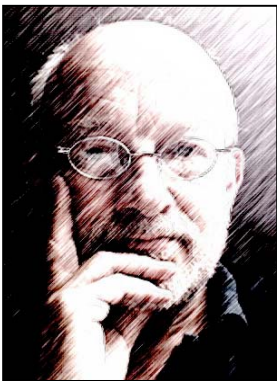


NEW WRITING

Opinion

Peter Shelton



Peter Shelton has been developing creative projects with learning disabled people since 1976, as a member of the pioneering Action Space team that worked to transform the experiences of people living in long-stay hospitals. He has

co-founded two arts organisations committed to providing new creative opportunities for learning disabled people: Action Space London Events, and First Movement (in Derbyshire).

Summary

Learning disabled people are used to having the power to make choices taken from them and, worse, when they do make choices they can be ignored. Peter Shelton and his colleagues at First Movement Trust found themselves in the enviable position of having to design a new building to be used by learning disabled people. Before there could be any creative thinking about building design, there had to be creative work to find out what the users without verbal or signed communication would want. Here began the listening game.

The Listening Game

And – this is the really important point – the end product is a building that learning disabled people really LOVE! It is also a cracking piece of architecture by anyone’s standards.

‘Why does every type of crazy person think they can bring all of their crackpot ideas and force them on learning disabled people?’ I recall the manager of a service for learning disabled people remarking, although I think the language was probably a little bit more colourful than that.

He had a point. In particular he was pointing to the phenomenon of people assuming that learning disabled people are a blank canvas onto which those around them can project their ideas and philosophies, however ‘crackpot’ they may be. What we are talking about here is the way we often fail to value learning disabled and multiply disabled people, based on an assumption that people do not have the ability to choose for themselves.

Of course, people do choose for themselves and are choosing all the time, no matter what their communication challenges may be. The fact that many people we work with need help to enact those choices does not mean they are not

choosing. What matters is whether or not those around them can be bothered to give the time and concentration to find out what these choices are. Equally importantly, are they prepared to respect those choices and act on them? If people can experience the world changing in the direction they want (however slight this may be) they are going to be encouraged to try to express future choices.

Everyone likes their immediate environment to change in ways that reflect their choice. Feeling the world become more as you want it to be is bound to make you happier, conversely feeling that the world is not going the way you want, or that you have no control over it, is a pretty depressing place to be.

What caused me to reflect again on this was spending a long time undertaking a very large project. My organisation, First Movement*, has had the privilege recently to create a new building which is being used by learning disabled people, and the whole choice thing figured large throughout the development of this building. Unusually, in this day of the Private Finance Initiative and Design and Build Contracts, we had the fortune to have a high degree of control over the development, design and construction of the whole project.

So, one of the first questions we asked was, 'If learning disabled people had the chance to design a building for themselves, what would it be like?' Of course there is plenty of literature that tells us how a building has to work to meet the physical access requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, and shedloads of information that has been supplied by people with sensory impairments about what makes a building easy, difficult or just plain impossible to use. But learning disabled people?

Beyond some general platitudes about making spaces 'easily legible', i.e. easy to understand, there is not a lot of guidance out there.

So we consulted the experts – learning disabled people themselves.

Seeing as many of the people who would be using the building do not use verbal or signed communication it was important that we found out from the silent majority of our users what they needed a building to be like, not just from the articulate few.

This was where the fun started. Aware that we would need to observe people's choices in very real and tangible settings, we set about building a variety of temporary rooms over a week in a large space in another centre. Think hammers, nails and large temporary walls going up, coming down, moving around, and quite probably an unsatiated desire to build dens! Add to this small video cameras either given to, worn by, or following the movements, eye movements and expressions of users and suddenly we had a working laboratory where people's choices could be observed and discovered as they moved through and around different spaces.

We could find out just how much space each person needed around them to feel secure, how they chose to navigate spaces, why they chose one route rather than another, which spaces they wanted to stay in and which they wanted to leave, their choices of colour, light and darkness, whether they liked sound and silence, their choice of textures for floors and elsewhere.

And these choices were incorporated into a brief that informed the work of the architect of our new building (and mercifully we had the kind of architect who was prepared to listen, and found the brief a creative challenge rather than a restriction).

And – this is the really important point – the end-product is a building that learning disabled people really LOVE! It is also a cracking piece of architecture by anyone's standards.



A building that people really LOVE!

Of course, few people are in the lucky position to create a building from scratch, but that is not the point. Whatever environment we are working, learning or living in, there is always the opportunity to improve it. One essential part of improving it is to reflect the choices the key people who have to spend their time in it have made. In reality it is not even the physical environment that matters most – it is the environment of people working around and for the learning disabled person.

If we are prepared to take the time to watch, listen and respond to the choices they are making we can not only make a better place for people to live in, we can make people happier too.

Surely, whatever the words that are used in our job descriptions, that is the whole point of why we are here, isn't it?

First Movement Trust: www.first-movement.org.uk/