

# Special spaces

When considering the buildings in which our youngest children learn and play, it's the small things which matter, says **Mark Dudek...**

**A**rchitecture can be inspiring. Whether it is at home or at school, the quality of a space can have developmental benefits, stimulating young children on many different levels and playing a crucial role in their social development. It is not just the big things – for example, efficient heating and ventilation systems to create a comfortable environment – which matter; the smaller features, which are so often ignored by architects and general designers of these special environments, do too.

I was reminded about this fact when my young children, Grace and Amy, aged three and five respectively, were playing outside in the garden one cold and frosty afternoon. They rushed in to tell me about something really important; they had found a kitchen sponge that was frozen solid and bonded to the ground. “Daddy, it’s stuck and hard,” they explained excitedly. The adult in me thought, “So what?”, but we looked together and I pointed out that they could release the sponge by pouring warm water over it. They then went to the kitchen, dragged a tall stool towards the high sink and I helped them to fill a bowl of warm water, which we took outside, gradually thawing the sponge until one of them managed to prise it away from the frozen patio.

This, I realised, had been a learning moment for all of us, and one that would not have been available to them if we had been living in a flat without a garden. However, that was the big thing; the smaller details were equally important. For example, the level threshold between the inside and the outside, which enabled safe and easy run-in-run-out play, and the coats and gloves hanging on the child-height pegs beside the back door were also crucial elements in this drama. It spoke about the transformation of the property of materials when you change the temperature. For them, I suspect, it was one small moment

in their fast developing lives that enabled them to observe something perfectly natural, yet new and magical. For me it emphasised how much young children can learn if the environment enables that learning (along with caring parents and parenting carers).

## Making improvements

Many childcare professionals now understand the importance of architecture in ensuring good provision for young children and their families. Even so, many are deterred from making improvements, perhaps because they lack financial support or because they feel powerless to do very much about the buildings they currently occupy. In an era of relative financial stringency, self-motivated activity at the community level is likely to be the norm as each district competes for scarce resources. However, by creating your own impetus it is possible to make something much, much better by attending to the details, on a relatively limited self-build budget. There is an apocryphal story, well known within the industry, about a now famous radio and TV presenter who, when given his own office at Television Centre, decided to take into his own hands the changes he felt were required. He was seen wandering off to IKEA, returning a few hours later with a set of tools, some shelving, curtains and a small sofa. DIY, he believed, was the most efficient way to make the room his own and get what he needed of it.

A number of important studies have shown that the quality of play spaces can either hasten or delay the rate at which children develop. For example, in his study of children’s play, Harry Heft (1988) suggests that environmental features should be described in terms of the developmental activities they encourage. He calls this concept ‘affordances’ in which, for example,

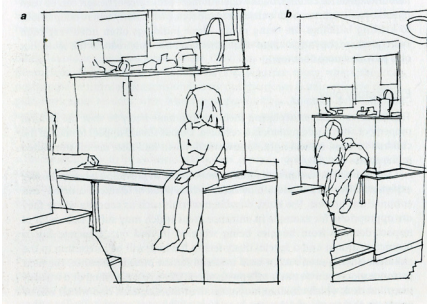
a smooth flat surface affords or encourages walking and running, while a soft spongy surface affords lying down and relaxing. This thinking can be extended to many aspects of the child’s environment, or to put it into contemporary academic language, his micro-environment (as opposed to his macro environment).

I know one centre manager who, being well aware of the pleasure young children get from wet messy play, set-out to create a wet play zone. So with the aid of a helpful parent who also happened to be a plumber, she fitted out one corner of the classroom (close to the garden doors) with a drinking fountain and two low ‘Belfast’ sinks, all at minimal cost. Together with appropriate flooring and wall finishes it provides a practical workshop zone where all sorts of experiments take place into the properties of malleable materials. This affords the development of little explorers, scientists in the making.

## Value your rooms

In observational studies at an old, somewhat decrepit Sheffield nursery some years ago (see illustration above), I noticed how two girls used a high but safe plinth as a viewing point where they could look down on other children. They were constantly climbing on top; it was





their place and clearly they took great pleasure in the affordances it provided. They would lie down and watch the movement of their friends below for what seemed like hours; it gave them a sense of belonging and made them feel special. Yet it was simply a device to separate one area of the classroom from another, an accident of design, which when discovered by children was somehow magical. When the community were in a position to commission a brand new building, this little feature was written into the briefing documentation and an absolute requirement for the new classroom, much to the bewilderment of the design architect.

Be aware of the existing features within your building which you take for granted but which children might value for particular child-orientated reasons. A special window seat niche, for example, which fits two friends, or a notice board at child height with displays of family photographs can make children feel at home. So often designers and architects only consider what they view as the 'function' of the building, which can be stark and institutional in feel. An over large window can be softened by the introduction of curtaining, which will not only amend the quality of light within the space but can be used as a theatre where children's plays can be performed too.

I believe it is important that practitioners bring their own aesthetic skills to bear, and view their rooms as places of beauty rather than a hard unyielding machine for learning. Value what you have and try to enhance it. I often think about how shop window dressers manage to take somewhat mundane environments and transform them into visions of desire. I am not saying the rooms in an early years setting should be like Aladdin's Cave, but the small moments will help children to develop and the setting to become a learning environment in the best sense.

## Small changes

Within those classroom spaces with high ceilings and walls (within which children can feel somewhat out of scale), you might want to provide a number of small enclosed areas. Get hold of some simple garden trellis, form it into a little room with three sides and a roof and fix it solidly to the wall. Buy some cheap soft fabrics from the local market, use a staple gun to cover the frame, create a soft floor with a bit of left-over carpet and some cheap cushions from Primark, and you have created a cosy enclosed area which is soft and intimate – the type of space where a few friends can enjoy reading and chatting away from the crowd. Of course, you must ensure that it is robust and safe to use – a local carpenter might give a few hours of his time on a Saturday to ensure this is the case.

## findoutmore

Mark Dudek is the author of new National Children's Bureau book, *Spaces for Young*



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