



THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

How Classroom Design Inspires
Learning and Wonder

Sandra Duncan, EdD, Jody Martin,
and Sally Haughey

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Foreword

The power of space.

It's an expression that brings to mind images of the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and of the sun setting over a magnificent mountain range—settings that invoke feelings of awe and humility.

But what of the everyday spaces, the classrooms, offices, and kitchens where the bulk of our lives are spent? Do these spaces not also affect us in profound and far-reaching ways? Think back to a classroom where you attended elementary school or perhaps your grandmother's basement or the vacant lot where you learned to ride a bike. What would such memories be without the surrounding environments? And would your memories be nearly as powerful without the sights, sounds, and smells of those places? What these memories all have in common is that we experienced them as children. It is classrooms, playgrounds, and lunchrooms that helped shape our experiences and selves—some for good, others perhaps not as much. Could there be a few basic principles at work in the places we remember most fondly? Can we intentionally design space in such a way as to enhance our learning and memories? The answer is yes. We can design spaces that inspire learning and a child's sense of wonder. The key is to preserve the magic and wonder of childhood by creating places that allow children to simply be children. It is what young children need and what they deserve.

—Sandra Duncan, Jody Martin, and Sally Haughey

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1

The Power of Space: Understanding the Importance of Classroom Design



The catalyst that converts any physical location—any environment if you will—into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings . . . We are homesick for places.

—Alan Gussow, *A Sense of Place*

Special spaces often become so because of personal memories, such as your childhood home or the spot where you fell in love. Some spaces, however, are special because they were created for specific uses and purposes. A library is a space to hold books along with other resources, and its purpose is to encourage literacy and offer information. A natural history museum is intended to educate visitors about the world. Clearly, the specificities and intentions of any designed space impact our emotions and behavior. Such places can awe young and old alike. Consider, for example, the Sistine Chapel.

The Sistine Chapel is a redesign of an older existing chapel in Vatican City. Completed between 1477 and 1481, the Sistine Chapel is renowned for its frescoes painted by a team of artists including Michelangelo Buonarroti, who painted the famous ceiling fresco. The design intention of the Sistine Chapel is to inspire worship. It is a sanctuary for people to find deep spiritual comfort and inspiration. The chapel's art and architecture bathe worshippers in serenity, beauty, and peace.

Just as the Sistine Chapel is intentionally designed to serve a purpose, so must early childhood classrooms be intentional. Classrooms are meant to inspire children to grow and become their very best, and intentional classroom design is vital for promoting this inspiration. Children deserve thoughtfully and intentionally designed classrooms. What are our purposes for teaching young children? What would the environment look like in fulfilling those purposes? What essential understandings lay the foundation for designing spaces for young children?

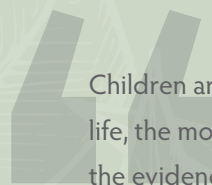
Essential Understandings of Classroom Design

As educators and designers of early childhood environments, we must examine our ideas about how children reach their maximum potential. Then we can decide which types of environments most effectively support children's growth. There are critical components—essential understandings—of classroom design that help to foster children's capacity to reach their maximum potential.



Children are miracles. Believing that every child is a miracle can transform the way we design for children's care. When we invite a miracle into our lives we prepare ourselves and the environment around us . . . We make it our job to create, with reverence and gratitude, a space that is worthy of a miracle!

—Anita Rui Olds, author and designer



Children are the spark plug in the engine of life, the motivation behind our best deeds, and the evidence for hope in the future.

—Ina Hughs, Foreword, *From My Side:
Being a Child*

Essential Understanding 1: Honor Children First and Foremost

Honor is an important word. It is about respect, empathy, acceptance, and patience. Classrooms designed to honor children are environments filled with choices, meaningful experiences, respectful interactions and communications, and relevant collaborations. Children are treated as important, competent contributors. Each child's voice is heard, and all opinions are valued. Children's work is respected and displayed with pride, integrity, and thoughtfulness. In classrooms of honor, the language and culture of each child is revered. Children's lives and identities are supported with dignity. Families are welcomed. Most importantly, honoring children means giving them a chance to be whoever they want, whatever they dream, wherever their journey takes them.

Essential Understanding 2: Cherish Children's Spaces

Early childhood practitioners nurture and support young children, but they often fail to consider how to extend this nurturing impulse to the classroom. The impulse to nurture the child comes more naturally than the impulse to nurture the space. If we truly believe in honoring children through the environment, then we must cherish the classroom space. This means creating environments that preserve children's child-like qualities—laughter, joy, inquisitiveness, curiosity, playfulness, innocence, and delight—not only in the world around them, but in their very selves. In these spaces, young children can sing, dance, build, paint, and share stories.

We place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force . . . that produces a sense of well-being and security.

—Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia philosophy and pedagogy





Essential Understanding 3: Celebrate the Spirit of Place

All children have a deep need for special places. Do you remember a favorite childhood place? These places hold a sense of wonder for us. As young children, these places enchanted us—whether our special space was a hand-built fort made of odd pieces of wood found in the garage, a secret meeting place under a big bush in the backyard, or the housekeeping center in the preschool classroom. We wanted to return to these special places time and again.

We vividly remember tiny details about our special places—the sights, smells, and textures. The Latin term *genius loci* means “the spirit of a place.” Anita Rui Olds asserts in her book *Child Care Design Guide*, “Our goal as designers is to create places of freedom and delight where the enchantments and mysteries of childhood can be given full expression. A spirited place satisfies children’s souls.”

What is the essence of a spirited classroom for young children? It respects and encourages children’s inherent drive to discover the world around them. Such a space is filled with interesting objects designed for sensory exploration that beckon children to investigate, manipulate, and collaborate with others.

A spirited place enlivens the soul.

—Anita Rui Olds, *Child Care Design Guide*

Essential Understanding 4: Create Islands of Balance and Beauty

Have you ever spent the day near water—a pond, stream, lake, or ocean?

The feel of the breeze, the sound of water lapping on shore, and the earthy scent wafting through the air? There is an inherent beauty and balance of nature that touches us deeply. Beauty has the power to give us a sense of peace and pleasure, and it is an essential force in our lives. This desire for beauty is not exclusive to adults. Author and educator Ruth Wilson believes that young children also need and seek beauty.

It really goes beyond the notion that children need beauty. Children *deserve* beauty. They deserve more than the mere walls, door, ceiling, and floor of the classroom. Children deserve more than institutional rooms with hard surfaces and cookie-cutter room arrangements, more than plastic and commercially purchased toys and equipment. Early childhood classrooms should have natural light, fresh air, growing plants, and fresh flowers. Children deserve beautiful nuggets of nature to explore and investigate. Classrooms of physical beauty foster aesthetic sensitivity and give children a deeper connection to the wonder of life.

When we experience the beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming.


—John O'Donohue, *Beauty*





The Power of Intentional Classroom Environments

The classroom is powerful. Its space has the capacity to regulate children's behaviors either positively or negatively. The classroom environment also has the power to nurture (or stifle) young children's growth and development. The environment significantly influences the quality of social interactions among children and adults. This effect is so significant that it has been deemed the "third teacher" by Reggio Emilia educator Lella Gandini. The types of materials available in the classroom, including the furniture, and the way in which they are arranged influence how children act, react, learn, and grow. Prakash Nair, Randall Fielding, and Jeffery Lackney believe that the power to affect children's development is rooted in more than arrangement and classroom materials. In their book *The Language of School Design: Design Patterns for 21st Century Schools*, they explain how the ideas of designers, educators, and architects can converge. The authors suggest designing schools with learning suites and studios where small groups of children can gather to collaborate and create. The authors suggest making classrooms flexible so spaces can be quickly reconfigured to support the emerging interests of the learners. They suggest breaking down the walls to let the sunshine in.



Our surroundings have a powerful influence on how we feel, act, and respond to the world. The growing field of neuro-architecture has confirmed that a thoughtfully planned environment is critical to a person's well-being. By researching how the body and brain respond to different features such as layout, furnishings, lighting, and color, science has proven that our overall health and well-being is directly affected by the arrangement of our personal spaces. Sarah Williams Goldhagen, professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, has conducted research on how our brains register our surrounding environments. In her book *Welcome to Your World: How Built Environments Shape Our Lives*, Goldhagen calls this idea *embodied cognition*. She believes that our surroundings shape our lives and nudge us to think, behave, and feel in certain ways. Other researchers, such as Rikard Kuller, Seifeddin Bailai, Thorbjorn Laike, and Bryan Mikellides, have studied embodied cognition with their research on the effects of light and color on the psychological moods of adults. They found a clear connection between participants' moods and their perceptions about the levels of light they were experiencing. Participants' moods were at the lowest when they perceived the lighting was too dark and, conversely, at the highest when they perceived the lighting as just right. Positive moods dropped off, however, when participants perceived the lighting as too bright.

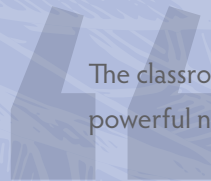
Likewise, Salford University emeritus professor Peter Barrett and his colleagues have studied the connection between space and children's well-being through the potential of positive spaces. Many young children are not yet adept at expressing their feelings or self-regulating their bodies. Therefore, it is the early childhood practitioner's responsibility to create classroom spaces that positively influence children.



Environmental Practices

According to the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, the concept of environmental practices refers to all factors of a space, including equipment, materials, routines, and activities that teachers can intentionally infuse, create, change, or alter to support children's learning. As far back as 1969, Sybil Kritchevsky, Elizabeth Prescott, and Lee Walling analyzed child care settings and determined that classroom design influences the behaviors and social interactions of both children and teachers. The researchers observed the physical space's arrangement and how children navigated through the classroom, worked with the materials, and interacted with others. Kritchevsky, Prescott, and Walling's research illustrated how a thoughtfully designed classroom positively affected children's actions while, on the other hand, inappropriately arranged environments negatively affected children's behaviors and opportunities for social interaction.

By altering the classroom space, teachers can achieve learning goals as well as solve existing social and emotional issues. For example, Kritchevsky, Prescott, and Walling found that crowding caused by large pieces of play equipment and excessive furniture limited children's desire to freely move about the classroom. Cramped classrooms resulted in reduced cooperation and decreased collaborative play, which stymied children's engagement with learning materials. Eliminating unnecessary furniture and reducing the number of shelving units increased children's engagement with the physical environment and their positive relationships with others. This research revealed the importance of tailoring the classroom space to fit the needs, skill levels, and experiences of young children in early care and education programs.



The classroom's physical design and décor are powerful nonverbal contributors to children's learning.

—Takiema Bunche Smith and Louise Ammentorp, "From Cinder Blocks to Building Blocks: Creating Beautiful Places in Children's Spaces"

Contemporary early childhood experts and researchers have confirmed the work of Kritchevsky, Prescott, and Walling. Ellen Nafe's research, for example, found a statistically significant correlation between children's positive behaviors and appropriately designed and arranged classrooms. Jim Greenman, author of *Caring Spaces, Learning Places*, declares that children deserve to spend their early years in environments purposefully designed to support their needs and stimulate learning. Other researchers, including Stephen Rushton and Elizabeth Larkin, assert that our most important priority must be to create classroom environments designed to foster meaningful communication and social connections, as these two factors are the true foundation of young children's learning. In *The Experience of Place*, author Tony Hiss says we all react, consciously and unconsciously, to the places in our lives. According to Hiss, the places where we spend our time have a profound impact on who we are as people and what we can become.

Because children spend an inordinate amount of time in early childhood classrooms, we must critically think about classroom design with a different viewpoint. Today, it is generally accepted that the arrangement of furniture and selection of learning materials within the classroom have a far-reaching influence on children's growth and development. Yet, we often find ourselves placing too much emphasis on what accreditation or licensing standards stipulate for furnishings and less emphasis on the more important variable of emotional or reflective effects of the classroom on young children.

Don Norman, a prominent academic in the field of cognitive science and design, coined the term reflective design. In his book *The Design of Everyday Things*, Norman describes three types of design:

- **Visceral:** how things look
- **Behavioral:** how people function within the design
- **Reflective:** the emotional impact of the design

Contemporary artist and expert designer of home interiors Susie Frazer uses this reflective methodology to design rooms in homes. She cultivates a sense of balance and calm in a room to support both children and adults to be their very best. She does this by infusing natural elements that activate well-being, such as tree twigs, live plants, neutral colors, and water effects. If we as early childhood practitioners are to follow the idea of reflective design, we must pay less attention to the furniture's functionality and more attention to how it is arranged and positioned in the classroom. In reflective design practice, it is also important to commit to designing classroom spaces that are aesthetically beautiful and have a positive emotional effect on young children.



Invite the *wonder* of childhood into your classroom

When was the last time you got down on your hands and knees to see your classroom from a child's height? Effective early childhood classroom design begins from the ground up.

Classroom design is a crucial component of an effective learning environment. *Through a Child's Eyes: How Classroom Design Inspires Learning and Wonder* will help you develop learning areas that leverage the magic of childhood. Learn how you can use the children's perspective to make your classroom a place of joy and possibility with the use of inviting materials, natural colors, intriguing loose parts, and unique sensory explorations.

On a tight budget? Inexpensive DIY projects—for everyone from beginners to those with more advanced skills—will help you transform your learning spaces. How-to directions, before and after photos, and many more details will assist you as you develop the classroom of the children's dreams.

Let the authors' expertise transform your classroom into a space that invites exploration, redirects challenging behaviors, and soothes stress and sensory-processing issues.



Sandra Duncan, EdD, has extensive experience as an early childhood education professional. She is a coauthor of *Inspiring Spaces for Young Children*, the *Rating Observation Scale for Inspiring Environments* (ROSIE), and *Rethinking the Classroom Landscape*. She is a sought-after speaker on developing child-centered, peaceful, welcoming learning spaces.



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Sally Haughey is the founder and owner of Fairy Dust Teaching, a company committed to the growth and empowerment of teachers. After 20 years of successfully teaching in various school settings, she has committed herself to what she loves most: inspiring teachers.


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