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The Creation of a Sense of Place: The Case of Preshil

Kimberly Dovey

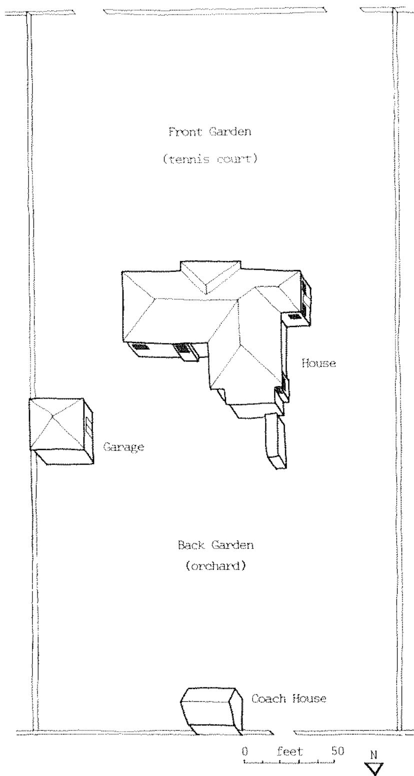
Preshil is a private school that was founded in Melbourne, Australia, in the early 1930s as an experiment in progressive education. I first encountered it in early 1979 when I spent a morning there researching children's images of favorite places. Upon penetrating an overgrown wall of trees I found a labyrinth of pathways, buildings, gardens, huts, and courtyards. The diversity was astounding and compelling, a rich tapestry of places and forms. Everywhere the evidence of creative and intense activity was stamped on the place. The attempt to communicate this quality is problematic indeed. It is perhaps most nearly captured in a quote from a long-time member of the school community:

> It's the informality of it, coupled with the complexity . Change in the school is almost always organic change rather than dramatic upheaval. There's a sense of evolution, of things being adapted. If there's a tree, a building will twist itself around it. Nothing is tidied up or ordered unless there is some purpose. The school seems to have succeeded in allowing what was there 50 years ago to still be apparent. There is a sense of thriving about the school, there seems to be purposeful activity behind every bush. People are surprised that in the heart of a place where there are concrete gutterings all over the place, carefully arranged thises and thats, here is an environment that seems less tramelled, yet with all this complex purposeful activity happening within it.

In the larger modern environment our shared places become increasingly managed, packaged, and regulated, and they often defy our attempts to care for them. It is easy enough to point out the insensitivities of designers, but perhaps more difficult to understand the conditions under which some shared places seem to thrive within such a barren context. My aim in what follows is to attempt such understanding through the case of Preshil. I have pieced the story together from interviews, observations, and historical records, but make no pretense at completeness. It is a personal view resting on my judgments of what we might learn. There is no rigorous documentation of environmental form nor an evaluation of its consequences. I was looking for clues for understanding the processes of environmental change over many years and the relationship between the community and the place that both engendered those processes and emerged from them.

Preshil began as a small cottage school, founded by a woman named Margaret Lyttle, and moved to the current site in 1938. At the time it was a fairly typical upper middle-class suburban house on a 400- by 200-foot site. Many physical changes occurred over the next 44 years. First, a classroom was transported from the former site and a new long classroom block was built. Thus, the backyard area was divided into three age-areas (the nursery school, the "fives" and the "biggies") that survive today. In 1950 a transportable classroom building was erected, further reinforcing these divisions. By this time the founder had died and was succeeded by her niece (also named Margaret Lyttle) who remains in charge today. Plans for a hall began to fertilize in 1960, and it was built in 1962. In 1963 the house was extended into a new classroom for the "fives." In 1967 the long classrooms were rebuilt and enlarged; and in 1969 some retreat rooms were built. The transportables were replaced in 1971 by the larger "home rooms" acquired from next door. The last major change took place in 1976 when an upper floor library was added to the rear of the house.

Although this is the formal history of the Preshil environment at a glance, it does not give us the whole story. To broaden this understanding I want to consider the whole gamut of environmental change from the most formal buildings down to the small, everyday, informal changes. The idea of formality refers to the process of change rather than to environmental form. The formal changes mapped in the drawings require self-conscious foresight, plans, and contractors; involve significant economic commitment; and have long-range consequences. At the other end of the continuum are the everyday informal changes that are extraordinarily complex, diverse, and impossible to map rigorously. They range from the

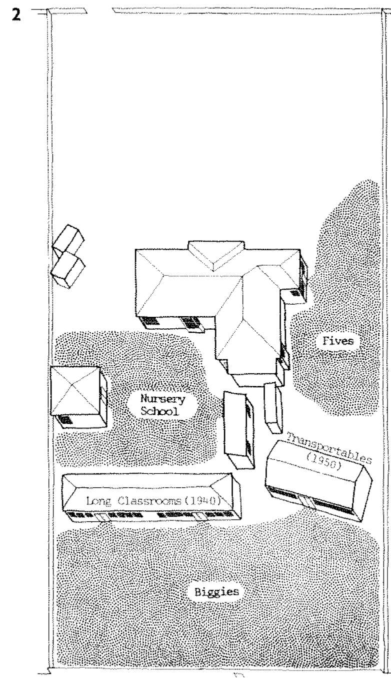


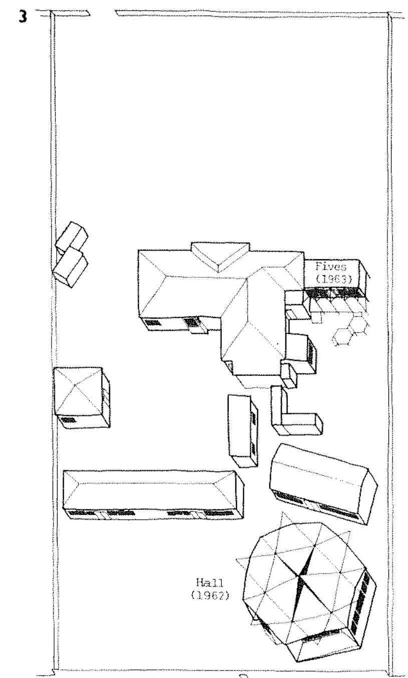
1 Preshil 1938

cultivation of plants, to the laying of pathways and the building of huts. Informal changes occur everyday as part of the ebb and flow of school life. They mostly happen spontaneously without deference to any higher authority. Essentially they are small-scale changes with limited long-term consequences for the whole school. It may seem frivolous to stress such mundane changes, yet their importance to school life comes from their frequency rather than size. Between these two extremes many semiformal changes were made. Verandas and rooms were added here and there; play equipment, animal pens, and gardens came and went; and air-raid shelters were built during the war, later to become underground huts and then mud pits. These semi-formal changes required planning, yet were generally undertaken by parent groups without drawings or contractors. To fill out the story a little and expand the basis for my argument I now want to discuss examples from either end of this continuum—first, the highly dynamic and informal activity of hutbuilding; and second, the largest and most distinctive of the formal changes, the creation of the school hall.

Hutbuilding

There is a long tradition of hutbuilding at Preshil; at any given time 30 to 40 huts can be found in various stages of construction or demolition, huddled against the boundary fence or infiltrating the forks of the numerous peppercorn trees. Hutbuilding tends to be a personal activity for the younger children (five to six years) and more collective for the older ones in groups of up to five. Built very quickly from branches, boards, and sheets of plywood recycled many times, the huts are mostly crude enclosures large enough for the person or the group. The motivation for such activity is clearly linked to the creation of personal places within the communal grounds and to the expression of identity. "They need their own little places," says Margaret, "because the world isn't giving them that any more." But more than this, hutbuilding cements the bonds of peer-group identity. And identity also means separateness, a retreat from the crowd achieved either by going up into the trees or by displaying private signs. Despite the claims of personal ownership, however, the huts are used surprisingly little once finished. An ex-student comments: "They were usually built, left for a while, then pulled down and another one was built. It's the building process; getting there is all the fun." Thus the huts are never really "finished," but rather are stages in a dynamic cycle of materials, ideas, and activities that can transform the hut landscape in a week. At the same time it is a piecemeal process that molds itself to the irregularities of the school life and environment, gathering together fragments of material and time and exploiting opportunities where and when they occur. It





2 Preshil 1950

3 Preshil 1963

4 Preshil 1969

5 Preshil 1981

would appear at first that this dynamism and frequency of demolition is contradictory to the creation of personal places and the expression of identity. Yet the cycle of build-inhabit-demolish-build is in another sense very much a reflection of the search for identity that is going on in the personal lives of the children. They are exploring roles and relationships and abandoning them just as quickly as their huts. Like the games of everyday school life and the plays presented in the hall, the hutbuilding is integrated with this ongoing drama of creation and discovery.

Hallbuilding

The creation of the school hall in the early 1960s was a remarkable phase in the evolution of the Preshil environment and community. It was at once a concretization and discovery of the school identity, and a significant learning experience for everyone involved. The hall was required for two reasons: first, as an expression of the school's identity and of the fact that, after 25 years, it was here to stay; and second, as a setting for the numerous plays written and performed by the children for the wider community. The initial idea was that the hall would be built in the front garden, an open grassy area that had evolved as a place of privilege for the older children. Kevin Borland, a young architect/ parent who became involved at this point, began with the view that "the children really were the clients." He aimed to involve them also in "an educative process as to what architects do," a process that was soon to reverse itself. The idea for the front-garden site had come largely from the adults, and it reflected their concern for image and display. Yet to the children the garden was a repository of meanings from everyday life that had accumulated in diversity and intensity over the years. They knew every inch of the place, its delights, secrets, and seasons. Despite the fact that the hall had been designed, these strong emotional bonds eventually led to a tearful plea that the hall be built elsewhere. The adults listened and a slower, more responsive design process ensued, giving legitimacy to everyday experiences as seeds for design. A further series of design meetings produced another design, a star-shaped hall in the rear corner of the site. Interestingly, both Kevin and the children claimed authorship of the design, which is perhaps an indication of a shared discovery. Kevin admits that the hall became a learning experience for him:

> I had great visions of everything that opened and shut, but that was contrary to the way that the kids and Margaret felt in relation to creativity. It can be a very restricting thing, it can't really develop spontaneity and invention.

Although the front garden was saved, the back corner was also well-loved and verdant, and so when the bulldozer came the children gathered around and cried. Almost any change was bound to bring loss, yet now it was a negotiated compromise rather than an imposed expropriation. Some trees had been traded for a hall and perhaps the children's sadness was less than their delight with the new building. "I remember that there

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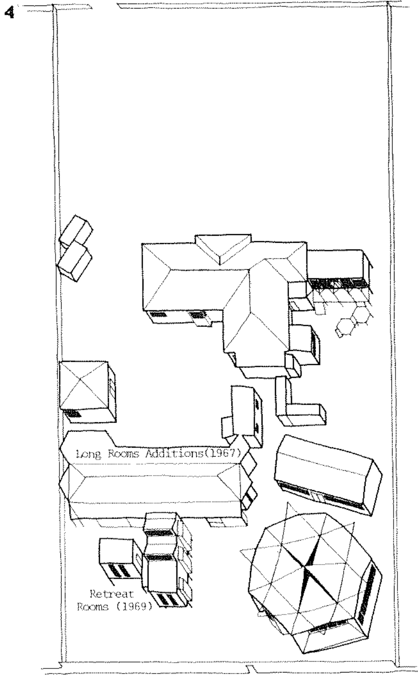

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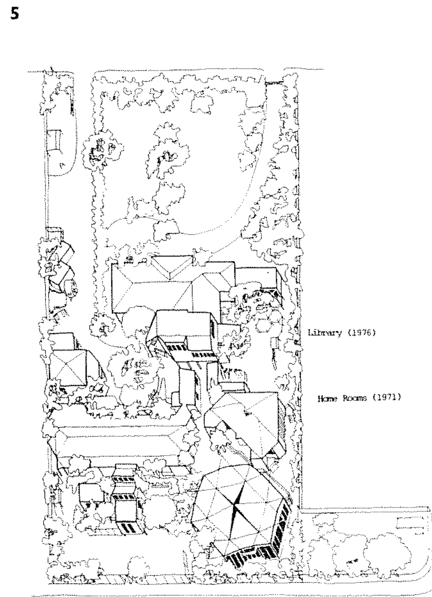


was an immense pride in it," says one participant. "It was better than we expected it to be." From the start the hall became a special place, indeed a sacred place where shoes were removed before entering. And even though the overt quest for identity through a front garden display was abandoned, a different and more profound sense of identity grew out of the process that was adopted. "It really did have the spirit of the school," says an ex-student. "The school is individual and the hall represents it a lot. The fact that the hall isn't out the front as a showpiece reflects what the school is all about; you don't have to put all the wares in the window." Once the design process was linked into the everyday life of the place, that indigenous character and identity flowed naturally into the built form.

The Primacy of Everyday Life

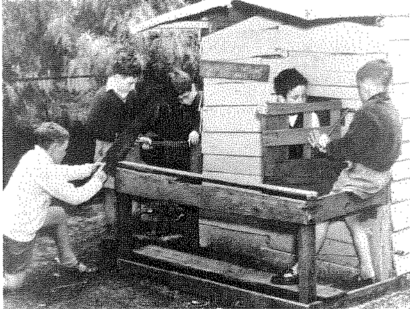
I have argued that hutbuilding achieves a successful integration of personal learning and environmental change. At a much larger scale I believe that the success of the hall was largely a result of a similar integration of communal learning and environmental change. In each case the environmental change emerged out of the ground of everyday life, with a myriad of activities, experiences, needs, hopes, and dreams informing the design.

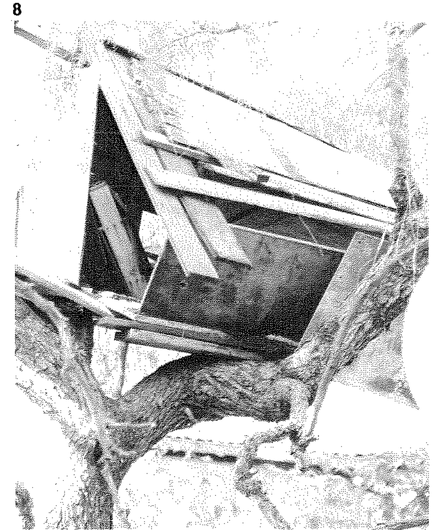
Whatever 'sense of place' may mean, it is through these experiences of everyday life that it is created and revealed. It is not the image captured in photographs or celebrated a few times a year; it is an ongoing lived experience. This is not to deny an aesthetic view of environmental quality, but rather to broaden it. From the eyes of the dweller, the aesthetic includes the beauty of the relationships that are being constantly acted out. Design problems emerge in everyday life and resolutions can only be tested there. In a process like hutbuilding this evaluative feedback loop is very short, we quickly know whether we are getting the change that we held (however vaguely) in mind. Yet the scale of formal design problems such as the hall requires plans, contracts, delayed evaluation, and a separation of the process from everyday life. At Preshil a means was devised for allowing the formal changes to grow naturally out of the context in which they were needed. There is no simple way to describe this process. It consisted of, rather, a series of closely interconnected properties which are outlined below.

Properties of Placemaking

1 A Cohesive Group Mind

At the time of the hall design in particular Preshil was characterized by a very high level of community cohesion, which Margaret calls a "group mind." This is a rather vaguely articulated but strongly felt sense of sharing aims and directions. "We all seemed to work with the good of the school in mind," she says, "even though we didn't necessarily agree." The community shared enough in common that their joint efforts became meaningful symbols of group identity. Coupled with this community cohesion was a strong sense of caring for the place, an emotional bond rich with layers of memory such that any proposal for





designed change aroused much interest. I believe that this cohesiveness, both between the people and with the place, was the fertile ground from which the entire process grew.

2 Active Involvement

It is tempting to call this characteristic "user participation," yet at Preshil the children were not merely consulted on alternate schemes, they were actively involved as initiators and designers and sometimes as builders. From the hall onward they made it clear that being clients was not enough. During the design of the retreat rooms in 1969 the process got bogged down, whereupon the frustrated children wrote and performed a play portraying Kevin as a doddering old man. As the process kicked off once more with the children's energy, Kevin lamented that there was no way to save some much-loved cypress trees. The children replied that they were sorry too but the trees must stay, and they threatened to lie in front of the bulldozer to save them. Ultimately the building design was juggled to allow one tree to grow through a carefully placed bay and another through an access deck. Clearly the children saw themselves as both initiators and arbiters in the design process.

3 An Elaboration of the Professional's Role

The active involvement of the children did not eliminate the need for a quite sophisticated level of professional involvement. Kevin's role however extended well beyond technical and design expertise, as one parent commented:

> I think he is the most exemplary architect, his gift of getting people to express themselves is very nearly unique. Lots of architects in my experience come with a very clear concept and they encourage you to say what they need to hear so they can then present their scheme. Kevin doesn't give that same air of manipulating things at all, there's a kind of openness and eagerness to be excited by the ideas of the people he's working with, it's very refreshing.

It is clear that the community responded to Kevin's ability to

6 Hutbuilding (c. 1950)
An expression and concretization of peer-group identity.
(Photograph from the Preshil Archives)

7 Huddled against the fence and infiltrating the forks of the peppercorn trees, the huts are crude enclosures large enough for their builders.
(Photograph by Kimberly Dovey)

8 The huts are never really "finished," they are stages in a dynamic cycle of materials, ideas, and activities.
(Photograph by Kimberly Dovey)

9 Children designed the hall (1961)
being clients was not enough.
(Photograph from the Preshil Archives)

10 The School Hall
"It was better than we expected it to be" claimed the participants.
(Photograph from the Preshil Archives)

11 The hall became a sacred place
"It really did have the spirit of the school."
(Photograph by Kimberly Dovey)

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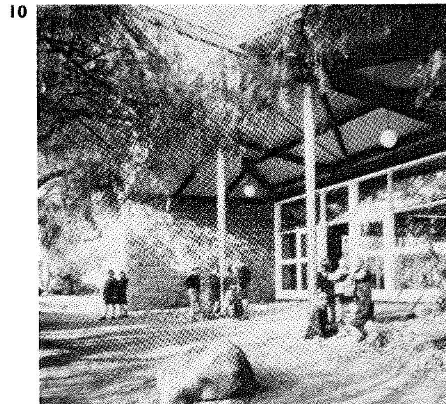

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work with others and to use interpersonal skills to elaborate the role of designer beyond its traditional boundaries. Yet he did not abandon his role of "formgiver" for which he had achieved a substantial professional reputation. Whilst there is a general appreciation amongst the school community for his design work, Margaret maintains a disrespect for anything that the children can merely look at rather than engage with: "The home rooms are not what we thought, Kevin's architecture had taken over. He's so wrapped up in his pine and exposed pipes." Mostly she tolerates the architectural gestures but her heart is in the richness of learning opportunities that are generated or denied.

4 A Catalyst

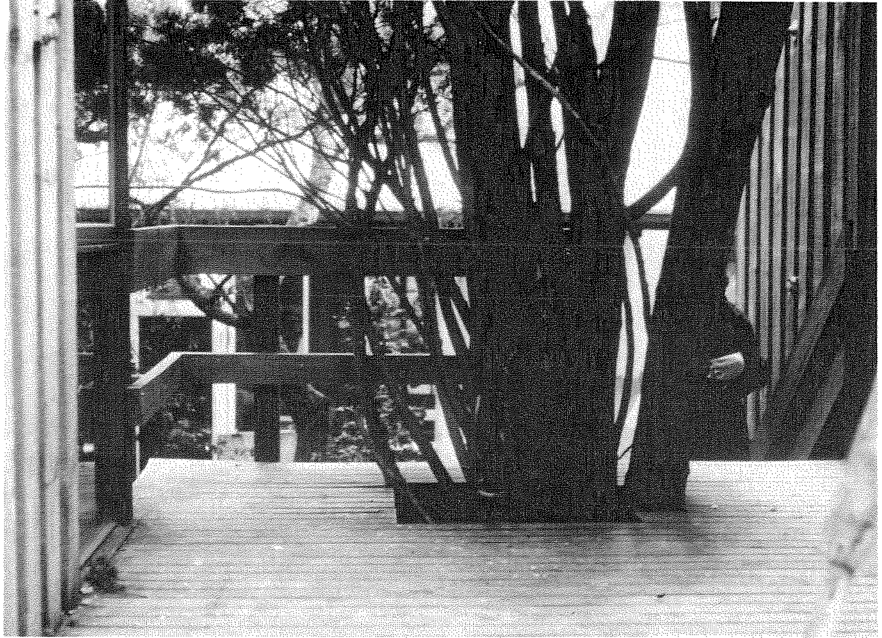
Margaret has an uncanny sense for such opportunities and has played a central role in the evolution of the place, not as a shaper of form but as a catalyst of process. She is the one most in touch with the group mind and an understanding of the place as the children experience it. Explaining that she cannot understand plans ("I can understand one room, but not the whole plan."), she has insisted that the children design by telling stories about how they might use the place. This seems to me to reflect an insistence on keeping the communication connected with everyday life and understandable to children. Plans were produced eventually, of course, then recycled as art paper.

5 Creative Communication

For the users to engage actively in the process of creating and exploring alternative courses of action, a high level of creative communication is necessary. Interesting clues as to the kind of communication that was characteristic at Preshil are revealed in a transcript of a hall design meeting. It indicates that a highly sophisticated kind of designing was going on between participants six to thirteen years of age. Ideas flowed quickly and freely, were combined, adapted, and refined. An idea for trees in the middle of the hall shifted to trees behind the stage (this idea was used), which led to trees behind the audience, to building the hall in the country. There were high levels of spontaneity and playfulness as various analogies and metaphors were invented and combined. The metaphor of the hall as a ball became that of a doughnut, a flower, and a mobile hall. The problem framework was being continually questioned as ideas such as mobile halls, multiple halls, no hall, and the re-use of existing buildings were introduced. The transcript reads like a "how-to" text on creative problem-solving and also reveals the best image that I have of the group mind at work. The sense of a shared dream is being discovered through design.

Edited Transcript of Ideas for the Hall (ca. 1961)

Make the hall like a ball and roll it around.
Build it like a doughnut with trees in the middle, natural scenery for plays.
We can make the back of the stage with just curtains over sliding doors and when we want a country scene, open up the doors and have real trees.
Have sliding doors in the back of



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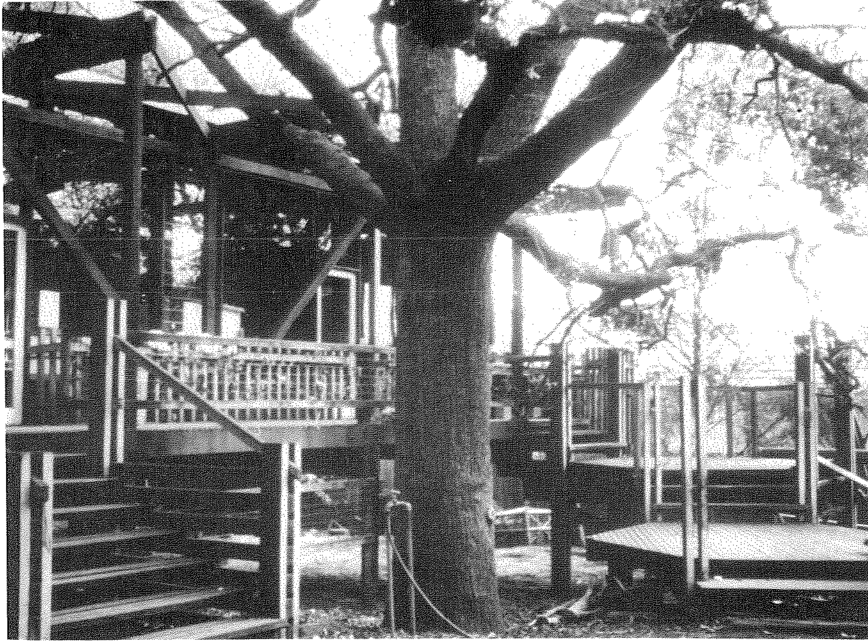
12 The Retreat Rooms (1969)
"The trees stay," said the children.
(Photograph by Kimberly Dovey)

the hall, move chairs out and sit in the open.
Sell Preshil and buy land in the bush.
If we build the hall and feel dissatisfied we need to be able to move it.
If we didn't want to take up any room we could build it above the nursery school playground.
Why not make our rooms two-storied?
Could we pull down the classroom and build the hall here?
Yes, let's have a hall and no classroom.
Have lots of little halls in one big hall.
Build a huge plastic shell over Preshil.
Spend money improving what we have.
But we want a circular stage.
Have it like a flower with a stage in the middle.
Why not build it ourselves.
Cut off the lower branches of the tree in the nursery school, build the hall around it.
If it was a doughnut some people wouldn't see.
That's where the change rooms are . . .

6 An Evolving Catalog of Options

The clues to this characteristic of the design process are also buried in the transcript that originally consisted of 78 ideas for the hall. Many of these ideas or variations on them were used in other buildings constructed many years later. The options of building on stilts, above existing buildings, around trees, as well as demolishing, renovating, and extending next door were all proposed for the hall and then used later in another context. It seems that through the process of designing, an unwritten catalog of options for ongoing environmental change evolved. The group mind came to embody not only a shared understanding of the place as it was, but also as it might become. These options, whether proposed by Kevin or the children, were being continually turned over as problems and opportunities arose. Design never began from scratch, but rather was built upon a massive accumulation of past experience. This unwritten catalog was, thus, a rich foundation for a participatory design process that, in turn, served to enrich and extend the catalog.



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7 Piecemeal Change

The large-scale formal changes at Preshil were carried out piecemeal with about eight major buildings and additions over the years. A process such as this has several advantages. First, the scale and, therefore, the complexity of each piece is kept to a minimum and the task is less likely to overwhelm the participants. Second, since the cycle from design through construction is relatively short, the possibilities for identification are enhanced because participants quickly see something for their efforts. Third, a higher level of adaptability is built into the system because the effects of environmental change on everyday life can be more quickly ascertained. The smaller the pieces are, the less devastating the consequences of error will be. And finally a piecemeal process keeps the catalog of options fresh within the group mind.

Preshil has never had a master plan; its order flows upwards rather than downwards. "Master plans destroy things," says Margaret. "What I feel about children now is not what I will feel like in five years' time. Preshil is like water, it finds its own level." Without any stable basis upon which a master plan might have been generated, the piecemeal approach allowed adaptability and responsiveness to the dynamism of everyday life. And like water environmental change at Preshil flowed into whatever opportunities presented themselves and felt appropriate for a given problem. No master plan could have envisaged the result.

8 Changing in Midstream

This property implies an ability to adapt to cross currents where and when they appear both during design and construction. The complexities of formal design ensure that some problems will inevitably emerge. At Preshil they were always regarded as another opportunity to learn. During the construction of the "fives" classroom in 1963 Margaret realized that the scale would be overwhelming to the children. After an argument with Kevin the access stairs were redesigned, creating a series of stepped platforms to break down the scale. Reassessing commitments can easily lead to

13 The 'Fives' Classroom (1963)
The stepped platforms were added during construction to break down the perceived scale.
(Photograph by Kimberly Dovey)

conflict, but conflict can lead to fruitful negotiations. The upper-floor library built in 1976 was designed as a staff room and altered during construction. New opportunities sometimes become apparent only in midstream, such as when some gaps left in the walls by workmen were turned into windows because they seemed interesting. It is very often only when we have gone beyond thinking and begun to act that the consequences of our decisions become apparent. Only from midstream can we see where the river flows, and capitalize on any new opportunities that are revealed.

9 Taking Time

A slow rate of change is another condition for adaptability and responsiveness to everyday life. Margaret sees it as a central aspect of designing:

> Time is the essence of everything, the hall was where we learnt that, it took two years of maturation. We'd be unsure until suddenly we'd know when it was right. When it doesn't happen that way it's wrong. It's like a gestation period. Every mistake we've made in this place is because we've rushed things.

Many of the other characteristics hinge upon this issue of time. If the design process is to be embedded truly in everyday life then considerable time must be allowed for the connections to be made. The dialogue between possibilities must remain open until it seems that the process has run its course in terms of both design and learning opportunities. In Margaret's words, speed "outpaces the community's understanding of being part of the environment."

On Process and Product

These nine properties are those that I see as important to environmental change at Preshil and to the sense of place that was engendered. My somewhat arbitrary categorization masks the fact that they are highly integrated. Each property seems necessary to some degree, yet the entire nine are essential to the whole system. Without community cohesion it is difficult to achieve active involvement and creative communication; without creative communication the catalog of options is dull; changing in midstream is difficult if you are in a hurry; and so on. Taken together I believe that these properties begin to suggest how environmental design can be effectively integrated with everyday life. Perhaps they also provide some clues about the difference between a mere physical setting and a sense of place. If there is one word to describe the design process at Preshil, it might be called "indigenous," the etymological root of which means "produced or born within." Clearly I see this indigenous process of placemaking as more important to the sense of place than the form of the product. My neglect of form is not because I think that the formal product is trivial, but rather it is because of the danger that everyday life will be ignored, denied, or purified when formal solutions are applied from above. The necessity for large-scale change renders mistakes in formal choice inevitable. And even highly appropriate formal choices may be undercut in time by shifts in the socio-cultural basis of everyday life. Mistakes, however, are less likely to emerge and are more easily mended if the process is piecemeal and involves the dwellers, and if they have the power and resources for ongoing adaptation. The key at Preshil was in connecting the processes of environmental change with the rich and surprising diversity of everyday life. Although the evolution of the place could have taken many forms, the design process contained the seeds of its integral quality.