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Image and Scale

by Gary T. Moore

What has happened to the art of building child care centers and preschools? Too often I am dismayed when I visit a child care center and find that it looks like an elementary school or, even worse, some sort of institutional building. Too big. Too impersonal. Concrete block or poured-in-place concrete. Brutal, inhumane even for adults. But for children? Are we creating developmentally appropriate environments, or are we creating warehouses for young children?

There are many issues here, but one of the central issues — the heart of the matter, it seems to me — is the image and scale of the building. Are we creating little schools for little children, in their image and scale? Sadly, often not. Often we see buildings not at all in the scale of young children. Not just in the larger cities, but we can easily come upon massive buildings for 200 or even 300 little children under the age of 5 or 6 in medium sized cities and in many suburbs. It's not just the number of children in one building that is the problem (it *is* possible to design wonderful buildings for 200 or more children), it's the inhumane image and overwhelming scale of many of these buildings. How might we turn this around? How might we create special environments for our littlest children that are appropriate for their size, that are not childish but are very much in their image and scale?

Image: The Building As a Friend

Our first general principle is *to design the site and the building so that it has a friendly, child-like, inviting image. We say "The building as a friend." Create this image by a combination of warm colors, child-scaled spaces and materials, inviting graphics, and architectural elements which will seem to belong to children and fit pleasantly into their accustomed physical and imaginal context.*

There are two issues with regard to the image of a child care or early education facility: its image to children and its image to parents. Being enrolled at a child care center or preschool is often a child's first

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separation from parents, home, and familiar surrounds. Many children find this experience difficult and anxiety provoking. Buildings project certain "personalities" which make them seem warm and inviting in appearance, or cold and formal. A child care center can be overwhelming to a child if it is formal, large, and lacks friendliness.

Experience in a child care center or preschool may affect the child's future attitudes toward school. We know from research that adults remember buildings first in terms of their use, second in terms of their location, and last in terms of architectural details. There is no reason to believe that children do it any differently. Undoubtedly, they relate to and remember buildings for exactly the same reasons, i.e., internal experience of use — the phenomenology of the building.

The image of the center and its program is also a major influence over whether or not parents will bring their children to the center. Parents want to be assured that the center is a safe and friendly place offering quality care. While the friendliness of the staff is paramount, we all pick up messages or read the cues that the environment provides us — whether it feels warm and friendly.

Therefore, it seems vital, as many clients have told me, to project a non-institutional image — a place to remember — a place children remember when they leave and return to fondly, including their unconscious memories of special places.

How can we develop a place that children can build upon — make their own, become their community — incorporating constructive play areas, flexibility of spaces and furnishings to which children can add?

A child-friendly image to the building is important; the building needs to be friendly, interesting, and inviting from a child's perspective.

While the building should project a developmentally appropriate image, it doesn't need to be, nor should it be, an overpowering visual image that overwhelms the program, staff, and children. Even to be a media event, a child care center or preschool and its facility need not be flashy, though it needs to be very, very good and sensitive to the developmental needs of children and the ways in which very good architecture provides a stage set for children's development. As one client said to me, "If the center does a good job, and projects friendliness, people will come to it."

Criteria/Things You Can Do

Here are some criteria or things you can do to create a child-friendly image:

- As discussed in earlier articles in this series, the building as a whole will be designed to be a campus- or village-plan comprised of identifiable, imageable "houses"; ensure options that eliminate any institutional, large-scale feel; ensure smaller units, wings, separate, or identifiable buildings connected by walkways, etc.

- Create one story or ground floor centers and coordinate height with other hopefully residentially scaled adjacent buildings.

- If possible, use outdoor space common with adjacent, compatible areas (e.g., a child care facility which is integrated visually into a housing complex).

- Preserve all special natural site features. If the site is barren, special effort should be made to provide natural areas. Even very small natural areas will be intensively used by children and will add to the homelike, backyard quality of the setting.

- Use residentially scaled, homelike elements for doors, windows, roof forms, pathways, and plantings.

- Use child-scaled materials wherever possible, e.g., bricks instead of concrete block, small window panes instead of large expanses of glass, narrow wood panels instead of large dry wall construction — and never, never, never concrete block if you can avoid it.

- Use warm materials such as wood or common brick in the exterior of the building.

- Use warm, inviting colors on all parts of the exterior visible to children and parents, and warm colors or warm off-whites in all interior spaces.

- Use easy maintenance materials to keep the new look fresh (e.g., stain wood, don't paint it).

- Vary and mix textures — grass, sand, natural rocks, small steps, brick pavers, warm wood siding, pitched roofs.

- Make renovations appear more than cosmetic by the use of contemporary architectural elements.

Child-Scaled Environments

Our second general principle is *to design all child care, preschool, and other child development environments to be child scaled — this includes fur-*

nishings and the materials of activity pockets, and the building and site as a whole. Comfort for both children and teachers may require, however, some compromises between child-scaled and adult-scaled elements.

The scale of the environment can influence the feelings and performance of children. This is conveyed through the scale of materials, furnishings, and building hardware, the scale of activity spaces, and the scale of their building as a whole.

Young children play on the floor, and are occupied with activities that involve tactile and visual interaction with surfaces and materials around them. It is important that their environment consist of materials which are child scaled and inviting. Anthropometric fit between children, furnishings, and building hardware is critical for optimal use and development.

Children and adults also feel intimidated by large, undifferentiated spaces. Without elements that relate space to human size, spaces will remain ambiguous and uncomfortable. The shape of space and, in particular, the relation between size and ceiling height should reflect the nature of the activity and number of children to be accommodated.

Finally, the scale of the building as a whole may influence longer term attitudes of children and teachers. The building should seem child scaled when approaching, entering, and moving through it. Critical features include the size of exterior spaces and building materials, elements like windows and doors, interior spaces, ceiling heights, and exposed systems like structure and HVAC systems.

Criteria/Things You Can Do

Here are some criteria or things you can do to create a child-scaled environment:

- Ensure smaller units, wings, separate, or identifiable buildings connected by walkways, etc.
- The entire building — from entry to all activity spaces to outdoor play yards — should be designed to be a mixture of adult- and *child-scaled environment, with an emphasis on the child scaled*. The child scale is critical given that most child care and other early childhood education centers want to foster children becoming independent.
- All spaces — interior and exterior — should be child scaled in all three dimensions.
- Break up spaces according to modified open space to provide resource-rich activity pockets for children.
- Ceiling heights should not exceed normal residential height (e.g., 8 feet in the U.S. or 2.4 meters in the rest of the world) to contribute to a child-scaled environment.
- Design outdoor spaces according to modified open space and activity pockets.
- Use overhangs of deciduous trees to provide a lowered height.
- Minimize the length of any circulation paths.
- In each activity space, select building materials, hardware, and furniture using elements to fit children following appropriate anthropometric charts: doorknobs, lockers, cubbies, drinking fountains, windows, sinks, toilets, mirrors, chairs, tables and other furniture, chalkboards and bulletin boards, stair rails, light switches, and so on. Leave nothing to chance. Check drawings carefully to ensure that everything you want is at the child's scale.
- For items that are not child scaled or within a child's reach, provide ways for children to use adult-height items (e.g., pull cords on ceiling fans, stools to reach light switches, etc.).
- Provide as many soft things in the environment as possible (e.g., floor cushions against window seats or in reading alcoves).
- Use bricks, small concrete blocks, or textured masonry which look like small pieces (e.g., large concrete blocks scored to look like smaller units) rather than featureless poured concrete or concrete block.
- Use relatively small panes of glass rather than wide expanses of sheet glass.
- Blank walls should have texture, graphics, murals, tack boards, or display shelves added to them.
- Vary ceiling heights (e.g., the under and over parts of lofts) between 4 feet and 8 feet (1.2 to 2.4 meters) to fit the nature of the activities to be accommodated.
- Provide some child-sized spaces (e.g., quiet nooks) where adults must kneel, and some level changes where children, even the youngest infants, can crawl up to be eye to eye with adults.

- Bring windows down to the child's scale, not the adult's (children do outnumber adults in all child care centers and preschools!).

In all ways, the size and scale of the building's exterior, its interior, and it's overall image should suggest residential qualities and familiar characteristics.