

The research approach of PLAY+SOFT: Furnishings for flexible and responsive environments (first published – Play Scotland, January 2007)

Increasingly, research into children's environments and learning styles calls for a closer collaboration between designers and pedagogy, so that these environments can respond to children and the furnishings themselves can become tools for learning and exploration.

PLAY+SOFT is the product of a 4-year research project conducted with the pedagogical consultancy of Reggio Children, the art direction of ZPZ Partners, children, teachers, and a team of 28 international designers. It takes as its starting point, "...the sensitivity, originality and creativity (of children)." It is an encounter between design and pedagogy, and an outcome of the ongoing research at the world-renowned pre-schools and infant toddler centres at Reggio Emilia, in Italy.

Places of beauty

The choices made throughout the PLAY+SOFT design process reflect the project's sensitivity to detail. Each piece is underpinned by guiding principles – to be stimulating and multi-sensory; to promote exploration, interaction and enquiry; to provide security and comfort. In this respect they can also be seen as a response to the currency of multiple intelligence theories: creating environments for visual, interpersonal and kinesthetic learners. They are used to define movement, create forums for meetings, and places for enquiry.

The aim is to make the environments in which children live – and by this the project means: all environments inhabited by children – places of complexity, places that are stimulating and which promote the formation of personal identity and growth; places of beauty; places for play.

...giving quality to play means giving quality to 'play-based thinking'.

The colours themselves mark a clear break with traditional furnishings – that is, the uniform (often garish) primary colours in building blocks and regular 3d forms. Instead: a rich chromatic landscape, which is vibrant and enjoyable. The research even developed a new, eco-friendly covering (ecosoftx®) and foam (sofficiel®). The result is soft to the touch, water-repellent, easy to clean and fireproof.

Colour palette

The wide and varied colour palette of the PLAY+ range is conceived in response to research and specifically to subvert the pervasive marketing culture of primary colours in children's environments.

Often the strategy is expressed that brightly lit, primary colours are the best environments for young children. This is not born out by any reputable research.

research. In fact, experience has shown that children are wonderfully sensitive and sensitive and responsive to nuances in both lighting and colour.

This multi-sensory theme aims to introduce new sensory qualities into environments for children. Smooth, rough, elastic; a rich colour palette; designed to be stimulating and warm; to both blend with and transform the existing setting. This underlines one principle arising out of the ongoing research of Reggio Children: that the learning environment itself should be the 'third teacher'- together with educators and the children's own experiences and their enthusiasms for enquiry and exploration. The learning environment should be a place that supports and provides contexts for learning. Encounters within this stimulating, aesthetic context will be enhanced by the context itself.

The nature of the PLAY+SOFT items means that they can be transformed, moved, rolled up, opened and closed. The objective is to facilitate flexible use of space: to create possibilities for redefining the children's environment, to enable a host of (perhaps diametrically opposed) activities.

The environment generates a sort of psychic skin, an energy-giving second skin made of writings, images, materials, objects and colours, which reveals the presence of the children even in their absence.

The school environment must lend itself to manipulation and transformation by adults and children alike and be open to different ways of use.

In her 2005 article, *the right to beauty*, Vea Vecchi cites human beings' primary need for aesthetic quality in life. With the same rationale, children have the right to inhabit places that are "beautiful and pleasant", because 'Beauty': can promote a "more attentive eye and an empathic relationship (with their surroundings)".

The cornerstone of our experience, based on practice, theory, and research, is the image of the children as rich, strong, and powerful.

The emphasis is placed on seeing the children as unique subjects with rights rather than simply needs.

It is, therefore, a deeply held belief in children's rights that drives the research: the right to play; the right to beauty.

Design for children

The art directors for the PLAY+ project – ZPZ Partners (Michele Zini, Claudio Zoboli, and Mattia Parmiggiani: designers with an impressive and highly influential tradition developing settings for children in Italy and throughout Europe) – speak of an environment as "a protagonist in the construction of the identity of each child and each of us". In other words, there is a direct correspondence between external, environmental factors and cognitive development; and interventions to nurture

development include the intervention and scaffolding (in Vygotsky's sense of these words) initiated by the setting itself. ZPZ Partners insist, "...schools and environments for children should be places of sensory exploration that foster children's self-learning." With this sensibility, the furnishings and equipment developed with Reggio Children become tools to transform a setting with the intention of a more stimulating and effective learning environment.

The 28 international designers – each with common experience, yet different cultural perspectives, designing for children – were brought together by the project leader Maurizio Fontanilli (PLAY+ Research) and a remit defined by ZPZ Partners and Reggio Children, to provide original designs for the project.

James Irvine, the influential British designer based in Milan (who has worked with international companies such as Olivetti, Cappellini and Canon), puts his role in the project in perspective when he says, "...the starting point designing for kids is to make it fun."

Places for the future

While the PLAY+ research project takes as its starting point the children of Reggio Emilia, it is not conceived exclusively for an age group or even for the world of education, but rather for any setting inhabited by children: places where children are valued and where their space can be defined by these furnishings.

(In the) construction of buildings, there is a tendency to pay more attention to functional aspects and conformity to standards, neglecting interior design (and the extent that an environment can educate the eye and sensibilities).

Or, as Carla Rinaldi explains the way in which the PLAY+ range relates to the philosophy and pedagogy of Reggio Children:

(The pieces represent) objects with flexible identities... objects that suggest possibilities, ideas and emotions that enrich the projects of play, learning and the life of children and adults alike.

The PLAY+ project aspires to transform the possibilities and tools that may be used to create environments that are rich and enjoyable for children. This is its central premise: supported by the experience and authority of Reggio Children and the expertise of the designers. The proof for its success rests with children themselves and their response to these innovative new environments.

All quotations by Carla Rinaldi and Veia Vecchi (Reggio Children), and Michele Zini (ZPZ Partners) are from articles written exclusively for the launch of PLAY+ in 2005 and reprinted as a preface to the PLAY+ catalogue

www.feelgood-designs.com/catalogue

Ronald Fielding's article 'Learning, Lighting and Colour' (2006) was first published in Professional Lighting Design (PLD) magazine and can be downloaded at www.designshare.com.

Further references:

CEPPI, G. and ZINI, M. (eds) (1998) *Children, Space and Relations*. Domus Academy and Reggio Children: Reggio Emilia (8887960119).

DUDEK, M. (2005) *Children's Spaces*. London: Architectural Press.

DUDEK, M. (2007) *Schools and Kindergartens: A Design Manual*. Germany: Birkhauser

FILIPPINI, T. and VECCHI, V. (eds) (1996) *The Hundred Languages of Children*. Reggio Children: Reggio Emilia (8887960089).

GARDNER, H. (1993) *Frames of Mind*. Fontana

NAIR, P. and FIELDING, R. (2002) *The Language of School Design*

VYGOTSKY, L. (1978) *Mind and Society*.