



# Performance Art Spaces

## Performance Spaces, Storytelling areas, Stages and Amphitheatres

In the development of the school landscape, the performance space can be as central to a successful outdoor design as the school hall is to the indoor life of the school.

If well designed and positioned, the area will be a well-spring for creativity, learning and play, and be used for a multitude of activities: performing, reading, storytelling, role play, singing, music and dancing, an exhibition space for art and sculpture, and being together in small and large groups.

The space may be large: accommodating the whole school for outdoor assemblies, concerts or theatre; or it may be intimate, providing a sense of seclusion for one class to have outdoor lessons, storytelling, circle time or quiet reflection. It may be necessary to have a number of spaces, each with a unique character and atmosphere, so that the activities and performances that take place there may be influenced by surroundings and environment, and not just by group dynamics.



Heronsgate Primary School

From a simple proscenium arch painted on a brick wall to an elaborate stage and auditorium with seating for large numbers, the key questions when planning such areas are:

- What size should the space be?
- What form should it take?
- Where is it to be positioned?

And consider those criteria with regard to:

- Money and input available for the project
- The vagaries of the British weather!

### Planning and participation

Much of the planning can be undertaken by the school. Indeed, the success of the project will depend on the active participation of all who will use the space. Unless the performance space is for a particular year group, the whole school should be represented through a project management team using the development process outlined in the LTL School Grounds Toolkit. To guide you through the process a Groundnotes information sheet on Pupil Participation in the School Grounds is available free to LTL members - call the Advice Line on 01962 845811.

Professional help may be needed during the project: a project manager/designer/landscape architect can help draw up technical plans or oversee the construction of the area; a skilled landscaper/buildier can design and build areas to suit a certain budget; an artist/craftsperson can create murals, mosaics, sculptures etc.; or specialist theatre groups, actors, poets and dancers can work with the school in delivering and creating unique performances which will take place in the new area.

LTL can help by finding suitable professionals in your area, and those who specialise in working with, and supervising children and teachers.

## Wind, Rain, Sun

Some of the most spontaneous performances take place under that great blue arch and an outdoor performance space can be an exhilarating place, particularly for children. Typical British weather, and the fact that much of the school year takes place during the winter, means that such an area needs to be sheltered - for physical comfort and for good acoustics. Sun is often a problem as well: areas should be protected from direct summer sun while letting winter sun penetrate.

Shelter for outdoor performance spaces can be created by:

- Using structures with support for climbing plants:
  - ▶ Camouflage or horticultural shade netting or drapes can also be used.
- Sinking the area into the ground:
  - ▶ Amphitheatres are often built in this way, allowing a sense of enclosure, intimacy, protection and good acoustics.
- Using a bank or low wall to cut seating into:
  - ▶ Amphitheatres: see the photo below.



Sutton Park, Firat School © G Redmond

- Using space under trees, or close to hedges:
  - ▶ Wind resistance, shade, good sound resonance and an added air of excitement! A path will probably be needed to have all year access.
- Using trees and shrubs as part of the design:
  - ▶ Use evergreen plants to protect from cold (north-easterly) winds.
- Giving the area a roof:
  - ▶ Shingles would be most expensive but have a 30-50 year life span.



Snowfields Primary School © National Grid

- ▶ Polycarbonate sheeting is the least expensive, but can look ugly...however, the addition of a willow, bamboo or woven twig screen can transform this into a rustic style retreat.
- Using the shelter and space between buildings:
  - ▶ Courtyards are good areas to site performance spaces and have easy access from school buildings.
- Using walls as protection from prevailing, or cold winds:
  - ▶ Walls are also good as a support for a structure, or as a backdrop for a stage.

Some performance spaces and outdoor theatres have been created in old bike sheds and neglected playground buildings. The complete protection from the elements means that murals retain their vitality when outdoor murals tend to fade, and other materials will be far more durable. This is an opportunity to create unique and wonderful artwork - the examples here, at Snowfields Primary School are based on the art of Giorgio de Chirico.



Snowfields Primary School © Art's Desire

If you want to use your performance space all year round, consider getting some camping 'carry' mats. These are made from plastic foam and can be cut up into smaller pieces to allow children to sit on damp benches. You could also use slightly more low-tech plastic bags - cheap and damp proof!

## Practical Participation

Ways in which children can be involved include:

- Gathering information within the school; surveying and measuring dimensions of seating and stages; designing and helping with murals and mosaics; making models for large scale artwork; researching theatrical history and theatre design; visiting other outdoor theatres (Regents

Park Open Air Theatre in London run school workshops); practical help with construction, planting, making paths, distributing woodchip etc.



Astonfield Middle School © G Redmond

## Spaces on a budget

The beauty of the performance space is that it can be created for very little money. Here are some ideas:

- A painted proscenium arch on a wall can have classroom chairs arranged around it, or logs arranged to provide an auditorium. Lengths of log, placed in a circle on grass or under trees can form a storytelling area and performance space for class based activities... and this can also be used by children at playtimes for sitting, or for climbing and balancing on. Always consider building onto existing features, even if it's just one tree. A structure which incorporates that tree into its design, will really stand out and have an air of beauty.



St. Gabriel's and St. Mary's CE First, Hatley Swan © G Redmond

- A whole school amphitheatre can be created using lengths of logs as tiered seating, the largest diameters being used at the back, with the diameters of the logs becoming smaller towards the front.
- This particular type of amphitheatre can also be used as play equipment and as a maze. When using logs like this, remember to peg them securely to the ground and check their stability occasionally. Also, hardwoods are preferable to softwoods which can ooze sap when freshly cut and give off splinters. A ground surface of woodchip has greater durability than bark chippings.
- The use of hazel hurdles, living willow, a hedge, or a small avenue of trees can create an enclosure around



Eredon Hancock's Endowed First © G Redmond

the area, or a part of the area, to emphasise the performance space, or enclose the audience.

- The very simplest way of creating a performance space is to have a supply of cushions and beanbags to take outdoors to a designated space. Do some survey work first to establish where the best location is - consider the environmental conditions: wind, shade, noise,



Bishops Wood Environmental Centre © G Redmond

puddles etc. If this space is successful as a performance space, why not use it to make a more ambitious permanent performance space?

- Schools with maypoles often report a demand for them from neighbouring schools. They can be freestanding with their own base, or fitted into a permanent pre-created socket in the playground.



Wilby VC Primary School

## Larger Budgets

Treated timber and masonry built structures and performance areas are more expensive than their log and plank counterparts. They will need careful planning and often require precise designs and specifications. A good designer/landscape architect may be needed here.

A professionally designed space will often incorporate different levels: tiered seating, raised or sunken stages. The change of level adds vitality to the scene and focuses attention on the performance. Raised areas give an ambience of excitement and exhilaration, lowered areas give intimacy. The design of the stage itself can also create a focal point.



Aston Fields Middle School, Bromsgrove © G Redmond

At Aston Fields Middle School a large performance space was put together by 100 pupils and a few volunteer parents supervised by two skilled landscapers over four days. The auditorium is framed by large log logs, and is used all the time, including for role play in History lessons.

Brick built structures can have sharp edges. If small children are using this, then keep the risers low and deep.

## Performance Art!

There is no limit to the various ways of decorating performance spaces. Indeed, with the simple addition of books on walls, or on parts of the structure, some areas can be used as an exhibition space for art and sculpture. The Japanese stage at Millbank Primary was based on Year 3's studies of Japanese and Eastern Art and the outdoor stage decoration at Queen's Park Primary is influenced by the theatre designs of David Hockney.

Wall hangings and textiles, abstract and figurative sculptures and even outdoor musical instruments can all be built into performance spaces.



Millbank Primary School © Art's Desire

## Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls... take your seats!

The planning, construction and use of an outdoor performance space is an opportunity to gather information and inspiration from others who have created such a space, to give free reign to the imagination of the whole school community, and to create an area that is a wonderful learning environment and a valuable resource for your school. Be unique!



Queen's Park Primary School © Art's Desire

## Some useful websites

[www.artsdesire.co.uk](http://www.artsdesire.co.uk)

(work with schools on outdoor theatres, stages, murals etc)

[www.comyouthart.co.uk](http://www.comyouthart.co.uk)

(work with schools on amphitheatres, stages, storytelling areas)

[www.childrenofborner.sch.uk](http://www.childrenofborner.sch.uk)

(see plans and photos for new amphitheatre)

[www.open-air-theatre.org.uk](http://www.open-air-theatre.org.uk)

(Regents Park Open Air)

LTL members can download free curriculum notes for this Groundnotes. Simply visit [www.ltl.org.uk](http://www.ltl.org.uk) and enter your membership number when prompted to do so on the Members home page.

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Leigh County Infant School