

Environments

One area in the schools of Reggio Emilia where attention to aesthetics is clearly visible is in the physical environment, not generally found in other schools. What a lot of criticism and what a lot of positive comments Reggio has received over the years on this subject from our various visitors. Reflecting on reasons for this ambivalent attitude suggests the existence of certain widespread and deeply rooted stereotypes concerning education, schooling, learning and aesthetics, and I could recount some startling examples on the theme.

One I remember very well, because it was the first of many other examples, concerns a university teacher who came to Reggio Emilia to lecture on science for our professional development. Visiting the *scuola comunale dell'infanzia* Diana, she walked through the door, gave a quick look round the piazza inside the school (see Figure 7.1), empty because the children were in their classes and commented, 'Do children live here then, or is it a showcase?' I was left speechless and doubt I gave her an adequate answer because I was not prepared for that kind of objection or perception of the environment.



Figure 7.1 The piazza in the scuola comunale dell'infanzia Diana

Thinking back, her reaction seems extremely clear and interesting, because it registered a certain mental scheme, and demonstrated her own personal culture concerning school environments and, in the end, unfortunately her culture of childhood. The *scuola comunale dell'infanzia* Diana obviously, despite all its problems of insufficient space and the financial problems we had managing it, stood outside this mindset. It looked too well cared for, too tidy, too clean, too lovely – too everything.

I will try now, many years later, to give an answer to this lady who compared the piazza in Diana to a showcase. Partly she was right: the environment is an element we perceive strongly and it expresses ideas, not only about space but about its inhabitants, their possible relations with the environment and with each other. Built environments are always windows for ideas.

Among other ideas in Reggio pedagogy, we are convinced of the right to beauty in a healthy psychological relationship with surroundings. Inhabiting a place which is lovely and cared for is perceived to be a condition of physical and psychological well-being and, therefore, the right of people in general and even more so of children, all children. The extent to which physical environments influence our construction of identity is not something only we in Reggio believe. However, it seems our cities do not pay much attention to this idea and a certain contempt for beauty can be sensed; more important is the economic return for builders.

I remember a very brief discussion with a city official in Reggio Emilia who maintained that environments are not particularly important because it is the people living in them that make them more or less pleasant. If we take this – I fear widespread – position to its extreme, then city administrations become exonerated from responsibility for the quality of places, placing it instead on individuals. According to some ways of thinking, schools for children, for reasons beyond me, should be rather untidy, should have badly handwritten signs stuck on the walls and doors with pieces of sticky tape, should not be too well looked after, with an occasional coat of paint sufficient to make them acceptable.

Another comment from people visiting our schools, typical especially of people coming from the pedagogical field, is, 'You are very good, but there is an excess of aesthetic care in your work'. An excess of aesthetic care! It would be interesting to hold a debate on the subject, and I hope this book in part manages at least to illustrate some aspects behind our choices.

Certain attitudes, related to care for environments, seem to me to be extremely natural; indeed, I suffer when I visit schools where I note a lack of care, which often approaches or crosses the border into slovenliness. There is often a certain amount of confusion between care, the culture of inhabiting and luxury. So as far as school environments are concerned, I cannot but ask myself how much respect there is for children inhabiting them, to what extent care for the environments they learn in affects their general education.

Fortunately, the importance of environment as an educating agent has been perceived by very many people visiting our municipal schools in Reggio, where the importance of constant care and research into interesting furnishings, materials and contexts by personnel and management has been recognized. We have seen evidence of this in school renovations carried out in many countries around the world. It is my impression that attention towards physical environments has been a kind of starting point from which to begin a journey of evolution for many groups of educators.

How ideas about environments were born

Apart from an artistic background, my interest probably derives from relationships with family and friends that made me highly sensitive to environments and the quality of living. In Malaguzzi, I immediately found an attentive and curious listener on the subject and my architect husband, Tullio Zini, who had worked with Malaguzzi in Modena on the design of early childhood centres was asked, free of charge for very little money was available, to design furnishings for the *scuola comunale dell'infanzia* Diana: tables, chairs, cupboards and containers for children, and a glass wall to separate and sound-proof the area planned as atelier. This latter space, which had not been properly defined or made distinct, faced on to and sometimes became one with a central space in the school then referred to as the *salone* or hall. The project we worked on created a very beautiful, partly transparent wall, highly contemporary and attuned to aesthetic research in the 'radical movements' in architecture during those years (1972).

Once the furnishings had been made, the environment immediately appeared different, as did the image of the child and the school housing the child. So began a highly fruitful collaboration; I communicated to Tullio the impressions and needs I and my colleagues perceived from our observations with children and he would generously supply suggestions and designs, always highly economical and simple to make, seeing as their manufacture was often entrusted to school parents or pensioners in the neighbourhood – former carpenters or smithies. Many of these furnishings, with certain adjustments and reworkings, were taken up throughout all the schools and are still present and functioning, for example the arena steps for morning meetings, atelier workbenches, the double curve of the *dressing-up stand* and the *inhabitable kaleidoscope* (which spread throughout the world) and various others.

Important research

In the 1970s, again with consultancy by Tullio Zini and an artist friend Nino Squarzi, who had already contributed some innovative ideas for the initial project by the architect Millo on indoor and outdoor spaces at Diana, an entire

school year was spent investigating how spaces in schools were used by children and adults, the quality in the use of these spaces. This enabled a reconsideration of school spaces, and led to the design of new environments, furnishings, equipment and objects. The inquiry used a means of collecting data that was typical of urban studies. All schools were supplied with several copies of suitably scaled plans of their rooms and the research consisted in recording the position of children, teachers and parents at different hours of the day, marking them on the floorplans with different colours. At the same time, evaluations of quality were made for the use of various spaces with indicators of appreciation by children, acoustics, quantity of space and furnishings available.

This work strongly modified our ideas about spaces inside the school, not only from a functional point of view but also considering conceptual aspects. It was immediately obvious the quality of use of space was worst at two times in the day: the lunch for all children and the time when all the children poured into the school's central hall with excessive overcrowding and unacceptable noise levels. From this moment on, starting from this research, the central hall was conceptually transformed and the metaphor of the *piazza* came to be used; entrances came to be considered as a kind of visiting card, introducing the school and its inhabitants and spaces for communicating with the outside world. From this experience, using pedagogical and spatial imagination, we also conceived the mini-atelier with Tullio Zini's collaboration and this was built immediately afterwards, when we took the opportunity afforded by an act of arson at Diana.

A negative event like a fire became an opportunity for creating prototypes for new environments; the mini-atelier drew on all the observations and reflections we had made before that time and attempted to put them into practice in a concrete way. I will take the time to tell the story of what happened because I feel that much can be learnt from it, some of which, with appropriate reinterpretation, could still be enormously helpful today. I remember that when the fire broke out a colleague phoned me and I immediately rushed to Reggio from my home in Modena. Before my eyes I found the new atelier completely destroyed because the fire seemed to have been started precisely in that place. Together with the new dividing wall and furnishings, the entire archive of work from those first years was burned; the rest of the school was partly damaged and above all the walls were completely black.

I had been looking disconsolately for some minutes when Malaguzzi arrived and said to me in an impatient voice, 'Come on, don't stand here regretting, we have to build it again a better way'. The *scuola comunale dell'infanzia* Diana and the *Consiglio Infanzia Città* (see Chapter 6) were marvellous and immediately organized shifts for cleaning and repainting the entire school with the help of all available parents. More than a thousand hours of work were done, naturally all entirely free of charge, but more importantly we decided to use the event to propose building work at the school, especially extensions to classrooms which were really tiny.

We formed a work group made up of some parents from the management council, architect friends including Mariangela Calzolari, who was a municipal technician and subsequently became responsible for renovation, school staff and pedagogistas. Different hypotheses were discussed, some too fantastic or expensive, however, all useful for building up different imagery and getting beyond usual frameworks. In the end, the idea on which to base work which seemed best and was unanimously accepted was the one proposed by Tullio Zini and it included plans for moving the east face of the school and adding a new row of pillars five metres from the back of the school along its entire length (see Figure 7.2). This solution made it possible to use very simple building techniques and reuse all surviving door and window frames from the old facade.

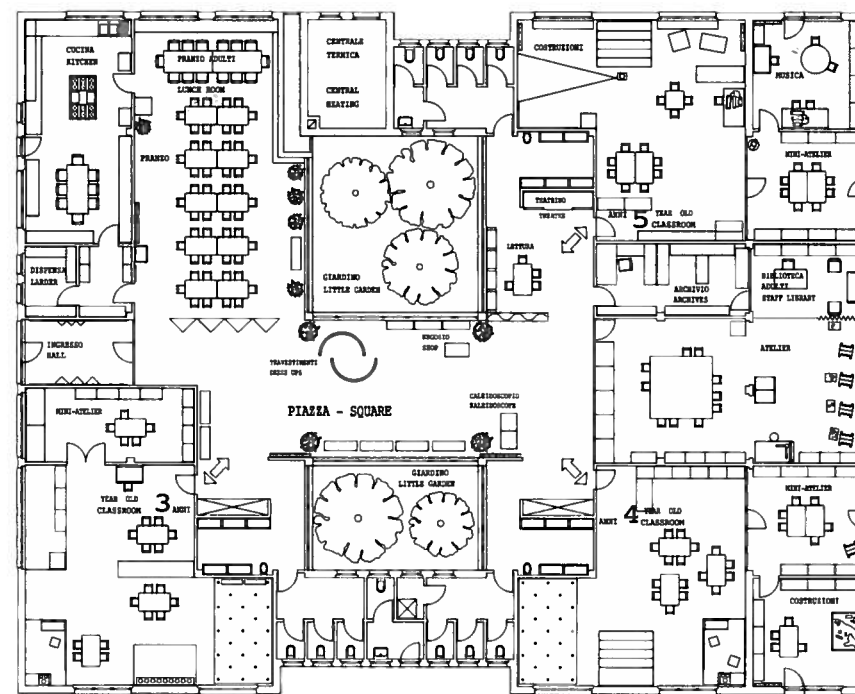


Figure 7.2 Floor plan of the Diana school used for research into the use of spaces

The new dividing wall for the atelier was conceived as a visual screen, a hoarding for presenting work by children. The upper section of the wall was transparent and the lower section, considering the very little money available as is usually the case in schools, was made using the simple expedient of covering a panel of plywood with work by children and protecting it with a piece of flexiglass – making it easy to remove and change work – thus simultaneously keeping the wall and the atelier visually up to date (see Figure 7.3).



Figure 7.3 The atelier window in the *scuola comunale dell'infanzia* Diana

In the *scuola comunale dell'infanzia* La Villetta, created by renovating an early nineteenth century villa, one observation from the previous analysis of school spaces had been that classrooms organized with L-shaped floor plans best enabled teachers and children to organize themselves. Having part of a living space visible and partly screened off allowed less visual interference and greater tranquillity for work in groups. This is why when renovating the Diana school, rather than simply extending classes, the design project created three spaces: the first was a traditional classroom capable of containing all the children; a second small space, which we called the 'mini-atelier', contained large quantities of materials for working with different techniques, was acoustically but not visually separate from the rest of the class for working quietly in groups; and a third small space for group activities could be separate acoustically and visually. This was one of the most important spatial inventions, the one causing the greatest change in ways of working, making it possible and practical to do various kinds of work in small groups and to be able to observe and document children's work.

Furnishings in the new atelier and small spaces were designed by Tullio Zini together with school staff – a large central table, storage for paper using simple bricks as supports for planks of wood, and the same ideas were also used in the mini-ateliers present in each classroom. All this work was done by the municipality's own team of carpenters with help from pensioners in the neighbourhood.

The importance of observation *in situ* became increasingly clear for me after this experience, also the contribution gained from making and imagining new possibilities for inhabiting spaces and the contribution made by exchange and dialogue with people who have specialist competencies; at the same time I understood how important it was for these competencies working by our sides to be of high quality. If renewal is to be more than a word it can come only from this collaboration.

In these first examples of closely woven dialogue between pedagogy and architecture, which would continue over the years and make generations of teachers, atelieristas and pedagogistas more sensitive to their physical environments, the role of the atelierista and her approach to observing children, the importance she gave to certain facets rather than others, and an attention to detail which might generally be considered unnecessary were all significant. There began to be some understanding of the importance of games of balance played by children on lines of shadow, of a feeling of hospitality created for example by large platters of fruit placed in the entrance for visitors, of contributing to a beautiful environment with branches and flowers painted by the children on transparent paper and placed in classroom windows, of capturing the green in the gardens and bringing it into school, of how a graceful arbour of plants climbing over wires put up in the mini-atelier ceiling made it more precious...

Our ability and sensibility in observing how children moved through spaces had also increased. We were better able to perceive aspects of their natural predisposition for establishing a relation with space, how they *taste* space with their powerful but sensitive sense of physicality. Running, jumping, variations in footsteps, hands touching and stroking surfaces; children explore spaces to make their formal, tactile, sonorous and luminous qualities emerge. They feel chromatic qualities and details.

In recent years with the advent of the digital camera, we have been able to observe and confirm this sensibility towards environments through photographs taken by children themselves. It is truly surprising to see the photographs they take, photographs that let us see their ways of seeing, their totally unanticipated viewpoints, such as the importance they attribute to one colour, filling up an entire photographic image with it, the very strong interest in a ray of light entering a window, the *flowering* of a crusty wall, or the play of reflections on a window pane. Ninety per cent of photographs taken by children with digital cameras are details, with girls and boys showing a similar percentage in this preference.

We have begun some small areas of research that have already given us different, interesting elements of information connected to the ages of children, their gender, individual strategies and preferences. This research will be continued for at least two years and aims to collect data internationally.

Pedagogy and technicians

We worked for many years with the technical office in the *Comune* of Reggio Emilia, which is responsible for design, renovation and (in the past) maintenance of municipal schools. Collaboration was not always easy for either of the two parties. Images of childhood and aesthetic frameworks were probably sometimes rather different.

Carla Rinaldi, who became director of municipal early childhood services together with Sergio Spaggiari after the death of Loris Malaguzzi, is highly sensitive to issues of environment and architecture and, together with some of her pedagoga colleagues, she organized a series of meetings and lectures by pedagogistas and architects of quality. These meetings were open to staff in schools and municipal technical offices; city architects were also invited. The reaction from these municipal professionals was surprising to say the least; rather than being pleased at an opportunity for exchange and updating, they took the event as an offence to their professional competency.

When building work is undertaken for school renovation or to bring a building up to new standards, atelieristas, more confident with visual material, tend to become a main reference point for municipal technicians, although everyone working in the school as well as the pedagoga actively participate in the process of critical reflection. However, not all architects and building professionals enjoy this type of participation, which I personally also consider to be precious from a psychological point of view, considering the results it has often produced. Such active participation by school staff often gives rise to particular attention being paid to the quality of living in a space and taking care of an environment, and for children this is a source of education.

The aesthetic quality of an environment requires attention and gestures of care, the maintenance of things and of culture, an attitude of respect for the things around us to which we should dedicate careful thought, organization and financial resources. If children live in well-tended places and see how a community looks after them, they will more probably become citizens who are attentive towards the environment housing them. So for at least twenty years at Diana, groups of parents and school staff regularly repainted the lower parts of school walls – the most exposed areas – and part of the furniture, for though children know how to take care of their environment, there are many of them and they are extremely lively.

A meta-project on environments

In the 1990s, our interest in environments gave rise to a research project carried out together with Milan's Domus Academy¹. Despite obvious interest in the

physical environment of *nidi* on our part and the part of many visitors, nothing can be taken for granted. Michele Zini, one of the architects who worked with the Domus Academy and coedited the book *Children, Spaces, Relations* (Ceppi and Zini, 1998) resulting from the research, took nearly two years to persuade us that it would be useful to disseminate ideas and concepts about young children's environments and to demonstrate the extent to which dialogue between the advanced pedagogy of Reggio Emilia and the advanced design of Domus Academy could be highly productive for advancing ideas and the concrete creation of environments. I do not remember very well the reasons for our caution but perhaps organizing thinking in new ways (and collaborating in the way proposed meant doing this) sometimes needs time to mature and we needed to be convinced that this research pathway really would move us forward.

Once we had clarified the *angle* of the book, we began a series of meetings, which all the participants from the world of pedagogy and the world of architecture and art recall with great pleasure. Our effort consisted in finding words and concepts to represent a kind of environment for children that was far removed from those more generally to be found or imagined in services for children. *Children, Spaces, Relations* helped us clarify, not least of all to ourselves, our values and choices we had made over the course of years and this made it possible for us to communicate these values more effectively with others, at the same time increasing our sensibility towards environments and our capacity for relating to them with practical solutions. This *environmental meta-project for childhood* produced a sort of reference manual for people interested in designing private and public spaces which house children, facilitating conditions of reciprocal listening between the world of childhood and the world of advanced design.

The care we take when we design environments and the care we take when we inhabit them derive from and correspond to an image of the child (and humanity) that is the foundation of the educational philosophy we refer to. We must evaluate in everyday life how much environments allow or forbid, how much they encourage or censor, how much they educate ways of seeing, exploration and sensibility. The extent to which personal sensibilities and culture can grow on journeys of this kind is often underestimated, as are the effects it can have on our relationships with children, the surrounding environment and educational work.

One of the most significant aspects which came from the environmental meta-project was the importance of sensory qualities in environments: light, colour, sound, micro-climate, etc. and how much these influence people's perceptions and overall quality of living. The information and culture we gained from research in these areas amplified and caused greater sensibility in our work with children and considerably improved interventions on the environment by contributing to a more careful, emotive way of seeing the surrounding reality. We know children are born with a very sophisticated

sensorial apparatus, equipped to receive a myriad of stimulations, a capacity for learning and growth, which tends to get dispersed by time, because generally inadequate attention is paid to maintaining these capacities or to ensuring children receive adequate stimuli for achieving their potential. If we consider, and this is universally recognized, that our senses are large and precious receptors for collecting and processing information about reality, then we need to find contexts to accommodate this extraordinary natural patrimony and keep it *alive and practicing*. I will recount just a few illustrations, among the many I recall.

Exploring with the senses

Children had been invited to explore the school and investigate the different qualities of light, smell, and sounds present, being careful also to note any variation during the day, during changes in weather and with different seasons. At the end of this work, various spaces were evaluated by children on the quality of these different elements and their variations, using symbols and indicators they created themselves. In a different workshop, atelieristas and teachers were asked to redesign spaces in their schools through an analysis and application of sensory qualities. Another proposal to make with children, simple and also interesting, is to analyze herbs with noticeably different characters such as rosemary, cat-mint and thyme and try to represent their smells in drawings, then attempt to create sounds and rhythms suited to describing them – and perhaps even try to dance their different essences.

Antonella Spaggiari, who was Mayor of Reggio Emilia for ten years, loves to recount the story of a visit to Diana during which she was struck by the way a small group of 5 year olds was working on the exploration of an onion. Some children were representing the onion's shape in drawings, others were drawing its smell, some were trying to produce sounds to represent it and others still, together with cooks in the kitchen, were breaking onions into little pieces to make them into a salad. This reminds me that many years before, together with the children, we had enacted a sort of 'striptease' on an onion by stripping away its layers one by one and applying these thin layers to a window pane, the veils of the skin transformed into a host of butterfly wings by light passing through them.

Explorations on light led us to bring different tools into school environments for children to explore and manipulate light, in different ways and from different points of view. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the theme of light was subsequently chosen as the main subject in the first atelier organized at the new Loris Malaguzzi International Centre; work based on a scientific approach but also enriched by past experience which was more connected to aspects of expression and environment.

An ecology of place

In my last example, I recalled the experience of having some exemplary aspects and others that it would be better to avoid. Some years after the publication of *Children, Spaces, Relations* (1998), which stimulated much interest and was translated into three languages, we felt the need to take up reflection on environments once again. To do this, we formed an interdisciplinary group to make research on two spaces in schools: entrances and bathrooms, the latter a place to which little reflection had been dedicated apart from thoughts on hygiene and sanitation. We worked together with two young architects (Michele Zini and Francesco Zurlo) and with them we charted a highly interesting journey that made it possible for us to see spaces we used on a daily basis in different ways.

Teachers and atelieristas analyzed these two chosen environments as subjects for research, collecting and documenting their constituent materials and colours and using graphs to visualize the numbers of people using them. Comparing the collected data with recommendations in the 'meta-project for children's environments', the distance separating them became visible. These two environments are both often designed without sufficient attention paid to spaces that children find important. In the case of bathrooms, designs often separate the body and its needs from the pleasure of being in them, and ignore the opportunities they offer, such as the presence of wash basins and water; in fact, the way these spaces were perceived and inhabited by children and adults was documented, clearly revealing the extent to which bathrooms are spaces children frequent joyously and that are almost always underestimated in school design.

At the end of the research, we were able to build up metaphors capable of giving us new thoughts on these two spaces, often considered to be only functional and of secondary importance. It is always interesting when we make concrete choices to have imagery constructed from new metaphors to refer to and use, capable of guiding new models for inhabiting space, and this is true both for furnishings and the living potential of a space.

Once the research was finished and visual documentation had been created that was capable of communicating results to colleagues in other schools, it was time to start the actual process of changing the environments that were the object of the research. Up to this point in the tale, I think the research can be considered effective, formative and culturally precious and it could be a reference for further research into modifying and updating other school spaces. But the second part of the tale must instead make us reflect on how it is possible, so easily and with such superficiality, to dissipate riches that are capable of producing innovation.

At the same time as this research was being carried out, work had begun on rebuilding bathrooms in many schools with the aim of bringing them into line with new safety standards. I believe anyone would find it natural to think that such recently concluded research on an environment would constitute

material of great interest and a source of new design ideas. It is not my intention to mete out criticism, but I find it difficult to understand and accept the waste of experience and intelligence that takes place all too often even in little things. I fear, to tell the truth I believe, the recently concluded research and the work undertaken on rebuilding bathrooms never met, were never put together for exchange or related to each other, with the result that once again the part considered 'theoretical' was separated from the practical with all the damage this short-sighted and basically banal dichotomy inevitably causes. This was confirmed by the work carried out producing environments that are rather ugly, anonymous and extremely distant from the image hypothesized in the research done with the schools. (Let no one use the excuse of funding because this issue was not even considered.)

Creating two ranges of furniture

Even in Reggio Emilia, despite the quality of environmental culture existing in our schools, not everything happens automatically, and we need to continue defending our cultural achievements with perseverance and attention. Experience built up over years and which has given great impulse to the sensibility of school staff towards environments, must always be repropounded, reinterpreted and readapted, and each new project or school renovation must be the occasion for research and development of environments. A culture must continuously be informed and develop – because if the opposite happens it regresses and can no longer transmit competencies it has acquired to new generations of children, teachers, atelieristas, pedagogistas and technicians. As the queen says in *Alice in Wonderland*, 'it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place' (Carroll, 1998: 145).

By their background and role, atelieristas ought to be *vigilant sentinels* of this attention to environments, and press pedagogical directors so that the culture of environment continues to live on, aware that all this can only be obtained through constant evolution. In professional development courses held by Reggio Children, the theme of environments is always given space and importance. But unfortunately there is always limited time and the subject needs to be taken up on different levels in the workplace and in schools.

There is a very widespread idea that furnishings are a secondary element in environments; instead they are an integral part and their choice reflects in precise ways the image we have of childhood and school environments. For all these reasons, when a young businessman in our city asked us to collaborate on creating a new range of furnishings, we accepted enthusiastically. The work group developing the furnishings included different areas of competencies: the businessman, architects, a pedagoga and atelierista and a contract between Reggio Children and the company stipulating that royalties on the products created would be reinvested in research in schools. This is how the

Atelier3 range of furnishings was born and we feel it truly gives an innovative image of children and schools, to the extent that various companies in the field have also been stimulated to create new ranges of furniture.

Atelier3 totally covered the different types of furniture needed for a school but it did not include a series of elements that could contribute to creating soft, imaginary spaces. To fill this gap, Atelier3 was integrated with a new range made of 'soft' pieces. On the initiative of the same intelligently sensitive young businessman and with the same designers, and with Reggio Children once again by their side for consulting on the new range, PLAY+ Soft was born. Whereas the first range showed a certain design uniformity, the large group of young designers and architects made the furnishings of the new range into a varied landscape.

For the most part this new range of furnishings is composed of soft elements, renamed 'big softies' and this project, more than the previous one, is capable of going beyond preschool environments, and adapting to people of various ages. The project has been capable of entering home environments, shopping centres, bookshops (such as the chain run by Italian publishers Feltrinelli), New York's MoMA Museum, dedicated spaces for childhood like Heathrow airport's new T5 terminal in London and Stockholm's House of Culture and many other projects, confirming once again the extent to which a dialogue between pedagogy, atelier and architecture, which began many decades ago, has given rise to interesting and original journeys now increasingly extending beyond school environments. Rightly so because childhood does not only inhabit a world of schools.

Between art and pedagogy

Dialogues with Places is one of the most recent exhibitions created together with children to inaugurate the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre in Reggio Emilia. The suggestion giving shape to this exhibition came from a project entitled *Invitation to...* conceived by artist Claudio Parmiggiani, who I have already mentioned in Chapter 6 and who is a long-time member of the 'conceptual' art movement in Italy, which goes back to the 1970s. In this project, the municipal administration of Reggio Emilia, with collaboration from private sponsors, commissioned and organized the creation of five contemporary works of art to be permanently situated in various places round the city; spaces freely chosen by five artists of renowned quality: Luciano Fabro, Sol LeWitt, Eliseo Mattiacci, Robert Morris and Richard Serra. In his *Invitation to...* project, Parmiggiani writes, 'For an artist it means electing a place as the emblem of an idea and thinking of it as a voice in his or her work... and through their work communicate the energy, presence and profoundness of this place informing it and giving it meaning... The works are, therefore, expressions of a real solidarity with an environment and its reality' (Parmiggiani, 2003).

We felt the pathways pursued by the five artists to create their works could also activate important and interesting processes with children, such as choosing a place, creating a relationship and dialogue with it, and arriving at the point of designing a piece of work that is attuned to the place and its identity, simultaneously modifying it and enriching it. In this type of journey, important artistic, cultural and social processes are activated which are important also from an educational perspective. The *Dialogues with Places* exhibition (see Figure 7.4) opens with a strong statement, 'Every place has a soul, an identity. Trying to understand that soul and relate to it means learning to also recognize one's own soul' (the word 'soul' is taken from James Hillman's *L'Anima dei Luoghi*, 2004).

Together with James Hillman, many voices have made themselves heard, mournful voices warning us and creating alarm bells, placing care for the environment and its quality in a new and lucid relationship to health, and to physical and mental well-being.



Figure 7.4 The *Dialogues with Places* exhibition

Too often we can observe an apathetic, resigned acceptance of vulgarity and ugliness, a lack of care for environments we inhabit. This degenerative process is culpably underrated; caring for our environment is considered to be an unimportant element of life and culture, not fundamental but a useless refinement, superfluous, or an activity to be carried out at one's discretion. Instead, we believe that today more than in the past, in a situation of social and cultural transformation taking place around the entire planet, in situations of massive *migratory flows* originating in the need to survive, to work, or in tourism, our relationship with environments is an element of enormous importance, because it leads us to a reconsideration of profound aspects connected to cultural, individual and social identity. This general responsibility also involves education.

It is our hope that a sensitive approach to surroundings, in constant daily ways, made up of many actions, of attention and choice, can be a positive element for participation and conscious solidarity with all that surrounds us and with other human beings of all cultures and backgrounds; an indispensable attitude for the future of democracy and the human species.

The Wonder of Learning is a new exhibition created in 2008, a travelling exhibition aiming to update and replace the 1975 exhibition *The Hundred Languages of Children* and organized by the *Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'infanzia del Comune di Reggio Emilia* and Reggio Children. It contains a section dedicated to this theme of 'dialogues with places' in order to underscore how important the subject is for us and as a practical illustration of possible ways of working with children.

The new Loris Malaguzzi International Centre, where the second phase of building work is nearly completed, has once again drawn to our attention the issue of a culture of environment, the importance and, simultaneously, the fear of beauty. Just as in the 1970s, we continue to hear voices that accuse us of excessive attention towards aesthetics and as always the impression is that there exists a large amount of confusion between professional competency, a culture of inhabiting spaces and luxury. It is saddening after all these years to find ourselves discussing aspects we believed to be more consolidated at this point.

The International Centre has been generated by the pedagogical culture of the municipal schools, and by the attention, hopes and dreams this has awakened in parts of the world. The centre represents a culture sensitive to aesthetics (in terms of connections between structures), which we have built up over many years. To return to where I began the chapter, it is still hurtful to see that certain aspects of this culture, that some of us consider important, are instead perceived by others as a form of *megalomania* and superfluity.

Today in an economic recession involving many countries, there is a need for courageous, lucid and anti-conformist choices. In times of difficulty like this, where both reality and dreams have doubts about the right course to follow, more than any other time we need to be aware that only a culture of professional and ethical rigour and beauty can help us to continue with our hopes. As the poet Friedrich Hölderlin tells us, 'where there is danger, a rescuing element grows as well' (Hölderlin, 2004: 39).

Vea Vecchi in conversation about architecture and pedagogy with...

Carla Rinaldi, pedagoga, Director of Reggio Emilia's municipal schools from 1970 to 1999, Professor of Education at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and President of Reggio Children since 2007; and Michele Zini, architect and designer with ZPZ Partners, working with Reggio Children and Domus Academy Research Centre (June 2009).

VEA: I'd like to start from the book *Children, Spaces, Relations: Meta-project for an Environment for Young Children* (Ceppi and Zini, 1998), which is based on a research project that began the ongoing dialogue between Reggio Emilia and the world of design. Michele, your work as an architect designing *scuole*

dell'infanzia, *nidi* and other spaces for children and as a designer of furnishings for children has an important point of reference in the *Meta-project* carried out in the late 1990s. How did the idea for that project come about?

MICHELE: The idea of working on a project about designing environments for children came from the need to find some tools to activate a dialogue between pedagogy, architecture and design. We wanted to make explicit all the ideas and knowledge on the environment that had developed in Reggio's schools, and at the same time to fertilize them with the cultural and technical knowledge and know-how of the world of contemporary design.

There were also some empathies that suggested this encounter: we were reading some of the same authors – Edgar Morin, Gregory Bateson, Ilia Prigogine, Bart Kosko, Marc Augé – studying complexity theories, and visiting the same exhibits of contemporary art. This led me to propose to Domus Academy and Reggio Children a sort of roundtable of research on the environment of young children, applying the work method of the meta-project, which we were experimenting with extensively at that time and which was a current of research in Italian design.

VEA: Carla, you readily accepted the proposal and transformed it into one of the strategic projects of Reggio Children. Why?

CARLA: The meta-project was the discovery, very banal but profoundly true, that we were not constructing a project but *a way of thinking about designing*, the conceptualization of *project design*. For those, like me, who were educated with a concept of project and project design that was dynamic but also specialized, the meta-project became an opportunity to understand in depth this concept of 'meta', going from the project to the meta-project. I think that this was a bold step, which I think is demonstrated by the fact that the book, even though it has been translated into many languages, has not yet been entirely understood in its deepest essence, this 'thinking about thinking' of architecture.

VEA: How did you work on the meta-project?

MICHELE: We applied the holistic approach that characterized all of us from a cultural point of view. We organized a group of people who worked in different fields (art, design, architecture, pedagogy, bio-engineering, interface design, primary design). The job of the two coordinators, Giulio Ceppi and myself, was to elicit contributions, even very different ones, on the subject and have them 'dialogue' without excessively mixing the languages and the approaches; that is, without 'levelling down' the different languages into a single style and language, but rather maintaining a 'semi-finished' level, which would preserve the strength of the differences. Also, the final drafting of the book on the meta-project and its layout, which entrusted comprehension of the meaning to the relationship between text and images and enabled a non-sequential reading, was an attempt to offer something that each reader could personalize, rather than follow one set of rules and a single recipe.

CARLA: The meta-project was an interdisciplinary encounter for *trans-disciplinary* construction. In fact, this experience compelled us, as you often say, Vea, to construct this sort of 'distillation of knowledges', the result of which was the meta-project. We consider inter-disciplinarity to be essential for seeking new answers and new questions, which our times call for. Ours is a true 'season of design', when it is indispensable to dare the new and design the future.

VEA: The meta-project became an approach and a heritage of the world of pedagogy?

CARLA: There was a positive fusion between pedagogy and architecture/design. The book was presented, metaphorically, as a sort of scribbling pad that invited and suggested change. It is not coincidental that almost immediately afterwards we began the research project with Harvard Project Zero on individual and group learning, described in the book *Making Learning Visible* (Rinaldi, Giudici and Krechevsky, 2001). These were enthusiastic and fertile years, where the 'meta' level began to become, if not everyday practice, at least an everyday effort.

VEA: What are the most novel aspects that this research brought to the design of environments for young children?

MICHELE: This work was important because it made visible the boundaries of a field of research that before were hidden. Since then, designing environments for children has become a field that includes different projects that nourish a body of knowledge and are enriched by belonging to an ongoing laboratory of research, which continuously redefines its objectives and for this reason is kept alive and interesting.

It also shifted the problem from building structures to creating artificial ecosystems made up of furniture, symbols, colours, materials, lights, smells and sounds. It became more evident that it is not only compliance with the regulations that determines the quality of a project. Nor is it simply the architectural quality; there are examples of beautiful buildings that fail to provide a good environment for children. What determines the quality of a project is its capacity to transmit and support a certain image of the child, a child who has a hundred languages and the right to an environment that is rich, multifaceted, complex, well tended, beautiful.

And finally, this work made it clear how senseless it is to conceive the architecture and the interior design of a school separately, as often happens; rather, they are elements of the same environmental system.

CARLA: For me, this experience represented that famous 'paradigm shift', precisely because it meant overcoming the separation between spaces and furnishings. The encounter between pedagogy and architecture within the Municipality of Reggio Emilia was courageously introduced by Malaguzzi, inspired, I believe, by the great masters of pedagogy like Maria Montessori. It was really somewhat of a cultural 'scandal', the idea that the clients, in this case the pedagogical team and the teachers, and in certain cases also

the parents, would sit at the same table as the architect. Usually it was the architect who would 'deliver' a house or, in this case, generously deliver a school to the teachers. This was the first sign of this concept of 'doing school', in both the metaphorical and literal sense, involving the team in building a 'school of thought' to make a three-dimensional school.

VEA: Carla, can you talk about the context in which the culture of the environment of young children originated in the schools of Reggio Emilia.

CARLA: When I first started working in Reggio in 1970, it was an extraordinary moment, in which the design of the *scuola dell'infanzia* Diana had just been completed by the architect Millo, who worked for the municipality. The real turning point was with that design. I started when the project was initiated for the *nido* Arcobaleno with the architect Carta, who had taken to heart the lessons of Diana, challenging our knowledge of such young children – which meant challenging our own ignorance, because in that period (1972–1974) there weren't other *nidi* conceived as educational environments from which to take inspiration, apart from the corporate day care centres at Olivetti. In fact, the architectures of the ONMI (Opera Nazionale Maternità and Infanzia), created during the Fascist era to provide welfare services, offered a design based primarily on welfare and healthcare. The first *nido* designed and opened in the 1960s in Reggio Emilia, Cervi, embodied that health-oriented stereotype.

The *nido* Arcobaleno broke down this approach. Architecture has always had a powerful role in our experience, since architecture shapes the pedagogy, it is one of the strongest influences. So when you make architecture you actually renew the pedagogy; the architecture is not only the architecture of the building, but it determines and modifies the pedagogical architecture. So in reality, architecture and design are in relation with pedagogy, and this gives rise to an extremely generative moment, a moment of crisis, and the crisis is accentuated with the involvement of the teachers and the pedagogistas as protagonists. When this involvement happens, the teachers began to feel legitimated, encouraged to think about the spaces of the school, to imagine them, to want them different. They felt this as a duty and a right and they considered the space to be a fundamental part of the relationships, of the learning and of the communications that developed in the school.

VEA: A space that is subject and protagonist?

CARLA: The space is no longer simply background, but a key player: organizing a space means organizing a metaphor of knowledge, an image of how we know and learn. In fact, if knowledge does not progress by formalization and abstraction but, as it seems, by the capacity to contextualize, to create relationships, to act and to reflect, then the spaces and the furnishings, the lights, the sounds must allow relationships, actions, reflections, sharing and collaboration. So here we have the concept of designing the environment that also means designing life, which means constructing a context in which it is possible to continue to live.

In my view, it is a concept that finds one of its highest expressions in the meta-project. The antecedents are found in the years I was talking about before, the early 1970s; maturation occurred during our happy encounters with architects like Tullio Zini. But the meta-project was the moment where this positive fusion really took its highest form.

The keywords contained in the first part of the book were used to formulate general criteria and contexts in an attempt to identify the desirable characteristics for an environment for young children, based on a critical analysis of the experience of the *nidi* and *scuole dell'infanzia*. But they also represent the most effective synthesis of the trans-disciplinary experience that led our thinking 'to think about itself'. If I had to illustrate the keywords I would use the helical form of DNA.

MICHELE: The meta-project is actually a sort of genetic project, a system of conditions, qualities and values able to contribute to the identity of the individual projects that derive from it. The hope is that ten different designers who take inspiration from the meta-project produce ten different projects, but all with the same 'flavour'.

CARLA: The keywords of the meta-project are also the script of a pedagogical *curriculum vitae*, or in any case I'd like to begin to rethink them in this way, because they are much more 'secular' than all the technical terminology. They are keywords for inhabiting, and, therefore, for living... I just got the desire to view them as *structuring elements* of a curriculum vitae, or as *aims* for a curriculum vitae, and at the same time *outlines* for a curriculum vitae.

MICHELE: Another characteristic of that work was the involvement of many people from different cultures and languages around the theme of designing environments for children: to create a network of thinking, a group competency, a sort of collective intelligence that is mutually nourished. In the meta-project, like in the more recent case of PLAY+ Soft, creating a network of people who offer their perspectives on the environment becomes an objective in itself: *the means is the message*.

CARLA: In the book you are not able to identify who wrote what, whether the author of a piece of text is the architect or the educator. We 'spread the word' back and forth to each other, someone would throw out a word and someone else would fertilize it.

VEA: In your daily professional activity as educator and architect, what role has been and continues to be played by the research you carried out?

MICHELE: *Children, Spaces, Relations* is still used as a guide for our design projects for *nidi* and *scuole dell'infanzia*, but also for the two lines of furniture we created in conjunction with Reggio Children and the other spaces for children we've designed in public places (airports, shopping centres, parks). Each project takes shape and identity also from the cultural context, the site, the historical period, just as the projects in other countries – for example, the Takadanobaba nursery in Tokyo – are born

of a relationship between different cultures, from a dialogue that makes it possible to identify design elements that are not present in either of the two cultures but that arise from the relationship between them.

CARLA: The word 'relationship' is an important key for understanding. Why was this dialogue so fertile? Could it only have been so with a 'certain' architecture? Not by chance, the architecture represented in the meta-project is an architecture defined as 'relational', and ours is a relational pedagogy.

It is not by chance that we were constructing, talking and writing about relational pedagogy – Malaguzzi first and foremost – and they were writing about relational architecture, which highlights the 'soft qualities' and leaves to the architecture only the task of marking *fuzzy* boundaries. It is wonderful when you discover that you are a fish in an aquarium with other fish like you.

VEA: Michele, is there a particular characteristic always present in your projects that derives from what we have been discussing?

MICHELE: The search to give a multisensory dimension to the environment, which means working on identifying the materials, the lights, the colours (the so-called *soft qualities*), with the aim of providing not just comfort, functionality and easy maintenance, but also a sensory richness that is empathic with the children's cognitive processes. If children are a sensory laboratory and they know and interpret the world by engaging all five senses, then they deserve an environment that is rich from a sensory point of view with a design that enhances these aspects. A design for an environment for children that is poor from a sensory point of view is probably going to be an ugly design for children.

CARLA: It was evident to us that the younger the child, the more a relational pedagogy seeks a relational architecture, especially the 'soft qualities' because they are the ones to which the child is sensitive.

VEA: Michele, you've been collaborating with Reggio Emilia for fifteen years. What has changed in your way of working?

MICHELE: It has contributed to developing a way of looking, of thinking, and an enormous faith in children – a faith that is also nurtured by my daughters Alice and Mattia. Also, I've learned a 'reckless' and at times insane tendency to never be satisfied, a tendency, however, that generates quality and one that children deserve. And I've learned that it is truly naïve to think that a school, once the building is finished, is ready for use and the architect's job is finished. A good design project leaves some spaces (in both the real and conceptual sense) undetermined, so that the teachers and the children can determine their potentials. In reality, the designer should continue to work for a year or two in a group with teachers and pedagogistas to refine the design of the school, in a sort of relationship of 'design maintenance' that completes the realization of the project.

VEA: You have taken the research of the meta-project and the case studies of your architecture and furniture to many parts of the world. Which concept has turned out to be the most difficult to communicate and share with other cultures?

MICHELE: The concept of 'rich normality', a concept that I really love, but it is especially difficult to share in other countries. I am able to communicate the difference between simple and simplified, between complex and complicated, between multisensory and cacophonous, but I have a hard time translating from the Italian the concept of rich normality...

CARLA: The definition of 'rich normality' emerged from a discussion between Andrea Branzi and myself, where you were also present, Vea. I was discussing the idea of transgression as an 'escape from normality', and especially of always living outside the normal. But Andrea Branzi brought in this concept of 'rich normality', as the normality that also contains the anomaly, that is fluid, very difficult to inhabit, where there is beauty and ugliness, and we are called upon continuously to redefine beauty and ugliness, and so on.

Vea Vecchi in conversation about architecture and pedagogy with...

Paola Cavazzoni and Maddalena Tedeschi, pedagogistas who have worked with various architects, coordinating the development of new municipal schools; and Tullio Zini, an architect who has worked with Reggio since the 1970s, including designing the scuola dell'infanzia in the Loris Malaguzzi Centre along with ZPZ Partners and Gabriele Lottici. The three have worked together on many projects (February 2009).

VEA: You have all recently been involved in the opening of a number of municipal schools. For an architect and a pedagogista, what's most important in this collaboration? What are the roles and the meeting points, what difficulties might be encountered, and what do you learn from each other?

TULLIO: I think that designing involves envisaging many things – functional needs, quantities, possible future developments. But it also means a synthesis among different competencies; designing means coordinating and 'gelling' these different worlds to seek the most effective way to harmonize them and make them applicable to the everyday reality. As suggested by Vitruvius, the architectural theoretician of Imperial Rome, an architect has to know about mathematics without being a mathematician, about music without being a musician, about poetry without being a poet, and so on, because you have to be aware of all the different competencies that can be involved, in order to recognize their importance and fuse them together in a project. In my opinion, this statement by Vitruvius is close to your pedagogical theory of the *hundred languages* that children possess, and your rejection of hyper-specialization, and the ability to dialogue with other cultures and competencies that you consider to be such a rich resource. This concept can also be seen in the Renaissance, with the idea of the universal man whose culture encompasses all fields of knowledge.

So if you're designing a school you have to try to understand the pedagogical values. Designing a new school with this awareness is such a complex issue that, without the contribution of those who will inhabit it, those who are able to clarify the deep nature of what a school means, you risk creating projects that are worthless. There really must be an exchange, because there are many things you don't know: the daily life of the child, the child's relationships with his or her surroundings and with others, and so on. And if you don't ask these questions to those who inhabit the school on a daily basis, well, there's no way you'll ever know them.

We are talking about an exchange of competencies that is complex, and this is why I've always thought that creating a school is like creating a little city, because a school encompasses and reflects many of the themes of everyday life: the relationships with parents, food, sleeping, friendships, attachments, and many other things. So designing a school means confronting and resolving problems in a way that requires many and different competencies.

MADDALENA: I absolutely agree with Tullio about how designing requires that everyone involved comes to the table with their own competencies and curiosities, and that we have to be open to listening to competencies that we don't have and someone else does. Working with Tullio has been important as a professional experience but also a personal one, and I'll explain why. In terms of the relationships that we can glimpse and that we hypothesize in the school, what we are actually talking about is the relational life of the children, of their families, but also the life of the teachers, the cooks and auxiliary personnel; it's the life of many people for many hours a day.

So designing a school goes beyond the functional aspects of the environment, which naturally are important, and beyond the good organization necessary so that everyone can work in the best way. I believe that the most important goal is to ensure the best life to the people who live in that place.

I recall the emotion I felt when I first entered the *nido* Gianni Rodari, designed by Tullio, the fascinating plays of light, the *embraces* of the architectural forms and of the materials, the sensation of real pleasure. These feelings derive from qualities that are intrinsic to the environment and that emerge from an idea that values the people who inhabit the space. This attempt to imagine spaces and new possibilities in the children's living together helps create a new way of working and of teaching.

VEA: The relationship between Tullio and the schools is longstanding: to what extent have the pedagogy and the architecture evolved together?

TULLIO: I've always thought that to create a good architectural design, you have to take into consideration not only the structures of the buildings, but also the environmental qualities of inhabiting the space, such as the light, the sounds, the colours, the materials. All these elements must be part of the architecture. Talking about the 'soft qualities' in inhabiting

spaces is easier now, because these concepts have gradually become more widespread, but back in 1989, when we began working on this type of project, they were not so common. Reggio Emilia has never just been content with the quantity of schools created, but as soon as one was finished, we would begin to examine the quality of living that it could offer.

When you design a building, you always try to get an idea of how someone might feel in the space you are proposing. You think about how people can move around in the space, with what rhythms and what ways of being they will be able to inhabit these new unexplored spaces. Then there's another aspect, a very complex one and also difficult to describe, which considers how to represent this new and growing culture of childhood without falling into 'infantilism', into a language that is simplified and banal.

PAOLA: I think that this idea of a complex design process has had an almost daily impact on the quality of inhabiting the environments; it also contributes to a greater awareness of how the children perceive, move around and inhabit the space, and this has given value to the culture of the children and their rights. Even the teaching practices were modified because looking at the furnishings and the objects as *words about the space*, looking at them as subjects in relationship, I think makes for a greater sensitivity, learned and expanded through the dialogue. All this helped the teachers to see the children's research and explorations in the space with new eyes, and to understand this as research and not just simply the manipulation of objects.

So I think that what you asked at the beginning is important: how did all this evolve, and what new elements did it bring to the latest architectural projects carried out? I think that what contributed to the evolution of the dialogue was primarily the idea of relationships: a pedagogy that believes in a child in relationship right from the start is the same as a relational architecture, so I think this indicates that you need to create places with strong relationships to each other, places in which there is not a hierarchical separation between different kinds of knowledge, between play and learning, between kitchen, hall and classroom, between inside and outside space, and the architectural culture has given concrete shape to this concept in the two most recent *nidi*.

Another evolution is represented by the use of different sized spaces. This had been experimented with in the *scuole dell'infanzia* built up to the 1990s but was not yet geared toward the younger children. It meant crediting very young children with the ability to use these spaces, and it also meant breaking down a number of stereotypes. A small child is not necessarily happier in small spaces; creating tall spaces with different levels, I believe, offers the child different possibilities. The space that Tullio created in the *nido* Iotti, its large size, is a strong provocation, but it also makes the centre a community space, where adults and children can be together. It can hold lots of people, it's a spacious meeting place, and for the teachers and myself this shifted our way of looking at the children.

Keeping the children in limited spaces certainly makes control easier, but perhaps it also reduces children's perceptions and questions. Being able to look at things from many points of view is a provocation, but also a metaphor. In *nido* Iotti, we saw very young children experiencing the *high space* in an extraordinary way, curious to encounter it, some also with caution, and I believe that this also led the children to a different way of relating with the teacher.

Designing is a creative act that becomes more interesting when carried out by pedagogy and architecture together, allowing our research and observations to evolve.

TULLIO: Over time, I have learned to value and to incorporate into my design projects the care that is typical of the feminine world, the importance that women's culture gives to gracefulness, to attention to details, and to low key furnishings, which are represented here by the flowers in that vase, the plant that is climbing up the building, and I think that these things are like enzymes that inadvertently change the architecture, without the need for introducing major structural transformations.

MADDALENA: I remember the discussion we had with you about what image to give of the *nido* as a public place for the community. How to give value to the idea of participation that is so important for us, the relationship with others, the possibility to involve everyone – children and adults, the neighbourhood, the town – in the choices made. And I remember how designing the entrance caused us to reflect on this idea. How to design an entrance that immediately expresses this idea of a public place, that cannot be confused with the entrance of a house or just any place; it had to make clear that this is a place of culture, open and public. The result was this entrance that is *important* but not oppressive, that is light and welcoming, with lots of windows, that also seeks harmonies with the surrounding environment, with a sage green column standing near a tall tree, a ginkgo that we recognized as the 'prompter' of that huge space.

I think this way of seeking connections is really precious, like the idea of designing these classroom spaces by highlighting their volume, their width, the different levels, and above all the thresholds, those intermediate places of contact. You enter the room and there's a lower ceiling that welcomes you and makes everything more familiar and private, and then suddenly you move and the perspective changes, because the ceiling rises, there's a much deeper volume; but that's not all, because wherever you position yourself your view is different. So they are places that in their way of being and presenting themselves, elicit and support research in those who inhabit them, children and adults alike.

PAOLA: I wanted to go back to the reflections on the language and codes of the physical space, of which children are very sensitive interpreters. An example, to clarify what I mean: the strong acoustics of a very large space can be a problem, but I noticed that at *nido* Iotti the use of the large

shell-shaped dressing-up area assumes a special identity because dressing up is not just about putting on clothes: *Zorro* becomes even more *Zorro* if he runs, if there's a sound, if there's a big echo. Dressing up is also based on Mom's high heels, and the particular sound produced by a large space makes this a special dressing-up experience.

Children listen to the spaces and the places, they know how to listen to the languages of the space and I think that we adults can, too, if we consider this to be an important element that allows us to live better.

VEA: Has the actual use made of environments always followed the original design intention?

TULLIO: My idea is that in designing spaces you have to propose simple, basic landscapes, in which life can then evolve in a complex way, just as everyday life does. So you need the least possible number of constraints, to provide just some conditions of inhabitability and use, then allow the space to be used and changed in terms of function. You need to make suggestions but avoid overly specializing the spaces, because life evolves at a higher rate of speed than you foresee.

PAOLA: We have always tried to create a multipurpose space along with an idea of the relational aspect. So the stairway-play structure of *nidi* Rodari and Iotti was conceived by Tullio not only as an element of connection between the higher and lower levels, but as giving the possibility to have spaces for looking outside, terraces for being together. But it was also a space that the children themselves further reinvented; for some of the children, it's the niche where they can read or take precious objects, or a place where they can work on special construction projects.

MADDALENA: Tullio, I remember what you said about simple landscapes. And I think that the new school at the Malaguzzi Centre is also a challenge from that point of view, because this school is very large and rich, but then when you look at it you see the structures are minimalist and they seem to be waiting for the dialogue with the people who will inhabit the space. This is not the virtuosity of a structure that imposes on you a certain type of communication; instead, it's like a very light invitation, like whispering to the teachers and children to continue being interested and engaged, to verify things, to move things around, to invent new functions, to play with everything.

At the *nido* Iotti, we documented how in the room that faces onto the parking lot, the 6–8-month-old children who were starting to crawl would return to the windows, re-enacting goodbyes to their parents: after saying goodbye at 9 a.m., at 10.30 they would go back and confirm the farewell, 'Ciao!' As if they needed this sense of security, they would go back there and relive the emotion of that moment. During the initial period of attendance at the *nido* this was wonderful: the projecting windows became a sort of *security niche* to which the children could return, and this gives you a certain idea of the space.

TULLIO: The window sill is low and wide enough for the child to be able to sit inside it and look out...

MADDALENA: ...they were sitting there on the window sill like on a bench, and they would do the goodbyes, also collectively, all there close to each other saying 'Ciao!'...

TULLIO: ...these are the opportunities that you try to provide, then they are transformed, enriched. When we were assembling the last stairway at the *nido* Iotti, while the workers were still on the job, the intermediate landing had already become the place for dolls, it had already taken on a different use, already reinvented. You might not think of these things while you're working on the design, but when they happen, you learn to see the places anew, with different eyes, and you are happy about that. When we designed these stairway-play structures, we had also invented other interesting situations, like small windows through which the children who are crawling can look outside, lowered spaces and hideouts, but all this costs money and so you have to set limits, but there could be lots of opportunities...

MADDALENA: We are wondering how the children will live in the new school at the Malaguzzi Centre, because the school will be inhabited by children who have recently arrived from various parts of the world, who have lifestyles, maps, colours and mental images that may be different. It will be very interesting to experiment with these different points of view. We are imagining this kind of 'inter-language' that is not only verbal but in relationship with the environment and the materials. The documentation will be interesting because it will help the children to see themselves anew, to talk about themselves, and it will also help us as adults to open different spaces of thinking.

TULLIO: I believe that in this approach that I've taken, not overly defining spaces, there's the idea of a real dialogue, as if to say, 'Now it's your turn'. I think that the dialogue has to take place in this very free way, also working together to correct any design errors.

PAOLA: Oddly, all this research is often seen by others as a privilege, that in Reggio there aren't all the restrictions that other places have. How many times has someone said to me, 'We can't do this'? Our attention to the regulations and to safety is never separate from evaluations on well-being, quality and the rights of the child, never forgetting that the child is the protagonist.

MADDALENA: If we want to construct new spaces and interesting relationships for the children, we have to consider the furniture, the colours and the environment as a whole; there is a thread based on beauty that connects the parts, that creates harmonies and relationships. The multidisciplinary group set up to consider the furnishings at the new school in the Malaguzzi Centre consisted of pedagogistas, architects, interior designers, people with a special eye, but also the artisans who produce things,

along with teachers and atelieristas of different generations. One choice we made was not to totally complete the new school but allow it to evolve, especially in the ateliers. There will still be the possibility to invent.

PAOLA: We continue to talk to Tullio about this, as one of the authors of this dialogue between pedagogy and architecture that has characterized our experience since the 1970s. This has involved not only architecture but also designing furniture and objects that derive from observations of the children, developing prototypes that were then tested. This design collaboration started with the inhabitable mirror triangle created by Tullio, which has been reproduced in many countries.

MADDALENA: Original objects were invented starting precisely from listening to the children. I remember that Malaguzzi himself had observed in the *nidi* that the children would learn to walk by pushing a small chair, so a group of teachers devised a sort of trolley with wheels with a mirror applied on one side.

TULLIO: We all contributed ideas and potentials, and now we have to continue to work together.