Environments that Speak to Children

by Michelle Pratt

Photograph by Michelle Pratt

When considering the way an environment 'speaks' to children, teachers must ask themselves, "What can children do?" "How and where can they do it?" and "How they can work together?" Kritchevsky and Prescott, with Walling (1977) state:

"What is in a space, a room, or a yard, and how it is arranged can affect the behaviour of people; it can make it easier to act in certain kinds of ways, harder to act in others. We don't ordinarily think to take out a deck of cards at a dinner table set for six, even though the number and arrangement suggest a poker game. The whole setting gives us cues about expected behaviour, and generally we do what we have been invited to do . . . in a similar way, particular settings invite children to involve themselves in particular activities, and the extent of children's constructive participation in the activity will depend in large part on how well certain concrete, measurable aspects of the surrounding physical space meet their 'hunger, attitudes and interests'. . . ."

Michelle Pratt is a Director of New Shoots Children's Centres-New Zealand. The focus of her work is in the design of Early Childhood Centres and educational contexts. She has been an advocate for early childhood education for sustainability for almost 25 years and is delighted that an international movement is beginning to coalesce around environmental and sustainability issues and early education. She co-ordinates a successful Childcare Design Facebook Group and is interested in design elements that encompass Centre and furniture design. Visit Michelle's website: www.newshoots.co.nz or contact her: michelle@newshoots.co.nz

Assessing the Physical Environment

There are three key areas to consider when assessing an environment for children:

- The physical environment (how this is designed and its ongoing management).
- The interactional environment (social interactions between groups within the environment).
- The temporal environment (routines and schedules.

Key areas of the physical environment to consider are:

- organisation.
- aesthetics.
- leaders who understand good design and their ability to implement desired change (the support systems and training provided).

I believe these key areas have a significant impact on the way children inhabit their environments, the messages communicated, and the emotional climate within the setting, which influences children's learning, well-being, and development. It's about taking a broad view of the way the environment is organized and its impact on the children who inhabit it.

Defining Areas for Children's Play and Interaction

Defining areas of activity and play for children is an art and a science. For example, areas within early childhood settings often are poorly located in relation to each other:

- Blocks, manipulatives, and construction are often found in front of dramatic play areas.
- Climbing equipment is placed in the middle of a room or within an otherwise quiet reading space.
- Pathways allowing children to move freely between areas or have a clear view of what is available are unrecognisable.

An additional challenge in the organisation of rooms is that often spaces are created to be neutral; a neutral room does not have to be a bore. The solution is to create contrast. This can be achieved with the use of wood, metal,

Copyright © Exchange Press, Inc.
Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.
All rights reserved. Visit us at www.ChildCareExchange.com
or call (800) 221-2864.

tactile rugs, a beautiful piece of art or sculpture — this is what makes rooms feel like a home. Teachers need to be provided with expert advice and support in putting this together.

Anita Olds (1987) suggests that well-designed activity areas have five defining attributes:

- a physical *location*
- visible *boundaries*, indicating where the area begins and ends
- *work* and *sitting surfaces*
- materials *storage* and *display*
- a *mood* or personality

These attributes are all interconnected and should not be considered in isolation.

Creating Flow Patterns within the Centre Environment

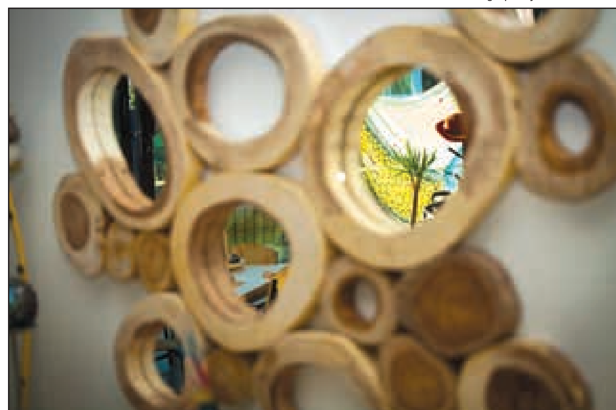
The connections between activity areas need to be considered when designing environments that support children's learning. Through the provision of a range of experiences — quiet times, enjoyment of a sense of order, participation, the chance to make a mess, collaborative activities to name a few — we develop a fun place where children can learn and develop. It may seem obvious that quiet areas are located together, away from noisy areas, while art areas need access to water and provisions for clean-up, this is often not evident. The connections between areas need careful consideration.

Using the Existing Structures

Structural aspects of the building should also be taken into account. Anita Olds (1987) recommends capitalising on features such as windows and doors:

- Platforms or steps can be built below windows to allow children to reach a view.
- Corners and nooks can be used to create spaces for children to withdraw from the group. These spaces are essential in group care situations when children do not necessarily want to be with others.
- Shrubs and trees within the natural environment are places for the development of quiet spaces.
- Natural and existing undulations can support large motor equipment such as tree stumps, sticks, slides, and items to hang from.

Photograph by Michelle Pratt



The planning of these areas affects the choice of nearby activity spaces. Areas of high use should be spread throughout the available space so that children will be more inclined to work as part of small groups or as individuals, rather than in a crowd of children. Resources need to be chosen and positioned carefully to support children's learning. The purchase and use of large manufactured play structures should be carefully considered. Often planned natural landscapes can achieve the same ends.

Communicating Pathways

It is important to consider the flow of activities from the children's point of view. Children need to know where they can find and return things in order to set their own goals, decide what they are interested in, and be able to manipulate materials to explore those interests. This assists children in reconstructing their knowledge in different activity areas. In order to regulate their own emotional needs, children need to know where to find quiet, busy, noisy, or creative spaces — or spaces where they can have physical contact with others.

Outdoor areas may include defined pathways; these can incorporate different textures, shapes, and forms. The width and texture of an outdoor path gives children messages about how the path and the space it leads to can be used. Differing textures also can help to create sensory interest for children, defining areas of activity.

Photograph by Michelle Pratt

Impact of Colour

Indoors, boundaries can be created using multiple floor coverings, matching colours within an area, draping fabrics or installing materials that differ, staggering ceiling heights, and using furniture. Olds (1987) describes colour as ". . . the most powerful visual organiser." Specific and clear use of colour needs to be carefully considered.

Early childhood centres are often visually cluttered environments with the use of bright colours scattered throughout. Examples of how colour is used can give messages to children and can be seen in the grouping resources and furniture.

- Keeping tones neutral (one matching colour) gives a visual message about where items belong together. This allows children to focus on items of interest without too much visual distraction.
- When walls and furniture are presented in an array of bright colours they add to visual confusion rather than standing out as items of beauty and intrigue. Colour needs to be used in an intentional manner.

Considering Aesthetics

Dissanayake (1992) talks about *aesthetics* as the 'critical evaluation' of art (which includes the visual and dramatic arts, as well as dance and music) or a design, based on criteria that are seen as important by a particular culture or person. The aesthetic experience consists of the use of form, line and colour, themes of the work, combination of mediums, use of symbolism, and so on. Inherent in this definition is an appreciation and recognition of the skill and craft of the artist who has executed the work. Dissanayake also views aesthetics as the appreciation of a pleasant and special sensory experience (usually visual, aural, or tactile). Additionally, aesthetic objects or situations often involve other features "that are pleasing to the cognitive faculties: repetition, pattern, continuity, clarity, dexterity, elaboration or variation of a theme, contrast, balance, and proportion."

There are clear linkages that can be used in the design of early childhood settings. As Gonzales-Mena and Eyer (1994) state,

"Aesthetics is a worthy but often unconsidered goal when designing the visual environment for infants and toddlers (and pre-schoolers). Children are more likely to grow up with an eye for beauty if the adults around them demonstrate that they value aesthetics."

Unlike Italy and many other European countries, many societies have yet to establish a strong cultural identity which embraces the arts and creativity. Functionality, immediate usefulness, and cost cutting become the focus. This approach generally excludes considerations of important design principles or aesthetics. In early childhood settings the result of this type of approach can be uninspired, particularly in the development of outside play areas. However, the use of trained designers, architects, and landscape architects can ensure that costly mistakes and unappealing environments are prevented.

Many classrooms are cluttered with displays created with pre-produced materials: 'cute' paintings of commercial images or adult art, both of which are unimaginative and commercially oriented. The display of natural materials and items of beauty is essential in early childhood settings. They can be aesthetically pleasing, not only because of the inherent natural beauty of the materials themselves, but also because of the way the objects are arranged (balance, contrast, spacing, arrangement), as well as how and where they are situated (light, proximity to other activities). Fundamental to this belief is the thought that the experience will be pleasurable and provoke an emotional response. Presentation of children's work is often not well considered; artwork is either randomly or chaotically displayed on centre walls, or in some cases, entirely absent. A good result is found when the environment reflects the beauty of the people who inhabit it and the splendour of the natural world. It should give pleasure to those who work and play in the centre and to those who visit. The *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures of the National Association for the Education of Young Children* states, "The environment should be attractive, colourful, and have children's work and other pictures displayed at children's eye level" (NAEYC, 1998, p. 49). While these standards are designed for preschool and kindergarten rooms, this does not necessarily fit with appropriate aesthetic design and is open to misinterpretation. Houle & Krogness (2001) discuss how kindergarten and primary school teachers are under increased pressure to support literacy development. Literature in this area suggests that teachers create classrooms that are rich in print, incorporating such things as word walls (signs, labels, bulletin boards), and more. However, Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp (2008) caution that, "More does not mean better. In a room cluttered with labels, signs, and such — print for print's sake — letters and words become just so much wallpaper."

Good aesthetic decision making can help to de-institutionalise environments such as early childhood centres, hospitals, and other institutions where young children are cared for, for long periods of time. The current aesthetic is to make environments for children as 'homelike' as possible. Environments that are considered beautiful and inviting can feed souls. Respect

and care for objects and equipment is fundamental to this working.

Crook and Farmer (1996) believe that the presentation of equipment and resources should say ". . . 'come and get me,' inspiring feelings of excitement, intrigue, and the desire to explore." In order to make ordinary things look extraordinary, presentation should be thoughtful and uncluttered.

The Reggio Emilia approach stresses the "environment as the third teacher" (Gandini, 1998, p. 177). Reggio-inspired teachers examine their classrooms critically and reflect on all aspects of teaching environments, including the purposes of display and classroom aesthetics. For example, following her visit to Reggio Emilia, Hertzog (2001) wrote, "I can strive for more aesthetically pleasing environments in our classrooms. I can ask teachers to examine their classrooms for clutter."

In closing, I have often heard people say, "We will sort out the environment first. Then we'll start to work on program planning and outcomes for children and families" as though they are disconnected. The learning environment should be based on observations of the children and the goal of supporting and extending their learning. Planning the environment is part of program planning.

References

Crook, S., & Farmer, B. (1996). *Just imagine. Creative play experiences for children under six.* Melbourne: RMIT Publishing.

Dissanayake, E. (1992). *Homo Aestheticus: Where art comes from and why.* New York: The Free Press.

Gonzales-Mena, J., & Eyer, D. W. (1994). *Infants, toddlers and caregivers* (4th ed.). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.

Hertzog, N. (2001). Reflections and impressions from Reggio Emilia: "It's not about art!" *Early Childhood Research and Practice,* 3(1). Online: http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n1/hertzog.html

Kolbe, U., Shephard, W., & Eaton, J. (1994). *Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre handbook.* Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University.

Kritchevsky, S., & Prescott, E., with Walling, L. (1977). *Planning environments for young children: Physical space* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Olds, A. (1987). *Spaces for children: The built environment and child development*, p. 137 (Weinstein, C. & David, T., Eds.). New York: Plenum Press.

Rinaldi, C. (1998). The space of childhood. In *Children, spaces, relations: Metaproject for an environment for young children.* In G. Ceppi & M. Zini (Eds.). Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.

— ■ —

Photograph by Michelle Pratt