

Can Design be Sustainable? No, Design Must be Sustainable

Design, Sustainability, and Quality of ECEC Services

by Aldo Fortunati

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yet in the theory and practice of early childhood pedagogy.

While the link between space and educational experience is deeply rooted in some of the most important pedagogical thinking through the years — marking certain key moments during the last century — common practice shows that the significance of this relationship has yet to become widely accepted.



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The idea that space contributes to the quality of the experiences that children and adults develop in educational settings is not adequately expressed as



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Prerequisites and General Guidelines

When we think of the sociality of children in their first years of life, in the ways that this can favour and sustain processes of experience and knowledge acquisition, together with the ways in which the situations that host these processes can offer support, we are entering a complex area, which is partly conditioned by the way in which settings generate sociality.

In this framework, a traditional classroom — the symbol of an institution that is resistant to change — represents the asymmetry of the actors involved and the absence of any horizontal social dimension that might involve potential for relationships, exchanges, and shared constructive relationships.

On the contrary, we must accept that the unit of space, which is a primary point

of reference for children in an educational service, has its own complex and multi-faceted identity, remembering that this complex unit can embrace different experiences during the course of a single day.

Arranging space in areas — that are open, but well defined and suitably furnished — encourages the development of these experiences and an environment that is rich in stimuli and organised opportunities, providing the right contextual precondition. It ensures that children will not feel bewildered in an excessively large space that has no points of reference, but will feel comfortable, able to find their way around and move independently.

If this is what we have in mind when imagining the primary unit of reference that a space must offer to the daily experience of relationships and activities in an educational service, it is also important to emphasize that the space

must not limit the possibilities offered to children's daily experience.

This approach suggests also that a space should offer opportunities for connecting and integrating rooms. The space for relationships and connection that we have in mind has an identity and internal arrangement that makes it a place not just for passing through, but for living, in the fullest way possible. This is a place that has a broader social dimension than that of the room, yet it offers corners, small spaces, and cosy areas. It is a common space, with fewer familiar features, linking up different environments in a transparent manner between rooms and the outside area.

If until now we have described a space that not only contains, but also embraces, a range of possibilities interconnected between each other, it is important to add that within these possibilities, there should also be room for acknowledging a special kind of experi-

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ence that can only be generated by the social dimension of a small group.

Settings that are well equipped for specific activities serve as workshops, offering children opportunities for experiences that complement those already available in the normal spaces used by the group. These new activities differ from those of the daily routine, ensuring new learning possibilities. They can offer support to adults too, giving them the chance and capacity to make the matrix that sustains the development of experiences in space and time more polycentric, based on dialogue.

Finally, the garden is so crucial to the design of an early childhood service that it has always played a primary role in ECEC services everywhere in the world. It is not simply an open space, but a place that presents similar complexities and arrangements to those of the inside area, with the difference being that here a dominant feature is the relationship with natural elements —



trees, plants, water — in a setting that changes according to the weather and the seasons.

Functionality, Beauty, and Low Cost: The Three Legs that Support Good Design

So far I have tried to sum up some guidelines oriented to the quality of the situations we offer to young children in an educational context; now we need to better understand what the proper approach is to develop their design.

We are often led to believe that design has to do with the ability to create masterpieces or works that represent architectural virtuosity.

Actually, design is not to produce masterpieces of art; but it has to develop a series of good and realistic examples, considering that the places that host children's education are not to be pieces of art but ordinary spaces capable of developing extraordinary experiences.

Thus, when we face the issue of ECEC service's design, we must bear in mind that design was born to disseminate





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beauty and because of this, its relationship with sustainability — in terms of ease and low-cost thinking about production — is a natural relationship.

This means using ‘simple’ resources to make them become rich; children make the potential of their way of knowing and learning visible and it leaves space to them to interpret and use opportunities with creativity. Beautiful and sustainable — at least ecologically — spaces are the real contexts that are the most interesting for children’s experiences.

There are different levels on which design can — or rather must — be sensitive to sustainability.

The first level is about the impact of the plan of the service on the environment. Even if in this case it is obvious that planning an ECEC service in an urban area with an high housing density is completely different from planning it in

a rural area, the measure of the impact must be taken into account in both cases: in the case of an urban area it must realize a solution without implementing new buildings, while in the case of a rural area it will be important to use building techniques that are not invasive, but rather able to softly integrate with the surrounding environment.

The second level concerns the issue of furniture: thinking about both the way in which furniture can be a sort of articulation of the architectural container and the way it can represent a support for children’s experiences and able to sustain their active protagonism. Anyway, the point is planning a context not in the direction of limiting and closing the paths of experience, but rather of opening possibilities that can offer different and personal interpretations to children.

The third level is the one of materials and toys. This is really an aspect in

which richness and low cost can meet each other in a positive and favourable way. We must remember that the experience of education passes through the experience of the world rather than from the one of words; this idea — as simple as it is important when we’re considering early childhood — calls upon our ability to offer contexts and situations in which children can explore, manipulate, and transform — alone and together with other children — objects and materials that are immediately accessible and useful to experience — but also to create different and new possibilities. This is why complex and expensive toys not only are not helpful, but can also represent a way to lead children toward predictable and valueless activities. On the contrary, materials taken from nature (with a massive use of wood, bushes, cortex, leaves, pine cones, stones, shells) and also materials used everyday in family and domestic life can be extraordinary resources to develop a

creative use through which children can express their constructive potentialities as protagonists.

In all these cases, the first thing we have to think about is that what design offers to children's experience has to be first of all functional and adequate for the

way children develop their relationships, knowledge, and learning, giving value in each situation to their active and constructive contribution, and fully limiting the need for the adult to take advantage of their protagonism through his or her intentions.

Summing up, we need to develop a design able to disseminate beauty, making extraordinary the ordinary educational places, and freeing children's creativity.



La Chiocciola ECEC Service in San Miniato: Design Serving Children's Protagonism



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The premises consist of a simple area, with a basic shape that evokes the houses of the nearby ancient town of Roffia, even though the ECEC service premises have been built with state-of-the-art technology (even if the final aspect does not recall a rural building, the basic material that has been

used is wood; furthermore a system of solar panels supports the autonomy of the power source, while a dehumidification system maintains a pleasant climate in the inside space even during summertime, without the need of an artificial system of air conditioning). The spaces for the children look out onto the garden in a south-facing direction, while the entrance and the service areas are spread out along the opposite side, overlooking the road.

The layout presents innovative features: it consists of one big space, rather than being strictly divided up into a series of rooms linked to each other. The arrangement of the building has offered the opportunity to create a sequence of spaces that offer well-defined settings, areas, and corners, without sacrificing the unity of the premises as a whole.



La Chiocciola has a capacity of 30 children, a number that is larger than a typical class size. It may seem risky to doggedly search for solutions that are outside the box in an effort to introduce new, more open and fluid possibilities; so the design of the space, the transparent connections between different areas, and the lack of any closed doors, balanced by careful attention to the layout of well-defined areas, will help both the children and educators in their daily activities and in finding opportunities for experiences, sociality, and learning.





From the entrance other areas lead off, including the dining area, and those for symbolic play, dressing up, and other activities, as well as for rest time. Three sliding panels enable areas to be closed off on a temporary basis; alternatively they can remain open, like coloured pictures on the walls. One area at the far end of the building is set aside for the smallest children, and has its own changing table. At the other end, visible from the changing room at the entrance, is an area set aside for workshop activities.

All the spaces used by children face the outside area. The aim is to ensure that the settings in the service have strong links with the landscape and its main features. Near the workshop, a recessed area and

a glass wall enable the children to work — inside or outside — while looking at the town’s ancient bell tower.

The furnishings are simple, without any overwhelming colours or superimposed figures. They are meticulously designed — often also with the direct and active contribution of parents and of the community — to complement the size of children themselves. Careful attention is paid to details, which are chosen to encourage original, creative, and innovative activities.

Furnishings, toys, objects, and wall panels all combine to produce a light, welcoming environment, which offers a generous range of opportunities and stimuli. They do not constitute a scenario in their own right, but create a good background for daily life and for children’s experiences.

The veranda along the south-facing wall offers protection from the summer sun and extends the inside space towards the garden, framing the Tower, which is the symbol of the city of San Miniato.

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