



## **Betty Wallingford**

***A designer, maker and storyteller, Betty Wallingford graduated with an MFA in Child Culture Design from HDK-Valand in 2022. Before coming to Sweden, she worked as a museum researcher and exhibit designer in the United States, including the New York Hall of Science and the Museum of Food and Drink. In addition to museum work, she recently served as a prop and costume designer for the Gothenburg English Studio Theatre. As a designer, she is interested in working collaboratively with all ages to create immersive and imaginative experiences. Previously, she earned her Bachelor's degree in Anthropology from Wellesley College.***

# **The Secret Post-Box**

## ***Imagination and Fantasy in Design Methods***

### ***Abstract***

**Children make up a large demographic of those who visit heritage museums and historic sites – brought there on school field trips or accompanying caregivers. Heritage practice, in turn, often uses children as motivation for their work, striving to “save” these sites for future generations. Despite this relationship, children’s opportunities to contribute their authentic perspectives is limited.**

**This project, called *Byrån för Glömda Saker* (or the Bureau of Forgotten Things) explores how imagination and fantasy could help activate cultural heritage environments for sites of children’s agency. Running over seven months at the heritage site, *Lilla Änggården*, in Gothenburg, I was interested in how explorative design methods could help change children’s role within heritage practice beyond that of a passive receiver of information, and into a role in which they can authentically discover and explore these sites in ways that are meaningful to them. Using one workshop as a case study, this paper outlines some of the methods that emerged from this work – context-specific practices and design characteristics that help create a space for children’s imaginative agency and storytelling. I argue that these methods may help to increase children’s agency, interest and sense of belonging in heritage spaces, and in turn, open up heritage sites to new perspectives and more democratic methods of participation.**

### ***Keywords***

**Imagination, cultural heritage, storytelling, agency**

## ***Introduction***

**The Byrå för Glömda Saker began in a playground. It began when I brought a plate of cookies and a loosely formed idea to a group of neighborhood children, and asked them, “would you like to help me find the lost stories of history?” Or perhaps the Byrå began a month later when I handed each child a badge with a shovel etched on the front, and walked together into the forest by Lilla Änggården – the heritage site that has been the context for our explorations. In short, this project explored how children engage with heritage, and how they feel free (or not free) to contribute their own imaginations to those narratives. It is also a project about design – how alternative design methods might create space within heritage narratives for children’s imaginative agency.**



**Using the Byrå’s “post box” as a case study, this short paper explores the design methods that emerged through this work, including practices and conditions that support children’s imagination, and how imagination and fantasy are design methods in their own right.**

## ***Project Overview***

**The project, Byrå för Glömda Saker, or *The Bureau of Forgotten Things*, took place over seven months (December 2021 - May 2022) at the site Lilla Änggården, a satellite of the Gothenburg City Museum. Lilla Änggården is a historic house with a**

surrounding park and forest. The house remains relatively closed off, and the public is only allowed in during guided tours. The goal of this project, in part, was to explore how to activate the house's surrounding outdoor space, inviting new perspectives and new ways of engaging with the house's history. If we conceptualize heritage and history as a form of storytelling, I saw a critical need to create a space within heritage practice for children to practice their own storytelling and imagination around heritage narratives. By working with a group of children on-site, I attempted to explore the following questions: *How could children's imaginations activate cultural heritage environments as sites for children's narrative agency? And in turn, how could heritage become material for children's imaginations?*

Throughout the project, I took an explorative and iterative approach to develop methods for working with children – each phase of the project was a result of the continuous layering and reflection from the one before. This approach helped me to investigate design practices that could create a space for children's imaginative agency, and methods that might allow me, as an adult, to authentically inhabit this space of imagining alongside them.

### ***Background***

Why consider imagination within cultural heritage? The heritage industry frequently uses children as motivation and justification for their work. The phrase, "we need to save this place for our children" is heard often in context with conservation projects – yet what power do children actually have within heritage practice? The nature of reconstructing the places and narratives of the past is often seen as too delicate – too serious – for children to take part in. The Swedish National Heritage Board describes

**cultural heritage management as “preserving and managing sites of historical, architectural or archaeological significance and to empower cultural heritage as a force in the evolution of a democratic, sustainable society” (Riksantikvarieämbetet, n.d.). While this definition maintains that heritage is, of course, about the past, it also calls attention to heritage as a matter of society’s present and future. In this sense, heritage is rooted in our ability to imagine.**

**Yet what does it mean to imagine? The word “imagination” has a wide range of understandings and usages across disciplines. In context with children, Brian Sutton-Smith writes “the history of the imagination in childhood is a history of ever greater suppression and rationalization of the irrational” (1997, p. 151). To avoid falling into the position of an adult rationalizing children’s storytelling, I reflected on my own role and capacity to imagine – understanding imagination as something *everyone* does, not just children. In this paper, I often connect the words imagination and storytelling. I do not claim that these words are interchangeable, and there are many functions of imagination that do not relate directly to narratives and storytelling. However, for this project concerning heritage narratives, I was most interested in imagination’s storytelling capacity – its inherent role in how we form and understand the narratives around us.**

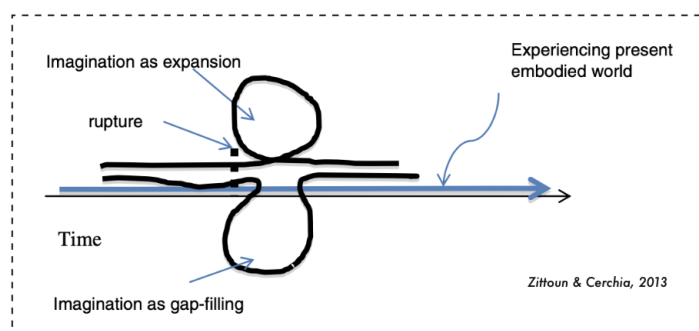
**I reviewed texts on imagination from across disciplines, including philosophy, natural sciences, and social justice. While not a complete summary by any means, the following two understandings were central in developing design methods that could create a space for children’s imaginations.**

## ***Imagination is Social***

**Imagination is often considered as a deeply personal act – something that people do in quiet moments of reflection. However, the imagination is something that groups do together, to both question and uphold the status quo (Harrington, 2021). Our privilege and positionality influence what and how we imagine. We learn what is possible from others, for ourselves and for our communities. This understanding of imagination led me to design workshops and experiences for a *group* of children, rather than working individually. It also was critical in helping me reflect on my own role in the social group – as someone who has power to bring forward certain perspectives and, in turn, conceal others.**

## ***Imagination is Material***

**In their 2020 work on the “Material Imagination,” Koukouti and Malafouris write, “our human ways of imagining cannot be separated from their relevant socio-material and cultural environment. Human persons imagine inside their world.” (pp. 38) In other words, imagination happens in our minds, yet it also happens within the frames of our culture.**



**The above diagram from Zittoun and Cerchia (2013) can also help in conceptualizing how the imagination relates to our everyday, embodied experiences. They explain that imagination, in an epistemological sense, is triggered when there is a rupture or gap**

in our everyday experience. The entanglement of imagined experience and embodied experience is complex, messy, and impossible to separate from one another. In other words, imaginary life is not separate from “real life.” This framing helped me to understand design’s potential to draw attention to ruptures in the narrative and material environment.

## **CASE STUDY: THE SECRET POSTBOX**

In the following sections, I will describe the Byrå’s first mission, burying our secret post-box, and subsequently, what happened to the box afterwards. From this case study, I will draw out several practices that helped to create a space for children’s imaginations to grow. In addition, I hoped to use this infrastructure to embed this work on site.

### ***Description***

My goal for the first mission was to do a collective act that would unite the group around a shared piece of infrastructure. Our mission was to take an old box, which I had purchased at a second-hand store, and bury it somewhere in the forest by Lilla Änggården. This box, in result, would become the official postbox and hiding place of the Byrå för Glömda Saker (the title of which I had burned into the box’s lid). Inside the box, I left a letter and badge which welcomed them as a new “agent” of the Byrå.



Five children joined the mission, and when we gathered together one of the new agents read the letter aloud to the group. We

walked together into the forest, using one of their sleds as a way to transport the box. The children chose a place for the box under a hemlock tree, near a large boulder the Grén family named "Gabriels Fästning."

The children collectively dug a hole, while simultaneously discussing how the box should be used and who would be allowed to use it (only those who had a badge, it was decided). They wanted to start filling the box with forgotten things, and one child ran to get a mitten that she had seen on the ground. After checking that the box was completely hidden, we left and ended the mission with a team snack.

The story of the post-box does not end there, however. When I went back the next month to check, it was still snugly hidden in the earth (with new forgotten things added as well). About a month later, I accidentally broke the top of the box. Soon after, I went back to try and repair the box, but it was clear that someone had already attempted to do so – in fact, it looked as though the box had been dug up, turned around, and re-buried. I decided not to interfere. However, during the month after the box continued to disintegrate and there was a strange and animal smell emanating from it's interior. One day, I went to the forest intending to take the box away, but to my surprise, the box had been placed up in the tree. Later on, the parents of one of the children asked me if I was responsible,

December



February



March



May





saying that her son “thought it was quite mysterious,” and that he had thought of many stories that could explain what had happened. However, it still remains a mystery to me to this day. After another month or so, the box moved down from the tree where it stands today, smelling like dirt and leaning casually against the hemlock tree under which it was once buried. By not interfering, many stories and opportunities for imagination emerged. The box was an active communication platform throughout the year, and was where I left letters to the children before each subsequent mission. That being said, the unexpected ways the box was used – how it changed, what we *don't* know, ended up being just as valuable as its intended use.

### ***Methods***

The following are several practices, taken from the post-box example, that helped create a space for children’s imaginations to grow throughout the project. These methods are not directive – they will not dictate what to do – they are rather ingredients and characteristics of a way of working.

### ***Creating Gaps***

Intentionally creating barriers and leaving gaps invites the imagination. If we cannot see the entirety of something – or touch or hear the entirety of something – our imaginations are inherently called to fill what is missing. These gaps can be physical – the box as a barrier between outside and inside, what we can and cannot see. They can also be more conceptual – gaps in time or knowledge. Using objects that can act as gap-makers during a design process can support children’s imaginations without prescribing *what* they should be imagining.

## ***Togetherness***

Understanding the imagination as a social act, methods that invite a group of people to work together can create a context for the imagination. When children were at work burying the post-box, they were simultaneously discussing future plans for the post-box. The ideas and stories told by some children sparked new ideas and stories from others.

## ***Embedded in Place***

Rather than the term context-specific, I use the term embedness because it implies an inseparable entanglement between action and place. Burying the box in the ground allowed the group to make a long-lasting impact to the site, becoming a part of the site's ongoing story. By doing this act early on in the project, it was my hope that children gained a feeling of ownership of the site. There are many contributing factors that influence a child's feeling of ownership and belonging, and it is not my wish to oversimplify this complex relationship. That being said, I believe that embedded actions, like burying something, can contribute to a child's imaginative agency – that a site's material landscape, its stories and infrastructure, could be material available to the imagination.

## ***Time***

Designing for and with imagination requires trust and time. Stories need time and space to layer from one another. It was my initial intention that the "forgotten things" that we put in the box would spark children's storytelling and imaginations, yet I found that the richest moments of storytelling surrounded what *happened* to the objects. What happened to the box when it appeared up in the tree? Who added the pair of dirty sunglasses in

February? These changes, acts of random chance and mystery, were only possible through time.

### ***Feeling over Efficiency***

I view this last characteristic as perhaps the most important, yet also the most difficult to put into words. If we consider the functionality of the post-box as a communication platform between child and adult participants, then it is an entirely inefficient object. However, if we consider the *feeling* the post-box helped communicate, then it served a different purpose. Methods that may not “make sense” from a functional or rational perspective still may contribute to a productive context. In fact, I would argue that letting go of rationality is necessary in methods for children’s freedom of imagination. As warned by Sutton-Smith, children’s imaginations are always subjected to adult rationalization, and in attempt to move away from this dynamic it is critical for adults to become less rational, less focused on efficient outcomes and recognize themselves as an entangled element of the story itself. Instead of asking – will this method answer my questions? I suggest asking, instead, will this method create the right feeling among participants? This requires reflection on the social and material components of an experience, specific to the group and site you are working with.

### **Conclusion**

Designing methods that create a space for children’s imaginations means recognizing that the methods, are in themselves, an act of imagination and storytelling. The characteristics and practices listed above are by no means a complete list – my work with the Byrå brought forward many questions, some answered and many ongoing areas of reflection and thinking. However, I hope that these practices may contribute new ideas to what it means to

**work with a focus on imagination. I hope, in addition, that it may help you reflect on the capacity of your own imaginations.**

**In conclusion, it's critical to acknowledge that children's imaginations are *already* active forces within cultural heritage environments – they visit museums with school, they have picnics in historic parks with their families, they play in the ruins of old fortresses. Creating a context where children have agency and space to weave together that existing experience with cultural heritage material and narratives can open heritage environments up to new ways of engaging with that history. My intention in this project was for the Byrå can serve as that context. The Byrå, and the imagination with this space, does not “reimagine” or “re-write” any aspect of history, we simply construct new pathways to see to what's already there.**

## **References**

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