

## Reinventing Modern Children’s Spaces and Places

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*Reinventing Modern Children’s Spaces and Places* is intended to be a forum for discussing the development of modern child-centric environments as representative examples of distinctive contexts within the modern movement, thus helping to establish the place of the child in the history of architecture.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the different political, social and cultural events taking place in western countries have triggered a new consciousness about the need for new and appropriately designed spaces and objects for children, both for their public and private lives. The industrialisation process and urban growth; children’s birth and mortality rates; the increased participation of women in the labour market; public awareness of the need for safe and healthy environments; the kindergarten movement; the recognition of the benefits of leisure and sports activities; the establishment of medical, psychological and sociological studies about children; and the establishment of free compulsory education (along with the decline of child labour), all of these factors together form the basis of the impetus that has been given to the creation and development of modern facilities for children.

The growing attention that is now being given to the rights and well-being of children and the role that their environment plays in their upbringing had already been declared one of the great missions of the twentieth century by Ellen Key, in her book *The Century of the Child* published in 1900. But it was with Philippe Ariès’ pioneering work *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) that an intensive debate was finally set in motion within the field of childhood

studies.<sup>1</sup> The use of spaces and material artefacts provided evidence for claiming that a new idea of childhood had begun in early modern Europe, drawing attention to the need for childhood to be studied from an architectural perspective. In the last two decades, this new field of research has been gaining importance in academic circles and has been the subject of numerous debates reported in a vast number of articles published in journals, magazines and books.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, exhibitions such as *Kid Size: The Material World of Childhood*, at Vitra Museum (1997), *Century of the Child. Growing by Design 1900-2000*, at MoMA (2013), and *Playgrounds. Reinventing the Square*, at Museo Reina Sofia (2014) have brought this matter to the attention of a wider audience, leading to a discussion of the material culture of children from a multidisciplinary perspective.

The architectural response to the consequences and challenges brought by the Second World War underlined the importance given to children in the reconstruction process, stressing the impact of environments on children’s education and on the shaping of future citizens.<sup>3</sup> Children’s needs were placed at the centre of the social policy of postwar welfare states, resulting in a new theoretical approach to urban and architectural questions, unlike any other that had been known previously.<sup>4</sup> The growing importance attached by the privileged classes to promoting a good and creative childhood and to encouraging the participation of children in family life, coupled with the gradual appearance of a new consumer-based lifestyle, completely altered the nature of the objects designed for children, due both to the creation of new child-centric products and environments and to the fact that children were regarded as important and active agents in the decision-making processes of consumerism.<sup>5</sup>

The modern movement’s project for social reform, its functional and rational principles supported by the use of new construction technologies and materials, and the importance given to the design and quality of industrial production, all played a key role in the creation of an appropriate and attractive design for children’s equipment and day-to-day products. The historical significance of spaces such as schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, orphanages, hospitals, indoor environments, and the learning and play materials, and daily artefacts produced during the modern period with a child-centric approach are representative of the importance that was attached to the architectural discourse of that time.

The focus of *Reinventing Modern Children’s Spaces and Places* has been broadly defined. It covers different areas of activity (outdoor/indoor spaces, public/private spaces), seeking to identify the new approaches brought to children’s spaces and places by the modern movement by addressing the following questions: How did different international contexts affect the design of children’s spaces and places during the modern movement? What were the design and architectural interpretations of the children’s different demands and aspirations? What is the meaning of these spaces,

their identity, values and specificities, their potential and their contribution to the reinvention of the design of children’s present-day urban environments? The interpretation of modern case studies from different geographical areas, performed at different times, provides a basis for reflecting on the historical significance of children’s spaces within an international framework, as well as on their current meaning, covering a number of political, social, educational, architectural and urban concerns. It is an opportunity to grasp how architecture is representative of, yet also influenced by, “culturally constructed views of ideal childhood”.<sup>6</sup> It also makes it possible to discuss modern accomplishments that either have no identified authorship or are afforded less consideration through their being part of the domestic sphere, having remained far removed from the architectural debate, but nonetheless playing a crucial role in the pursuit of the social aims of the modern movement.

Yael Allweil discusses the historical design process of a Kibbutz children’s house (1925-29) built to house and educate children in a community that understood the key role that they played in the foundation of a new communal-national society and therefore regarded the care of children as a collective responsibility. Developed with the full involvement of the community, this project was seen as a modern social and architectural model by other Kibbutzim.

Paola Virgioli follows the design process of thirty-five Italian school buildings (1970s) that used a flexible prefabricated system to create a child-centric educational environment. Despite being seen as suitable for their initial educational function, these buildings do not meet the current regulatory requirements raising questions about the principles that should guide their rehabilitation.

Marco Di Nallo explores the theme of playgrounds by following the construction of playgrounds in Zurich (1950s/1960s), as part of a public campaign to raise awareness about their importance for the education and moral training of children. Initially designed for children, the first playground soon began to be attended also by adults and older people, creating community centres that were regarded as important architectural and social means for supporting democracy.

Klára Bruhová returns to the discussion of playgrounds with an analysis of children’s playground artefacts (1960s) designed to improve the public spaces of prefab housing estates in Prague. The conception and design of these playground artefacts brought together architects and artists who cooperated on a project that discussed function and art with the aim of stimulating children’s imaginations.

These cases are particularly relevant in the light of current issues and concerns in western societies, namely the declining numbers of children to be found in the public domain of cities, mainly as a result of an ageing society; the current standardised solutions for children’s urban and

architectural spaces, applied indiscriminately to distinct contexts, which are limiting the imagination and inventiveness required for children’s play and socialising; the challenge brought by children’s present-day dependency on technology and how this can be incorporated into their educational and leisure environments.<sup>7</sup>

The educational, recreational and social values of the modern facilities that are located in distinct cultural and international contexts will be an opportunity to reinvent the children’s spaces of both the present and the future. The idea is to promote a fertile discussion and ensure that we enjoy an intellectually lively session.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in French under the title *L’Enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime* in 1960, in Paris.

<sup>2</sup> See Burke and Grosvenor, *School*, 2008; Châtelet, *L’architecture scolaire*, 2004, and *L’école de plein air*, 2003; Dudek, *Children’s Spaces*, 2005, and *Kindergarten Architecture*, 1996; Grosvenor, *Materialities of Schooling*, 2005; Gutman, *Designing Modern Childhoods*, 2008, and *A City for Children*, 2014; Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 2013; Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child*, 2013; Ward, *The Child in the City*, 1978; Leddermann, *Playground and Recreational Spaces* 1968; Lefaivre, *Aldo van Eyck; the Playgrounds and the City*, 2002. See also the notebook of *Growing by Design: The 1990 International Design Conference* in Aspen, by Jane Clark Chermayeff and the catalogue produced for the exhibition *The Classroom, from the Late 19th century until the Present Day*, VS school museum 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child*, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood*, 1-18. For example: Alison and Peter Smithson (*Urban Re-identification Grille*, CIAM 1953), Aldo van Eyck (*The Child in the City: the Problem of Lost Identity*, CIAM 1956; *Amsterdam Orphanage*, CIAM 1959; *Playgrounds in Post-war Amsterdam*), Le Corbusier (*Unité d’Habitation at Marseille*, 1946-1952); *Post-war Hertfordshire school building programme*; and the schools designed by Hertzberger.

<sup>5</sup> See Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child*, 2013, and the chapter “Power Play” from the catalogue of the exhibition *Century of the Child – Growing by Design*, 182-213.

<sup>6</sup> See Gutman, *Designing Modern Childhoods*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> See Dudek, *Children’s Spaces*, 2005.

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OGATA, Amy F. *Designing the Creative Child. Playthings and Places in Midcentury America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

### **Papers presented in the session:**

“Today’s Child is Tomorrow’s State’: Kibbutz Children’s House as Nursery for the Good Zionist Subject 1922–1948”

Yael Allweil, Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, Technion IIT, Israel

“Thirty-five Italian schools to save: the “Valdadige” schools designed by the Studio Architetti Valle”

Paola Virgioli, Università IUAV di Venezia, Dipartimento di Culture del progetto, Venezia

“From Playgrounds to Recreation Centres for People of All Ages: Alfred Trchsel and the Case of Zurich”

M. Di Nallo, Università della Svizzera Italiana, Academy of Architecture, Milano, Italy

“Game, Function and Art: Children's Playground Artefacts”

Klára Brůhová, Faculty of Architecture, Czech Technical University in Prague, Czech Republic