

Abington Friends and Abington Art Center's Sculpture Park Collaboration

Over the past six months Abington Art Center has been fortunate enough to collaborate with a class of visionary fourth graders from Abington Friends School. We started off with a simple goal: to create a temporary sculpture for the Sculpture Park that explores the themes of decomposition, natural vs. man-made materials, and shelter. The 4th grade science class joined us with some background knowledge about decomposition and some big ideas.

Over the course of the year the students have learned about land artists, organic materials, and engineering. They have designed, collaborated, and built a unique, site specific structure made completely from natural materials that were predominantly sourced from the sculpture park. This project was student led and emergent and exists as a product of the students' labor.

After exploring how to build with natural materials, we made some discoveries. When building a moquette, one student noticed that "the cordedge [was] fragile because it's very dry so it [was] hard to wrap it around the stick." Another student observed that "the structure kept falling, balance [was] easier when [they] found the right shapes that fit together and it [was] easier to work on a flat surface." We implemented techniques informed by these observations when it came time to build on a large scale.

We decided to work only with organic materials. We defined this as materials that decompose, are found in nature, and are not made by humans. Each student submitted their own sketch with ideas and as a group we voted on which elements we wanted to incorporate into our final design. Much of our inspiration came from artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Robert Smithson, and Mario Merz.

Once it finally came time to bring our vision to life, students sourced materials such as fallen branches, large rocks, and mica, from the grounds. Watching everyone work together, communicate, problem solve, and test the limits of their strength was inspirational and exciting. A big part of this work is that it is ephemeral and eventually will decompose. Once public work is out in the world, we have little control over how it will be received and interacted with. After one particularly productive working session students left their piece only to discover that some branches had been broken upon their return. The students approached this reality with acceptance and began to problem solve. We decided that we should make a sign, however the students noted that markers are not really organic. When creating a "do not climb" sign they used grass as a way of making organic marks.

We discovered early on that it was important to make a plan and ensure that students were communicating with one another to prevent injury and maximize our time together. When building, each student was able to contribute in a way that was meaningful to them. Some hunted for beautiful treasures, some helped with thrashing and creating a makeshift pulley system, and others hauled mulch and fallen branches. This collaborative and inspired work is currently on view and can be found along the path in the Sculpture Park until it breaks down and returns to the earth.