

LOCAL LEARNING

ALIVE (Sparks) & Jacob's Wells Bath Project



MUNICIPAL BATHS AT JACOB'S WELLS

Local Learning

ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

This non-profit organisation is our first point of contact for this live project; run by Ruth Myers and Pete Insole they aim to teach and support the Bristolian local communities through several avenues of education, heritage, inclusive design, acting, music and play. They have been involved with a whole host of projects; some focused-on heritage and conservation to others involving community led design. And some of their projects are more art and culturally lead. Each project regardless of theme has one guiding thread that unites them all, and that is a dedication to creating something special and to supporting the community they are working with.

We saw this firsthand throughout all the work we have done with Ruth; through the people we spoke to and connected with during the Sparks Project. We also saw this through the colleges and schools we visited during the inclusivity consultation for Trinity and Jacobs Wells baths. Looking over their previous projects such as Meadows to Meaders and Disability Activism Bristol we can really get an idea of how much Ruth and Pete care for the localities they foster and help. I think that as designers and as architects we should aspire to be as involved in the communities we design for, as Ruth and Pete are. They create a rich environment for creativity and freedom of expression which is unlike any live clients I have worked with previously.

We would personally like to thank both Ruth and Pete for giving us the opportunity to work with you on both the sparks project and The Jacobs wells baths project as it has been a truly remarkable experience and we dedicate all the work we have produced to the spark you ignited in us.



WASHING
IN THE WELL Bathing
In The Past

REMEMBERING JACOB'S WELLS

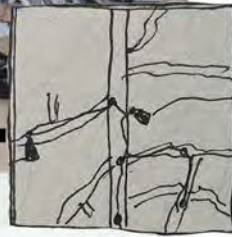
SPARKS EXHIBITION

HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING

The Sparks ALIVE project was very fast-paced yet allowed us to really think outside the box within the limited time frame. We were amazed to discover how many ideas we could come up with despite the time constraint. This was a very special project that drives us to take a step back and forget our roles as architects for a moment and try to view things from the community's perspective. We were constantly questioning ourselves: whose thoughts matter? What background story are we trying to portray to the community? How are we going to conduct activities to drive engagement and gather the information we need from the community?

Our initial thought process was focusing on how we should and what we should, but after our conversation with our "client", Ruth, we also realised that we should have thoughts on what we are trying to gain from the community; the feedback on the activities was one key point we overlooked. It was fun discussing our ideas with Ruth and listening to the advice and thoughts she had for us. The final outcome was exhibited at SPARKS Bristol, where we gained even more insight and understanding of what Bristol meant to people. Each of us experienced and gained different things throughout this project.

For the exhibition, we started with multiple ideas, but we eventually decided on creating one map to show the 7 evolving boundaries of Bristol, with clay figurines representing previous projects by Local Learning. We prepared clay as one of the community engagement activities to see what meaning Bristol holds for the local community and to see if we could topographically map people's memories. We then prepared another map and use string to map out all the community journeys to SPARKS and their first steps into broadmead.



ANDREW REFLECTION:

The Sparks Project really helped me and the team hit the ground running, The rapid idea generation and quicker execution helped us be creatively free without overthinking. This project also allowed us to see the impact of Local Learning and the community Ruth and Pete have fostered. Seeing the number of people that came there to share their input and support them was truly inspiring. I was primarily working on the topographical map of memories during the exhibition and being able to hear the local communities' memories of Bristol was both interesting and heartwarming and really reminded me of how much the built environment affects our lives and also how our lives and memories impact the spaces and connections we create. This project really helped to ground us within the community so that when we moved onto Jacob Wells Baths we had more vested interest.



ANNABELLE REFLECTION:

We were discussing with Ruth the other day, and she mentioned how she would appreciate the idea of introducing previous projects by Local Learning to give the community an insight into what they're doing. As I look through the booklets given by Ruth, I am fascinated by all the stories and thought processes that were behind each project, so I had a thought of creating clay figurines that symbolise each project, with short descriptions briefly introducing each project's background. I really enjoyed working on this because it gave me a chance to understand Bristol more, being an international student here. The project flow was remarkable, and I appreciate our teamwork and conversations with Ruth. All in all, the project was a very inspiring one and gave me a deeper understanding of how we, as architects, can socially engage in projects.



ABDULAZEEZ REFLECTION:

This experience helped me truly understand the importance of working with real clients rather than corporations. We often fall into the mindset that they either "know everything" or "can know everything through enough research". Working on a live project with individuals who would use the spaces was deeply humbling and completely changed my way of thinking for me. Speaking with people from different backgrounds and hearing their varied perspectives was incredibly rewarding and eye-opening. I was tasked with working on the Broadmead map installation. My role was to help visitors to the exhibition navigate and trace the routes they had taken to reach the Sparks Building that day. Using a green thread, I guided participants as they mapped their journeys and shared how they travelled using different modes of transportation. My second task involved asking participants to recall their very first visit to Broadmead. With a red thread, we traced those historic routes together, uncovering journeys shaped by different eras, perspectives, and starting points. Seeing these overlapping paths past and present was fascinating and brought the map to life in a way I hadn't experienced before. Alongside this, I listened to their personal stories, some of which stretched back as far as the early 1960s about their first experiences of Broadmead and Bristol in general and how the area has changed over time. This was a completely new challenge for me, as I'm not naturally inclined to interact with lots of people. However, stepping outside my comfort zone was ultimately rewarding, and I'm proud of myself for rising to the challenge. Overall, it was a meaningful and enriching experience that reshaped how I view both architecture and engagement with the people it serves.

Jacob Wells Baths: A Civic Building in Transition

A photographic timeline documenting architecture, decay, and reuse
Jacob Wells Baths, formally known as Hotwells Public Baths, is a former public bath located on Jacob Wells Road, Bristol. Designed by Bristol City Surveyor Josiah Thomas and completed in 1889, the baths were constructed as part of a wider Victorian response to public health and sanitation. The swimming baths closed in the late 1970s, leaving the building vacant before later reuse.



Victorian Bathhouse

The baths originally operated under a class-based and gender-segregated system, reflecting Victorian social structures. In 1905, the natural hot springs at Jacob's Wells were diverted to supply the baths. The building was awarded Grade II listed status in 1977, shortly before the swimming baths permanently closed.

Future

In 2023, following the community-led #SaveJWB campaign, Bristol City Council agreed to transfer the building to Trinity under a 35-year lease, securing its future as a civic and cultural space.

Reuse and Transition

In 1984, the Bristol Community Dance Centre acquired a 30-year full repairing lease, adapting the former baths into a cultural space. A reclaimed rosewood sprung floor was installed over the former pool, marking a shift from public hygiene to collective movement and performance.

Planning permission was granted in 2015 for the refurbishment of the south wing and conservation of the Pump Room. However, funding could not be secured without an extended lease, and the building was returned to Bristol City Council in 2016.

About Trinity

Trinity is a membership-based community and cultural hub that supports creative expression for all. Its mission is to empower communities through the arts and ensure that everyone can access and shape arts and culture in Bristol.

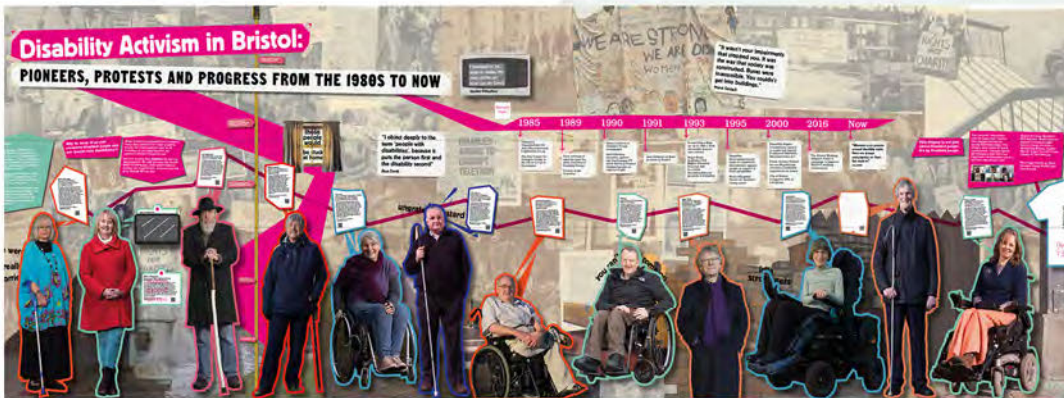
NARRATIVE SECTION:



CITY OF BRISTOL COLLEGE

ACCESSABILITY DESIGN CONSULTATION

As part of our aim to produce a youth centre within Jacobs-Wells Baths we visited the local college to garner some design input from the students on the pathways to independent living course. This co-design session was invaluable to our progress on the project, and the students came up with some insights that we definitely would have overlooked.



DISABILITY ACTIVISM RESOURCE

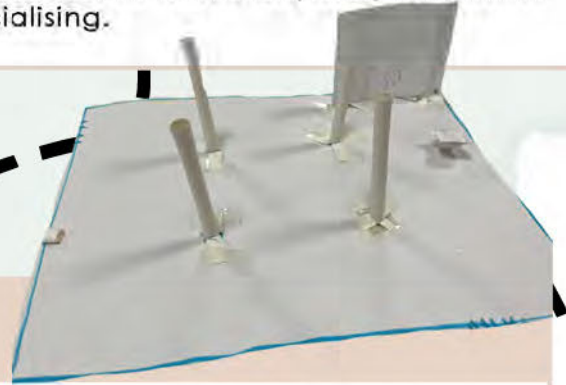
They started off by going through the disability activism learning document provided by local learning, Daisy Holder and David Ellington. Throughout the presentation the students gave insights into their experiences with their disabilities, and we focused on how we should design a space that allows a disabled person to utilize the space like anybody else. During this part of the day the students really focused on what factors could be seen as negatively impacting disabled people such as areas being overstimulating due to loud TV's, crowds of people as well as more traditional access issues such as counters and furnishings being too high for wheelchair users, pillars in walkways ext. We made an important note that windows should be on pully systems to ensure that anybody can open them. They also mentioned that staff and students should be trained in sign language to allow easy communication. This input really helped us to ground our ideas and started to help us put together the beginnings of a proposal. I think one thing we would have ideally changed during this section was if the students were able to visit the site even just the facade, we could not do this due to health and safety. It would have helped focus our discussions more towards the accessibility problems that Jacob-wells baths has.





LAYING THE GROUND

We then moved on to ask the students what they would want included in an accessible youth centre. We discussed adding a games room, cinema space, dancing spaces and karaoke, a kitchen and a quiet space with a reading nook. Some of these spaces can be multi-use. We spoke about focusing on the main youth centre around this main social table which other spaces can then branch from. This idea would foster a great community and encourage the users of the space not to leave anybody out when playing and socialising.



CINEMAS AND PEACE

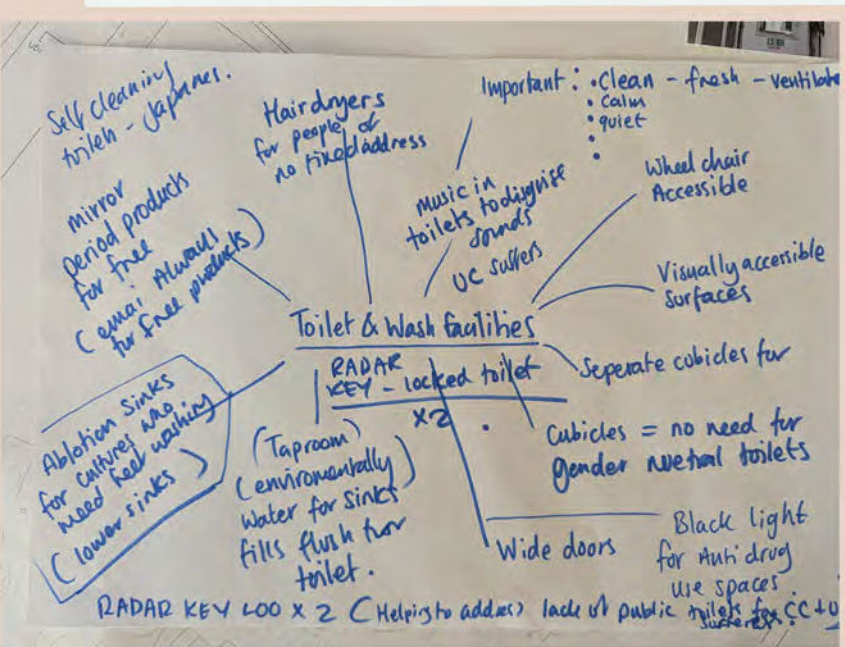
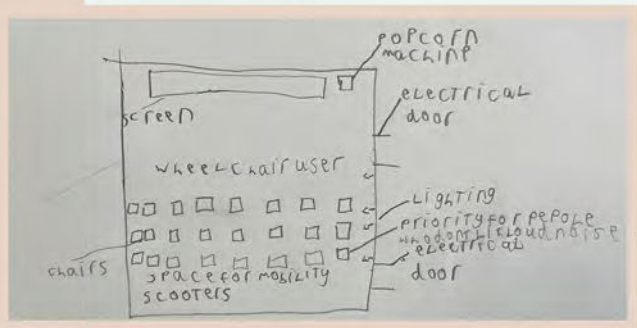
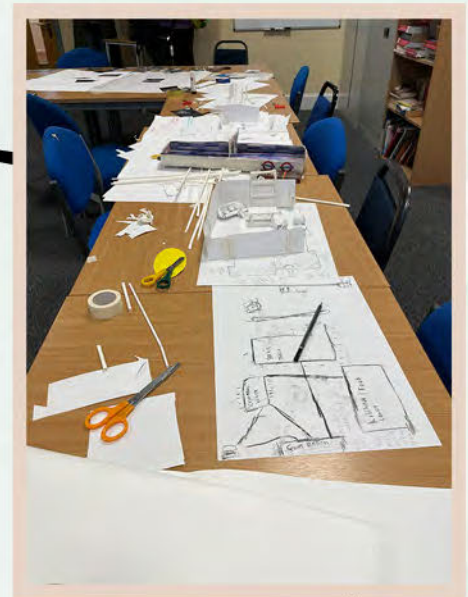
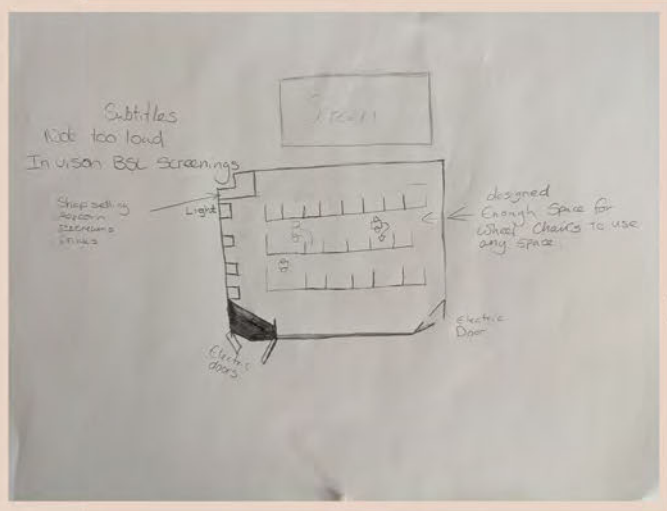
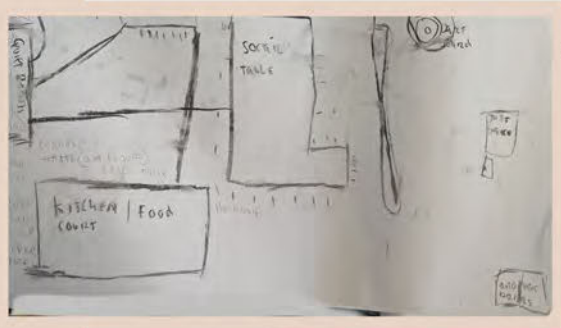
Two of the students focused on designing an accessible cinema space while the other student began master planning the Youth space before then focusing on the quiet/calming spaces. Some key takeaways from the session were that all doors and access points should be automatic; all hallways and social spaces should be able to fit a mobility scooter through. All the spaces in Jacobs wells baths should be designed with all forms of disability both physical and mental in mind. The student designing the quiet space was very thorough in how he wanted his quiet space to be designed with subtle lighting to ensure comfort and minimal stimulation. Sensory and fidget toys to support those with cognitive disabilities or neurodivergence. Soft carpets and furnishings to make the space comfortable and noise cancelling headphones for those that want them. He also wanted to integrate the reading nook into this space.

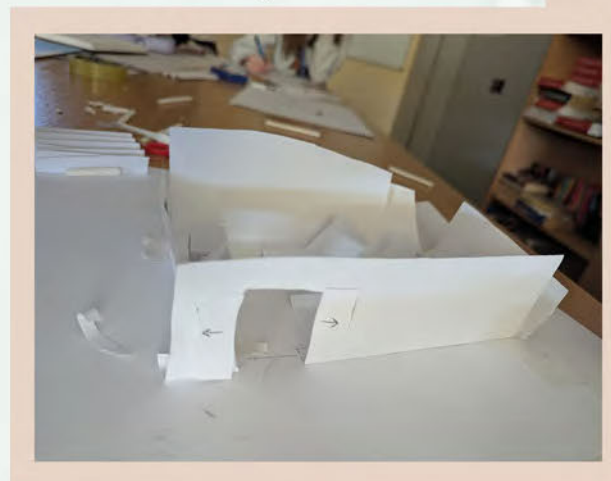
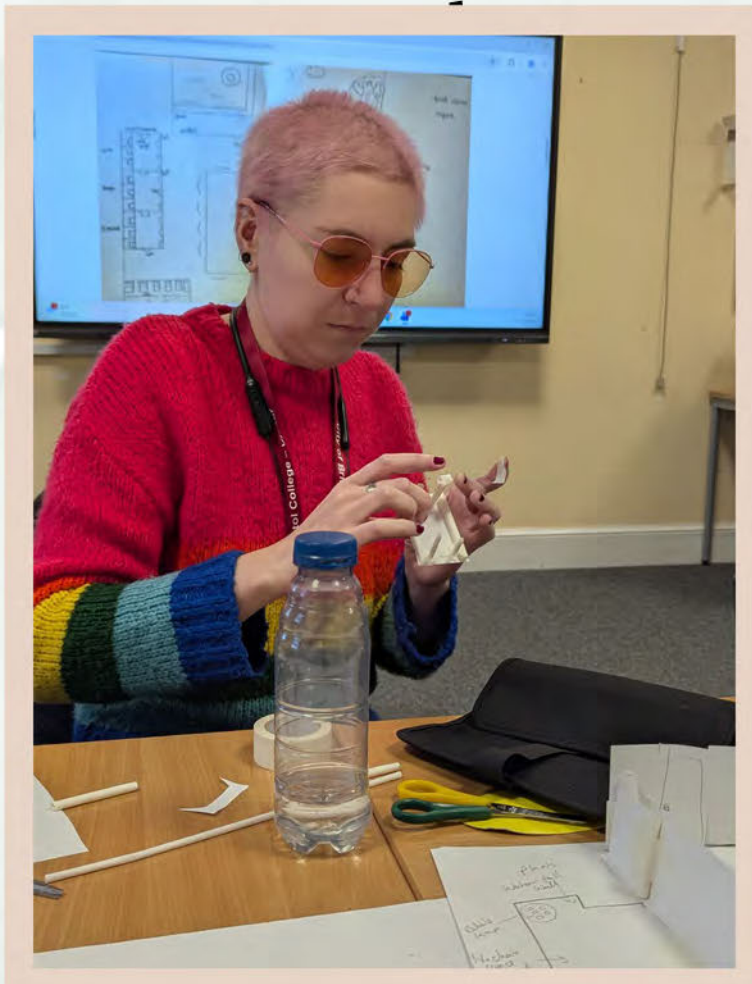
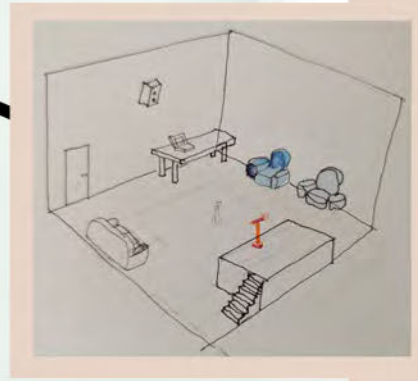
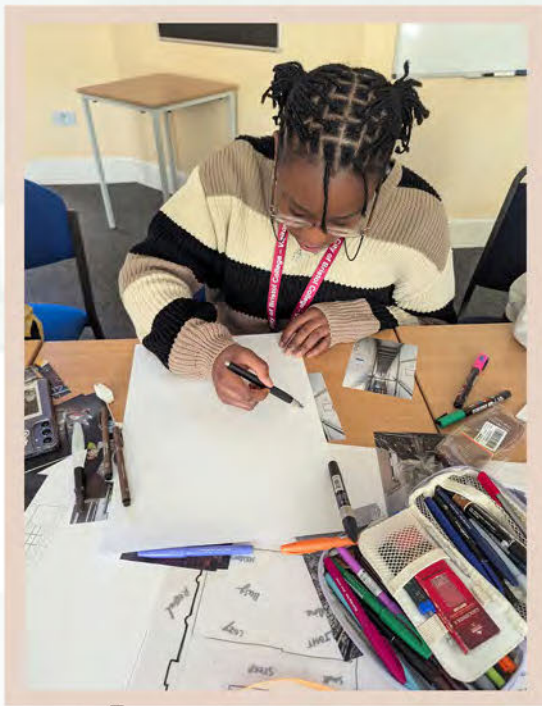


OUTCOME

Our time at Bristol college was invaluable, it has been the cornerstone of our jacob-wells baths youth club proposal and in reality, our job on this project has been to realise and synthesise these students' visions of how they think the space should work. As we progress with our proposal this intervention has been repeatedly drawn upon time and time again as it gave us the initial broad strokes of the project.







Visitors' Stories

MELANIE

"I did a lot of ballet and tap dancing in my 20's. My favourite dance move were the spins, though I could never keep up with funky dance workout at Jacob's Wells Bath. Dancing felt like freedom, being able to move around to the flow of music and surrounded by others was therapy for me."



ANN

"I came to Bristol and started teaching German at UWE. I did quite a lot of ballet in my early 20's. Back then, I was involved with a group of people to find a community dance centre. Unfortunately, it didn't work out for the two places we found. It was a blessing that we found Jacob's Wells Bath at the end, though sadly I was pregnant at that time."

EDSON

"I remembered in 2016, working on a project where i spent two months in and out Jacob's Wells Bath. We had a show there, where there were spotlights shining on the dancers. I loved the feeling of celebrating dance together, felt like i was back home."



ALEXANDRA

"I started ballet in my early 20s and have been doing it for years. I remembered Jacob's Wells Bath was a dance centre for 35 years. The original swimming pool was transformed into a big studio. Most of my memories in Jacob's Wells Bath were the dance sessions, including circle dancing, ballet and contemporary dance."



HANNAH

"My friend asked me to join her for a dance session at Jacob's Wells Bath. Although I was not fond of that idea, I went anyway. Things went downhill when I got stagefright and stood frozen in the middle of the stage while others were dancing cheerfully around me. Moral of the story, dancing was not for me."



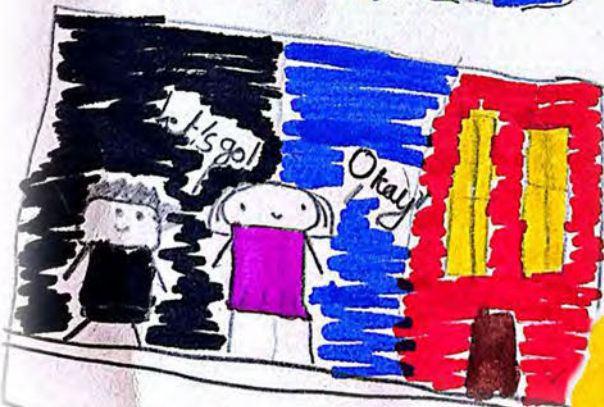
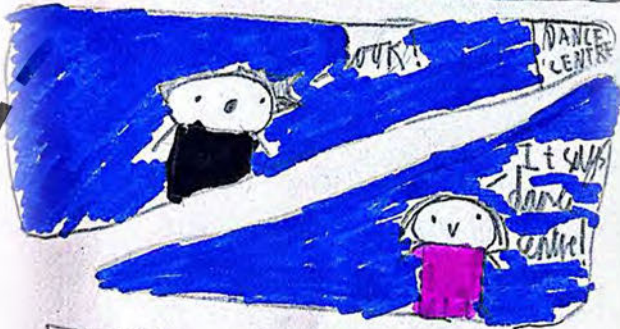
Comic Book Activity



To learn more about Jacob's Wells Bath, we visited Hotwells Primary School for an intergenerational storytelling session that brought together children and adult visitors to share memories and experiences of the site. Six visitors joined us—Edson, Emma, Ann, Melanie, Alexandra, Hannah, and Jude from Trinity—who generously shared their personal connections to Jacob's Wells Bath with the children. It was an exciting opportunity to listen to the children's thoughtful questions and observe how they transformed these stories into creative ideas for their comic project.

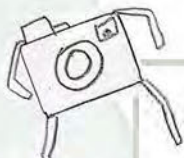


Emma and her husband had a walk



We began with a storytelling activity in which each visitor was paired with a small group of children. The session was lively and highly interactive, with visitors bringing a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. Some shared fond memories of taking dance classes at Jacob's Wells Bath, one spoke about hoping to join the team there but never having the opportunity, while another reflected on less positive experiences from their own dance lessons. The children were eager and engaged, asking about favourite moments, dance styles, and unexpected experiences. Through these conversations, they gained a richer understanding of the site's social and cultural history, while also relating the stories to their own interests and curiosities.





In the afternoon, the focus shifted to helping the children develop their comic storylines using ideas gathered from the storytelling session. To start the session, we held a short dance activity that explored current popular songs and helped us understand what the children already knew about dance and movement. The children were then divided into groups, each working with a different visitor's story. We introduced the comic templates we had designed to guide the structure of their narratives. To encourage discussion and collaboration, large scrolls of paper were laid across the tables so the children could map out their ideas together before sketching their comics.



Alex wanted to be a yoga teacher.



She applied for the job.



Alex's first day. She started dancing and met Alan and Helen.



Melanie has arrived at the dance centre.



Initially, many of the children were hesitant and unsure about how to develop their storylines. Ruth played a key role in supporting them by offering clear examples of how a story might begin and by prompting the children to continue and expand on a sample narrative. We further supported the groups by suggesting possible story elements and helping them translate their ideas into visual form when they struggled to express them graphically. It was particularly interesting to see that many children chose to focus on how the visitors came to Bristol and discovered Jacob's Wells Bath, highlighting their curiosity about personal journeys and first encounters. The children proved to be marvellous listeners, thoughtfully weaving together different memories and perspectives into their comics. Overall, the engagement session successfully met our goal of collecting and preserving personal memories of Jacob's Wells Bath, while also inspiring a younger generation to connect creatively and meaningfully with its history through storytelling and visual expression.

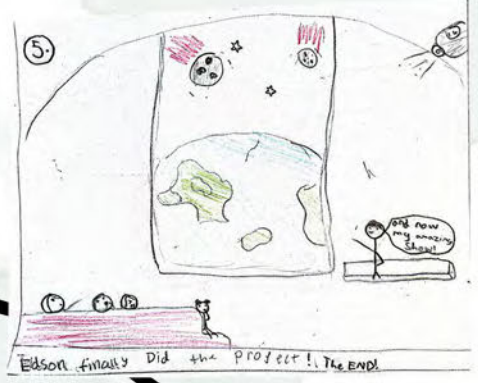
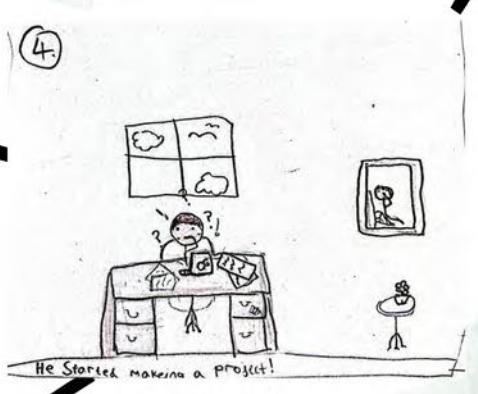
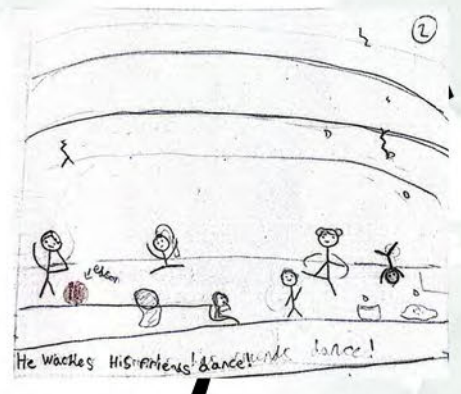
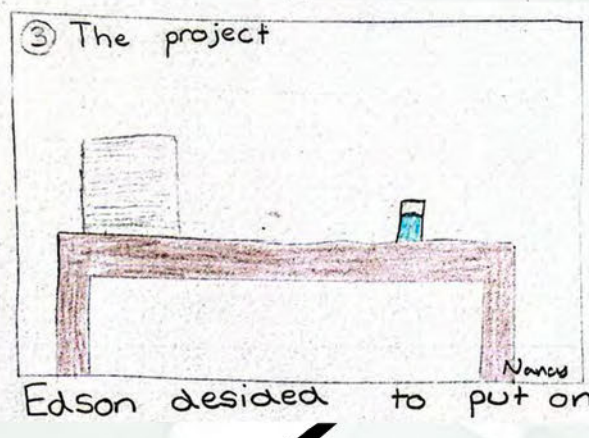
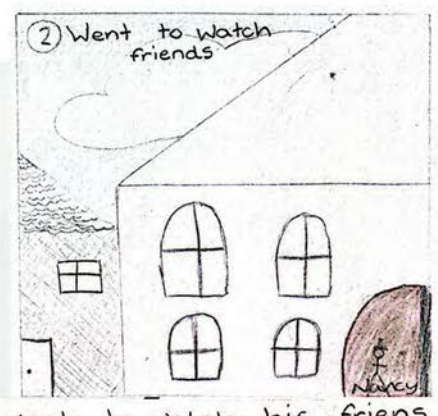
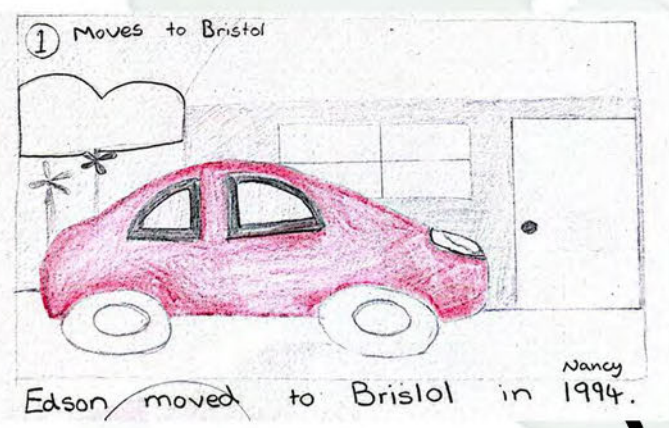


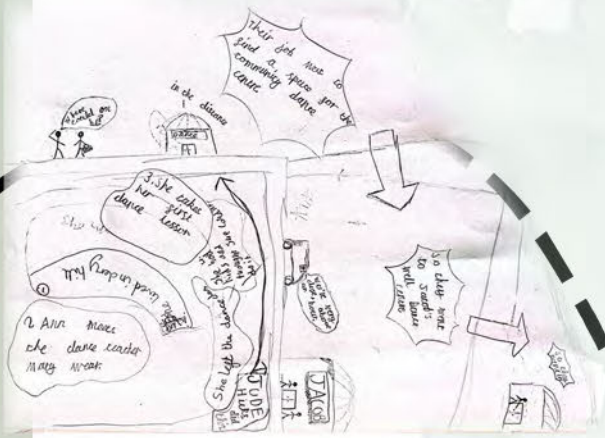
Melanie is having lots of fun and waiting to join the dance class.



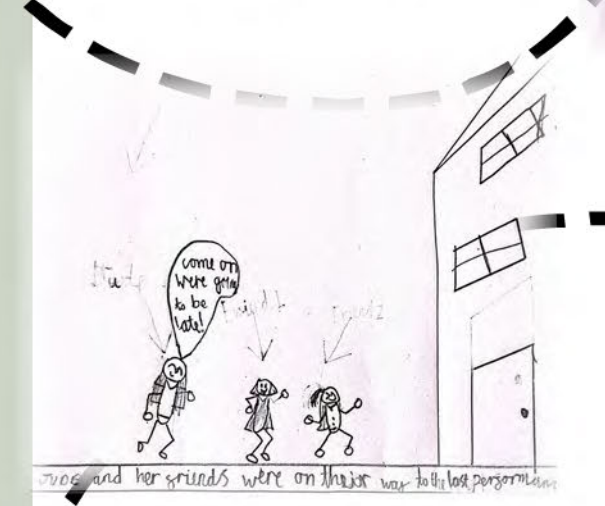
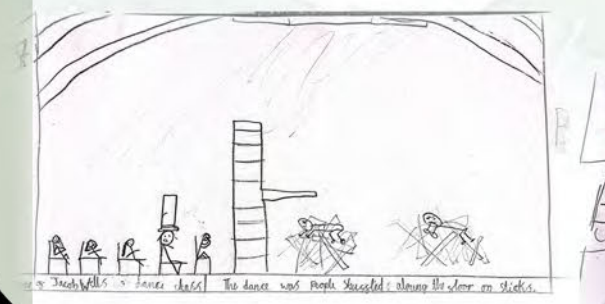
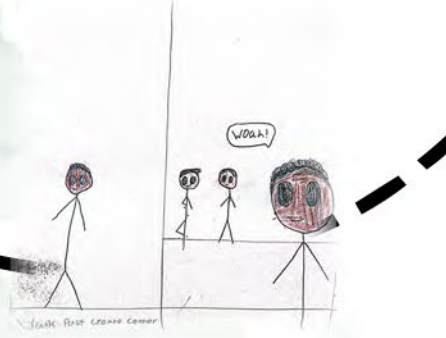
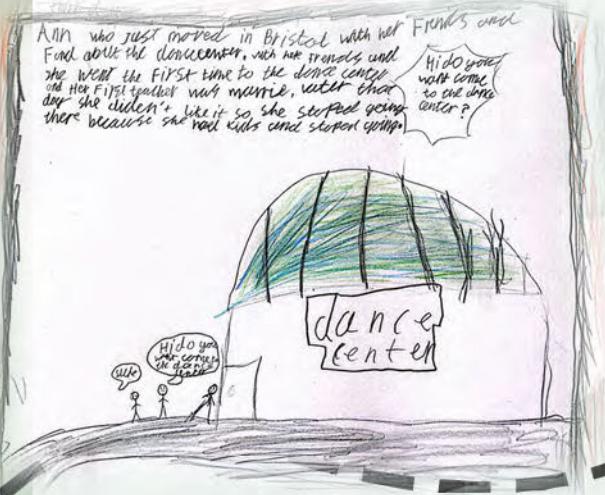
Melanie has stood up for dance classes.

Melanie is about to start her dance class and she's very excited.





Edson was born in 1969



Jones and her friends were on their way to the last performance

WILLOW PARK PRIMARY

THE RHYTHM OF WATER AND DANCE

Our time at Willow Park was incredibly insightful both thanks to the students and especially the first-hand accounts from Alan Dyte about his time swimming and dancing at Jacob-wells baths as a blind individual. The day started off with Ruth introducing us to the children and then going into what they think Jacobs wells baths might be from the name alone, this gave us some inspirations for some subtle nods that we can include in our proposal to pay homage to the children's ideas. They thought the building could be a Bird bath, an Artist, a water well or a bakery. Perhaps the final proposal could include some sculptings of these within the garden space out the front.

The students were then asked about their first times swimming, and they spoke about feeling scared that they sometimes avoided their lessons, but they also felt pressured, eventually they did say it was fun. We can draw parallels between the children's feelings while swimming and the way that Alan felt when he was swimming and its especially interesting how mired his experience was in safety constraints and risks before even getting into the pool. I think that while designing the youth club that Bristol city college came up with, we should focus on ensuring these feelings are accounted for via the quiet space. We could potentially do this via colour theory and lighting.

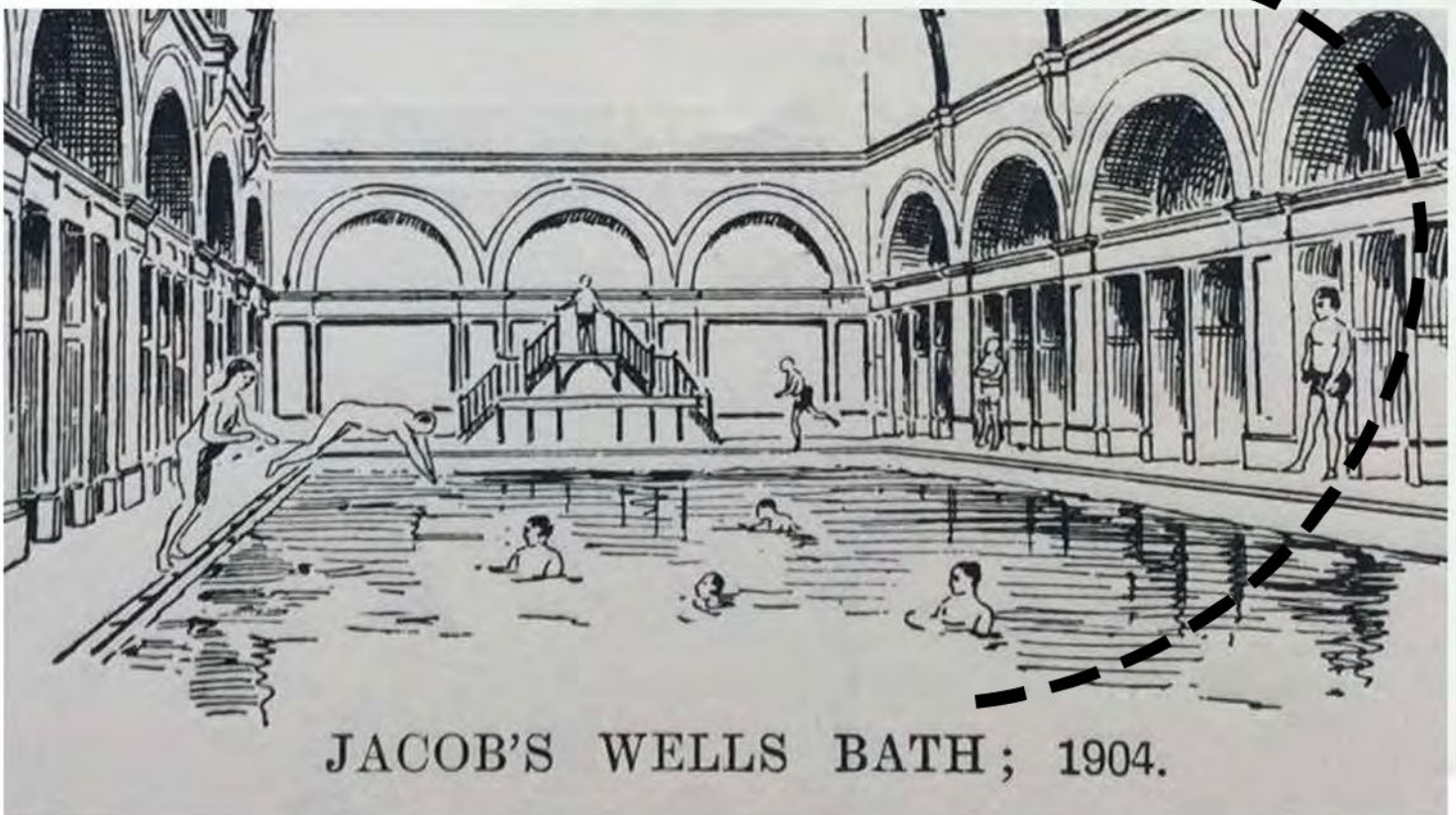
After this Alan began to recount his history with Jacobs-wells Baths; he went swimming there from 1948 – 1953. He spoke about the struggles they had to deal with from being guided around the bath so that they can get a feel for the layout of the space, this was to make sure they dont fall in. He also spoke about how when he was swimming it's impossible to tell which direction he is in due to the water, so they had to tie a rope around him. The most difficult part of going swimming for him as a blind person was getting into the water as he was not able to see the stairs. They felt their own shoes when trying to find their cubicle as they were just tents, not a proper room, this meant there was nothing else they could use to identify their cubicle. One aspect I found interesting was his memory of his body when he was getting into the pool he will never forgot the feeling of the cold water slowly creeping up his body and how uncomfortable that made him feel.



A CLAY BATH

Alan also spent 10 years going to Jacobs wells when it was a dance school and loved it. He focused a fair amount on the time with his dance partner, and he found it truly freeing. As a visually impaired person dancing did not come easily to him and it had its challenges but as he was reciting his stories you could really tell the joy that dancing brought him. Hopefully, through the youth club design we can bring back some of that energy into Jacobs wells.

After this we then got the students to start making pool lining tiles out of clay with some of the textures, thoughts and feelings of Alan's times at Jacobs wells baths. The students jumped at the chance and really came up with some unique concepts; some common themes were the use and feel of the floating ropes, the overhead arches of the ceiling and the waves within the water. We should aim to incorporate these iconographies within the proposal.



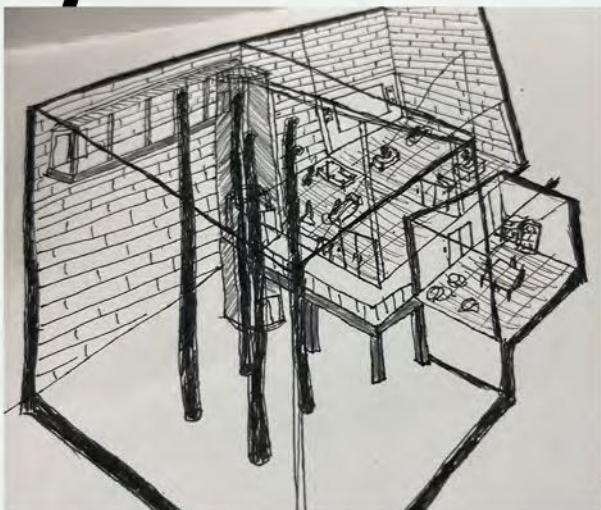
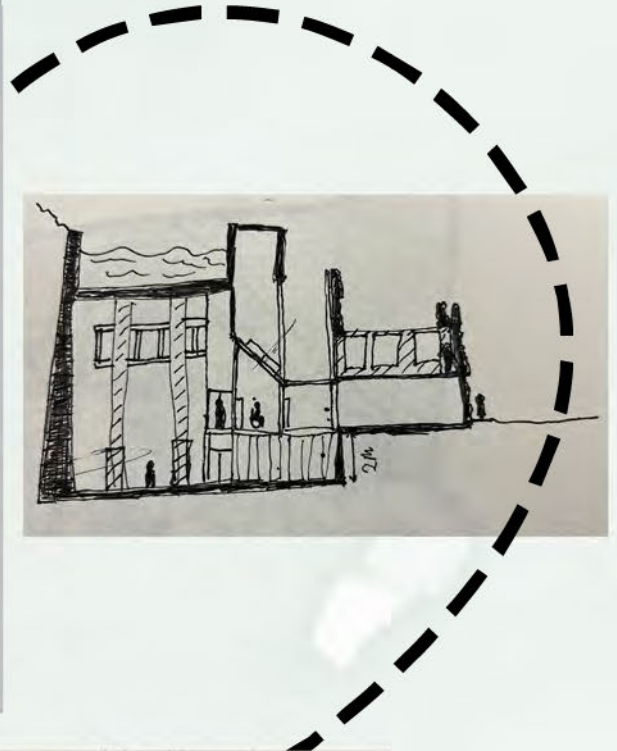
Our Proposal

ACCESSABILITY DESIGN CONSULTATION

We have designed a new entrance to Jacob Wells Baths with new circulation up to the main hall, This ensures that Jacob Wells Baths will accommodate everyone and cater to each user's specific needs.

The Youth space consists of a main social space/games room, A cinema/dance/karaoke space and a quiet calming space. Each entrance is an automatic double door with a touch panel. We raised the floor within the space under the tank so that it is fully accessible for wheelchair users. The main hall is then accessed via a lift and an enclosed glass veranda that overlooks the new bar space. The space underneath the youth club can be utilised for storage.

Our proposal incorporates and honours the historical context of Jacob Wells Baths as well as the communities we have Co-designed with.

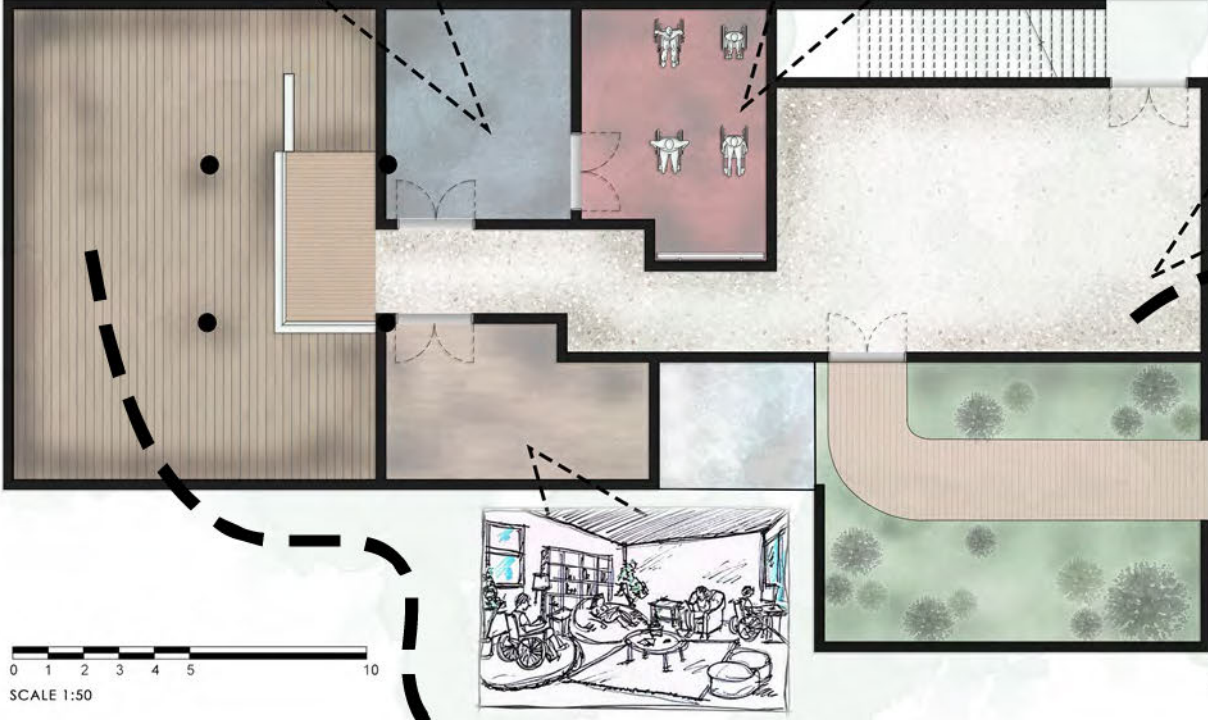


ACCESSABILITY DESIGN CONSULTATION

The most difficult design challenge we faced was how do we make the space accessible, due to the ramp required to deal with height differences within the structure would be impossible to fit.

We have utilised the minimal outdoor space in our new entrance way to create a community garden & a water fall feature that uses the spring fed water in the tanks above our proposal. This feature can be used as a bird bath to pay homage to the students at Willow Park Primary

YOUTH CLUB PLAN



YOUTH CLUB SECTION



Jacob Wells Baths Reflection

ANDREW REFLECTION:

This project has been incredibly engaging and a unique experience that has allowed us to deep dive into local communities across Bristol and the ideas behind co-creation. I think having Local Learning as a client guide us through some of the nuances of the project has been invaluable, yet we have still had many opportunities to flourish our creative input and design through play. I think the one thing I would change about the project would be to involve Trinity more in the co-design element perhaps having someone from there during the visit to Bristol City College would have honed our ideas and scope much earlier.

ANNABELLE REFLECTION:

The Jacob's Wells Bath project provided me with a valuable opportunity to immerse myself in a wide range of engagement activities. As architects, we are frequently required to present our thoughts, ideas, and designs, yet this project particularly through working with Local Learning helped me develop equally important skills as a listener and observer. I was continually fascinated by the creativity of the children involved: the way they perceive the world, approach problems, and propose imaginative solutions.

This experience encouraged me to push beyond conventional limits and explore architectural ideas through creative processes and play. Clay played a significant role in the project, serving as a tactile and expressive medium that allowed ideas to be translated into physical models. These models often conveyed a deeper level of understanding than words alone. Through these activities, I gained a stronger appreciation of the architecture of Jacob's Wells Bath and the rich history embedded within it.

Overall, I am deeply grateful for this experience, which reminded me that understanding a building extends beyond drawings, plans, and sections. Architecture is also shaped by memory, storytelling, and the lived history of a place, all of which are essential to truly engaging with the built environment.

MORGAN REFLECTION:

The Jacob's Wells Baths project was a valuable experience that allowed me to work closely with the local community and better understand the idea of co-creation. Working with Local Learning helped me see how important it is for architects to design with people rather than simply designing for them. Listening to the ideas and perspectives of the children and other participants showed me how creative and insightful community input can be.

This project also highlighted the importance of using playful and hands-on activities to share ideas and encourage collaboration. These methods made it easier to communicate design ideas and allowed everyone to take part in the process. Through this experience, I developed a stronger understanding of the history and meaning of Jacob's Wells Baths and how places are shaped by memory and lived experience as well as by design. Overall, the project helped me appreciate the social role of architecture and the impact it can have on communities.

ABDULAZEEZ REFLECTION:

For the first time, I had the opportunity to work with a community, which enabled me to understand the goal of Local Learning. I'm happy to have been involved in the design and consultation process of the project, as well as exchanging ideas with my colleagues, which gave me a different and unique perspective on how to work with other individuals. It's been a beautiful learning experience, and I'm immensely grateful for the opportunity.

Group Dynamic Reflection

ANDREW REFLECTION:

During this project myself and the group have risen to every challenge we had to face. Especially as some of us have had exceptional circumstances due to illness and I am incredibly pleased with the outcome. I have found it really interesting working collaboratively with the team as our group has a diverse architectural education from several different countries, however this has also created its own set of unique challenges. I found myself stepping up to do a lot of the management and organisation within the project and this resulted in a fair bit of pressure. I think learning to play a supporting role is something I need to work on. Overall I have loved working with Annabelle, Azeez and Morgan, we have created a strong project and I look forward to seeing how the consultation turns out in the future.

ANNABELLE REFLECTION:

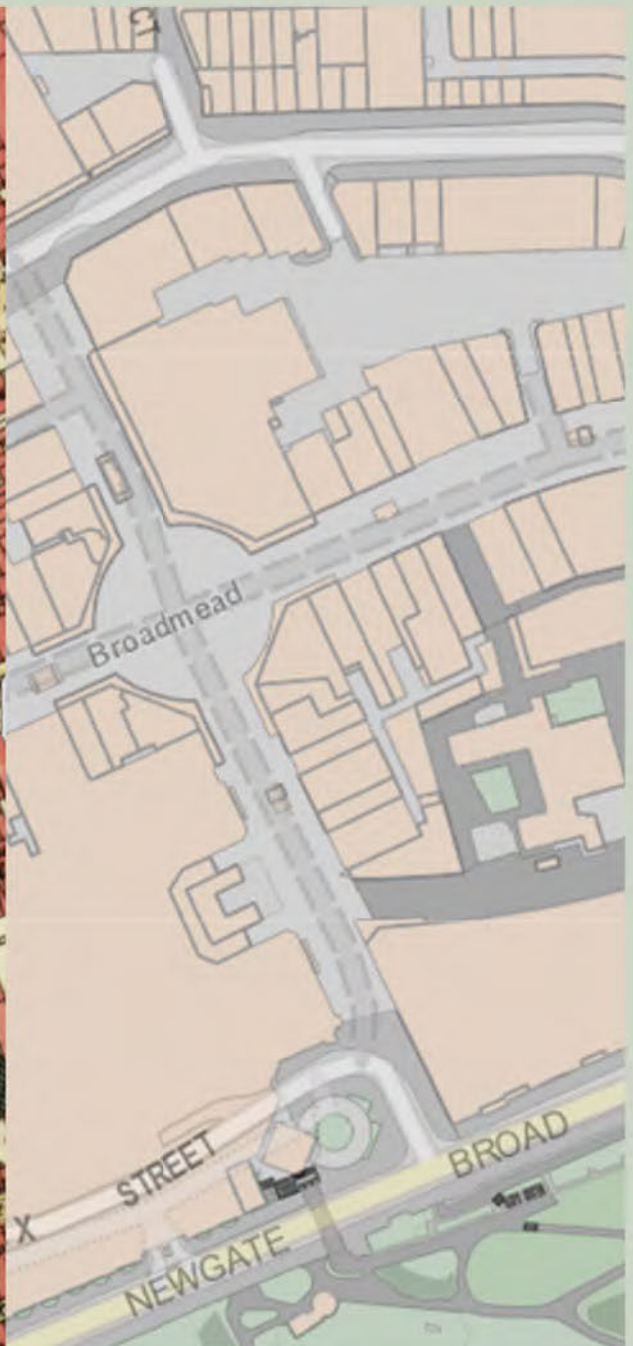
The overall project was interactive and fun. It was an interesting experience to discuss our different ideas, design solutions and thoughts. Having teammates with different architectural backgrounds really prompted us in continuous discussions. We had challenges in between whether it is time management or delegation of task. Working together as a team and with Local Learning really showed us why communication matters. It was a valuable experience working with new people and having a real client. All in all, this project was really insightful and gave me a better concept of how socially engaged architects can be for their future practice.

MORGAN REFLECTION:

Working as part of this group was a positive and rewarding experience. Throughout the project, we faced challenges such as managing time, organising tasks, and balancing different ideas, but these were overcome through regular communication and teamwork. Working with people from different backgrounds and with different approaches encouraged open discussion and helped us learn from each other. This experience improved my confidence in working collaboratively and highlighted the importance of clear communication and shared responsibility when completing a group project, especially when working with a real client.

ABDULAZEEZ REFLECTION:

My group faced some challenges working together as a team, but it was important that we were able to scale through each of them. We had each other's backs and filled in for one another in order to succeed. We were each given different tasks, mostly based on our varying strengths. I was tasked with turning the sketches we, as a team, put together on paper into a CAD format. I was responsible for drawing the floor plans of the different levels, producing elevations, as well as sections. Just like any architect or architect in training would encounter some design problems, it wasn't anything that we as a team couldn't solve easily and quickly. I was also tasked with creating a physical 3D model of the building, which was challenging but accomplishable. Working with Annabelle, Andrew, and Morgan made it very clear to me that individuals who have a common goal to make something succeed will succeed, regardless of any challenges faced.



"Broadmead is more than a place—it's a collection of moments stitched into our hearts. Every corner holds a memory, every visit brings a familiar comfort, and together they remind us that some places become special simply because life felt good there."