners. Equipped with a plan, a design scheme based on surrounding Dartmoor landscape, some eco-friendly paint and a few brushes, students spent two incredible days working with the prisoners to create an interactive mural for visitors to Dartmoor prison.

Extract from a student’s reflection:

“What was so different from this social justice project to my work in the past? I had a sudden realization that we were focusing on the people, not the problems. It tasted completely different. This positive perspective of creation and connection, detached from the endless struggle of opposition and elimination of problems, opened a huge array of possibilities and optimism. My new understanding of small-scale action from the past months in Schumacher College had been informed with lived experience. It is also a humanization of scale.”

“Changing the order of things, co-investigating and co-creating with the subjects of reality revolutions into a creative and transformative practice that is humanizing and can eventually lead to a cultural change. We didn’t change the penitentiary system but within this old dominant system we created humanized structures and experiences for everyone – them and us. How do we allow more human expression in whatever we design? What if our structures and systems were to promote the humanization of every person? Would we have a healthier culture? I believe that today, a revolutionary act is to humanize ourselves, our culture.”
The Embercombe Way: Land Regeneration and Stewardship.

Embercombe is a nature-based learning centre located in a 50-acre valley on the edge of Dartmoor. It is a place to find deep connections with nature through residential short courses or long volunteering programmes. In 2018, after nearly 20 years since it was established, the management team began to rethink the arrangement and experience of the place to realign its educational offerings to the needs of today’s world.

Over six weeks, our student/designers in residence worked with the community and the land to explore and identify a new pathway for Embercombe; to develop the principles, processes and practices for 7 generations to come. Building on the history, guiding principles and the future vision of Embercombe, along with personal and group experience of the place, students identified the need for a unifying foundational concept - Stewardship.

Stewardship, as ‘the care for, and the responsible management of an entity with which one is entrusted’ would weave together different aspects of the project and four guiding principles: (i) The Children’s Fire - no decision or action will harm generations to come, (ii) Rewilding people - we are nature, (iii) Twin Trail - the commune between all of life, and (iv) Love, Gift and Responsibility - foundational qualities honoured and celebrated at Embercombe.

Extract from a student’s reflection:

“All the wandering of our days at Embercombe generated clouds of prima material that were to become our project. We started pulling down the threads of the previously ungraspable clouds and weave them into a collective project.”

“Our minds think in many different ways, there will be times when I see what others can’t and times when I am blind to what others see. With an element of trust, we leave the space open for creativity. It is not about getting everyone to think in the same way, but allowing ourselves to navigate in uncertainty and to dive into a sea of possibilities. We need to invite trust into our processes; trust one another, trust the process and trust that things will emerge if we allow them to.”
Homelessness in Torbay: Collaborative community engagement.

The Ecological Design Thinking programme at Schumacher College has a close working relationship with innovative Arts organisation, Encounters Arts, a company of artists, producers, facilitators and change agents. Encounters work to create the conditions for a creative, caring, connected world in which all can learn to flourish, living together within the Earth’s ecological limits – and their approach to transformation has inspired and informed students work for a number of years.

This short placement provided an opportunity for our student to work as a member of their creative team on a live project addressing one of our most fundamental human needs: how we provide shelter, and do so equitably, sustainably and collectively. The Torbay End Street Homelessness campaign (TESH) started in 2017 to address street homelessness and has focussed on community engagement since its inception. Encounters Arts were commissioned to plan and facilitate a one day event to bring together TESH and other groups and individuals concerned about housing people who are homeless using arts-based and cultural activities to: inform them of the range of possibilities such as community land trusts, develop their ideas and priorities for how they would like to develop housing or related projects for people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, and how to make those projects happen.

Working as a core part of the project team, our student researched, designed and delivered interactive information panels enabling participants to engage with a range of the responses to homelessness and participated in a day-long creative community consultation process.

Extract from our student’s reflection:

“It was a great gift to experience, in real life, with customers, deadlines and goals, how Tim managed to keep the process alive, and to engage with, in the way that Patricia Shaw has described Hannah Arendt’s concern for ‘politics as a world of experience among human actors and what is involved in caring for such a world, a world we share with others, a common world.’

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