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Sébastien Moriset

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LIVE WITH OPTIMISM  
1978  
WORLD PH

IS DE BÂTISSEURS

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## TEACHING ARCHITECTURE AND HERITAGE TO KIDS

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**Sebastien Moriset**

CRAterre, Grenoble, France

If we consider architecture in its playful dimension as a great 'construction game' that is constantly being renewed, there is no shortage of ideas for engaging children. Vernacular architecture can be seen as a great DIY epic developed by generations of geniuses who assembled and transformed raw materials and managed to surpass themselves over the centuries. As in children's construction games, vernacular architecture has the advantage of hiding nothing, it does not 'lie', it displays its materiality and its constructive sobriety. It is easy to understand the principles of construction in its broad outlines and to imagine how the craftsmen proceeded with the construction by simple visual observation. Most of the operations involved in vernacular construction can be reproduced on a small scale by children: forming balls of earth to stack them, tying up bits of wood, manipulating stones or adobe bricks of modest size, stuffing clay-straw daub into a formwork, etc. Creating, assembling, mixing, stacking or wetting fascinates children. One of the great advantages of vernacular architecture is that it uses healthy materials. Earth, stone, wood, straw and water are familiar, non-aggressive materials. They are mastered by most children who have had the pleasure of handling them by a lake or a river shore. It is always possible to get a slight injury by catching a splinter of wood in the finger or a pebble on the foot, but that is nothing like handling concrete or metal beams.

There are many possibilities for mobilising children and we give here some examples that have often been tried and tested and have proved their effectiveness.

### **Adopting a site to embrace heritage values**

Children are regularly mentioned in discourses on heritage preservation. Heritage professionals like to say that they are conserving sites 'for future generations'. In reality, these future generations are already here before us, yet we rarely think of involving them. You do not have to wait until children are adults to make them aware of heritage. They are perfectly capable of understanding heritage values if we help them. One way to do this is to adopt a site. It can be an abandoned building, a park, a path along a river with some archaeological remains, the nature of the heritage is secondary. The idea in adopting a site is to create a bond of affection for the site by a group of children, usually a school class. Together with the teacher, the children can draw the place, express what they like or dislike about it, carry out clean-up campaigns to keep the site in the best possible condition, all punctuated by friendly outdoor picnics. In this way, they learn to take care of it and develop a new way of looking at a site whose interest

*opposite page*  
**Kids exploring building materials at the Grains d'Isère festival, France**  
*(credits: P. Doat)*



Old wooden house adopted by a group of kids in Røros, World Heritage Site, Norway

(credits: author)

opposite page  
Kids playing with building materials at the Grains d'Isère festival, France

(credits: author)

would otherwise escape them. When the heritage allows it, it is also possible to integrate the children into conservation workcamps. But this requires the utmost caution and expert supervision to prevent any risk of accident.

### Analysing heritage

Children can at a later stage participate in analysing the heritage they encounter on a daily basis. One of the exercises that can easily be carried out is analysis through observation and drawing. This exercise can be done in three thematic half-days. The first day consists of the children moving around the chosen place and drawing the elements that stimulate their senses in a positive way. They will draw places that they find beautiful, where they feel safe or where they can play, hide, buy good food, etc. The result is a wall of very positive drawings that is the result of the children's own reading of the site. This can be compared to what we adults call a heritage 'value statement'. The next day is similar but focuses on what they do not like. The result is another wall of drawings, but darker and much less joyful, where fears, ugliness and misunderstandings emerge. The last day is an opening for proposals with the idea of "how would you like this place to evolve positively for you and your own future children?". These exercises always lead to unexpected and highly relevant project proposals, some of which can then be implemented with the help of local authorities. It is important to remember that children have more time than adults to observe their environment and can therefore make valuable recommendations. It is advisable to have one or more heritage professionals accompany this exercise. They can help the teachers to prepare the visits well, for example by looking for old pictures of the places studied which will ease the analysis of the historical





#### Heritage elements accessible to kids

(credits: author)

evolution. They can also help to open up the kids' minds to cultural or natural heritage values that they would not have thought of. We also recommend that the exercises be carried out on sites that are familiar to the children, the historic centre of their town or village, the nearby countryside with its old houses, rather than taking them far away to visit a castle or a cathedral.

#### Understanding raw materials

Understanding a raw material can help children to master it, to understand how it reacts when it is worked with. Simple exercises such as those in the Elementerre kit described in this book can explain, for example, the components of earth and the role that water plays in its transformation. Similar exercises exist for wood and fibres. It is not essential to go through this scientific stage, but it speeds up the mastery of a material by revealing some secrets that are difficult to see with the naked eye.

#### Transforming raw materials into building components

Once the material is understood, it is then easier to work with it, by preparing clods of earth, moulding bricks, attaching bundles of straw or cutting branches to be used in construction. This step may seem daunting for children who could go straight to assembling elements prefabricated for them. However, it is an essential part of developing sustainable building skills. Earth is ideally suited to the self-production of building components. By realising that they can make bricks themselves rather than buying them, children are already taking a big step towards empowerment and resilience.

#### Assembling materials

Building a tree house in the forest is always a fabulous thing for a child to do. Many children love to build and when they are not in the forest, they assemble huts in their rooms with chairs, cardboard and bed-sheets. Children's self-building of small structures is a gateway to the realities of the building site. They experiment, get hurt sometimes, shed a tear when everything collapses and then explode with joy when, with

patience, the structure is completed and finally holds. The adults must limit their guidance to the minimum to allow each child to understand for himself by making mistakes, by interacting with his friends, by seeing his piece of wall collapse before starting again. Children must be encouraged to become autonomous during these immersions in the world of construction and to acquire their own know-how.

### Designing sites for children

The actions proposed above directly integrate the participation of children. However, it is also necessary to think of them when designing heritage promotion policies. Facilities, signage and activities must always take into account children's understanding, body size and aspirations, so that sites are useful and enjoyable for them. Information signs should be fun, well-illustrated and low enough to be seen by children. Heritage should be an opportunity to have fun and touch things. The remains of a medieval tower or an old locomotive that children can climb into are much more exciting than features that cannot be accessed. An archaeological site visitor centre can be very exciting for children if 'baby-excavation' areas are designed for them. They can then have a good time experiencing the excitement of uncovering items from the ground.

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