

Serendipity Saturdays

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Katy and I had the first ideas for Early Learning while she was pregnant with her daughter Agatha, we were discussing our shared love of wooden toys, which moved on to objects made by fathers for their children. Whilst researching the history of building blocks, we discovered the ‘gifts and occupations’ created by Friedrich Froebel. They were so simple and familiar, yet had so much potential. In the same way as the system was originally intended as a pedagogical tool for children, it provided us with a structure to base our project around.

Froebel’s 20 gifts and occupations are a series of tangible objects and activities, which deliver a hands-on curriculum for learning through play. Froebel believed in the unity of all things and as such the gifts and occupations flow and connect “from solid, to plane, to line, to point, and then reversed to arrive back in three dimensions with activities in ‘peas-

work’ and modeling clay”, Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*. Early Learning sits at the intersection of education, art and design, not just for children, but also with them. The project started properly a few years after its inception through a series of workshops on Saturday mornings with a group of artist fathers and their young children. These have been a chance to reconcile Froebel’s original intent for the gifts and occupations with a new purpose and interpretation.

Our exhibition for Glasgow International 2018 at Scotland Street School Museum marks a halfway point in the project and showcases a more contemporary idea of child’s play integrated with archive material and a Froebelian context. At a time when children were supposed to be seen and not heard, Froebel believed in the child and the teacher working together. This is echoed in the co-authorship and collaboration in the

artworks produced by the fathers and children for the exhibition and the activities planned for the public workshops.

The workshop strand of the project will continue with Early Learning in different settings and with different participants. We are planning to use these to inform the design and development of new toys, play devices, objects and activities for children bringing the project full circle.

In 1982 Julie Korver, a former teacher and her husband Tom Thorpe, an architect visited the Frank Lloyd Wright institute in Oak Park. There they found an antique set of Froebel's blocks on display, which Wright had played with as a child. They decided to reproduce and sell these with an instruction manual for gifts 2-6.

"These are very special toys – toys that are more than play things – Toys So Special™ They are Gifts"

The institute then used their replica blocks in a series of children's workshops they ran in the 1980s called Serendipity Saturdays.