

Elegant Interior and Exterior Play Spaces for Young Children

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Introduction

Well before Emile encountered Nature (Kessen, 1965), the relationship of children to the spaces in which they are found has been of interest. Of perhaps even greater interest to educators has been the relationship of children to spaces designed specifically for them, although many feel that achieving quality in the design and construction of such spaces, even more than achieving quality in the design and construction of equipment and materials for children, still remains elusive. In the United States, early definitions of quality, according to Ruopp *et al.* (1979: 61) focused on, "*a loving home-like environment in which the child is safe, adequately fed, active and happy*". Prescott (1994) identified factors such as softness that appeared to indicate a responsive quality of the environment to the child, and Olds (2001) listed four basic environmental needs: encouraging movement, supporting comfort, fostering competence, and encouraging a sense of control.

Fowler (1980: 85) noted that, "*the ways in which each environment is arranged can greatly help or hinder young children's learning*", and more recently, the quality of spaces for children (Olds, 2001; Fallon, 2003; Schonfeld, 2006; Friedman, 2007) has been related to specific mental, social and/or emotional developmental benefits. Architects (Le Corbusier, 1968) and early childhood specialists (Clarke-Stewart, 1987), suggested that the physical environment and design may play an essential role in helping define quality in programs for young children, and specifically on the relationship of indoor (Swim, 2004; Gandini and Greenman, 2005; Greenman, 2007) and outdoor (Frost, 1992; Berry, 2001; Sutterby and Thornton, 2005) child care spaces to quality. To Torelli and Durrett (1996: 12),

"A well-designed environment is, of course, safe for infants and toddlers but, more than that, it supports their emotional well-being, stimulates their senses, and challenges their motor skills. A quality design aims to create a classroom that is highly functional, aesthetically attractive, age-appropriate, child-directed, and teacher-supported. A well-designed group care environment promotes children's individual and social development."

How might one begin to identify design indicators of program quality that go beyond these indicators, and beyond common constructs of safety (Beaty, 2003), minimum licensing regulations, general environmental rating scales (Harms and Clifford, 1998), developmental appropriateness (Bredekamp, 1987), and children's competency (Maxwell, 2007)? One approach might be to consider the aesthetic impact of design on

children. Maslow and Mintz's studies in the 1950s (Hearron and Hildebrand, 2007: 184) demonstrated the "*impact of the environment's aesthetic quality on human interactions and perceptions*". Let us consider aesthetic quality and its possible impact on designs for children with a new term: *distinctive elegance*.

What is Distinctive Elegance?

Elegance implies refinement, grace and beauty. It has much to do with taste, but relatively little to do with money. There are perhaps as many wonderful examples of financially challenged facilities striving for elegance as there are particularly ostentatious facilities demonstrating crude excess. As French (1994: 2-3) noted,

"One characteristic of functional design is elegance. Most people find a buttercup beautiful ... [T]he buttercup has an essential elegance, much more fundamental than its mere appearance. It is an elegant solution to a difficult problem in functional design ... and its beautiful outward form is a reflection of its economical design.... [T]he locomotive is (also) an elegant design, economical in its use of energy and material, with its balanced mechanisms and well-proportioned parts, full of ingenious detail and thoughtful refinements, and the overall coherence and unity that results so often from a single purpose intelligently pursued. It has beauty for the educated eye - and because of its simple action the education need only be slight - and that beauty comes nearly all from its functional design, and very little from conscious aesthetic intention."

Distinctive elegance in designs for young children requires at least five conditions:

1. A distinctively elegant space must be what Prescott (1994) calls a place to remember, a place Wien, *et al.* (2005) call special and one that appeals to both occupants and observers. It attracts and sustains attention and induces fondness. In the words of Nelson (2004: 1), the founding father of hypertext:

"I am a design chauvinist. I believe that good design is magical and not to be lightly tinkered with. The difference between a great design and a lousy one is in the meshing of the thousand details that either fit or don't, and the spirit of the passionate intellect that has been tied to them, or tried".

A distinctly elegant space must demonstrate respect for all its inhabitants. It should call to children as well as adults. In US classrooms, the prevailing design concept is often 'child proofing', which suggests an emphasis on safety, perhaps by an assumption that young children are like Huns and may destroy everything in sight; therefore, early childhood spaces should be like bunkers.

2. A distinctly elegant space considers scale and proportion. It should fit, like baby bear's chair and porridge. To Kidd (1987: ix),

"A Japanese room, composed of an astonishing number of straight lines and right

angles, whatever its size, is best observed seated on the floor. From this vantage point the lines seem to radiate from us".

Rooms for young children should be best observed, appreciated and evaluated from a point one-half to one meter above the floor.

3. A distinctly elegant space demonstrates an appreciation of the materials utilized and strives for perfection of detail. Any real understanding of a space must begin with an appreciation of the materials used in its construction. For example, the dovetailed corners of a birch Nienhuis box for sandpaper letters for a Montessori classroom shows thought in the choice of material and care in the construction of the corner detail; this demonstrates respect. Such care and attention makes that box a delight to see and hold, and encourages children to treat it with respect. Let us also consider chairs. As Merton (quoted in Andrews and Andrews, 1973: xiii) reminds us, *"The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it."* The ubiquitous plastic chair in US classrooms, with little thought to proportion, hip to knee length, or back support is a disrespectful choice, and does not imply respect.
4. A distinctly elegant space models restraint, complexity, idiosyncrasy, variety, subtlety, refinement, grace and beauty. Distinctly elegant rooms are the antithesis of typically cluttered US classrooms which look like they are in the middle of what we call a 'garage; or 'tag' sale, with the visual chaos against which Nancy Rambusch, founder of the American Montessori Society, used to rail, complaining that the Thanksgiving turkeys were still up on the walls when the Easter bunnies arrived. Children are not idiots and spaces for them should acknowledge that they appreciate visual restraint, challenge, and can discern good design.
5. A distinctly elegant space should be culturally reflective but universally appreciated and admired. Like a great chef, one should try to use whatever materials are indigenously accurate, appropriately scaled, and close at hand. Alexander (1964), in writing about the notion of fit in design, notes, *"The form is a part of the world over which we have control, and which we decide to shape while leaving the rest of the world as it is. The context is that part of the world, which puts demands on this form: anything in the world that makes demands of the form is context. Fitness is a relation of mutual acceptability between these two."*

One expects a preschool playground in Fortaleza, Brazil to look different than one in Vilnius, Lithuania. I will now briefly introduce five examples of distinctively elegant interior and exterior designs.

Distinctively Elegant Indoor Spaces

Maddex (2006: 1) notes that Frank Lloyd Wright states, "*the enclosed space within is the reality of the building*" and set out to let, "*the room inside be the architecture outside*".

Ospedale Innocenti, Florence, Italy



In 1294 the Silk Weaver's Guild in Florence, Italy assumed the role of protectors and educators of the city's abandoned, primarily illegitimate children, and later initiated a tax on silk to support their activities. In 1419 they started construction of the first separate hospital to house and educate foundlings. Brunelleschi, who designed the dome for Florence's Cathedral was admitted to the Silk Guild as a goldsmith and helped create a masterpiece of early Renaissance architecture for the foundling hospital and its surrounding square (Fanelli, 1980). As a result, Agatha Smeralda, the first child accepted at the hospital as well as the thousands of other young children, all given the name Innocenti, were housed in an elegant and highly rational design. The building housed orphans during both World Wars and still houses a scuola materna in the back and a child advocacy institute as well as a museum (Becocci Editore, 1977). For our purposes, this facility demonstrates all that is possible when the best architects and artists contribute to a design for young children.

Ecole Maternelle Rosa Bonheur, Nice, France

Rosa Bonheur was a French realist painter (1822-1899), considered by the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York as the most famous woman artist of the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. She was primarily known for her paintings of horses, and was the first woman to receive a cross of the Legion of Honor in France, personally bestowed by the wife of emperor Napoleon III to show, as she said, that "genius has no sex" (Smith, 2007). The Rosa Bonheur nursery school is an outstanding example of renovation, in a glorious setting, with a poured observatory floor, art niches in ancient exterior walls, a kiln as an integral component of a integrated art program, glass block interior walls, round sinks and bunk bed cots.

Tikan Paivakoti, Kuokkala, Finland

This facility for 100 children, next to the university town of Jyvaskyla, offers full and part-time care. While its exterior is gray and outside play spaces are not particularly interesting, its interior is wonderful. There one finds a sauna, child-scaled wading/swimming pool, an interior slide from the second floor, thoughtful storage with excellent cubbies, and very well crafted furniture including stacking benches. There are also fireplaces, a terrific playhouse under the stairs, heated floors, and perhaps the only elegant interior in the world that includes velvet paintings.

Distinctively Elegant Outdoor Spaces**Colégio Baptista Santos Dumont, Fortaleza, Brazil**

Take a cement pyramid and cut off the top, take another and cut off the top and build a large opening in the side, and then take a third and build a playhouse inside. Truncated pyramids are the design concept for this preschool, which proves that programs can provide novelty, elegance, and particularly interesting experiences to young children on a very limited budget.

Kindergarten #141, Vilnius, Lithuania

In Vilnius kindergartens were given numbers rather than names. Number 141 is a most unique outdoor play space, made completely of small tiles, including a tiled floor surface, tiled playhouses and climbing structures, and tidepools that catch the rain or can be filled. Easy to clean, unforgiving for slips and falls, slightly psychedelic, and perhaps on the very fringe of elegance, but included here for its uniqueness, and its conceptualization.

Conclusion

From these and other facilities, it is clear that the United States has much to learn from other programs around the world, particularly in relation to design. Part of the value in looking at facilities outside my own country is what McGlade terms *eyes wide open* (McDonnell, 2008: C6). When one is in a new environment, things are different and fresh, often created with a different perspective, and as a result one tends to pay closer attention. My observations of programs outside the U.S. have greatly informed me about the limitations of many current designs, and required me to question why so many spaces and furnishings in the U.S. have fallen into such predictable, and often far from optimal patterns.

Baby Bear was correct in looking for porridge that is 'just right'. Children desire what Hunt (1964: xxii) called *optimum incongruity*, a match between where they are at this moment and what, developmentally, is needed to help them get where they want to go next. Good teachers are often intuitively aware of this problem of the match; designers and architects often are not. However, French designer Jean Touitou (Bagley, 2008: 192) believes that a child is never too young to, "*develop an appreciation for quality goods.... Even if you grow up to be an accountant, it's better to be surrounded by beautiful furniture than by ugly furniture*". Naoto Fukusawa, perhaps the most influential product designer in Japan (Rawsthorn, 2008: 126) believes we must no longer focus on objects in isolation but consider how each is related to the way it is used, the things around it, and the entire surroundings, what the French curator Bourriaud might call *relational aesthetics* (Browne, 2008: 131). This requires new reflections on the design of spaces for children, respect for their ability to appreciate quality even at a very young age, and a desire to create environments that can initiate and sustain their attention.

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