

# The Spirit of Place

by Anita Rui Olds

Being forced to maintain the same level of alertness and concentration all day undoubtedly places internal stress on children's bodies, even if this is not perceptible to the adult eye.

A variety of moods — providing options for different levels of engagement — helps people to feel comfortable and remain alert in the same environment over long periods of time. Many centers suffer from either blandness or overstimulation with insufficient variety of mood within each group room.

The mood for each function should match the level of activity and physical energy children expend in performing it. Tranquil activities occur best in warm, soft, textured spaces. Expansive activities require spaces that are cooler, harder, and more vibrant in tone. The ultimate goal is a room with several activity areas, each of which has a unique spirit of place. Then, as children go from place to place within the room's four walls, they can experience spaces that are soft and hard, dark and light, cold and warm, colorful and bland, large and small, noisy and quiet.

Differentiation in the physical space can be provided by varying:

- floor height (raised or lowered levels, platforms, lofts, pits)
- ceiling height (canopies, eaves, trellises, skylights)



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- boundary height (walls, half-height dividers, low shelves)
- lighting (natural, fluorescent, incandescent, local, indirect)

Mood setting also results from decorative techniques that make a space sensorially rich and varied — plants, pillows, colors, textures, fabric, knick-knacks, etc. Anything that moves, grows, or changes shape (mobiles, wind chimes, fish, animals, plants), or that reflects movement (mirrors) will add visual interest and excitement. Tablecloths, flowers, subdued lighting, and candles in nonbreakable jars at meal times create delightful atmospheres that are part of the good life children are entitled to share.

Sensory variety can be provided by varying:

- visual interest (wall murals, classical art, children’s paintings, views to trees and sky)
- auditory interest (mechanical gadgets, music, voices humming, gerbils scratching, children laughing)
- olfactory interest (cookies baking, fresh flowers, plants in the earth)
- textural interest (wood, fabric, fur, carpet, plastic, laminate, glass)
- kinesthetic interest (things to touch with different body parts; things to crawl in, under, and upon; opportunities to see the environment from different vantage points)

The skin — the largest organ of the body — is a vital source of stimulation for the arousal system. Most authorities agree (Montagu, 1971) that touch is the most critical sense for children under three and for those with special needs. Ayres (1973) suggests that increased tactile and somatosensory stimulation may improve the form and space perception of children with learning disorders. Moreover, in their national study, Prescott and David (1976) found that “softness” was the primary predictor of the quality of a day care program. Thus, textural decorative elements (pillows, cozy furniture, wall hangings, carpets), and malleable and messy play materials (water, sand, paint, and clay) should be plentiful. Rather than luxuries, these are essentials for promoting children’s well-being, as well as creating moods and softening institutional blandness.

Be sure that materials selected are in accordance with local fire and building safety standards. However, code requirements should not become an excuse for eliminating textural variety from a room. An increasing number of attractive fabrics and finishes — in a variety of colors, textures,

and patterns — are available commercially. Originally designed for health care settings, these items are washable, germ-free, and meet class A ratings for smoke and flammability. Consult local architectural or interior design firms for commercial grade sources.

Mood setting also involves providing a space with aesthetically pleasing objects, finishes, textures, and works of art. “Beauty is as beauty does” in designed and constructed environments as well as the social world. The need for beauty is particularly important for differently-able children, so that associations with a dingy place are not transferred to seeing the children as ugly. Most importantly, a harmonious space transmits psychic wholeness and tranquility. Beautiful spaces visibly relate all the people and parts, acting as a mirror of the well-being desired for all children and caregivers.

## SUMMARY

- Within each room, areas with different moods — soft, hard, dark, light, cold, warm, colorful, bland, etc. — are required in order for children to maintain their energy and attentiveness over the course of a long day.
- Research indicates that the degree of “softness” in a room is predictive of the quality of care. The primacy of touch for young children, coupled with the fact that the skin is the largest organ of the body, make the presence of a variety of touchable textures critical to children’s psychological and physiological well-being. Pillows, cozy furniture, wall hangings, carpets, and malleable and messy play materials such as water, clay, paint, and sand are critical for softening institutional blandness and promoting children’s well-being.
- The mood of an activity area is created by personalized decorative techniques (pillows, color, textures, fabrics, knick-knacks, and furniture design); by varying the physical parameters of space (floor height, ceiling height, boundary height, and lighting); and by varying the visual, auditory, olfactory, textural, and kinesthetic qualities of a space.
- Quiet, tranquil activities call for warm, soft, textured spaces. Expansive activities call for spaces that are cooler, harder, more vibrant in tone.
- A harmonious space transmits psychic wholeness and tranquility, offering a mirror of well-being all children and caregivers deserve.

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