

What happens when a group of children in a garbage heap?

You get a trash city, of course!

For years, people have been saying that children in our consumer, mechanistic orientated society are losing their creativity because they are subjected to toys that are too realistic, colourful, rigid, and stereotyped.

At the Edmonton Art Gallery a project is underway that disproves this and allows children to exercise their creativity with the minimum of preset rules and the maximum of freedom, using trash as a medium.

The children, between the ages of six and twelve, from various schools across the city, come to the Art Gallery after school and on weekends to build what they call Trash City, using paper garbage, old lumber and imagination. The city they are building, it never quite finishes, is complete with highrise building, schools, stores, offices, whatever they feel characterises a city. The children have their own elected leaders, a police force, laws, and codes of behaviours.

Because the nature of the Trash City project is one without structure and because the children are constantly changing from day to day, Trash City is in a constant state of change. Buildings are torn down, new ones erected, streets are changed, laws are changed; there seems to be no limit to the imagination of the children as they invent and build the city.

The idea for Trash City is the result of Gary Harland, a first year Arts student at the U of A. He organized the project and arranged for various individuals and companies throughout the city to donate paper, cardboard boxes, lumber and various other articles which the children use. Harland gave the children the basic idea of the project then let them take over. Although he is

on hand to give guidance and help to kids when they run into problems.

The Trash City project has been underway since the beginning of January and will run until the twenty-seventh. It is located on the second floor and the public is welcome to wander in at any time.

The first impression you get when you enter the large room where the kids are building is one of utter confusion. There are large piles of paper and smashed cardboard boxes in the middle of the room, paper litters the floor, and along the walls are stacks of old wood and paper boxes, old crates and just plain trash. The place looks like an indoor garbage dump. After a few minutes, you begin to notice structures growing out of the mess. A wig shop, complete with paper wigs and discarded cosmetic boxes is doing a thriving business a sheriff's office stands against the far wall along with a jail, on the wall of the sheriff's office is a rack that holds three rifles the kids made out of pieces of dowling, a piece of wood and several feet of masking tape holding them all together. Three young girls are busy in the centre of the room with hammer and saws putting the finishing touches to the second floor of an apartment building. All around the room stand other buildings in various stages of construction or demolition.

Someone has marked out the floor with masking tape to represent a road system and there are several boys pushing wheeled carts around, making noises that are supposed to represent cars. One boy, David Holloway in grade six is riding a four by four wheeled cart around the road.

I asked him what he was doing. He said he was driving a



bus. In order to drive the bus he had to have a licence issued by the sheriff.

About this time the sheriff arrested some nefarious criminal for some sort of heinous crime or other and threw the poor kid in jail then set two guards to watch him. One of the guards, equipped with deputy badge, waved his gun around a little too freely. The sheriff saw this and came rushing across the room from where he had been in the act of giving David a speeding ticket, and shouted at the guard. "Don't you know its not right to point guns", and then proceeded to give the kid a long lecture about guns.

While all the shouting was going on, the prisoner escaped. Unfortunately for the sheriff, it was some time before the jailbreak was noticed, by that time the prisoner

had hidden himself under a pile of paper. When the sheriff finally did notice he organized a posse and commandeered the buses and cars to use in the search for the convict. Eventually they uncovered him and the six of them dragged the kid back to jail and threw him in. This time they

used four guards to make sure he did not escape.

When the project began, Gary Harland gave the children a few ideas about how to go about the whole thing but the children have elaborated upon the original theme and now the Trash City concept bears little relationship with its beginning.

Among the many structures the children have constructed is a pressurized dome. It consists of a large plastic bag eight or nine feet long with an eight inch house fan pumping air into it. The resulting house is a good four feet high. Originally the clear plastic was unmarked but the school kids have added little sayings and slogans in coloured marking pen until the whole surface of the dome is covered.

Some of the slogans and comments have a lot to tell about the effect the youth culture and the media have had on elementary school kids. "Hello beautiful people," "Love", "Stop the War", "The Pepsi Generation", hundreds of peace symbols and the occasional swastika.

A very strange thing happens among the kids after you have watched them for a while. They unconsciously set up their own leaders and clear any ideas of plans through him for approval. Because the majority of these children are strangers to one another it is interesting to watch the way they set up their pecking order.

I watched one group of children for a while as they went about forming a scheduled bus system. There were five kids involved and up until the idea for the bus system had arisen they had been separated from one another because they were working on different projects.

They clustered around one of the buses and started to talk. One kid, a large beefy, dark haired kid about 12 years old had the basic idea for the bus system. The other four kids crowded around him as he outlined the idea. From time to time one of the children put forward an idea.

It is strange to see that any discussion about the idea was withheld until the leader decided it had merit. The final decision was made by the leader and he

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