SENSORY GARDENS: ASSESSING THEIR DESIGN & USE

This study involves the design and use of sensory gardens by evaluating the garden's functional areas that are utilized by users, especially children with special needs and adults in special schools. The users have been observed experiencing and engaging with the multi-sensory environment. Preliminary site studies have been carried out in various sensory gardens around the United Kingdom, requiring personal observations of the usability of these gardens and conducting individual interviews with teachers and key experts. The research aims to evaluate spaces in sensory gardens by examining their usability, the users' behavior and their perceptions in engaging with the outdoor multi-sensory environment. Speculatively, the research will:

- Understand the design process, patrons and intentions of the designers/learners;
- Observe the variety of patrons of visit;
- Find out what users really like in their sensory gardens;
- Discover features that are utilized by users and the frequency of visit;
- Look at the opportunity for users to engage physically within the sensory garden.

Further data collection will include in-depth interviews and observational mapping. A theory that will be developed in conjunction with this is environmental design. The findings will then be used to design recommendations for sensory gardens on the selected case studies. Research done by Wair and Casson is also believed to be beneficial to this study in terms of the methodology and approach they suggest.

What is presented here is the initial data collected from May and July 2007, looking at two sensory gardens. The analysis is still in progress. So far the data shows the link between the physical design with the number of visitors, the nature of users and the time spent on visit in the behavioral settings. These sensory gardens are also illustrated in the photographs.

* Images by Hazrene Holbourn

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