

IDEA JOURNAL 2015

INTERIOR+URBAN

Project review

A reconceptualised interior architecture and urban interface. A series of early childhood centres is grafted onto the public realm via a new public entrance, administration and studio art space that renegotiates relationships between the centres and the public realm, adults and children, and pedagogy and a wider cultural context.

Between children and the city

From the designer

A microcosm of the city.

There are many components of a city and its daily activities in the school for young children; just as the daily work in the school creates a microcosm of society¹.

The Wanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten is a collection of four smaller Early Childhood Education Centres (ECEC) actively engaged with their wider community. They serve different age groups of children and different functions – from kindergarten and preschool, to sessional child care, parent education, staff and hospitality. Over thirty five years the ECECs have clustered around an established courtyard garden, evolving like a small part of the city might over time. With incremental growth came inefficiencies and inconveniences for parents and staff, illustrated by dispersed entries and offices, and a lack of hierarchy between spaces. In 2012 an invitation to reconsider the collective Kindergarten and Crèche as a whole gave an opportunity to celebrate and express the ECECs child-centred pedagogy through design. The management had over time formed an integrated ECEC hub with early childhood education at the heart². The overarching New Zealand Early Childhood curriculum Te Whariki may be understood as a series of woven strands where each strand embodies an area of learning and development woven into the daily programme of the early childhood setting³. The strands are: Wellbeing, Belonging, Contribution, Communication, and Exploration. Principles of Empowerment, Holistic Development, Family and Community, and Relationships weave through these strands. In conjunction with these principles, the Reggio Emilia philosophy influences the educational rationale. It emphasises the idea that the school is a collective environment, based

on participation and community management, on collegiality, conviviality, on shared values, and objectives⁴. Reggio Emilia pedagogy is also significant for its recognition of the role of environment in education.

Key to these overlapping learning philosophies is the idea of the ECEC as a connected, active part of the city, not a separate world apart. The WCBK Administration and Atelier project is an interface and a filter between the ECECs and the city. In Reggio Emilia terms it is a place of osmosis with the world outside⁵.



Engagement of urban and interior contexts. Photographs by Leigh Mitchell-Anyon.

Common ground.

The new interiors were conceptualised as common ground; places of meeting and exchange. Designed from the interior in relation to the urban contexts, a series of three renewed spaces mediate between the city space of the street and the secure interiority of the ECECs. The first is a space of welcome, introduction and hospitality for children and their adults. The second is a protected semi-private space of sanctuary for socialisation,

meeting, working and counselling. The third space is a shared child scaled atelier; an arts education space to foreground children's art practice. This space opens onto the main landscape courtyard that functions in a similar manner to the 'central piazza' advocated in Reggio Emilia centres. All new common spaces are shared between the ECECs.

The wall as an Interface.

The external wall surface was conceived as an extended permeable membrane through which relationships to the city are negotiated. Different connections to the exterior are ordered by the double datum of child and adult eye levels. The central place of the child is evident from the main entry doors which are child scaled and given priority through red colour. Children and adults are intrigued and want to enter. Children enter as growing humans entering the next stages of their development and as new participants in the life of the city. Adults enter with a sense of the magic of being a child again when anything may be possible. The exterior wall wraps the new spaces and curates views to the arrival and drop off space and street. It creates space within spaces to facilitate rituals of arrival, welcome and settling in. Children are protected within the interior yet can see out through vertical slot windows. Low shelves and purpose designed child scale fittings accommodate children's interests and needs from reception through to a waterfall stainless steel sink where setup and cleanup of art activities can be managed by children alone or alongside adults.

The wall thickens around large pure geometric windows facilitating engagement and occupation within the window depth in the manner of a bay window. An abstracted Nikau palm growth motif within a triangular window engages visually. A series of low square windows open onto the main courtyard, and translucent shelf-walls display children's artwork within the atelier and give glimpses of these from the street. Reggio Emilia advocates the environment as third teacher with founder Loris Malaguzzi famously noting that

There are three teachers of children; Adults, other children, and the physical environment: The environment is the third teacher⁶.

Research from the Reggio Emilio Domus Academy Research Centre supports this through the idea that place identity occurs not from formal codes but from the quality and intensity of the links established and the experiences activated within that place⁷. This principle is reflected in a deliberate attention to the visual qualities of space and of the enclosing wall; to their aesthetic qualities. The nature of the interconnections such as

the filtering of views in and out, and the attention to colour, light and material qualities are intended to create distinctive space that facilitates the potential for memorable relations with space and place to develop over time. Indirect learning occurs through the performance of the environment. In this case it is ordered with deliberate openness and neutrality to facilitate space for potential engagement, and to foreground activity.



The street in early evening; The Atelier, and Child with the red door.
Photographs by Leigh Mitchell-Anyon .

The aesthetics of engagement.

This modest design addresses functional issues of the brief, but also engages its urban and interior contexts as an integral microcosm of the city. Its aesthetic renders a distinctive urban identity with clear expression and articulation of its child centred philosophy. This occurs through the creation of child scale elements, the use of primary geometries and a wall enclosing a series of common spaces. The three linked interior spaces are planned to suggest and accommodate activity, but with enough loose fit and neutrality in furnishing, colour, space and light to accommodate a range of activities. They also synthesise a clear interior identity focused on

children's engagement with their immediate environment and their place in the city. The new spaces also act as interface with the safe and more segregated interior domains of the four ECECs. Ann Pairman and Lisa Terreni (2001) note that the early childhood environment gives children important messages and cues. In other words, the environment 'speaks' to children - about what they can do, how and where they can do it and how they can work together. They also 'strongly argue that careful organisation and aesthetic considerations influence the emotional climate of an early childhood centre and children's learning'⁸

From the magical moment of entry in this educational centre children are the focus and learning is facilitated by the interior aesthetics and sensory atmosphere. The project articulates a child centered focus and creates an active engagement of its interior and urban contexts.

From the critic

A simple addition to an existing building, the alteration to the Wanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten is rich in subtle design strategies and potential experiences. One main strategy appears to lead the design: to engage with the community in the city, by facilitating a permeability between the urban context and the interior content. Two principal spatial qualities that emerge are the attention to different scales and its luminosity. The Kindergarten and Crèche employ three flexible pedagogical philosophies: Te Whariki, Pickler and Reggio Emilia. These symbiotic philosophies drive the client's curriculum and associated activities. The Reggio philosophy is prioritised by the designer as a main design driver while sustaining the strategy of interaction with the city

To engage with the community and the city

Reggio Emilia philosophy promotes an integrated adult (parent, guardian, educators) participation in the child's education to enhance learning and community wellness. Centred on the education of young children this holistic philosophy of respect creates learning spaces and places around the child at the epicentre. Specific design principles are found in Reggio schools, where design tools are utilised to both deal with forms relationally and to create light-scapes. Colours and materials are carefully selected and further sensory experiences such as smell and sound are considered in the spatial composition.

This interior architecture project clearly responds to Reggio principles, and has been developed in an inside-out fashion. The external envelope in its

scale and form embodies the internal pedagogical considerations while providing a sense of domesticity. The building's attractive facade to the street distinctly expresses the programme of an early education centre⁹ by communicating three singular geometric forms: the disk, the triangle and the oblong. The two first figures define large windows set onto two different textured walls. The oblong shape is illustrated by the geometry of side openings including the adults' entrance door and next to it a small red door reserved for the preschoolers. Importantly these openings play a crucial role in embodying the Reggio concept of community engagement. The windows allow a connection with the community; passers-by often interact with occupants on the other side of openings. The sizes, forms and low sills convey that the children must be visible to the community as much as the community visible to them. This direct dialogue also illustrates an intention to integrate adult participation in the child's education towards community wellness. It demonstrates an engagement of the city in the interior and vice versa.



Inhabiting the window of 'seeing and being seen'. Photograph by the authors.

The second role of the windows is as a lens for the child to experience being in the World. Thick edges of the windows accentuate difference between the inside and the outside and create and in between space. Here visual cognition is facilitated for the child to comprehend and understand the world through apprehension, perception and comprehension¹⁰.

"Visibility is huge" says the owner who promotes the idea that seeing and being seen leads to likely engagement¹¹. For the child, seeing and being seen implies an understanding of what is subject and object.

Permeability between urban context and interior content

The design of the entrance initiates an engagement that according to the owner, has led to an increase in families participation for greater learning outcomes¹². The entrance transparent space allows both engagement and retreat. The light that permeates and the warmth from sunshine have meant that 'people did not want to leave'. This concept of visibility of spaces is carried throughout the project where a variety of visual connections are made to and from spaces. The small red entrance door is a simple device that indicates to the children that they enter their own special place and for the outside adult community to understand that this is a space designed primarily for children. It is important for parents and children to feel that they 'belong' there¹³ and the sense of appropriation of space, central to the design of early childhood education is well considered here. The scale of the project its composition and layout have been carefully thought through to provide young children the opportunity to own space, to make it theirs, to give them a true sense of belonging to the place. There is no doubt that the smallness of interior spaces, the dimensions of the rooms, the low walls and gentle pitched ceilings signify that the design is primarily focused on the needs of very young people while retaining comfort for their adult caretakers and teachers. People feel that their relationship to the building is intimate. The increase in the sense of accessibility and welcome from the entrance, to the office and the back space of counselling has reinforced more communication between parents, caregivers, and educators. "People feel safe for conversation in discreet spaces" says the client.

The specific quality of light found throughout this design is noteworthy. The volumes, orientation and arrangement of the different spaces as well as the selected colours provide different rooms with an accentuated luminosity. This controlled luminosity is perhaps instinctively reflective of the client's interest in Reggio. Its quality is undeniable as it enriches the

rooms with a sense of immanence. Light enters the building in many different ways, directly and indirectly, from the surrounding street or from the sky. The orientation of the walls and the redesign of the facade allow the morning sun to penetrate a translucent panel into the children's studio (named *Atelier*) while moderating the summer heat. The *Atelier* or studio is a specialist art space in Reggio interior architecture. This children's space is also filled with direct light in the afternoon through sliding windows through which children engage with others playing on the verandah or in the central courtyard, the centre of social interactions. The detail and attention to a child's scale features throughout the project, from the reception desk to the window sills. Finally joinery in natural wood has been selected to complement the sensory experience of the child in their learning environment.

As a conclusion the design of this interior architecture embodies in its simplicity the care and needs of its in-occupants. The work demonstrates the effect that design can have on communities. The idea here is that ECEC play an 'explicit role in families' lives and in developing resilience and democratic communities'¹⁴. The peaceful curriculum and culture of respect central to this preschool centre's pedagogy, is clearly materialised through its designed spatial qualities and the openness of its architecture of engagement with community and the city.

The interface

An interface can be defined as a common boundary between two bodies. It is also described as a space of interconnection, a common ground between two domains. It offers the possibility of a dialogue, here a dialogue between the interiority of a learning centre and its urban context. These notions of interface clearly emerge from the critic's observations and the designer's reflections. While the designer proposes that the ECEC is a microcosm of the city, it is also a space of experiences and exchange between the child and the community they belong to. The Reggio philosophy underpinning the interior design stresses the idea that the school is a community environment and in this context, it promotes space as a 'third teacher' where intense links and activated events provide learning¹⁵. As an interior proposition, it is clearly designed to sustain specific learning developments. It is demarcated from the sphere of its surrounding urban space and at the same time it allows a high level of permeability in selected areas. This dichotomy echoes the need to shelter the child while celebrating Reggio philosophy of engaging the community

in the learning process. It may also reflect the need for privacy, the creation of individual spaces while accommodating for spaces of collective exchange. This is embodied in the materiality and form of 'the wall': the designer offers the wall as a mediator between community and child. It allows at times certain permeability, at others it thickens and indicates shield-like properties.

The notion of community engagement in the ECEC is further established by a process of osmosis: where the community permeates and participates in centre activities. This permeability is supported by visual devices put in place in the interior and architecture that allows the space of learning and its activities to be exposed to the urban *milieu*. In this generous interaction both child and community are seeing and being seen. The visual aspect is the most critically developed sense in the design of the ECEC new common spaces. Through its interior and urban qualities this modest project is a space of exchange and dialogue, an interface between child and the city.

¹ Giulio Ceppi and Michele Zini ed, *Children, spaces, relations: metaproject for an environment for young children*, 1998 (grafiche Rebecchi Caccarelli s.r.l: Modena, Italy), 14.

² "Wanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early learning Centres history," Central Baptist Kindergarten & Early Learning Centres 2012-2013, accessed March 05, 2015, <http://www.centralbaptistkindergarten.org.nz/cbk-info/history.html>

³ "The principles, strands and goals of the Early Childhood learning curriculum," New Zealand Ministry of Education, accessed March 05, 2015, <http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/curriculumAndLearning/TeWhariki/PartA/PrinciplesStrandsAndGoals/StrandsAndGoals.aspx?p=2>

⁴ Giulio Ceppi and Michele Zini ed, *Children, spaces, relations: metaproject for an environment for young children*, 1998 (grafiche Rebecchi Caccarelli s.r.l: Modena, Italy), 20.

⁵ Giulio Ceppi and Michele Zini ed, *Children, spaces, relations: metaproject for an environment for young children*, 1998 (grafiche Rebecchi Caccarelli s.r.l: Modena, Italy), 14.

⁶ Malaguzzi Loris, [thethirdteacherplus.com/s/TTTIdeasFlashCards.pdf](http://www.thirdteacherplus.com/s/TTTIdeasFlashCards.pdf), accessed March 17, 2015, <http://www.google.co.nz/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CCgQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fthethirdteacherplus.com%2Fs%2FTTTIdeasFlashCards.pdf&ei=rCYHVcPXNcfEmAXpulGgBw&usg=AFQjCNE14e8VhiGfeAusx15-nSSgQUI70g&bvm=bv.88198703,d.dGY>

⁷ Giulio Ceppi and Michele Zini ed, *Children, spaces, relations: metaproject for an environment for young children*, 1998 (grafiche Rebecchi Caccarelli s.r.l: Modena, Italy), 11.

⁸ Ann Pairman and Lisa Terreni, "If the Environment is third teacher, What language does she speak", 2001 New Zealand Ministry of Education, accessed March 16, 2015,

<http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/curriculumandlearning/learningenvironments/thirdteacher.aspx>

⁹ Research has shown that parents are attracted to buildings which clearly signal the association with children through design features. Ball, M. & Niven, L.

Building in SureStart Local Programmes, Nottingham: DfES Publications, 2005: 4

¹⁰ Duncan, C. Glance vs Gaze, Master of Architecture, Victoria University of Wellington, 2012: 21.

¹¹ Duncan, J. & Te One, S. Early childhood education services: The heart and hearth of Communities. In J. Duncan & S. Te One (Eds.). *Comparative early childhood education services: International perspectives (Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood)*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012: 1- 12.

¹² Wylie & Thompson 2003:69-78 cited in Duncan, J & te One,S. *Comparative early childhood education services: international perspectives*, NY:Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 27

¹³ Boag-Munroe, G. Engaging 'hard to reach' Families , in *Debates on early childhood Policies and Practices. Global Snapshots of Pedagogical Thinking and Encounters* Editors: Theodora Papatheodorou, Routledge 2012: 187

¹⁴ Duncan, J & Te One,S. *Comparative early childhood education services: international perspectives*, NY:Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 18.

¹⁵ The space becomes the most effective tool in bringing about social change and enhancing learning (Peters cited in Sailer & Penn 2007: 2