

MANCHESTER SCHOOL
OF ARCHITECTURE

FOREST SCHOOL



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MANCHESTER
1824
The University of Manchester

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University

b the
URNSIDE
inspiring change centre

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Partners

The Burnside Centre, founded in 1969, is a long-standing, Ofsted-registered childcare provider and accredited community organisation with over 50 years of dedicated service. Rooted in a strong community engagement and empowerment ethos, Burnside delivers inclusive, community-led services that prioritise engagement, co-creation, and partnership. The Centre responds to grassroots needs by offering accessible learning opportunities, personal development programmes, support services, and practical guidance, ranging from early years childcare and youth programmes to well-being support and volunteering opportunities. Its mission is to empower individuals of all ages to build confidence, develop new skills, and take an active role in shaping the future of the local community.

Introduction

FOREST SCHOOL A FUN SPACE FOR LITTLE EXPLORERS

In collaboration with the Burnside Centre, Forest School is to reimagine an underused green plot into a vibrant, child-focused outdoor learning space. This project seeks to bring woodland fantasies to life, creating a playful, immersive, and magical environment where young children can explore, learn, and grow through direct interaction with nature.

Based on the client's vision to the Forest School, it is envisioned as a living classroom where every experience is rooted in play and discovery, and brings children closer to nature in a fun and safe environment. Examples of spaces to include are cosy dens, willow structures, and hidden spots perfect for games like hide and seek. This school encourages children to share stories, express their feelings, sing around a fire pit and plant, observe insects, and explore simple woodwork. The site is surrounded by trees and visited by local wildlife such as birds, hedgehogs, and squirrels, which provides children with limitless opportunities to connect with nature through engaging experiences and activities. This project, thus, is believed to be able to build a foundation in the children's minds for a more compassionate and ecologically conscious future by shaping them through open-air learning and collective care.

The project agenda focuses on sustainability and low environmental impact design. By utilising reclaimed or natural materials and working with the existing landscape, the interventions are fundable, realistic, yet deeply imaginative. The vision of this project is to provide an uplifting and inviting space that feels exciting, nurturing, and alive, a place where children feel safe to explore, families feel welcome to gather, and nature is honoured as both teacher and playground.

Forest School offers positive social impacts by improving childhood well-being, reducing social isolation, and reconnecting communities with nature. It aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Quality Education, Good Health and Well-being, and Life on Land.

Overall, Forest School is more than a site; it's a spirit of place. It is about belonging, discovery, and joy. In transforming this hidden green space, we are cultivating not just a woodland classroom, but a lasting legacy of wonder, connection, and hope.

Client Introduction

Client Brief + Vision

User + Key Theme

Main target people



User 1: Kids (2 - 4 yrs)
Quantity: Apx. 20

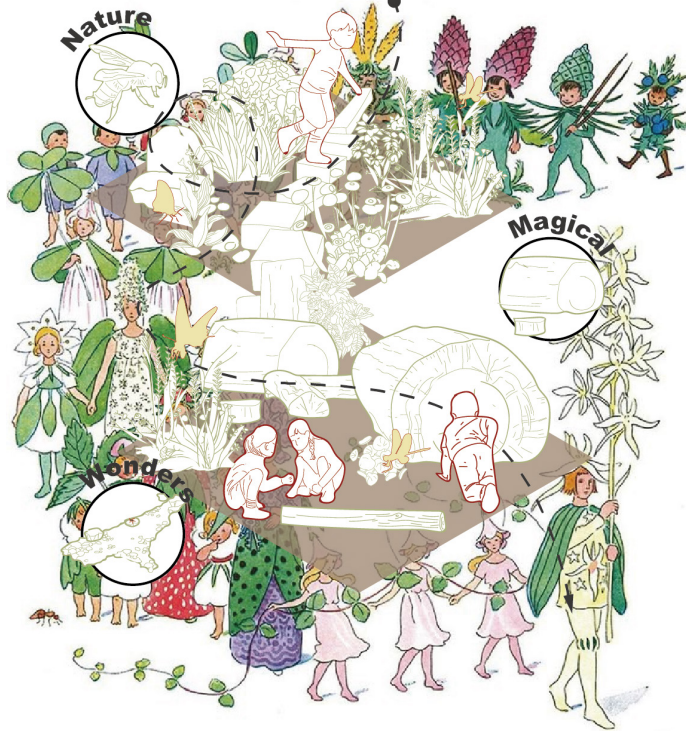


User 2: Teachers
Quantity: 3-5



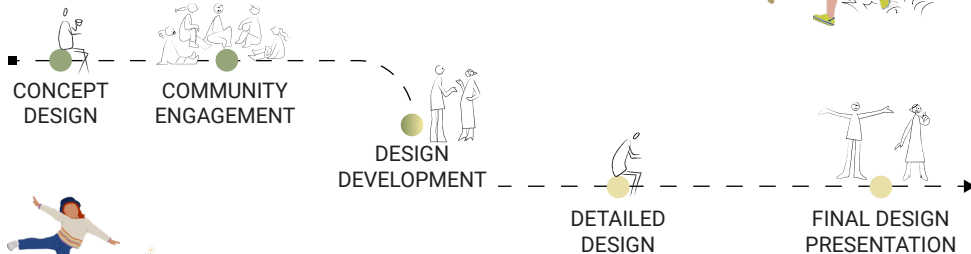
User 3: Families
Quantity: Unknown
(Occasional)

Collage of Client Vision



Project Key Stages

WEEK 1



WEEK 2

Site Visit

The site visit took place before the involvement of the BA students, allowing us to prepare, take initial measurements, and engage in early discussions with the project's collaborators about their vision. These helped us to have a further understanding to the site and project requirements before introducing them to the BA students. After engaging with the collaborators, we found them open-minded, very supportive, and willing to let us explore various design ideas.

Throughout the visit, we captured a range of photographs and videos to document the site's atmosphere, scale, and key features. This visual documentation would help the BA students understand the site clearly without requiring a physical visit.



Ice breaking

Day 1

Engaging Activities

The first day began with student introductions, followed by a trip to the park where various ice-breaking activities took place, including games such as charades and others. BA and Master's students gathered together and actively participated in activities. Through a series of games, everyone became much more familiar with one another.

These activities provided a fun and engaging way to ease the atmosphere, help the group get to know one another, and enable connection through shared experiences in a natural context.

Initial Concepts

Later that day, after the ice-breaking activities, we returned to Geoffrey Manton where students began brainstorming and sketching initial ideas for the forest school design. The day was productive and enjoyable, with full student engagement. This playful start laid the foundation for teamwork, leading to a more collaborative design process with open discussions and sharing of ideas.

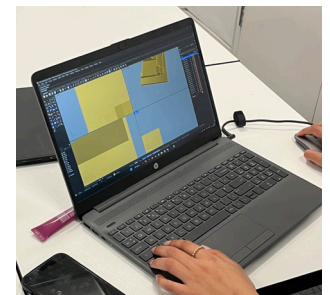


Site Model Making (Interim)

Day 2

Digital & Physical

The key focus of this day is the skill development of both digital and physical modelling of the BA students by working on the Burnside Centre site. At the beginning of the session, students were grouped based on their interests and strengths, thus, creating a dynamic mix of perspectives and skills. We worked alongside the BA students, engaged in hands-on model making, exploring the spatial qualities of the site and increasing their understanding and familiarity with the site. In this process, they were encouraged to engage in active communication, decision-making, and sharing ideas. As we navigated the challenges together, such as scale, material choice and representation techniques, they showed strong teamwork and mutual respect among group members. This shared experience is believed to help foster a sense of collective ownership over the project and achieve a unified vision based on their understanding of the site requirements.



Community Engagement

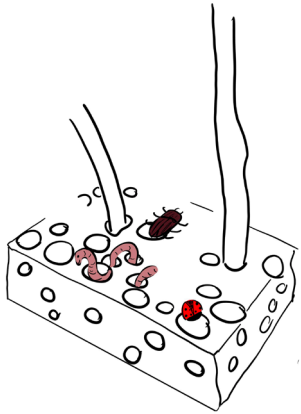
Day 2

DIY WOODLAND

On Day 2, the other part of the group visited Burnside Centre for a workshop with children to gather their ideas for a forest playground. This experience improved the students' communication skills and taught them to listen carefully, gaining inspiration from the children's ideas and turn their needs into thoughtful design solutions.



Kids' work



Design Development

Day 3 - 4

Proposal Development & Preparation

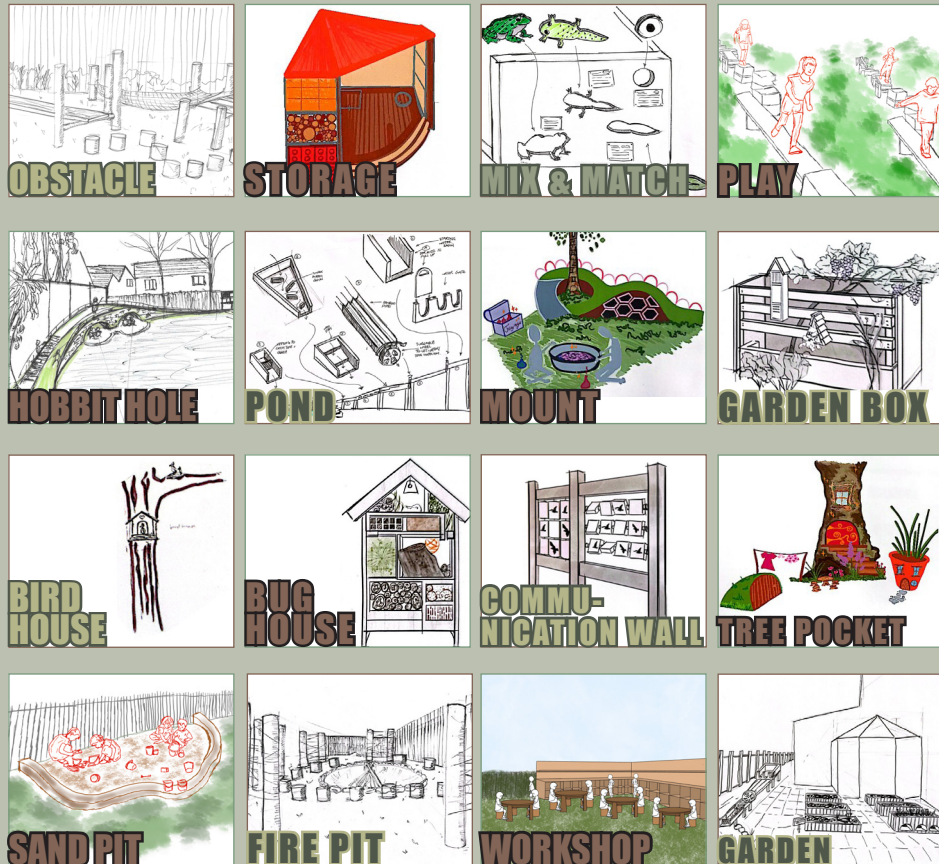
Day 3 focused on design development. For this stage, the students were divided into two groups: one tasked with exploring a more education-focused design and the other with developing a more playful concept design, each focusing on different potential uses of the site. The activity was carried out in a collaborative and engaging way, starting with research and brainstorming. Each student then developed and sketched their initial ideas and rough proposals, contributing to a shared collection of creative concepts and designs.



Concept Design & Proposed Elements

Day 3 - 4

The students worked in two groups to explore the forest school setting, focusing on themes of education, play, and enjoyment. Their designs thoughtfully combined learning with play, making them especially appropriate for early childhood education. Through this process, they enhanced their spatial design and critical thinking skills, while also developing stronger collaboration and decision-making abilities. Particular attention was given to safety and inclusive design, with considerations for children with visual impairments and non-verbal communication needs. The aim was to create a playful, welcoming learning environment for all.



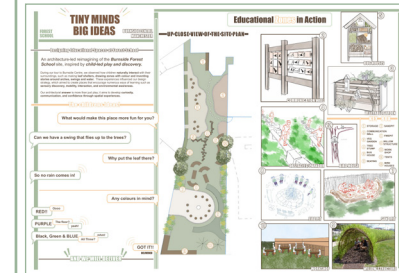
Design Proposal (Interim)

Day 5

Interim Presentation

Day 5 involved presenting the proposals to the client at Burnside Centre, with the entire team in attendance. The students delivered their presentations professionally, demonstrating enthusiasm and clearly communicating their ideas to the collaborators. They received direct feedback, which was recorded and later used to improve the designs.

[Group 1] Education Scheme Proposal



[Group 2] Fun & Play Scheme Proposal



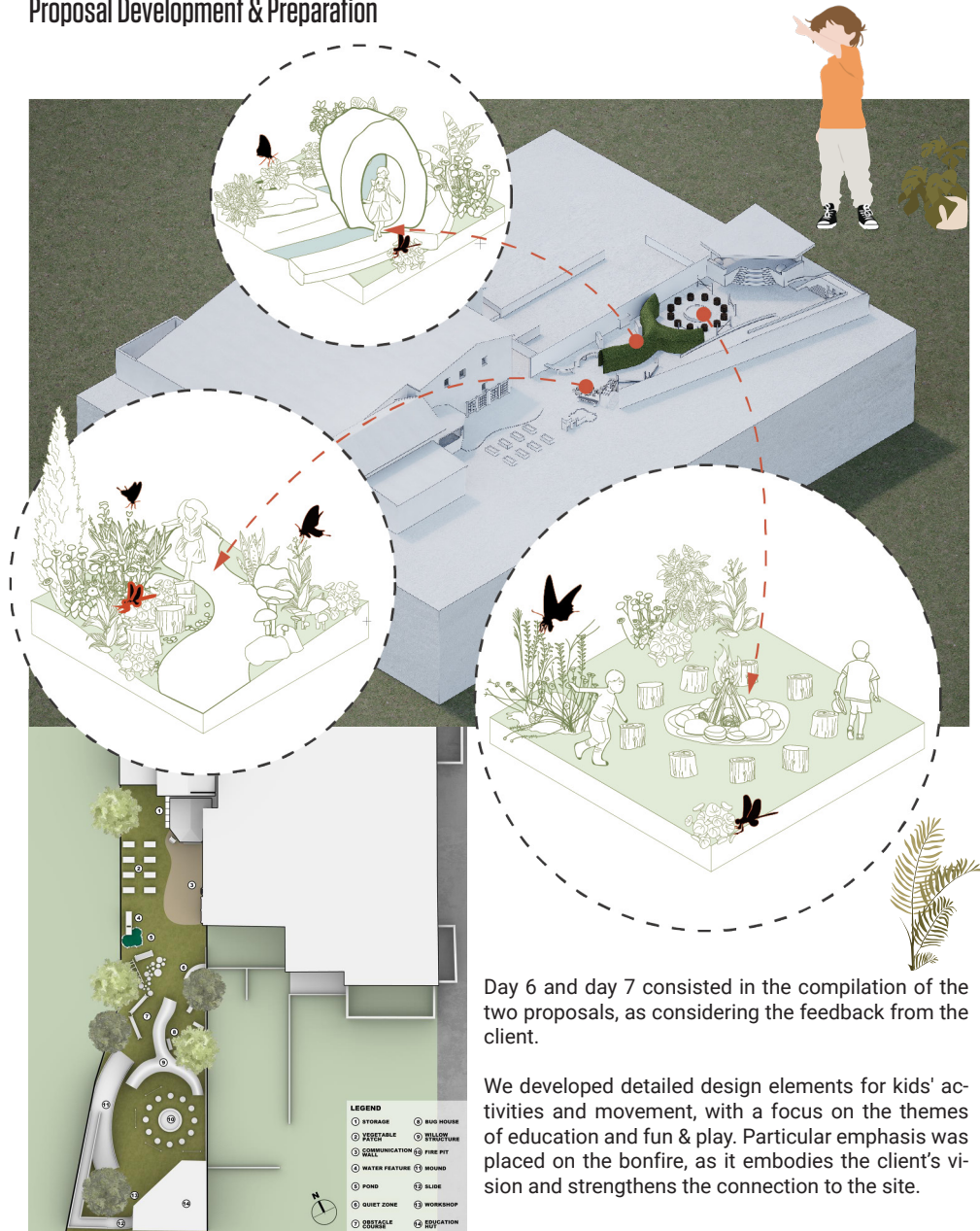
By the end of the day, the students had gained hands-on insight into how client meetings unfold, while also improving their skills in communicating design ideas clearly and responding in a positive way to feedback.



Detailed Design

Day 6 - 7

Proposal Development & Preparation



Day 6 and day 7 consisted in the compilation of the two proposals, as considering the feedback from the client.

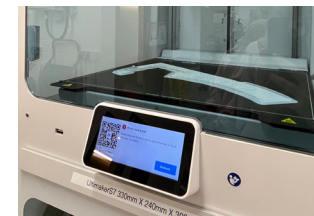
We developed detailed design elements for kids' activities and movement, with a focus on the themes of education and fun & play. Particular emphasis was placed on the bonfire, as it embodies the client's vision and strengthens the connection to the site.

Physical Model Making (final)

Day 8 - 9

B15 Physical Model Making Workshop

Over the past two days, BA students dedicated their efforts to constructing a 1:50 scale model of their final design. We collaborated closely with them throughout the process, providing both guidance and technical support. The finished model displayed a high level of spatial accuracy and fine detailing. By using techniques such as laser cutting and 3D printing, students gained meaningful hands-on experience, enhancing both their model-making skills and their ability to bring design ideas into physical form.



Day 9

Visual Renderings & Diagram Making Workshop

On day 9, alongside physical modeling, students attended a workshop on visual rendering and diagramming to develop skills for creating clear, atmospheric architectural illustrations that effectively convey their design ideas.



Final Design

Day 10

Presentation

On the morning of Day 10, we had our second meeting with the clients to present our final design proposal. Over the past week, we had refined our design based on the feedback from the first meeting and built a physical model. At 11 a.m., all the BA students arrived at the site to deliver their presentations. The experience was truly engaging. Each student shared their design concept and addressed the questions raised by the clients. We successfully concluded the presentation and took a group photo with the owner to mark the occasion. This process gave the BA students valuable experience in presenting their ideas to the clients, adapting their communication in real time, and clearly articulating their design thinking. They also learned how to translate hand-drawn concepts into digital formats and reflect critically on their work—skills that will be highly beneficial for their future academic and professional paths. The clients showed strong interest in our designs and even asked to keep the model. The site owner expressed great interest in our designs and even asked to keep our model!



Reflection

The project centered on creating a child-focused outdoor learning space guided by the core principles of fun and play and education. These ideas informed the design process, leading to a vibrant, sensory-rich environment that encourages natural interaction and inclusivity. Special attention was given to children's varied needs—such as supporting non-verbal communication—resulting in a safe, engaging, and developmentally supportive space. The journey was marked by strong collaboration, with enthusiastic student involvement throughout the process. As a result, participants developed a range of hard and soft skills, including teamwork, communication, physical and digital modelling, and visualisation—skills that are both professionally and personally valuable. As master's students and project leads, the experience challenged and strengthened our leadership and organisational abilities. Guiding a diverse team towards a common goal helped us cultivate mutual respect, improve collaboration, and build strong connections with the students. This journey not only enriched the final outcome but also fostered growth for everyone involved.



ABOUT

Each year the MSA LIVE programme unites Masters Architecture year 1 and Masters of Architecture & Adaptive Resuse students with those in BA year 1 and year 2 and Masters Landscape Architecture 1 in mixed-year teams to undertake live projects with external partners to create social impact.

LIVE PROJECTS

All MSA LIVE projects are live. A live project is where an educational organisation and an external partner develop a brief, timescale, and outcome for their mutual benefit.

SOCIAL IMPACT

All MSA LIVE projects are for community benefit or have social impact. Social impact is the effect an organization's actions have on the well-being of a community. Our agendas are set by our external collaborators.

EXTERNAL PARTNERS

MSA LIVE projects work with many organisations: charities, community groups, social enterprises, community interest companies, researchers, practitioners and educators.

STUDENT-LED

Our MSA masters students take the lead in the project conception, brief development, delivery and co-ordination of a small project. Other cohorts joined for an eventful 2 weeks of activities at the end of the academic year.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Working in teams within and across year groups and courses; MSA students participate in peer to peer learning. In addition, collaborators, participants and students engage in the transfer of tangible and intellectual property, expertise, learning and skills.

LARGE SCALE

This year approximately 650 students from 5 cohorts in MSA have worked on 40 projects with partners.

QUESTIONS

For questions about MSA LIVE please contact the MSA LIVE team:

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BLOG

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SOCIAL

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