

Towerbank Primary School sits one street back from one of Edinburgh's best kept secrets – the Portobello Promenade and beach. Just 3 miles East from the historic centre, the school serves what feels like one of Scotland's most active and supportive school communities – currently fighting to rebuild their decrepit multi-storey Secondary School on an underused piece of urban parkland. In the last year, over 12,000 local residents submitted responses to the City Council's consultation on a Private Bill that could clear the path for a new high school to be built on the park; the highest ever number of responses to any public consultation launched by the city's children and families department. 76% of the responses were in support and the Bill is now being prepared.

Whilst the battle for the High School continues to rage inland, the staff, parents and children of Towerbank have been quietly getting on with their own plans to turn a sea of tarmac into a playground that caters for the children's educational and social needs. The Primary School is one of Edinburgh's largest – with just over 600 children currently attending – and has just been extended to cope with rising numbers and need for adequate teaching space.

The existing school is a 3 floor Victorian building that has been extended in several phases; most recently with a brand new block of 8 classrooms and the growing school nursery coming onto site from a neighbouring street.

The external landscape consists of tarmac and a cherished small outdoor classroom that is beginning to take shape with planting and natural structures. The main outdoor space is also crushingly small, and must be amongst one of the most pressured outdoor play spaces in the UK.



Do It Yourself!

Andrew Siddall tells us how parent-power in one community has made a huge difference to the future of a primary school playspace.



In 2012 the Headteacher asked the Parent Council for help and shortly afterwards a group of parents were invited by the Chair to meet and discuss what could be done to change the tarmac into something more suited to the huge range of needs that the children and staff place on their playground. The mission was seemingly impossible as there would be no money available within the school budget nor any financial support from the City Council.

What the school perhaps hadn't reckoned on was the passion and professional experience that would answer the Headteacher's call for help. Parents came to the group with a broad range of skills, abilities and passions including participation and engagement with children, architecture and landscape architecture, accessibility, play and its role in learning, and fund raising experience.

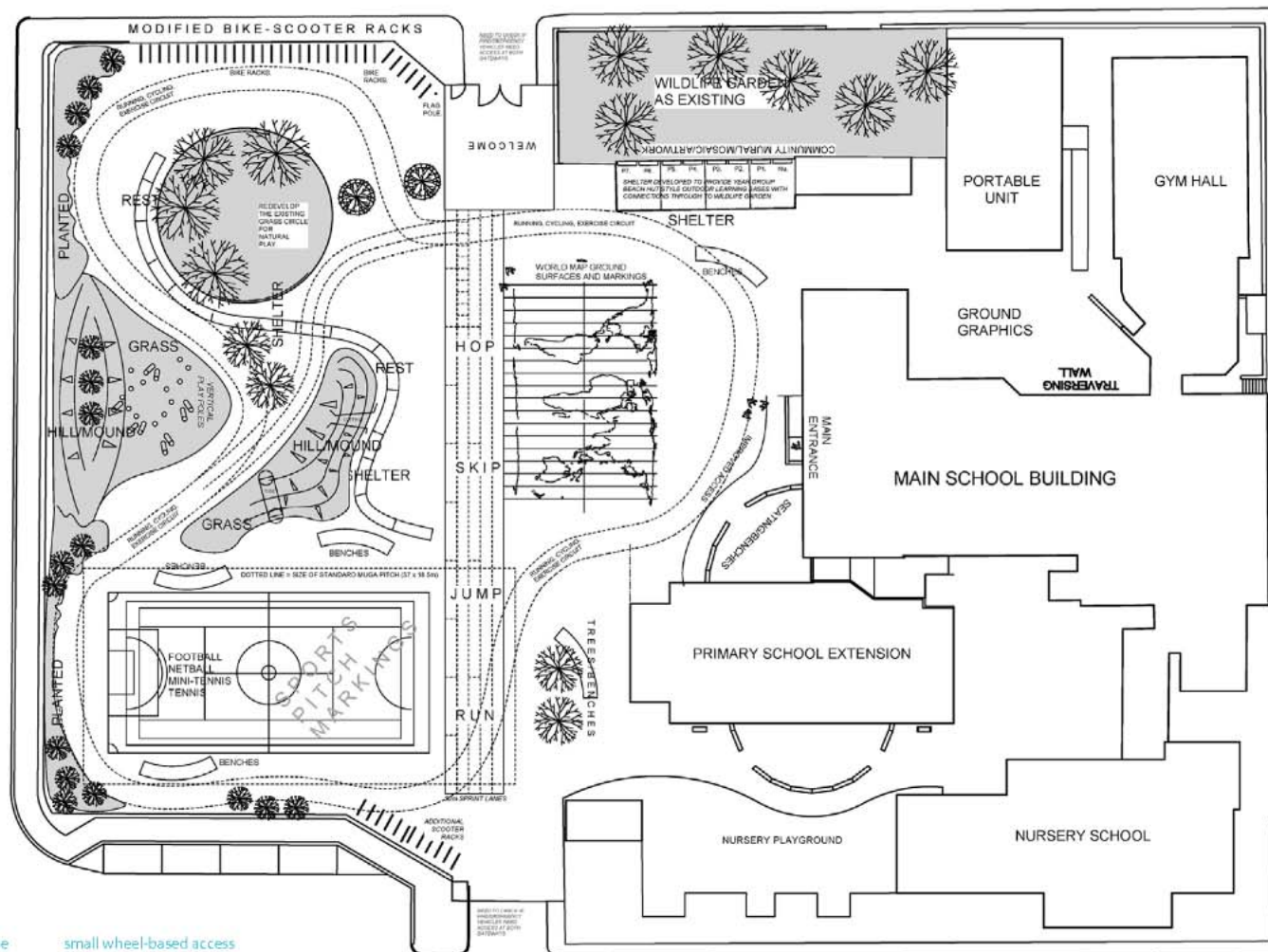
In parallel with the Parent Council (similar to but with different powers to Governors in English schools) the Parent Staff Association (PSA) turned their attention to raising funds for the future playground with the intention that when the new extension building works had been completed in August 2013 there would be funds to begin changing the playgrounds.

The children were consulted by the school and asked to describe their visions for the playground by drawing 'ideas for now, ideas that were likely, and ideas that they could hope for'. Their drawings consistently asked for grass and trees, sheltered spaces and more distinct sports and play equipment to be provided. Their responses were modest and simple: please can we introduce variety and have more than featureless tarmac to play on.

The parents formed a Playground Design Group and driven by the children's briefing information and a wish list from the staff began assembling ideas and suggestions for the new playground. A stall was situated at the School's Spring Fair, a photography competition was run over the summer holiday and over the last year countless hours have been spent in the evenings (after children's bedtimes) discussing how we could begin to change the playground.

In September 2012 the parent group issued a wide invitation to a design charrette to assemble the emerging design ideas into a coherent plan. What emerged was a densely drawn and intensively planned vision for the playground that set a high level of ambition for the types of space and feature that would support the children's learning and social engagement with their playspace.

Out of the densely imagined plan emerged a set of priority ideas that were then presented back to the school and specifically to the PSA as they would be providing the financial support to get on and do something. There were 10 ideas that would set the scene for a playground plan for the future:



1. Sports pitch markings. The existing tarmac is devoid of any visual feature.
2. Natural landscape. Other than the timbered outdoor classroom, there is no soft landscape.
3. A traversing wall. An idea to enliven one of the smaller outdoor spaces by using existing walls and an idea that could herald the

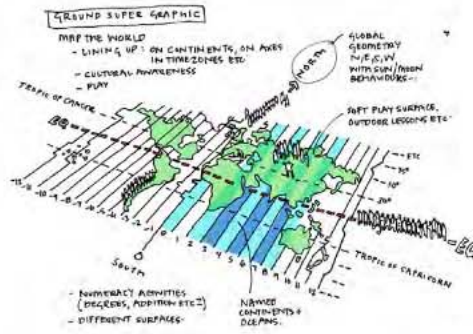
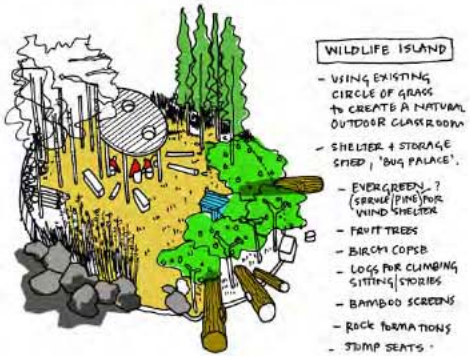
- beginning of change for the parents that have tirelessly contributed to the PSA funds.
4. Scooter and bicycle racks. A staggeringly high proportion of the children come to school on bicycle or scooter. The school catchment is long and narrow – mostly served by the Prom which acts as a school superhighway allowing safe pedestrian and

- small wheel-based access to the school. The existing racks, whilst numerous, are a congested area at best with several hundred children locking their rides at drop-off and pick-up times.
5. Ground graphics. As mentioned above there are none currently save some faded number games. The children's drawings showed

- far greater capacity to change the hard surfaces into large scale graphic spaces – many of their designs hinted at World maps.
6. Landforms – or topography. The existing playground is

- not only featureless but flat.
7. Play equipment. Ranging from Nursery aged children through to Primary 7 children.
8. Shelter. Somewhere to sit and enjoy being outside in almost all weathers.

9. Perimeter. The fence and edge that surrounds the school has the potential as a play space or zone.
10. Stage or performance area. Somewhere for formal and informal playing and performance.



In February 2013, one of the parent group established a week long design project within the College of Art at Edinburgh University where students take a week away from their chosen studies to participate in their Innovative Learning Week – a voluntary offline design exercise. Children and staff started the week off by briefing the university students alongside two of the parent design group. The students then visited the school mid way through the week to consult more widely with children staff and parents and completed their project on the Friday with a pop-up exhibition of designs in the existing school shelter.



Some of the proposals are beginning to take shape:

Top left: a proposed wildlife island will be established on a large grassed disc in the playground.

Top right: a world map will create a large space for 'lining-up' and for the children and staff to explore a huge range of learning and play scenarios.

Above (middle): first and developed prototype scooter rack collars being tested in the playground.

Right: showing the potential for the shelter by creating smaller mini-shelters around the columns and using the town's skyline as a mirrored backdrop to the seating. (Picture courtesy Javier Vidal)



What was terrific about this was the sensitivity and maturity that the students applied to their designs and above all else the fact that their clients (the children) could see their thoughts and ideas transformed in the hands of the students.

This last year's efforts came into focus during the summer term when the Headteacher returned from a year of absence and began meeting with the parent group to push ahead and agree on the

overall plan, what could be done and when. The first part of the plan to be implemented was the traversing wall – as this could be put into place before the outgoing Primary 7 children left for the High School, and could be installed whilst the ongoing extension construction work was being completed. Installed by a team of expert climbers from the Cairngorms the wall has been an overwhelming success.



As the school settles into their new accommodation the parent group continue to press ahead with the design priorities and the next target and challenge on their horizon is to be larger capital funding opportunities. The new academic year promises new sport pitch markings and a bespoke design solution for locking scooters to existing bicycle racks that came about during the Innovative Learning Week. If you think you can help or know of any suitable funding streams please do get in touch.

We now have an agreed strategy for the whole playground design and will be chipping away at designing and delivering parts of it over as many years as it takes to acquire the funds and deliver the designs. Watch this space.

Andrew Siddall is a parent involved in the redesign and development of Towerbank Primary School's playground in Portobello, Edinburgh. He is a Director of Civic Architects and has many years' experience working within school communities through organisations such as School Works and the BCSE. For more information see <http://www.civic.org.uk>

