Places for Childhood in the 21st Century

A Conceptual Framework

Jim Greenman

> To live in an environment that has to be endured or ignored rather than enjoyed is to be diminished as a human being.
>
> — Sinclair Gauldie, *Architecture: The Appreciation of the Arts*

The age of subterranean childhoods, while not exactly over, is slowly receding. Children in all-day child care are far less likely than in the past to be in a basement or in an unlicensed, hazardous space, and child care environments are undoubtedly much safer and healthier than in the past. But what kind of places could or should full-day child care centers really be—what sort of stage for what kind of experiences?

A baby welcomed into a center today may spend up to twelve thousand hours in child care, more time than she will spend in all of elementary school and high school. This is in sharp contrast to the 500 to 1,000 hours a child spends in a preschool or Head Start program. Moreover, she will not crawl in alone; she will have a family, and the complicated relationships that ensue will likely have a significant impact on her family, certainly more than the impact of a nursery school or even a Head Start program (Greenman 2001). The program also may be the site of much of the development of a sibling relationship. In practice, the child care program and the family will be raising this child together.

Of current models for child care environments, some are good, some are mediocre, and many are bad. And child care is child care, right? Yes, except for differences in community, culture, landscape, climate, and ages served, hours, services, sponsors, and budgets. We need to acknowledge not just the educational needs of children in full-day child care but also their need to wander, explore, love, and live well. We need to make sure that the form child care takes is more than just tolerable since today's models will establish the design in place for years to come.

The landscape of childhood

In the last few decades, the pace of life has continued to accelerate for many families (Rosenfeld & Wise 2000). Balancing work and home life is a survival issue for many households, and child care programs play a huge role in supporting families. The design of the child care environment and program has an impact on the quality of that support.

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An increasing climate of fear

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The last 20 years have seen an increase in parental fears for their children and fears by professionals of both child harm and possible litigation by disgruntled or alarmed parents. The 24-hour world of sensational news and an increasing alienation from the natural world have created the sensibility that our world is a terribly perilous place for a child—potential harm lurks with every stranger and every strange thing or occurrence (Laudan 1997).

But is our world really a menacing place for children? For some children whose lives are brutalized by the effects of drugs or poverty or family dysfunction (or all three), childhood is a time of tribulation and terror. But for the great majority of children in our country, the world is almost certainly not menacing, although it often feels that way to families (Laudan 1997; Glassner 1999; Ropeik & Gray 2002).

What constitutes a safe and healthy environment and what is reasonable exploration and challenge for young children are becoming more constricted. These constrictions have had a negative impact on the design of children's environments, ultimately diminishing the learning opportunities. Well-designed child care environments can provide security and challenges—and connections to the real world beyond the center walls that children need.

Where's the space for childhood?

Children are losing habitat—the real world of people and nature and machines and an opportunity to explore that world (directly, not just electronically) and be a part of it (Greenman 1987, 2003; Moore 1990; Stein 2001). In the recent past, children did not need special places for play. They had more free time in houses, backyards, vacant lots, fields, and streets. They lived amidst shops and tradespeople and mothers and fathers working in and around the home. Above all else, they were connected to nature. Daniel Janzen, one of the world's foremost tropical biologists, writes

> Here's what nature does for us no matter whom we are or where we live . . . human animals carry around this big brain, this big device for processing input. Part of our ability to use that device depends on the complex stimuli that challenged it throughout our evolution. Nature—whatever is out there, from a single tree to a whole forest—provides a big wad of the possible information that we can process. If you diminish nature, you diminish the diversity of those stimuli. When we don't get input from nature, we don't end up having much sense of smell, hearing, and vision. Television becomes our reality. We can survive on that and do, but it is not nearly as complex. . . . When we diminish nature, we turn off a lot of things in our own heads. (as quoted in Gallagher 1993, 206)

Childhood is when human beings should fall in love with the world and all its untidy and sometimes scary complexity, delights, and mysteries.

Children raised in safe bubbles, disconnected from the world outside the windows of the home, center, or car, or beyond the fence, are effectively crippled and will be more vulnerable as they grow up (Nabhan & Trimble 1994; Greenman 2001). Childhood is when human beings should fall in love with the world and all its untidy and sometimes scary complexity, delights, and mysteries. There is another—literally heavy—cost to individuals and society: As children lose territory, they are gaining pounds. Children used to be able to move energetically from place to place on their own, from the back door to the yard, and as they grew older, through the neighborhood by foot or bike.

Now many children are driven or escorted everywhere, including their backyards and, of course, their child care playgrounds. In our escorting, it's not just that children are not free to come and go, it's that they and we are destination driven. There is no meandering. There is often no sense of journey, no "along the way." Full-day child care environments are a primary habitat for young children. They can be designed to restore the meandering richness to the child's life.

Early care and education: The perils and possibilities of the universal approach

NAEYC Accreditation and most state licensing standards do not distinguish between full-day and part-day programs. The adoption of a public front for early care and education and the blurring of distinctions between all-day child care and part-day preschools have both positive and negative ramifications for environmental and program design. The implicit valuation of child care as education is critical because there is no such thing as "just day care" or "just child care." What center, home, or preschool sets out to offer purely custodial care?

Children learn something in every setting, whether we acknowledge it or not, and that learning has implications for future learning. Child care settings are always early education settings (and provide the great majority of school readiness experience) but are often not adequately funded to provide *quality* education—or care, for that matter. The necessary strategic retreat from the term *day care* has a downside, devaluing the enormity of the experience of all-day child care. All-day child care environments deserve to be recognized as significantly different places than part-day preschools. Full-day child care centers are not just settings for learning; they are places where many children spend most of their early years. The learning requirements may be identical, but the living requirements are far more significant and should be acknowledged and not lost in the emphasis on school readiness.

Great places for childhood: A framework for quality child care environments

All-day child care environments should reflect a full vision of childhood and family involvement. The framework for quality that follows suggests considerations that should inform the design of child care environments. Each of the qualities has implications beyond environment and also applies to policies, practices, organization, and culture.

A great place to live

What happens in child care in the enormous amount of time that children spend there? It's life as we know it: eating, drinking, sleeping, separating from and reuniting with loved ones, growing, changing, learning, falling in and out of love, getting knocked down and picking oneself up, feeling deep distress and then being filled with joy (Greenman 2001). The people and place determine whether it is living fully or not, living well or not. Places to live encourage *competence,* provide *comfort,* and accept *individuality.*

In our living places, we can feel welcome and relax. We take comfort in the familiar order, the sounds, sights, and smells. We know our way around and how things work. There are few unwelcome surprises. Our treasured things are there to reassure us, as are our memories. We usually feel competent.

An unfamiliar place first makes demands on our awareness. After a time our steps are sure, and we more fully explore the new territory. In great child care settings, children are free to find or create sanctuaries and places to pause.

Asking whether the design for the environment will create a great place to live raises many questions: How will it feel to be in the environment for nine-hour days, 50 weeks a year, for five years? How are children welcomed, made to feel at home, and integrated into the setting? Are needs for public space, shared space, and design for individual competency building and comfort taken seriously?

A place of beauty

We live and work better in beautiful environments (Hiss 1987). Beauty, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, a matter of taste and culture. If every program aspires to create a place of beauty, the end results will be different for each program. But most would likely reduce the psychedelic kaleidoscope of every wall and window covered with riotous color and huge amounts of information; the too lush rain forest of hanging materials from the ceiling; and the proliferation of cute, commercial images, permanent murals, and cheesy décor (Greenman 2001).

Children are less cognitive and more visual beholders for they approach the world through all of their senses. A child's environment is an aromascape, soundscape, colorscape, texturescape, and lightscape, and the world one can experience through the skin, the fingers, and all sensory receptors (Ceppi & Zini 1998). Beauty flows from the entire sensory experience. Windows, lighting, acoustics, furnishings, and equipment determine the beauty of the setting (Greenman 1987; Olds 2001).

A place promoting strong families

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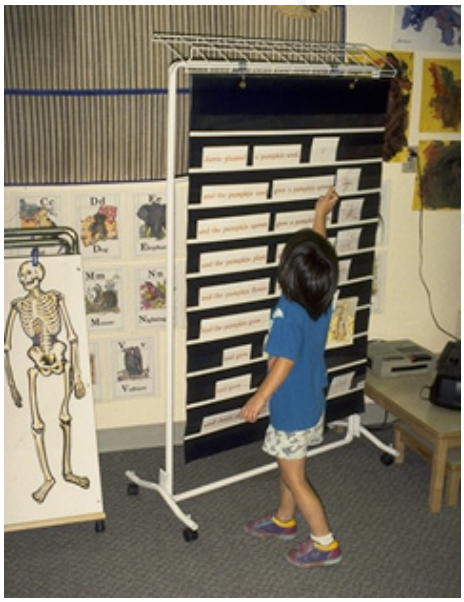
It is easy to believe in the importance of respecting and supporting families, but actually doing so in practice is far more difficult. Families come in all shapes and sizes and with cultures, beliefs, and values that are not always quite aligned to our practice. The way a family lives their life may well be here and there at odds with our beliefs or our policies and practices (Greenman 2001).

Traditional nursery school design, from the entrance to the predominately child-size scaling of the interior, is intended to create a child's place—a respite and learning environment away from the adult-scale world (Osmon 1971). In child care that is full day, families belong in the center and need to be welcomed into an understandable place that takes into account the presence of families in the size, scale, and functionality of space (Greenman 1997). A place that welcomes and empowers families encourages multiage sibling interaction

and has room for project displays and documentation of learning that keep families informed and engaged. A place that promotes families offers adult-scale places for gatherings and confidential discussions.

A community of caring

Does the environment support relationships and community? Or does the setting group individuals by the narrowest of age ranges and keep them apart, divided by classroom, age, and role? Is there developmental damage when children are cared for by a succession of relative strangers, however kind and skilled—nice people who blink in and out of the lives of children as they move through the center (Greenman 2001)?



Learning is built on a foundation of security, and that emotional and moral intelligence grows from a foundation of early trust and guidance. Having to cope with stress and to adapt to new or unpredictable environments affects the growth and development of the brain and the child's emotional development (Cacioppo 1994). A sense of community can create an envelope of security, cushioning the reality that some individuals will come and go.

Community flows out of an organization and environment that values and sustains relationships. An environment can support gathering together and connecting people with layouts that include meeting places indoors and out and the transparency of design that allows glimpses from place to place through interior windows and open doors (Greenman 2001). Design can accommodate for moments of needing to be alone or to be with another person, for respite from the group, and for supporting relationships that last over time.

A place for learning together

A simple way to evaluate a child care setting is to observe the quantity and quality of conversation: whether adults are listening to children, provoking the ideas of children, or offering a child the most precious gift—undivided attention. Children need what psychologist Rollo May commonly called the "full human presence" of others to overcome the feelings of insignificance that can come from being small in a crowd and new to the world. The full presence is also a requisite to truly knowing and being known by the child and to providing the right intervention at the right time.

How does the teacher devote his or her full attention, given real-world classroom ratios and group sizes and all the daily demands of care? Environment is crucial. In a well-designed space, children can both work independently and find space to play with other children. Children and teachers can find places for both quiet and group conversations: a window seat, an entryway bench, or even outdoors under a tree. A thoughtfully planned environment includes some simple things such as keeping an infant carrier handy to put the baby right there for all the nonverbal contact and a caregiver's reassuring murmurs and words.

A safe creative environment for exploration and learning

Designing for classroom teaching is not difficult, with the right room size and scale, light, storage, and access to water and power. To allow for exploration and learning is more complicated. In a group setting, is challenge possible for children who need to live exuberantly and explore with their bodies, who

punctuate their discoveries with noise and movement? Yes, if they are given enough room to grow and the freedom to test their limits.

Unfortunately the diminishing range of what constitutes a safe and healthy environment creates a problem: if a child is not allowed to stumble and fall, how will she learn to pick herself up? Some indoor and outdoor environments are narrowly focused on teaching for school readiness. Instead they should be loaded with the hands-on stuff of exploration and alive with What? Why? and How? questions (Greenman 2001).

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What places offer models of exploration and learning for child care center environments? Look to places of hands-on action like laboratories, studios, gardens, natural settings, and workshops (Greenman 1987; Moore, Goltsman, & Iacofano 1992; Stine 1997; Dudek 2001; Olds 2001; Curtis & Carter 2003). How does this translate to the child care setting? Offer children learning centers indoors and out, places for genuine scientific explorations, such as a sensory table filled with marbles and tubes or baskets of pine cones, leaves, or dried flowers placed near magnifying glasses. Provide a space where children can use art materials like natural clay or paint and paper in an open-ended way. Access to water is critical. A dirt pile for digging, a rock pile for building, sticks and cloths for making a home or shop, magnifying glasses for observing nature—with a few simple materials and a shift in outlook, we can transform outdoor spaces into environments that encourage exploration.

Look to libraries as another model. Are there book corners and writing areas, a computer center? Is there space for small-group reading? Can children find multiple quiet places to practice writing and to enjoy excellent picture books and literature that spark their imaginations?

Because early childhood is a time when children have to learn how to use their rapidly emerging physical powers, looking to gymnasiums and playgrounds as a source of ideas for indoor and outdoor space is important. Young children need to climb, run, throw, kick, and use all their muscles.

A place that encourages the development of responsibility, compassion, and community

How we describe our expectations for children and what our environment says about our expectations often differ. Environments that expect children to be competent and responsible members of a community pay great attention to child scale and child access to all resources. Children contribute to daily life—both in the preparation and the cleaning. The program encourages children to work together and share jobs that need doing. Materials are organized and available to all children, and children can reach what they need to use during the day.

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A place connected to the natural world, the larger community, and the world beyond

To put the *childhood* back into full-day child care, we need to think more creatively about our outdoor spaces. Twelve thousand hours spent largely indoors, with an outdoor environment designed largely as a hamster cage for recess, is far too often the experience of the typical child in child care. The outdoor environment, however, can be designed as a connection to the natural world and an incredibly rich laboratory for natural learning (Moore 1990; Frost 1992).

Beyond exploring the backyard and cityscape, twenty-first century technology can connect adults and children to others anywhere and put a whole world of resources at their command. Today's children's programs—*wired* and *global*, connected to the information age—can be ready to serve children and families of diverse origins and ready to begin children on the path to global citizenry.

There are real issues of security when designing child care facilities and considering their relationship to the outside world. But design also contributes to whether a program is accepted, valued, and *of* the community or merely *in* the community.

A great place for the staff to learn and to work

Our early childhood environments say a great deal about our assumptions about the work and our expectations for staff. Do we expect staff to be simply nurturing or actively thinking, planning, creating, working collaboratively, and meeting with parents? Is there office space, a conference or resource room, staff space in the room, and a lounge where staff can meet to have confidential meetings and to support adult communication? Are there computers and Internet access, professional journals, and books available to staff for exploring areas of interest?

Conclusion

The drive to protect our children is profound and easily can lead to cleansing their lives of challenge and depth. Early childhood is a time when children begin to live in the world and hopefully learn to love the world. They can't do this when fenced off from the messy richness of life to live in a world of fluorescent lights and plastic toys, two-dimensional glowing screens, and narrow teaching instruction. Scrubbing and polishing raw experience in the name of health and safety scrapes away the natural luster and meaning of childhood. Many of the wonders and joys of childhood that fuel the best in our adult selves are birthed in the unavoidable messes, bumps, bruises, and tears that come with exuberant exploration.

Places are living systems that are the result of choices, trade-offs, and compromises. Child care environments can be places for living well or falling in love with the world, and the stage settings for many of the experiences of a full and productive childhood. They can be habitats in which children and adults grow together.

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