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Breaking the Code:

Changing our thinking about children's environments

by Sandra Duncan

Sir Winston Churchill said, "We shape our dwellings, and afterward our dwellings shape us." Although Churchill was referring to rebuilding the House of Commons after heavy bombing during the Battle of Britain more than 50 years ago, his words continue to hold true, especially when designing environments for young children. If dwellings have the power to shape young children's lives, then it is crucial that we pay close attention to the design and development of these environments.

We are all impacted — positively or negatively — by the physical spaces and environments that surround us. Our immersion in these environments influences physical and mental well-being, and tenders our emotions in subtle,

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lasting ways. Entering a beautiful church or synagogue, for instance, evokes a sense of well-being that is dramatically different from entering a bowling alley or sports arena. Or, walking into a doctor’s examining room evokes an emotional and physical feeling that is considerably different from walking into a room for a therapeutic massage. This difference in human stance, attitude, and emotional approach is defined as environmental psychology, which is “the interactions and relations between people and their environments” (Oskamp & Schultz, 1998, p. 206).

As educators and architects of classrooms, it is our responsibility to create spaces that promote positive relationships between people and their environments. It is equally important to recognize that the “environment is invented by our presence in it” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 18). Life in early childhood classrooms organizes and clusters around the relationships between adults, children, and the space they occupy. Classrooms become living systems, which experience fluidity and change over time (Greenman, 2007). While some change can be attributed to architectural trends over time, there are smatterings of new thoughts — and the recession of previously influential ideas — that are significantly changing the way classrooms are designed. These new movements are breaking away from the traditionally accepted design codes.

Breaking the aesthetic code

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the expression of beauty (Lambourne, 1996). In the architectural world, aesthetics involves more than typical design components, such

as proportion and line. Aesthetics also entails elements in the space, such as textures, lighting, temperatures, sounds, and colors. And, as many experts believe, aesthetics embraces a social construct, which is reflected and embodied in the spaces people inhabit (Lambourne, 1996; Nair et. al, 2009; Rosario & Collazo, 1981; Stoecklin, 2001; Tarr, 2001). People’s perceptions of what is beautiful or aesthetically pleasing, therefore, are socially shaped and grounded in culture and familiarity (Reinisch & Parnell, 2010; Rosario & Collazo, 1981; Whole Building Design Guide, 2010). These socially-shaped perceptions become our society’s accepted expectations or aesthetic codes. Let’s look at one example.

One conventional aesthetic code is that pastel colors are often connected with infants, whereas bright colors are associated with preschoolers. In the early childhood preschool space, the acceptable code is primary colors, lively decorated borders, colorful, commercially-produced posters, and cartoon images of people and animals.

There are many other traditionally acceptable codes that permeate preschool spaces, such as the notion that walls filled with children’s work indicate productivity, an abundance of commercially-purchased toys indicates a well-equipped space, and full shelves result in learning. Fortunately, early childhood experts are beginning to break these antiquated codes by suggesting new aesthetic codes that stress the importance of designing beautiful, respectful environments rather than simply filling classroom spaces (DeViney et. al, 2010; Greenman, 2007; Nair, Fielding, & Lackney, 2007).

The new trend in aesthetic codes focuses on beautifully designed environments that are harmonious with children’s beauty. In such environments, neutral colors are used on the walls and floors, the furniture is made of natural materials, and the beauty of nature is infused into the room. Instead of bold and bright colors generating from the furnishings or wall decorations, the new code brings color into the space through the simple beauty of children’s paintings, weavings, drawings, or sculptures.

Also, this new code embraces simplicity and values children’s work, especially regarding how their masterpieces are displayed. Tarr (2004) challenges early childhood educators to think beyond the idea of decorating the classroom walls with scalloped borders and alphabet posters. She says, “Work that follows formulaic schemas, such as prescriptive worksheets or the St. Patrick’s Day mobiles hanging from the ceiling, stifles the true capabilities of young children and consequently silences imagination and creativity” (p. 3). Still, many educators continue to cover the walls with materials that not only have little educational value but perpetuate the wrong aesthetic code.



Creating color with children’s work — Fruit Bowl Sculptures

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DEVINEY, CREATIVE ENVIRONMENTS DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

Breaking the traditional aesthetic code requires de-cluttering the walls, removing commercially-produced materials, and placing children's framed creative expressions, as well as thoughtfully chosen masterpieces, such as Monet or Rembrandt throughout the classroom. By doing so, teachers can break down the walls of the antiquated aesthetic code and begin to create new codes that honor children's work and create beautiful spaces.

Breaking the tangible code

According to Reinisch and Parnell (DesignShare, 2010), it is not enough to simply have aesthetically beautiful spaces, "Rather, it is human relationships in harmony with the aesthetic qualities that make the difference. There are many beautiful spaces filled with aesthetic beauty that still feel cold and empty [because] they are lacking the relationship factor" (pp. 1-2). Research has long recognized that in order for young children to develop to their fullest potential, they need encouraging relationships with adults (Ciarrochi & Mayer, 2006).

It is common knowledge that a positive relationship between mother and child is essential to growth and development. Although this essential bond cannot be diminished, recent research has suggested that both animals and humans can benefit from secure and stable relationships involving alloparenting or multiple caregivers (Pavard, 2010). In a child care center, alloparenting involves the relationships between families, teachers, support staff, and administrators. Promoting positive relationships through alloparenting requires refocusing our thinking about the use of tangible space. This refocus requires a paradigm shift to break away from the traditionally accepted code of center configuration. Rather than merely focusing on the classroom space, equal attention should also be placed on allocating tangible places for staff and families. For example, Milgard Center's commitment to relationships and community spirit is reflected in the areas that have been dedicated not only to children, but to the adults and families who interact with the space.

In an existing center, the reality of allocating tangible space for staff and families is challenging because of limited square footage. Carving out spaces that facilitate relationships and increase community spirit may mean making difficult decisions about how the space is currently used and configured. For example:

- Could the break room double as a staff lounge and parent/teacher resource center?
- Instead of simply being a spot for the coffeepot, could this area become a place where parents and staff connect in a personal way?
- Or, could the center's entryway be transformed from a mere transition pathway into a space for gathering and socialization

by adding a couple of comfy chairs, soft lighting, artwork, and rug? If this area is large enough, it could also provide a place for an alternative learning environment for children, such as small group story time.

Because today's society is fast-paced, filled with complexity, and whirling at an incredible pace, it is becoming increasingly evident that children and families need environments that help them transition from the outside world to the center's world. In a typical classroom, for instance, morning drop-off can be challenging and hectic for all involved with most of the energy and attention being directed to custodial acts such as signing in or handling children's garments. Little, if any, attention is given to developing positive emotional transitions from the world outside the classroom. This problem is amplified by the traditional code of how the physical space is configured and designed.

The space near the entry door is all too often focused on custodial events. By placing furniture and equipment that serve custodial tasks (i.e., children's cubbies or coat hooks) near the main door, there is an underlying code or message that managing custodial jobs is more important than supporting relationships. Moving the custodial elements away from the entry door helps change this message to both parents and children. Hayes Child Development Center created a unique way to enter the classroom that sends a positive message regarding everyone's importance. And Milgard Center's attention to detail outside the classroom door conveys the idea that all the center's spaces are equally important in developing relationships.

Breaking old and making new codes

Much of the way we design today's early childhood environments is based on antiquated codes. Today's early childhood teachers



Creating color with children's work — The Seahorse Sculpture

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DEVINEY, CREATIVE ENVIRONMENTS DESIGN COLLABORATIVE



Developing relationships through use of space
Milgard Center, Lakewood, Washington.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MILGARD CENTER, LAKEWOOD, WASHINGTON



Transitioning from outside world to center world Children's Home Society of Washington, Highline Early Learning Center, Auburn, Washington

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, HIGHLINE EARLY LEARNING CENTER, AUBURN, WASHINGTON

are in a unique position to break away from the status quo and traditional codes by creating environments that are harmonious with children's beauty. Rather than designing with brightly colored paint, furniture, and equipment, the new aesthetic code calls for using neutral colors allowing the children's beauty to fill the environment. Instead of bombarding classrooms with commercially-purchased materials, a new aesthetic code is created by filling and coloring the environment with children's work displayed in a beautiful, respectful way. Rather than considering the classroom as the most important space in the center, today's code suggests that all the physical spaces are interrelated, tangible components of design that support relationships between adults and young children.

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Transitioning between outside world to center world Hayes Child Development Center, Lakewood, Washington

PHOTOGRAPH BY HAYES CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER, LAKEWOOD, WASHINGTON