

Forest of Imagination

Reimagining familiar spaces through creativity and nature awareness

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Introduction

Forest of Imagination is a place where everyone can explore their own creativity. It offers a re-imagining of a familiar space into a fantastical world to inspire intuitive play, imaginative thought and to heighten a sense of nature in the city. The Forest is a wild place, a metaphorical retreat from the everyday urban world, to share the innate creativity of human nature.

(Andrew Grant, Co-founder of Forest of Imagination and Founding Director of Grant Associates; cited in the House of Imagination, 2023)

Forest of Imagination is an annual participatory contemporary arts and architecture event in Bath, UK. It is free and open to all, with a creative learning programme that has been developed in partnership between Bath Spa University, House of Imagination (a creative education charity), schools, and cultural organisations. The impact of arts-in-nature practice on wellbeing, mental health, and sustainability is central to Forest of Imagination as it reimagines familiar spaces, inspiring creativity and heightening awareness of nature in an urban context.

Forest of Imagination is a metaphor for our collective imagination; it brings art, creativity, imagination, and nature into the heart of a city with sublime natural and immersive interventions, such as artistic and architectural installations, that connect the natural and urban landscapes with creative experiences. It also brings nature and creativity to the heart of the public realm and highlights the urgency of climate change. Co-founded by the House of Imagination and Grant Associates, this research and public engagement project is a unique collaboration between the creative and cultural industries and the community of Bath. The Founding Director of Grant Associates, Andrew Grant, is famous for the Super Trees, Gardens by the Bay in Singapore, which have inspired the Forest of Imagination.

In the Forest of Imagination, spaces in the city are reinvented to inspire spontaneous play, unleash imagination, and deepen our engagement with nature. It shines a light on the importance of global forests and the capacity of forests to inspire creativity in everyone. Our partners have significant track records delivering world-class cultural and creative learning programmes for all ages and encouraging

seldom-heard community members to engage through active interaction. This has been achieved by developing dedicated outreach programmes and working with local schools in marginalised areas. This chapter considers the impact of the Forest of Imagination on children's wellbeing and sustainability through a multi-modal case study, the Living Tree Mirror Maze.

Practice description

House of Imagination offers a creative approach to research and learning alongside artists. This creative methodology, where everyone becomes an artist, aims to make creativity visible through an arts-based participatory action research enquiry (McNiff, 2007), including transformative “glow moments” (MacLure, 2010) that informed this case study (Stake, 1994). This research was conducted in line with the BERA code of ethics (BERA, 2018) and gained ethical approval by Bath Spa University.

Throughout the project, House of Imagination collaborated with the St Andrews Primary School in Bath, working in particular with Year 5 children. Consent was given from children, parents, and teachers to take part in a multi-modal case study using photography, film, and written documentation. Children's responses, enquiries, dialogue, and processes of artmaking were observed and documented in this in-depth case study. The case study also addressed the artists' design and intent for the Living Tree Mirror Maze, as well as children's interpretation, debate, thoughts, and theories developed in collaboration with artists. Learning outside the classroom, with the city as a campus for learning, created a new space for children's collective imagination and celebrated the power of imagining a different world.

The aims of Living Tree Mirror Gaze were, therefore, to create a space that elicits children's imaginative thinking and creative engagement and to invite children to be good stewards of planet Earth.

Living Tree Mirror Maze 2022 case study (with thanks to Liz Elders' documentation)

Living Tree Mirror Maze was an installation at the Egg Theatre in 2022 designed by Berlin-based artist and filmmaker Andrew Amondson. It was also co-designed alongside mathematician Professor Alf Coles from the University of Bristol and Marcus Rothnie, architect at Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios. In this installation, we invited visitors and participants to walk through a geometric maze of mirrors into a living forest full of sound, light, and sensory experiences. The sound installation was created by musician Cosmo Sheldrake. Designer Matthew Leece created a FUNgal network of connecting and communicating tubes to represent the concept of a mycelium network in the Egg café.

Living Forest Mirror Maze invited enquiry into the natural world and agency for action in response to the climate emergency through a series of creative workshops for local schools facilitated by artists. The Living Forest Mirror Maze installation

provided a ‘living classroom’, an experimental site of learning that deliberately brought the inspirational experience and sensations of nature and wildness to children’s doorsteps. Children were invited to find and follow their fascinations, ask powerful ecological questions, and immerse themselves in self-directed enquiry following their ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In total, 16 classes of children and over 800 families visited the installation over a period of three weeks.

Collaboration of artists, children, and teachers

The Year 5 class was invited to consider the ideas of a Living Tree and Mirror Maze a week before their visit to the installation. The aim was to document the classroom discussion and share their thoughts with the artists. The teacher worked with the artists’ sketchbooks of ideas for the design of the Living Tree Mirror Maze and collaborated with the artists to co-lead the session at the theatre.

The artists and educators collaborated before and during the sessions in school and at the theatre. The teacher was an integral part, acting as a conduit for the flow of conversation and exchange of ideas. With his knowledge of the children, understanding of pedagogy, and the culture of enquiry the children were familiar with in his classroom, he was able to frame the sessions and questions and co-construct a dialogue with them. The teacher structured the sessions with the children around these key questions:

- How can we reflect on the nature of responsibility and our responsibility to nature?
- How can we reflect in the forest and hold a mirror up to nature?
- How does the forest and our connection to nature nurture our wellbeing?

Artists’ design and intent for Living Tree Mirror Maze

Living Tree Mirror Maze was a delicately balanced natural sculpture. Ferns, mosses, and plants had been borrowed from a local forest (to which they returned), providing a living forest for the children and families to explore and interact with; the conical tree had a circular pool of water inside (Figure 10.1). Andrew Amondson explained that the intent behind the initial concept was that the forest could become a space where we would all learn something about ourselves and nature: “These mirrors give us the opportunity to reflect upon ourselves, in nature, in the theatre”.

Matt Leece also installed yellow connecting tubes, which were designed to represent a mycelium network. These ‘talking-tubes’ were used to represent mushrooms and the underground, extensive network of tubes that bring information and sugars to the trees, referred to as the ‘wood-wide-web’. Professor Alf Coles explained to children that scientists have discovered that these networks, which produce mushrooms, are how the trees communicate with each other. For example, if there is a particular kind of insect, a predator, they will communicate that they need to put out a particular kind of scent to deter them.



Figure 10.1 Forest of Imagination

Children were invited to explore the network of talking-tube mushrooms through questions such as: What would the trees say to each other? What if we could talk through a tree? What would you say if you were a tree?

A special soundtrack was created for the installation to accompany the conversations with children by musician Cosmo Sheldrake, including recordings of rare birds threatened with extinction. Artists used the soundtrack in different ways throughout the week to create a space for listening and reflection. This added another layer to the atmosphere and experience of the Forest.

Outcomes of practice

Without the forest, rivers and trees, I would be a different person.

(Lily, aged 15 years)

Key themes that emerged during the conversations with children and young people included the importance of creative and inclusive placemaking, everyday creativity, co-design, and co-creation, and how these can lead to a higher sense of belonging, engagement, wellbeing, connection to nature, sustainability, and active citizenship.

Learning in, about, for, with, and through nature is vital in children's development and wellbeing. Forest of Imagination and Living Tree Mirror Maze invited children to become stewards of the environment through observing, noticing, feeling, choosing, and acting in social connection. Imagination, creativity, agency,

wellbeing, and shared compassionate values elicited hopeful action, envisioning change, and transformation. The following dialogue illustrated children's reflections on hope for their own future as well as for the future of our planet, both of which are intertwined.

Andrew Amondson gave the following provocation to support children's reflections:

Imagine that you can plant a tree that can save the world. Imagine if you could plant an idea that can save the world, plant it in the ground so that everyone can experience it. Plant an idea, maybe an amazing idea that could save the world.

In response to that, children described their thoughts and discussed how even the smallest changes have the potential to change the world:

If you have an idea, then that idea grows and grows like a tree, and it can change the world.

I kind of think, like, when you plant a tree, what does that tree symbolise? Does it symbolise a forest, or does it symbolise just this lone tree? And I thought about what if it was me . . . and you could show that you can change the world, you don't need a whole country, you don't need a whole continent . . . you can change the world.

Many recent articles (Kuo, Barnes, & Jordan, 2019; Moula, Palmer, & Walshe, 2022; Monbiot, 2013; Griffiths, 2013, 2014) advocate those experiences of nature boost learning, personal development, and environmental stewardship, playing a key role in the development of pro-environmental behaviour, particularly by fostering an emotional connection to nature. For example, Kuo's research implies that nature can promote learning by improving children's attention, interest, and enjoyment in learning and providing a calmer context for learning (Kuo et al., 2019). This study also revealed several engagement outcomes: children were more interested in learning in nature than inside, they were better able to concentrate, and they showed improved self-discipline. This was especially evident with children living in areas of socio-economic deprivation, which echoes the results of another arts-in-nature approach, 'Artscaping', which was delivered to children in areas of high deprivation and explored changes in children's eco-capabilities (Walshe, Moula, & Lee, 2022; Moula, Walshe, & Lee, 2023).

A recent systematic review on the impact of arts-in-nature for children and young people's nature connectedness found that "arts-in-nature offered inclusive medium to engage all children and young people, especially those who might otherwise remain disinterested about environmental issues and disengaged with educational programs" (Moula et al., 2022, p. 1). As such, through arts-in-nature, we have the opportunity to reconceptualise how we nurture children's natural drive to learn (Lee, Walshe, Sapsed, & Holland, 2020). This intention is set against an education system in England that is increasingly narrow, instrumental, and technical,

obsessed with targets and testing. Yet if education is about being in the world, then a pedagogy of enquiry is essential to make sense of the world as a rich tapestry of nature-connectedness.

Forest of Imagination and Living Tree Mirror Maze aimed to exemplify ‘nature-culture’ (Haraway, 2003, 2016) in direct response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2023) through vibrant public engagement. This was achieved by encouraging children, young people, and their families to rethink their own relationship with nature and to co-create responses, experiences, and exchanges that open up a space of dialogue around the role of creativity and imagination to invite change. Our priority was to demonstrate the importance of nature by integrating creative, inclusive, and interdisciplinary pedagogic approaches (Capra & Luisi, 2014, p. 13). As Andrew Grant stated:

We need to rewild ourselves before we can rewild the planet. We need to create places in cities that inspire and feed the future creativity of our children.

(Cited in Hay, 2018)

Implications for practice, research, and policy

Forest of Imagination demonstrates a significant shift in thinking in relation to children and young people’s wellbeing, health inequities, and sustainability. The children and young people who participated shared how nature within the Living Tree Mirror Maze made them feel, as well as the sense of calm and wellbeing they experienced. Furthermore, the Living Tree Mirror Maze invited them to be “good stewards of planet Earth”, to share their ideas about rewilding cities and bringing nature into homes, and how this would make places better to live. As such, the Forest of Imagination shines a light on the capacity of forests to inspire creativity, which in turn can enhance wellbeing and transform lives, communities, and economies.

There is an urgent and critical need for pedagogy and curricula worldwide to demonstrate how an understanding of biodiversity is central to surviving the climate crisis. We can learn from the indigenous wisdom of forests and pay attention to the opportunities that forests offer for learning, for being well, for belonging, and for taking hopeful action in response to climate change. Living Tree Mirror Maze sought to elicit the children’s thoughts and feelings on climate change, sustainability, and positive actions for change. The documentation of the children’s immersive learning experience in this ‘living classroom’ demonstrated the value of such experimental sites of learning. Working alongside artists, teachers, and co-designers supported the children’s imaginative thinking, creative engagement, and co-enquiry. The analysis shows the different ways in which the children engaged in self-directed enquiry through the sensory nature of the Living Tree Mirror Maze; their kinaesthetic ways of learning and how they used their imagination to reflect on ‘what if’ and ‘as if’. This effective exchange and dialogue between children, artists, and teachers in a democratic and authentic way of decision-making where

everyone's ideas are valued is especially important for children's sense of agency for action and hope in response to the climate emergency.

Based on Orr's (1992) notion of ecological literacy, our approach encouraged the recognition of connectedness between human and planetary wellbeing. Similar approaches, such as those adopted in the Forest of Imagination, have the potential to co-design eco-creative solutions for teaching and learning that empower young people and local communities to create positive change for future generations (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, Malone, & Hacking, 2020). Echoing Bourn (2021a, 2021b), Forest of Imagination suggests that we need a pedagogy of hope for planetary citizenship, which recognises our connection to the planet (Louv, 2008). Young people as climate activists can be a powerful movement for hopeful futures for future generations.

Conclusions

The Forest of Imagination and Living Tree Mirror Maze highlighted five key areas in terms of the impact of arts-in-nature practice: connectedness to nature; creativity and imagination; mental health and wellbeing; community engagement; and a curriculum for sustainability. Working alongside artists showed the importance of the arts, culture, and the environment in feeding people's capacity to flourish in a world where imagination and creativity are central.

Forest of Imagination shines a light on the capacity of forests to inspire creativity, which in turn can enhance wellbeing and transform lives, communities, and economies. We need to learn like a forest, with everything connected, tending to the possible. The forest is a space of connection, belonging, and learning; tuning into it invites us to explore imaginative solutions for a more hopeful future, allowing both people and the planet to flourish.

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