

Story Garden – Green Space of the Month – July 2003

Vicky Cave, Creative Director

Vicky.cave@discover.org.uk

Tel: 0208 536 5542

General enquiries 020 8536 5555

“Once upon a time, there was a piece of waste land in East London. It was contaminated with chemicals, and was a dump for old bicycles, sofas and fridges. Now it’s the Discover Story Garden for 2-7 year old children.”



Discover asked local children what they would like to see in a play garden, and they said they wanted a monster with a tongue you could slide down. They wanted a free play space where they could express themselves and let their imaginations run wild. Their Mums wanted a learning environment where the children could develop ideas and improve their communication skills – important because there are over 100 community languages spoken among the children in Stratford. So sculptor Andy Frost and landscape designer Vanessa Barker worked with local school children and volunteers to design and create a garden to make these dreams come true. The Story Garden is open every day except term-time Mondays, it’s free, young children and their families are very welcome, and there are people called Story Builders to help kids explore ideas, act them out and have great fun!

Benjamin Zephaniah, poet, local resident and Patron of Discover, says that “providing time and space for children to use their imagination cannot be overestimated. Discover offers real benefits.” This is the story of how Discover consulted with its ethnically diverse constituency to create the kind of green space young people and their families really want to share.

Stratford is a busy neighbourhood in the East London Borough of Newham. Surrounded by major roads, complex railway interchanges, and industrial sites straddling the River Lee, there is little in the way of green space, and what there is often does not feel safe to play in. Young children in particular need somewhere secure to play outdoors happily.

This is an area with a very diverse and somewhat transient population. Around 120 languages are spoken, and as new communities arrive all the time, the cultural influences continually shift. Five years ago the Somali community was growing rapidly. Today new East European communities are becoming established. The young people want to be able to fit in and get along with each other, so they soon learn to speak English together. But their parents want them to be able to keep up speaking their mother tongue, and to have their culture acknowledged.



Children helped to design and build a garden of their own

Discover wanted to help Stratford communities to create a playspace that would meet the needs of young children grappling with the challenges of life in a new environment. They had the idea that a Story Garden would help the children to make sense of their experiences. Many of these children do not have a garden of their own to play in, so Discover wanted to make a space that could 'belong' to everyone. They wanted to make sure the play area contained elements the children would enjoy – that it would be what they themselves wanted. So in the summer of 2000, they asked children at 10 local primary schools what they would like to see in a garden. The children called for a maze, tunnels, mirrors, slides – and they got them.

Sculptor Andy Frost looked at these ideas and wondered how to make them happen. Later that year he returned to two of the schools with a truckload of wood and a band saw to facilitate

woodworking workshops. The children were amazed when they saw all this wood in the playground. They shrieked with delight, grabbed handfuls and eagerly examined the precious raw material. “Where does it come from?” they cried. Soon Andy got them working to create wooden models of the type of play equipment they would like to have in the garden. The children got to keep the models they had made, but Andy photographed them and used them to design his installations. The sensitivity of the consultation process is reflected in the outcome. The Story Garden is a very beautiful imaginative play space. It is safe, and although it has not been open very long yet, already it is well loved by those who use it.

The site used to belong to the council who used it as a maintenance depot. It became a site for fly tipping, and was contaminated with poisonous arsenic. So the topsoil had to be replaced, at great expense. Volunteers from UBSWarburg worked hard to put in plants and to weave living tunnels of willow. The local Children’s Forum meets regularly and has had a lot of creative input into Discover. They came along one Saturday – with their parents and any interested friends – to help Vanessa, the landscape designer, to complete the planting. Then some students on placement from the NewVic Sixth Form College put in six weeks of exceptionally hard work to help Andy install the sculptures and lay the paving and turf.

Maintenance and security can be beautiful too

The planting is based on Permaculture principles, which make it easy to maintain in an environmentally friendly way, such as companion planting. For example, the willow tunnel is looked after by marigolds which deter the aphids – greenfly and blackfly – which would otherwise attract wasps (and deter children!) In one corner there is a sensory garden with lovely bright coloured, sweet smelling flowers. The rest of the garden has an irrigation system built in, but this is one part that is designed to need looking after, because that is one of the ways children are able to interact with the garden – by planting and caring for it. Discover is cultivating relationships with the local nursery and primary schools to get children involved. It is very much a “hands-on” garden.

The Story Garden is surrounded by a high, secure but also beautiful fence to protect it during the night. Wrought iron gates were designed by a local artist who ran workshops with the playgroup, working from visitors’ drawings. The light sensors, CCTV and floodlights obviously contribute to the feeling of safety, but these are not intrusive. The fence is softened by greenery but not a solid hedge. There are ‘windows’ through the shrubs so you can see in and out. The garden is lit at night by a ring of balls that glow different colours and look very pretty.

Open access projects like this often suffer vandalism and that was something staff were concerned about, but so far it has not been a problem. Vicky puts this down to the fact that so

many people have been involved in designing it, it really does belong to the community. It may also be because the Story Garden looks so beautiful, people don't want to harm it, they want to take care of it.



Accessible, supervised, and fabulous!

The Story Garden is open 10am – 5pm, and is free to 2 – 7 year olds and their accompanying adults. It is supervised by trained Story Builders who can encourage children to explore and inspire them to make meaning from the different elements of the garden. Each day's activities are themed around a special word. Children can tell their stories to a baby space monster, share them, act them out, and take home ideas and dreams.

To quote from some of the visitors to the Story Garden:

“The garden is a magic, secret place.”

“The Garden is beautiful and I love it.”

“ It's nice and relaxing for the parents too.”

The Story Garden is part of Discover, a new and innovative hands-on space where children and their parents, carers and teachers can play and learn together and make stories. They can dress up, make and play with puppets, explore different story settings such as a Secret Cave and huge Magic Parcel. Discover is open every day except term-time Mondays and entry is £2.50 per person.