
Not Just Anywhere: Making Child Care Centers into “Particular” Places

by Lella Gandini

When you enter a school for young children, you get an instant feeling about the children and the teachers. Their voices, their clothes, their motions all carry messages about who they are. But all too seldom does the physical environment carry these same kinds of messages. From one preschool to the next, from one child care center to another, you see similar kinds of activity centers, familiar educational materials, the same toys, and the same decorations on the walls — be it Santa Claus, Smurfs, or fall leaves. In other words, even though we may value individuality in children and adults, we rarely build environments which have *personality*.

One of the greatest challenges in designing institutions is to transform a physical plant into a human environment. One part of this transformation has to do with discovering ways to make impersonal rooms and hallways reflect the lives of the children and adults who spend so many active hours in that space. Who are they as people? What are their lives like outside of this building? What are their daily experiences? What are their homes like? What do they bring to a center from their culture? What is the history of their center or school?

Last year, while traveling in Italy, I discovered a program where teachers and children have found a wealth of ways to make rooms, halls, and familiar activity areas reflect their personal and cultural histories. The space that surrounds them has, across a number of years, become a particular space belonging to that particular group of children and adults with a unique history and cultural background.

The program is found in the Comune of Reggio Emilia, a town of 130,000 inhabitants which sits in the fertile plain of the Po Valley, located in the northern and economically better developed part of Italy. In Reggio Emilia, there is a strong preschool program which originated in schools started by parents at the end of the Second World War. The city now runs 20 schools for children between three and six years of age and 12 infant centers for children under three; it services respectively 47% and 35% of the children of those ages.

The philosophy underlying this preschool program has evolved through the years. Part of this dynamic growth has come from a partnership between teachers, parents, and educational advisors.

Among the ideas which have come from this collaboration is the educational significance of thoughtfully designed physical spaces.

Loris Malaguzzi, a leader of education for young children in Italy, talks about the importance of space in this way: “We value space because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective, and cognitive learning. All of this contributes to a sense of well-being and security in children. We also think that the space has to be a sort of aquarium which mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it.”

A Sense of Personal Space

The schools of Reggio are astonishing. The rooms are simply beautiful. There is attention to detail everywhere: in the color of the walls, the shape of the furniture, the arrangement of the simplest objects on shelves and tables. Light from the windows and doors shines through transparent collages and weavings made by the children. Healthy,

green plants are everywhere. Behind the shelves displaying shells are mirrors which reflect the patterns which children and teachers have created.

But the environment is not just beautiful — it is highly personal. For example, in one of the halls, a series of small boxes made of white cardboard creates a grid on the wall. On each box the name of a child or a teacher is printed with rubber stamp letters. These boxes are used for leaving little surprises or messages for one another.

Walking a little further, you see a display of pine cones placed in order by size, and next to them a series of round, polished pebbles arranged in rows by shades of color from white to dark grey. The natural beauty of these found objects, along with their form, texture, color, and size, is highlighted by the careful attention with which they have been arranged on a lighted shelf just at children's eye level. This display, like others throughout the school, records a recent event in children's lives. The display contains the treasures which children picked up on a special walk through the woods to the bank of the river.

Children are encouraged to bring in tokens of their home experience connected with daily or special events. They bring shells from their vacation on the seaside in the summer or they bring traditional decorations when they return from their winter vacations. Teachers collect these items and build displays where each child's contribution is respected and at the same time becomes part of a larger picture. For example, the children's decorations were each put in a transparent bag: the bags were all put together into a huge transparent hanging which caught the light from a nearby window. Children could simply

watch the play of light on the hanging, they could play counting games with the objects, they could gather around and compare what each of them had contributed.

The space in the school of Reggio Emilia is personal in still another way: it is full of children's own work. Visual expression is so important in the curriculum that an *art director* works with children throughout every school day. This art director teaches children and works with teachers to help them display children's work. The results literally surround the people in this school. Everywhere there are paintings, drawings, paper sculptures, constructions, transparent collages coloring the light, mobiles moving gently overhead. This work is not restricted to bulletin boards or hallway walls. It turns up even in unexpected spaces like stairways and bathrooms.

The art you see is not simply the result of exploring materials or making designs. It often is a reflection of children's immediate and personal experiences. Once, after a heavy rain, a big puddle of water formed in the school garden. The children went out to play and explore, stamping their boots and throwing pebbles in the puddle. Suddenly, one of them noticed their upside down reflections in the water. The children became excited, and the teacher began to ask questions. An animated discussion followed about why the reflection was upside down. The children experimented with movements and gestures looking at themselves in the puddle. Later, when they returned inside, they began to draw people and trees reflected in water. A small group made up a story about a child's adventure in a topsy-turvy world. This event marked the beginning of a long project

involving exploration of reflections in water and in mirrors.

As you walk through a school in Reggio Emilia, you often come across children clustered around a display of drawings or collages. They take pleasure in talking over their experiences, comparing work, or using their earlier drawings as a point of departure for new drawings, science experiments, or conversations. This lively record of past work surrounds the children and adults and creates a vivid record of their recent experiences.

A Sense for the Life of a Particular Community

When you wander to the housekeeping corner, you are in for a surprise. Against the wall there is a cupboard lined with foods — much as you might see in any child care center anywhere. But when you look closely, you see that the jars and boxes don't contain familiar plastic fruits and vegetables. Instead, the jars contain pasta of different shapes and beans of different types and colors — exactly the kinds of foods found in family kitchens.

While the pots and pans are small, they are not universally available stainless steel or plastic utensils. Instead, these items are made from the same pottery and glassware used by adults in this region of Northern Italy.

This same attention to the special qualities of local life turns up again in the kitchen area of the school. The kitchen is faced with an enormous glass window so that children can watch the cook and the staff at work on lunch. Above this enormous window, the wall is decorated with a handsome display of the kinds of strainers and spoons used in kitchens throughout the region. At the bottom of this display, there is a long

string of garlic such as children see in markets and at home. In this way, the culture of children's families and their community become a part of their school environment.

A Particular School with Its Own History

The schools of Reggio Emilia each have particular histories which are kept very much alive. The story of one particular school in Reggio, La Villetta, goes back to 1970. The end of the summer was approaching and the women of a working class neighborhood on the outskirts of Reggio Emilia were growing more upset and restless. Once again, it seemed as if their forceful protests and requests to obtain a school for their young children were going to be ignored. Near their neighborhood, where the city had expanded to meet the countryside, an old house stood empty. The old house was still elegant, though it was surrounded by an overgrown garden. One day the women forced the gate, moved into the house, pronounced it *the school* for their children, and stood fast in occupying the building.

In the days that followed, the women organized their resistance, looked for a teacher, and cleaned and repaired the dusty rooms. One warm late afternoon, while they were working, a beautiful large butterfly entered into the house and flew from room to room. The women were elated by the butterfly. They took it as a sign, a message of good fortune for themselves, their children, and their new school.

Some years passed, and this little incident appeared completely forgotten. The city government took over the funding and running of that school and began other neighborhood schools. Late one warm

afternoon, when parents had come to walk their children home, another butterfly flew into the open windows and sailed through the halls. The children became very excited, and the mothers recognized and remembered the original butterfly more than ten years earlier. Then and there they collected the children around and told the story of the proud beginning of the school and the visit of the first butterfly.

Since that day the butterfly has become a visible sign of the history of the school. The children designed a colorful butterfly canopy for the entry way of La Villetta. The butterfly now turns up time and time again in children's paintings, drawings, and collages.

Another part of the school's story is a tree which used to grow in the lawn outside the windows. The tree was very much a part of the children's play. They climbed in it, made circles linking their hands to embrace its trunk, and hid under its shade when the sun was too hot. However, the tree became diseased and had to be cut down. The teachers recognized the change and loss involved. Together they and the children put their memories of the tree into a set of tiles which now permanently decorate one of the classroom doorways. Although the actual tree is gone, the tiles record its many different seasons and uses.

An Awareness of Surrounding Space

The teachers of Reggio Emilia also value what is special about the spaces which surround their school. Part of their curriculum involves taking children to explore neighborhoods and landmarks in the city. Last year, much teaching and learning centered on a visit to the large stone lion that has guarded the market square for centuries. This

trip was planned to help the children get in touch with their own town, its busy daily life, and its history.

Early one morning, children and teachers took the public bus from the school to the historic center of Reggio Emilia. They walked to the market square, busy already with people bargaining and buying at the cloth, hardware, vegetable, and fruit stalls. Finally, after working through the crowd, they came in view of the stone lion. As the children were carefully prepared for this trip, they spotted it immediately and ran toward it. They surrounded the large tame wild animal; they looked at it from all sides; they touched it and felt the cold texture of the rough stone; they climbed on the lion, played with its mane, and explored its large empty eyes watching the busy crowd in the market. Then they started sketching on the large pads brought for that purpose.

Back in school, children and adults talked about the stone lion, and the children's observations were taped. Later, the slides taken during the trip and close-up shots of the lion were projected; the children played with these images and observed details that had escaped them or else recognized others they had stored in their minds. This renewed visit with the lion stirred them to relive the experience in several different ways: some of them built shapes to use in the shadow theater, some started painting the lion seen from different perspectives, and some worked with clay to reproduce its uneven texture and strong shape.

The whole experience, from that early morning trip to these new images that tell the story and to the many representations of the lion that are in the rich space of the school, touches many aspects of learning that form the core of this program

for young children. The story of the visit to the stone lion can be read through the eyes of the teachers by looking at the photographs and through the eyes of the children by looking at their sketches and drawings, which all decorate one of the walls in the school.

The schools in Reggio Emilia could not be *just anywhere*. On the one hand, the garden, the walls, the tall windows, the handsome furniture all say, *This is a place where adults have thought about the quality of space*. The schools are full of light, variety, and a certain kind of joy. In addition, however, teachers, parents, and children working and playing together have created a very particular space: a space which reflects their personal lives, the history of the school, and the immediate culture and geography of their lives.

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A Special Note

The schools of Reggio Emilia have developed a special exhibit about preschool education in their community. The exhibit is on display through June 30, 1991, at the Dayton Art Institute in

Dayton, Ohio. It will then move to Detroit, Michigan, in care of the Merrill-Palmer Institute (Wayne State University) and the Scarab Club, from September 6 through October 6, 1991.

*A more comprehensive introduction to education in Reggio Emilia will be available in the forthcoming book, **Education for All the Children: The Multi-Symbolic Approach to Early Education in Reggio Emilia, Italy**, edited by Lella Gandini, Carolyn Edwards, and George Forman. For more information about the book, contact Ablex Publishing Corporation, (201) 767-8450.*

In addition, at the Directors' Network Philadelphia Conference, "Color Your Staff Extraordinary: Developing Competent, Creative Teachers," Badgie Rankin, one of the authors of this book, will make a presentation on education in Reggio Emilia.