

## Creating Culturally Reflective Environments

# The Role of Culture in Designing Child Care Facilities

by Vicki L. Stoecklin

**C**“Culture is the framework that guides and bounds life practices.”

— Eleanor Lynch and Marci Hanson,  
Developing Cross Cultural Competencies

It is said by cultural researchers that cultural understanding is normally established before age five. As child care centers are being built around the world, it is important that even at the schematic design phase, we create children's environments which reflect the culture, values, and traditions of the country or area where they are being located.

Our firm has been asked to design a children's play and discovery center similar to a children's museum in the country of Qatar. In addition, through our research, this project was found to be in need of a model employer-supported child care program. Doha, the capital of Qatar, only had one child

care center in 1998 when we started our research. Clearly, if we wanted to get women to work at the children's play and discovery center, we would need to provide high quality child care as an employment benefit. This article will reflect upon our experiences in researching and studying the culture of Doha, Qatar to create a schematic design for the model employer-supported child care facility.

### Culture and Architectural Child Care Design

Think of all of the different styles of building and houses present in the United States and you will begin to understand the role culture has played

in architectural design. Picture the pueblo-inspired earth-colored homes of the desert Southwest, the fancy iron grill work of the buildings surrounding the French Quarter in New Orleans, the large front porches on homes in the Midwest, and the Spanish-style homes with portal entries and courtyards in California.

Children's environmental research demonstrates that children need a homelike and comfortable physical environment, yet very few child care centers are designed to imitate home-like features. Rather, the trend in child care facility design has been to create large, institutional buildings that have little in common with the design of the child's home and home culture. Many child care facilities being constructed do little to reflect the architectural styles and features of the surrounding communities and most look the same whether they are located in Maine, Florida, or California.

### Cultural Research for Child Care Facility Design

Our research into the culture of Doha, Qatar, took several distinct paths, which we usually modify and replicate, in studying distinct cultures overseas and

Vicki L. Stoecklin, MS, is the education and child development director at White Hutchinson Leisure and Learning Group



which specializes in design work for children and families. Vicki has over 22 years of experience in early childhood education and is interested in universal design for children and play garden design. She can be reached through the learning section of their web site: [www.whitehutchinson.com](http://www.whitehutchinson.com).

---

different regions of the United States. Even different regions of the United States have different cultures. The most effective research methods we have used include:

- Reading and studying about the culture;
- Talking, interviewing and working with early childhood staff, children and parents of the culture;
- Participating in the daily life of another culture; and
- Learning about the language of the culture.

Read about and study the culture. The public library, bookstores, and the internet all offer a variety of easily accessible sources of information about different cultural groups and regions of the United States and the rest of the world. We start our cultural research on the internet and usually find books and articles on a variety of issues including gender roles, education, parenting, and social structure. Books with pictures are also helpful in understanding spatial relationships, colors, textures, and architectural preferences.

When reading the material, it is helpful to keep in mind that what you read about a particular culture is a generalization. Although all persons of the same cultural history may share tendencies, individual behavior is influenced by other factors including age, socioeconomic status, and in many cases, gender.

Interviewing staff, parents, and children. Working with and interviewing staff, parents, and children of other cultures is always very rewarding. Parents, usually mothers, are interviewed in small focus groups about their preferences for children's activities

using a series of colored pictures showing children doing a wide variety of educational and playful things like dress-up, water play, and sand play. Sometimes I facilitate the groups myself with an interpreter, and at other times I observe another facilitator doing it. Focus groups with parents occur in a group of six to eight in a relaxed setting, usually in someone's home or in an existing child care setting. If I interview fathers, I will set up the groups separately since mixed gender groups usually yield invalid results due to social conditioning.

A design preference that mothers expressed in Qatar was that they did not want their children to play pretend restaurant, since, in their country, restaurant work signified a less than desired social status. Mothers in Qatar also expressed deep concerns about dress-up play in general since this country still dons the traditional garments that have been used for centuries, quite unlike other regions outside the Arabian Gulf. All of these parental preferences have influence on the types of equipment placed in a facility and, hence, have influence on design and room layout. Mothers also expressed the value of safety, supervision, and cleanliness. All of these parental preferences can influence the design, both inside and outside, and need to be understood at the schematic design phase.

Interviews with staff to identify local cultures includes visits to early childhood education centers, centers serving the disabled, and public or private education facilities. Time at the site is not only set aside for interviews but to watch the facilities in operation and view classrooms. Interviews are sometimes done with groups of early childhood teachers in a format similar to that of parents. In Qatar, individual interviews were done with principals, headmasters, the ministry of education staff, and child care center directors.

I have often times been surprised by the similarities in teacher preferences among several different countries I have visited, especially in light of the tremendous variation in what we would call a developmentally appropriate environment. It's almost as if teachers intuitively know about developmentally appropriate practice, but lack the training, money, and resources to implement it in their own environments or in teacher-child interaction. Looking at the overall education and child care system in some locations helps me to understand local philosophies and preferences.

We also do children's focus groups when we move from the schematic design phase to the final construction document process. On some projects, we do children's focus groups during the schematic phase depending on the complexity of the project. Children's focus groups are conducted in a similar fashion to those of adults; however, sometimes children are usually divided by age and gender. Dividing the children into gender groups is more crucial in those cultures where gender roles are more fixed by social norms. Children's focus groups might include games, identification of favorite colors, and some drawings of what they would like in their environment.

Participating in the daily life of another culture. Participating in the daily life of another culture is best experienced when you take the time to get off the beaten path. We like to visit local museums, parks, leisure sites, historical centers, shops, and local restaurants. Not only are these sites rich in cultural significance, but they are a great place to observe parent and child interaction, social norms, expectations, and physical design preferences.

My best trip off the beaten path was actually in a small fishing village named

---

Al-Ruwais which is located north of Doha, Qatar. We were invited to celebrate the wedding of a sister to our client. Although I tried to obtain some information about wedding traditions from the Qatari embassy, nothing could have prepared me for the uniqueness of the event I experienced. I was dropped off by the males in our party at a khaimah (a very large tent with a covered opening). In Qatar, wedding celebrations are held separately for men and women, since socialization between the sexes is prohibited.

As I was ushered into the tent I was intoxicated by the scent of burning incense and overwhelmed by the sight of close to 150 totally veiled women sitting on sofas on over 100 Persian rugs. I watched sword dancing and listened to music played on camel skin drums. It was an experience I will never forget. The evening taught me volumes about how this culture has managed to hang on to traditional practices despite the influence of the western world. It helped to set the framework for understanding their design preferences.

### **Applying Cultural Principles in a Schematic Child Care Design**

Qatar is a small peninsula protruding from Arabia's eastern coast into the Arabian Gulf and is known as one of the Gulf States. The Arabian Gulf area is mostly arid desert and its history is rich with not only desert nomads but seafaring people such as fisherman and pearl divers. Life used to be rough in a climate where summer temperatures soared to 120°F, but with the discovery of oil and gas has come a new level of economic prosperity and comfort. Although economic prosperity has brought profound change, the people of the Gulf States have a strong pride and commitment to preserve their heritage against intrusions of western culture.

Qatar is a strict Muslim country where the muezzin's (crier) call to prayer five times a day forms a rhythmic pattern to life. Women rarely pray at the mosque, but do most of the prayers at home. The women I interviewed in Qatar expressed an interest in a women's prayer room, so the combined play and model child care facility will include a women's prayer room. The prayer room will need to face Mecca, the holy site for Muslim orientation. The prayer room will include an ablution or washing area, as Muslims wash parts of the face, arms, hands, and feet prior to praying.

Homes and schools in Qatar are designed in the traditional Middle Eastern style with a walled entry from the outside. Entry to homes and schools are protected for a variety of reasons, some practical and some historical. Historically, the walled entrance became a barrier to outside tribes and protected the women from being abducted or carried off. In more modern times, the walled and gated entrance is used to control male access to buildings where women may be present. For modesty reasons, the women choose to stay covered (veiled) in the presence of non-related males. A protected and windowless entrance means that unwelcomed men will not show up and surprise working women. Behind a secluded, safe atmosphere women can feel safe to uncloak and unveil. Since education is traditionally separated by gender after preschool, you mostly find women working in girls' schools and child care centers in Qatar. On our conceptual design, the entry is gated and requires a zigzag entry, which guarantees that no one can be seen from the outside. The design also reflects other areas in the building where modesty might be an issue. Diaper changing stations will need to be partially screened from the observation windows, and additional bathrooms have been added in all classrooms so that the genders can be sepa-

rated. Parents of this culture have very strong beliefs and values about the separation of gender in using toileting facilities. In fact, the restroom facilities will have to be uniquely designed to facilitate sanitation techniques after restroom use. These washing requirements will also be carried out in the final design of the infant/toddler diapering areas. These issues are all very sensitive areas to explore. Doing the research allowed us to understand some unique restroom and diapering requirements.

The design of doors, important symbols of Arab hospitality, the shape of windows, domes, parapets, and Arabesque decoration contribute to the character of Islamic architecture. Islam has played a major role in influencing design since the dominant example of Islamic architecture is the mosque. These features and architectural details will be incorporated into the final designs in order to preserve the richness and heritage of Islamic design, which has evolved over centuries. Wind towers were a unique architectural feature of this part of the world before air conditioning and may be incorporated into the final design. The towers remain a connection to the centuries past and they are often times still seen on new homes even though they have lost their original function.

### **Conclusion**

Three years have passed since our original trips to Qatar. Our clients are diligently working on getting a permit for the project. I continue to study and read about the culture, including reading the Qur'an, or Holy Book of the Muslim religion. It has been said that once your heart touches the sands of Arabia you will be drawn back to this sacred peninsula. Indeed, I have spent part of the last year in another Arabian country, Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, studying their culture for another

---

children's project. Unlike their traditional neighbor, Qatar, the city of Dubai has been greatly influenced by western society. The sprawling and rising city has little that reflects the beauty of Islamic architecture.

During my stay I have spent countless hours interviewing and observing local Arab families and visiting primary schools and child care centers. I am sometimes overcome with emotions by the ways in which the local people, particularly the women, have accepted me into their sometimes secret and often misunderstood world. I am grateful for their openness and hospitality in answering my probing questions. I only hope that I can make a contribution to their society by providing examples of early childhood facility design that is culturally competent and supports and enhances their traditions, values, and norms. Insha Allah (God willing) — a Muslim way to define the future — I will soon return there to continue our work.

## References

Hajar, R. "Brides of the Desert." Culture Crossroads. March 1998. Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Lynch, E. and Hanson, M. (1992). Developing Cross Cultural Competence. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing Company.

Stoecklin, V. L. and White, R. "Designing Quality Facilities." February 1998. Chapel Hill, NC: Newsbreak.