

WORKING PAPERS IN

Early Childhood Development

45

Early childhood spaces

*Involving young children and
practitioners in the design process*

by Alison Clark



About the paper

This working paper explores the methodology and initial issues raised in seeking to involve young children in the design process. It reports a study concerned with how young children can play an active role in the designing and developing of children's spaces. The focus is on children under 6 years old in early childhood provision.

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December 2007

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Citation

Clark, A. 2007. Early childhood spaces: Involving young children and practitioners in the design process. Working Paper 45. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the children and adults who have taken part in study with special thanks for their interest and involvement to John Parr, Lesley Benson, Jacinth Jeffers, John Jenner, Jennifer Singer, Anne Thorne and Fran Bradshaw.

ISSN 1383 7907

ISBN 978-90-6195-099-8

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Chapter 1: Context

“Children and the way they live in places, build relationships, and learn are not always the primary starting point of reference guiding the various phases of school design and construction.”

(Veechi 1998)

This study is concerned with how young children can play an active role in the designing and developing of children’s spaces. The focus is on children under 6 years old in early childhood provision.

The opening quote is from Veà Veechi who for many years was engaged as an *atelierista* (art teacher) with young children in the Diana pre-school in Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy. Veà Veechi conveys a view of spaces for children which are about living, interacting and learning. This understanding led to the study title: ‘Living Spaces’. The study was carried out by Alison Clark and Peter Moss.

Children’s participation

The original idea for this study emerged from a series of studies about listening to young children (Clark and Moss 2001; Clark and Moss 2005). The first of these was a research and development study which explored how children under 5 years old could be given a ‘voice’ to share their views and experiences of early childhood and family services (Clark and Moss 2001). On one occasion a group of 3- and 4-year-olds were taking the researcher

on a tour of their early childhood centre. The children were in charge of the route and how the tour was recorded. They were striding confidently along a corridor, equipped with cameras, tape recorder and notepads documenting what they saw as the important features of the centre. At this moment the group was overtaken by the head teacher and architects, whom were carrying out a review or ‘snagging report’ of the recently completed building. It was not possible on this occasion to bring the adults and children together to share expertise but this was the genesis of the Living Spaces study, to bring the expertise of young children into the formal design process.

There is an increasing policy interest in listening to children and young people and seeking ways to involve them in decision-making. International impetus for change has come from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was ratified by the UK in 1991. Through this convention children’s rights have been given international status, on the same level as other human rights. The importance of listening to young children has been reinforced through General Comment 7 on early childhood issued by the UNCRC (2006). General Comment 7 can be seen to support a view of children as acute observers of their environment.

Strategies at an international level have been followed by a number of policy initiatives

General Comment 7

14. Respect for the views and feelings of the young child

The Committee wishes to emphasize that article 12 applies both to younger and to older children. As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be 'given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (article 12.1). Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places and routines in their lives, along with awareness of their own unique identity. They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language.

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Children Fund, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation 2006)

at a national level to promote children's participation, In the UK, for example, a Children's Commissioner for England was appointed in March 2005 to champion the views and experiences of children and young people. The Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities to take account of young children's views in the development of early childhood provision (McAuliffe, Linsey and Fowler 2006). One challenge is how to make this legal requirement a reality, in view of the range of stakeholder views that need to be taken into account.

Interest in children's participation has been further stimulated by academic developments, in particular a shift in how children are

viewed within social research. A 'sociology' of childhood, or childhood studies, has been taking shape in recent years. Children are seen not as a group of 'becomings' but as 'beings' whose ideas, approaches to life, choices and relationships are of interest in their own right (James and Prout 1997). Importantly, recognising children's competencies can help adults reflect on the limitations of their understanding of children's lives (Tolfree and Woodhead 1999). Researchers are increasingly interested in children's perspectives and committed to children being active participants in research itself, for example, Christensen and James (2000), Greene and Hogan (2004) and Lewis et al. (2004).

This desire to focus on children's competencies in sharing their expertise has led to a search for methods, which 'play to children's strengths'. Approaches adopted in international development to relay the local knowledge of communities have been of particular importance. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is one such approach that sets out to enable local analysis of everyday realities and local ownership of consequent plans of action (Holland and Blackburn 1998). The methods emphasise modes of communication other than the written word such as talking, walking or drawing. Such approaches are now being adapted for working with children in international development contexts (Johnson et al. 1998) and in the UK (O Kane 2000).

Children's participation in the environment

Children's active involvement in changing their environment has also been promoted

by a number of key projects exemplified by the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Growing Up in Cities project (Chawla 2002). This initiative grew out of the participatory planning movement of the 1970s, when work begun by Kevin Lynch offered one of the first cross-cultural explorations of young people's perspectives on the environment. The Growing Up in Cities project has produced numerous documented examples of children's involvement in community development and has also developed a manual for children's participation in this area (Driskell 2002). There are also several detailed guides to children's involvement in environmental planning, for example: Hart (1997), Adams and Ingham (1998) and Children's Play Council (2002).

Despite some important work that has demonstrated children's competencies in reflecting on their own environment, dialogue between children and architects, planners and designers is still the exception rather than the rule. One development in this area has been by the Sorrell Foundation (Sorrell and Sorrell 2005) that established a 'joined up designs for schools' project. The idea is to enable schools and designers to work together on a design brief entitled: How can good design improve the school's quality of life? The process is described as having four parts: the challenge, the brief, the conversation and the solution. Children and young people have focused on such issues as redesigning toilet facilities, outdoor areas and reception areas. The majority of these innovative projects, however, have been with secondary schools or with older

children in primary schools. Overall, children's involvement in the design of specific buildings is an under-researched area.

Young children's participation

Young children's effective participation presents policy-makers, academics and practitioners with difficult challenges. One stumbling block can be to determine which methods are appropriate for listening to young children's views and experiences. This can be a particular issue for professionals whose training does not include communicating with the under-5s, or indeed communicating with children and young people of any age. Many architects and planners fall into this category.

A second issue relates to how these perspectives can inform changes to policy and practice. There have been a small number of studies in which these barriers have been overcome. These studies demonstrate young children's abilities to provide new insights on subjects with which they are familiar, such as their early childhood institutions (Miller 1997; Cousins 1999; Clark, Moss and Kjörholt 2005). Research to date indicates a number of key factors, which young children have identified as important to their enjoyment of their early years' provision:

- Forming and maintaining relationships with peers and key adults
- The quality of food and drink available and their access to these facilities
- Access to the outdoor environment, and in particular, use of favourite equipment

- Having time to finish their ‘projects’
- Receiving support with difficulties arising from transitions to new settings.

There is a need for more studies of young children’s views and experiences of their early years’ provision across a range of different cultures.

Young children’s environments

Early childhood experts have emphasised the importance of the physical environment for the well-being of children (Weinstein and David 1987; Bilton 2002). It is relevant to mention the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia again in this context. A founding principle of these schools is the view of the child as competent and strong, a ‘rich child’ (Rinaldi 2001). In these pre-schools the environment has been described as being ‘the third teacher,’ with indoor and outdoor spaces being seen as active ingredients in the learning process, rather than passive structures. Close attention is paid to the spaces, materials, colours, light, microclimate and furnishings. Young children’s interactions with the environment are constantly observed and annual reviews are made with the help of parents (Veechi 1998).

In Reggio Emilia, young children have taken part in a number of projects that demonstrate their competencies in reflecting on their immediate environment. One example is a project at the Diana School where children explored the various spaces of the school at different times of the day and in different climatic conditions to create a ‘map’ of sensory paths based on light, smell and sound.

Such projects contributed to a dialogue with architects about what kind of space is needed for ‘living well’ in a school.

A few architects and academics have acknowledged the importance of environments specifically designed for young children (Dudek 2000, 2001; Weinstein and David 1987). Young children’s developmental needs have been central to these discussions. Dudek, a leading architect in the field, has proposed the following key aspects of architecture as being of relevance to young children (Dudek 2001).

1. Is the architecture interesting and engaging?
2. Is the architecture visible to its users?
3. Is the building designed with the scale of a child in mind?
4. Is there enough space?
5. Do the children have a range of spaces that will support different activities?
6. Are the routes through the building clear and unencumbered?
7. Is the outdoor space readily accessible?
8. Do children feel safe and secure?
9. Do you (the adults commissioning the project) understand the architecture?
10. Is the architecture flexible and extendable?

These key aspects direct attention to variety, visibility, accessibility and flexibility. However, young children’s perspectives themselves have been an under-used resource in testing out the relevance and applicability of such criteria.

This is the context that led to the 3-year Living Spaces study, which is a development of earlier studies by the authors using the Mosaic approach.

The study

The aim of the Living Spaces study was to investigate how young children's views and experiences could inform the planning, design and development of early years' provision. The study set out to investigate different stages in the design process from the early design stage to the review of a completed building. A further objective was to contribute to cross-national and cross-disciplinary and professional exchange about young children's involvement in changes to indoor and outdoor provision. The study was underpinned by the support of an advisory group which was a cross-national and cross-disciplinary group bringing together architects and early childhood practitioners with academics from a range of disciplines including history, early childhood and childhood studies.

Selecting architects

It was important to identify and establish relationships with architects who would be willing to take part in the Living Spaces study. This was a complex task as being part of on-going research can add an extra workload to an already pressured timetable. However, two architects' practices were identified and engaged in the study. Both were chosen for their established record in early childhood design and for their consultative approach with users, one of which had involved young children in design workshops. The architects' willingness to be engaged provided an important starting point for the study.

Ways of involving young children in the early stages of the design process are discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter will introduce and

Table 1. Studies by Clark and Moss using the Mosaic approach

	Purpose	Setting and age group	Timescale
Listening to young children (Clark and Moss 2001)	A research and development study to include 'children's voices' in an evaluation of a group of services for children and families	Nursery with 3- to 5-year-olds	18-month study 1999–2000
Spaces to Play (Clark and Moss 2005)	A pilot study to adapt the Mosaic approach for involving children in the redesigning of outdoor play provision	Pre-school with 3- to 4-year-olds	7-month study 2002–2003
Living Spaces	A study to involve young children in the planning, designing and developing of indoor and outdoor spaces	3- to 7-year-olds in a primary school and 3- and 4-year-olds in a children's centre	3-year study 2004–2007

focus on the first of two case studies, a primary school embarking on a building project to replace a free-standing nursery class into the heart of the school. Chapter 3 moves on to examine how young children, practitioners and parents can play an active role in the review of completed buildings. This chapter features the second case study, a nursery school that was transformed by new building work into a children's centre for children and families.

The final chapter looks at some of the initial questions that relate to the fields of early childhood practice and design. Specific attention is paid to new understandings gained from young children's direct experiences of early childhood provision, which are relevant to those with responsibility for young children, whether or not changes to provision are planned.

Chapter 2: Involving young children in the design process: Creating contexts for thinking

Involvement in an early childhood building project can be a time-consuming and anxious period for those with responsibility for its success. There are many stakeholders to take into account including parents, practitioners and the local community as well as the young ‘users’ of the provision. It can be difficult to maintain a focus on young children throughout the design process from initial consultation to the completed building.

This first case study set out to make the views and experiences of the youngest children more visible throughout the process, beginning with gathering their perspectives of their existing environment.

There were three phases to the fieldwork in Case Study 1. Phases 1 and 2 were carried out over a 9-month period and focused on gathering perspectives during the early design stage. They

Case Study 1

This case study is set in a primary school in South London.

The school’s catchment area covers a range of housing including high-rise flats and areas of social disadvantage. The school reflects the ethnic diversity of this part of London. It was described as ‘a harmonious, multicultural community where pupils flourish academically and socially’ in a recent inspection report. The primary school, originally built in the 1960s has been part of a building project involving its nursery provision. The school had a nursery class for 3- and 4-year-olds which had been housed in a ‘temporary’ freestanding single-storey building for over 30 years.

The general feel of the nursery classroom was light and colourful. There was a large surface area of windows through which the children could see out. The main door to the outside had glass panels in the top and bottom sections, which meant the children could see out through it.

The main classroom area was dominated by groups of tables with chairs arranged for daily activities including art activities. Several rooms led off from the main space. There was a large stock cupboard for resources and equipment. There was a small office for the early childhood practitioners only large enough for a small desk, two chairs and a filing cabinet. This was shared by up to four members of staff as well as visitors. There was a small food preparation area, a toilet for adults and a separate cloakroom and toilet area for the children. This area was showing signs of wear with ceiling tiles missing in places.

The nursery was surrounded by a large play space with soft and hard surfaces, lined with trees along one side. The play space was divided off from the main school playground by a low fence.

Figure 1
Groups involved in the early design stage in Case Study 1

Nursery class 3- and 4-year-olds (15)		Reception class 4- and 5-year-olds (8)
Architects (6)	Early design stage	Whole school consultation (approximately 180)
Parents (8)	Researcher	Practitioners (5)

Figure 2
Research activities designed to create contexts for thinking about the existing and new environments

	Tour	Map making
Magic carpet	Research activities with young children	
Photo book	Interview	Model making

were followed by a final phase that focused on adults’ and children’s views of the completed building. This working paper will draw on material from Phases 1 and 2 to illustrate how young children were involved before building work began.

Initial consultation had taken place between the school, the architects and the local authority before the research study began. These discussions led to initial plans for a Foundation Unit for the nursery and reception classes. This would bring the youngest children in the school together in adjacent classrooms joined by a play area. Other plans included a new children’s centre, a learning resource centre (library), new administrative facilities and improved external play spaces for the school.

Involving the youngest children

‘One of the difficulties encountered when working with children is finding ways to enable them to make their intuitions visible, to create contexts where their thoughts can continue to evolve.’

Reggio Children (2004)

Phase 1 of the study involved exploring with the youngest children in the school what they thought about the existing environment. This was not an easy task for children or for adults. There are few opportunities to stop and reflect on the environments in which we spend our working or leisure time. It was not a question of quickly ‘grabbing’ the first ideas expressed by the children. Instead the Mosaic approach enabled us to present many

opportunities for the young participants to revisit their ideas and to reflect on and develop these viewpoints.

During Phases 1 and 2 of fieldwork in Case Study 1, 23 children were involved – 11 boys and 12 girls. The children, who were in the nursery and reception classes, were between the ages of 3.5 years and 5.1 years, at the time when the research began in October 2004.

A key research question became ‘What does it mean to be in this place?’ This phrase conveys our interest in meanings and place. It signals an interest in individual and shared experiences. It acknowledges this is not a search for correct answers, but an exploration about how a particular environment is experienced by young children who are knowledgeable about the place. We did not use the exact phraseology of the question with the children but decided to ask:

‘Can you show me what is important here?’

Observation

It was important to start by ‘tuning in’ to how the children in the nursery were using the spaces inside and outside. We carried out two half-day observations following two 4-year-olds, a girl and a boy. Both children were among the older children in the nursery and were familiar with the setting.

This extract shows that the current location of the nursery had advantages as it enabled there to be interaction between the nursery children and the older members of the school. We found out subsequently that Sally had a sibling in the

Extract from the observation notes

Afternoon observation: dry, cloudy with some sunshine

12.40 The nursery children are going outside after lunch.

Sally finds the Spacehoppers (inflatable ball large enough to sit on). Another girl joins her. They bounce on the Spacehoppers across the large play area over to the short boundary fence of the nursery. This is adjacent to the main school playground. Sally and her friend bounce up to the older children who are looking over the fence. There is now playful screaming and bouncing as the girls bounce up to the fence and away again.

12.52 There are three girls including Sally on the Spacehoppers chatting to the older children over the fence. This continues for a few minutes until it is time for the nursery children to ‘line up’ for the start of the afternoon session.

Field notes, October 2004

school, who was probably among the group to whom she was talking.

Observations carried out inside the nursery pinpointed certain places which children spent a significant amount of time, sometimes of their own choosing and on other occasions because of classroom routines. This latter category of places included ‘the carpet’. Each morning and afternoon session began with a whole class discussion and learning activity with the children sitting in a circle on a carpeted area of the nursery classroom. This could take 40 minutes so it was one of the areas of the classroom with which the

children became familiar from their first day at nursery. Other features of the classroom included a 'home corner' with cushions and books that was used for role-play and as a quiet area. Another area of carpet was used for construction play with a range of big building blocks and smaller construction toys. There was a small water tray in the classroom.

The study could have concentrated on building up observational accounts of how the children were using the current environment. However, the aim was to investigate if it was possible to gather children's own accounts of the space in a form that would be accessible to others.

Young children in the nursery and the reception class were given a range of different tools with which to explore what they thought about their existing indoor and outdoor spaces.

Photo books

This stage of the study began with two linked activities: introducing single-use cameras to a group of nursery children and making individual photo books of children's chosen images. These children had not used cameras in nursery before. One child at a time had the opportunity to use the camera to photograph 'important things' in the nursery. The children could choose whether they went outdoors or stayed inside. However, at times rainy weather meant that children were limited to indoor images, even though they might have preferred to be outdoors. The intention was for each child to take 12 or more photos so one camera could be shared between two children. Some of the children were happy to take a few photos

and then hand back the camera, but one of the boys continued until he had taken the full film of 27 images.

Once the children had taken their photographs we arranged for them to be developed quickly so the follow-up activity could take place within a few days of the photographs being taken. Children met with Alison to talk about their photographs and to decide on which images they wanted to be placed in their own book of the nursery. Talking to the children as they took the photographs and as they reviewed their finished images was an important part of the process.

These visual records of the nursery revealed personal and shared meanings attached to different places, people and things. Most of the nine children who took part in this activity included photographs of other children. One of the boys included children in seven of his chosen eight images in his photo book. He even managed to include himself by turning the camera around and photographing himself! Only one child included an image of a practitioner, in this case a close up of the teaching assistant's legs. Photographs of Alison taken by children as the study progressed emphasised the different perspectives children had of adults, often showing legs or chins and noses, since this was the view from their height.

Children showed ingenuity in including imaginary places in their photographs. One of the boys (Jules) included a photograph of what appeared to be an empty table in his book of the nursery. In conversation Jules revealed that

this was an image of ‘the water and the boat’. Jules had transformed an abandoned glue stick in one corner of the photograph into a boat and the shiny tabletop had become the sea.

Natalie chose to include a record of herself in her book of the nursery by including her name card. This nursery had a registration system that involved each child picking up their name card in the shape of a duck and placing it on a display board when they arrived at nursery. There were different coloured ducks according to whether the children were full-time or part-time members of the nursery. Children consistently chose to photograph these name cards emphasising the importance of their name cards in belonging to the nursery.

Natalie’s photos emphasised activities that took place in such spaces as the sand and water trays. The class pet hamster was a popular choice. Natalie’s image of the hamster’s cage prompted an interesting conversation about



‘The water and the boat’

PHOTO BY LIVING SPACES STUDY

colour. The cage stood by a radiator, which was covered by wooden panels to prevent the children touching the hot pipes. This radiator cover was painted bright blue. When Natalie and Jules saw their images of the hamster cage they looked at the radiator cover in the photo

Table 2. Details of Natalie’s photo book

Page	Child’s description	Researcher’s description and comments
Cover	M, S, and C	3 children with a close up of a boy (C). But Natalie indicated he wasn’t the intended focus of this photo.
p. 2	My name	Registration board with close up of duck shape showing child’s name
p. 3	The hamster’s thing Amy is in her house	A close up of the class pet hamster (Amy) and her exercise ball
p. 4	This is the water	The water tray
p. 5	There is the sand	The sand tray
p. 6	The bookshelf	Bookshelves at children’s height

and exclaimed: “It looks different”. They ran off to compare the image with the actual object. It seemed from their conversation that the photo had made the radiator look a different shade of blue. Once the children had made their photo books of the nursery these were placed on the bookshelves so the rest of the group could share these records.

The book making was followed by another pair of related activities: tours and map making.

Tours

Ten children worked in pairs to lead a tour of their physical environment and to document the event by making a map using their photographs and drawings. This time the children used a digital camera. This technology enabled the children to review their images instantly on the in-built screen and assess whether they were satisfied with the image they had taken. This added another layer of reflection into the research process. The children were asked to begin the tour with where they came into school in the morning and then continue to walk around the site showing me what was important. The tours lasted between 20 and 45 minutes.

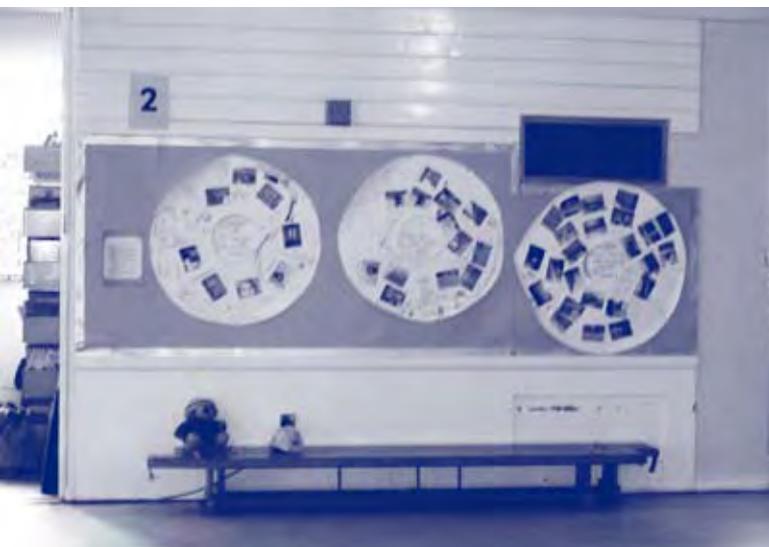
Within the parameters set for the activity the children showed variations in the tours. The children did not limit themselves to the immediate environs of the nursery class but included different elements of the wider school site. One of the boys, for example, was keen to take me to the school hall where he had recently seen an assembly about Goldilocks and the three bears.

Map making

The aim of map making was twofold: for the children to make a visual record of the nursery in the context of the school and at the same time to give young children the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their experiences of ‘being in this place’ or, as discussed earlier, creating a context where the children’s thinking could continue to ‘evolve’.

An important next step in the process was allowing the children to review their images. This provided an opportunity for more discussion about the children’s interests and priorities. Working with digital photography provided several opportunities to review the tour photographs before making maps. (It would not have been possible to use all of the children’s photographs on each map due to the number of images taken, in some cases more than 40). The children reviewed their images on a computer or using an index card, which showed ‘thumbnail’-sized images of each of their photographs in sequence. The children had little difficulty in recognising their own photographs and expressed delight at seeing their images displayed in this way. The next task was for the children to select the most important images to be printed out for inclusion on their maps.

Two of the children chose to make individual maps of the nursery whilst the remaining children made three shared maps. The individual maps were made of small rectangles or circles of card. The group maps were assembled on large circles enabling different children to work on a map at the same time.



Maps by nursery children on display in the school hall

PHOTO BY LIVING SPACES STUDY

The maps displayed a range of personal and shared meanings about the nursery and its environment, reinforcing the impressions gained from reviewing the children's photo books. Personal spaces included references to a sibling's classroom and photographs of benches where several of the children waited with their parents before nursery started in the morning. Shared spaces included the toilets, reading corner and the carpet. There was a prevalence of doors and gates marking the different boundaries of the children's world.

Interviews

Visual methods open up many different avenues for communication but interviewing children can help to reinforce understandings gained by other methods, or present opportunities to discuss unclear issues. The exact wording of the questions can be

problematic when consulting 3- and 4-year-olds (for example, Clark and Moss 2005). We adapted an interview schedule that we had developed in order to talk to children of a similar age about their outdoors provision (Clark and Moss 2005). The questions chosen for the Living Spaces study were designed to help children express their feelings about being in a place, for example:

“If you want to be with your friends at nursery where do you like to go?”

“If you want to be by yourself at nursery where could you go?”

This last question provoked unexpected responses. Several of the children replied they would go home to 'be by themselves'. These following responses are by 3- and 4-year-olds in the nursery class:

“If you want to be by yourself at nursery where could you go?”

CHRISSIE – At my Mum's house

HELEN – In the playdough

JULIE – I'd go back home

JULES – Outside place

NICHOLAS – I go with my Mum and Dad. I was sitting over there when I saw you

SALLY – To the book corner (Shhh)

JOHN – Right here (book corner)

PAUL – In the rain

VICTOR – I like staying at home with myself in the home corner

NATALIE – Be with Sally

Other questions were used which began 'Tell me about...' to find out about specific features of the nursery, for example the toilets.

The young children had much to say about the toilets and pointed out how small they were.

They also questioned why the nursery toilets had curtains rather than doors. Practitioners didn't know why this feature had originally been introduced. Children's attention to the topic of school toilets is in keeping with the findings of several studies with older children (for example, Burke and Grosvenor 2003). This suggests that children of all ages could be part of design consultations to improve school toilets.

Questions about favourite places inside provided a range of alternatives, including specific activity areas in the classroom and the dining hall. The following responses are from a group of 4- and 5-year-olds in the reception class.

'Where is your favourite place inside?'

ALEX – My favourite place is the dinner hall because I like eating

CLAIRE – In the writing area because you get to write and I can take it home. I can see my Mum and my Dad and my Nan when they take my little sister to school – I say hello

KATE – The home corner, playing dress ups

NEIL – When I sit on the carpet because they tell you lots of things

YUSUF – Over here (near the train), on the mat

FERNANDO – In the book corner

SUSAN – The home corner

SHAUN – The cars

Each of the research activities described focused on children's experiences of the existing environment. The interviews presented a chance to ask children about their thoughts on the

future nursery. We included a question asking the children: 'When there is a new nursery, what should it be like?' Here are some of the responses from children in the nursery class.

'When there is a new nursery, what should it be like?'

BEE – Apples

ANNA – I don't know yet

HELEN – Playdough, sand, teddy bear

MILLY AND JULES – Play with your friends

JULES – And with the car

NICHOLAS – Make it hot when you come from outside and tidy up and then go the carpet and then have fruit. Make it warm yes

SALLY – A playground

PAUL – Build it properly – build the lights

This is a difficult question for young children to answer. Anna's response, "I don't know yet" summed up this difficulty, although other children were able to convey the importance of friends, favourite activities and outdoor spaces. There were several comments about the lights, which led to conversations with the architects about these details.

Rather than just giving the children one chance to think about their response to a future nursery, we introduced a further pair of activities to help children explore what a new nursery might be like.

Model making

Construction activities were a frequent feature of the nursery and reception classes in this study, as in other early childhood settings. Children were familiar with building a range of

buildings and objects using a various types of construction equipment. The nursery class had a set of large wooden blocks. These were popular with the children who played elaborate games with them, often in groups of girls or boys.

Groups of children who had taken part in some of the other research activities were asked to build a new nursery using the blocks together with a pile of drapes of different textures. The children were divided into a boys' and a girls' group. The boys were used to being in charge of the construction area but the girls were more reserved and took their time to decide what they wanted to build. The boys group made a structure with a series of windows and drapes for curtains. The girls group started by making a chair that grew into a stage. (There was a small stage in the existing nursery.). Curtains and cushions were added followed by a carpet space. A huge sandpit was then added which in turn changed into a swimming pool and a park.

The reception class didn't have access to large building blocks but they did have a set of smaller blocks. Again, groups of children who had been involved in the research were asked to construct a new nursery. These older children incorporated their own drawings and labels into the process.

Magic carpet

This final activity provided the opportunity for the children to review their own images once again and also to consider these alongside photographs of a different nursery. The Diana pre-school in Reggio Emilia was chosen due

to the emphasis discussed earlier about the importance of the physical environment.

Children were invited to come and sit on the 'magic carpet' which would take them on a pretend journey to look at their own nursery and a different nursery far away (see Clark and Moss 2005 for further discussion of this technique). The images were loaded onto a laptop computer, which could be placed on the carpet and the children were in charge of the journey by choosing when to click the 'mouse' to move the images on.

Two of the boys involved in the review had moved from nursery to the reception class since they were first involved in the research. They appeared to be relaxed when reviewing their own photographs taken 3 months earlier, on the laptop computer. They were both proud to see their photograph of the sky. This image is entirely blue with no clouds in sight. The boys leapt up and checked to see what colour the sky was on the day of this review: "It looks darker" one of the boys exclaimed.

The children, and the 3-year-olds in particular, were interested in their own nursery but showed less interest in the Diana pre-school although some of the children's comments indicated that they realised it was different from their own nursery. One of the boys noticed that the chairs in the Reggio nursery were different because they were made of wood (and the chairs in his nursery were all made of brightly coloured moulded plastic). Other comments were directed at the activities

in which the children were engaged in the photographs, rather than in the environment. Two of the children in the reception class commented that the wide hallways in the Diana pre-school looked like an airport. The image showed a light tiled space with a tiled floor.

Emerging themes

Each research activity was analysed in turn and codes related to design issues were identified. Comparisons were then made across the different sets of data to identify common themes. These themes formed the basis for further discussion with architects, practitioners and parents. Four of the themes discussed were: personal markers, scale and perspective, visibility, and privacy.

Personal markers

The young children showed how their feelings about the nursery were linked to their own sense of identity. This seemed to be primarily about drawing attention to any detail in the space that made reference to them. Children photographed their own photographs on their coat pegs and any other reference to their name in the classroom. In some cases this included photographs of artwork on display. Secondly, children identified features which they linked with members of their family, whether parents or siblings. For example, on the tours some of the children were keen to point out places where they sat with their parents at the start of the day. Several children photographed their siblings' classrooms.

This material reinforced the importance of ways to identify particular spaces for individual children within the nursery. One early design idea was to create 'cubbies' for each child in the cloakroom area. Attention was given in the final designs to seating areas around the school building for parents and children to share prior to entering the nursery, and for meeting at the end of the school day.

Scale and perspective

The children's images raised questions about scale. There were examples where the environment could be seen to disadvantage young children. They stretched up to take a photograph over the top of the counter into the school office. The entranceway to the school, down a passageway surrounded by high brick walls appeared daunting from the perspective of a 3-year-old. A different sense of perspective was conveyed by children's attention to the sky, ceilings and the ground. One of the messages seemed to be that designing for young children needs to take into account this attention to close-up details and far-away spaces.

In response to the photographs of the sky, ceiling and floor surfaces, the architects designed 'island-like' floor patterns, and a unique ceiling with a 'Swiss cheese' pattern and floating 'clouds' to mimic the sky. The architects worked closely with the engineers to create a special lighting scheme that enhanced the ceiling design. The final designs included a variety of platforms to create different scales of spaces for teaching, drama and play. All the joinery was designed with the scale of the nursery child in mind—with the lower

shelves and cupboards accessible primarily to the children and the upper storage cupboards accessible only to the teachers.

Legibility

Children demonstrated the importance of feeling connected with other parts of the site, including the outdoor spaces. One of the 4-year-olds, for example, included a photograph of the outdoor space taken through a glass panel in the door. It was a rainy day so the children were inside but he was still able to convey the importance of the outdoors. Another child in the reception class explained to the architect how she liked to sit by a particular window because she could see her family bringing her younger sister to nursery. Being able to see and walk easily through a space is part of its 'legibility.' Lynch in talking about a city refers to legibility as:

"...the ease with which its parts can be recognised and can be organised into a coherent pattern."

(Lynch 1960)

Legibility can also apply on the smaller scale of a school or nursery. Trancik and Evans (1995) identify legibility as important design criteria in promoting young children's competency in early childhood provision:

"Legible environments inform the user of their orientation in space, easing their movement through a building."

(Trancik and Evans 1995)

A key feature of the final design has been the 'foundation hub.' This room forms the link between the reception and nursery classes,

and provides the main point of transition into the nursery. The aim has been to help children and adults to feel connected to the main body of the school and to its surroundings. The foundation hub features a transparent roof, and large folding doors to open it up to the outside. This room extends into the covered play space, to allow the children to enjoy the outdoors as much as possible, even in inclement weather. In addition, the new nursery features a big bay window, which allows the children to see out onto their play space and towards the entrance gate, where their parents and siblings come to meet them at the end of the day.

Privacy

The concept of privacy has many meanings, which may involve being alone but is not restricted to this interpretation. Titman (1994) links the notion of privacy with a range of shared and individual experiences. She describes a 'place for being' that enables children to:

"...be themselves, which recognised their individuality, their need to have a private persona in a public place, for privacy, for being alone and with friends, for being quiet in noise, for being a child."

Altman (1975) has described privacy as the ability to regulate social interaction (quoted in Trancik and Evans 1995). This interpretation places an emphasis on the agency of the individual to control the desired level of contact with others. Play spaces that provided privacy had been identified as important places by young children in the two previous studies carried out by the authors using the Mosaic

approach (see Clark 2005a and Clark and Moss 2005). Initial observations in the nursery in the Living Spaces study raised the question of how few opportunities the environment appeared to offer for children to withdraw.

Children identified indoor private spaces as the book corner and the home corner. As we have already discussed, several children answered they would go home to their parents or outside with friends if they wanted to be by themselves. Alex (in the reception class for 4- to 5-year-olds) offered an alternative response:

“Out on the seats – in the other playground or my nice inside self” (on the mat).

It is interesting that Alex was able to convey that his private space in a reception class was internalized rather than a physical reality.

Outdoor spaces

The second phase of the fieldwork was conducted 6 months later and focused on outdoor spaces. Previous studies by the authors had demonstrated the importance of these spaces for young children (for example, Clark and Moss 2005; Clark 2005a, 2005b). The relocation of the nursery to within the main school building had implications for the outdoor spaces that the young children would have access to. Their new space would be smaller and would change from a square to a rectilinear shape.

Research activities with children in the nursery and reception classes had two aims: to provide opportunities for the children to review

their views and experiences expressed in the first phase of the study and to discuss future possibilities for the outdoor space.

Three activities were devised: reviewing their documentation, a story-based session and a drawing activity.

Figure 3
Research activities with young children about the outdoor play space

Children reviewing tours and map making		Children reviewing interview responses
	Research activities about the outdoor play space	
Story-based activity		Drawing activity

Reviewing

Groups of children within the nursery and reception class began by reviewing their conversations with Alison about the outdoor area and reflecting on their photographs, interviews and maps also made at that time. The children’s photographs from their tours were shown to the children as a slideshow on a laptop computer. The review was arranged in an informal way with the children and

researcher sitting on the floor with the computer. The children were placed in charge of the slideshow of photographs so they could decide when to linger on a particular photograph and when to move on. If this technology had not been available, children reviewing an album of their own photographs with a researcher could have given children the same level of control of the exercise.



The bikes

PHOTO BY LIVING SPACES STUDY

Some of these children had since moved from the nursery class to reception and so had a different perspective on the space. Sally, for example, had said in the nursery how she didn't like going on the circular climbing bars. But when reviewing her thoughts, having moved now to the reception class she commented:

“But now I can do the ones without the big circles but I can't do the ones with circles.”

Story

One of the challenges was how to harness the children's imagination to think about alternative outdoor spaces. Stories offer ways into other worlds for adults and for children and so offered possibilities for this task. Children listened to a children's story called *In the Attic* by Hiawyn Oram and Satoshi Kitamura (2004). The story features a small boy who finds his way to an imaginary attic by climbing a pretend ladder. He goes to many places including climbing in spider's web, finding a 'cool, quiet, place to rest and think' and meeting a friendly tiger. This story was the catalyst for thinking about the future outdoor space.

Some of the children had already illustrated how they used their imagination to create different environments within the existing nursery space (see photo books above). This was a reminder that young children are not necessarily limited by the physical restraints and possibilities of a particular site – they come with knowledge of a range of imaginary spaces gathered from their own cultures.

Drawing

The final activity drew together the children's work to decide on which elements of their old playground should be kept, if possible, which should be replaced and which should be added. Drawing was chosen as the medium. This is in keeping with the principles behind the Mosaic approach – using tools that play to young children's strengths.

The following themes emerged as important features for the new play area. This included

thinking about equipment but also about social and aesthetic spaces:

- Places to climb and slide
- Places to sit and wait with parents and siblings
- Quiet places
- Places to ‘run around and do things’
- Things to keep including the bikes and balls
- Things to replace: the tunnel, plants, the playhouse and the sand pit.

The play space that was established alongside the new nursery set out to include these features. Popular toys from the old nursery were transferred to the new space supplemented by expenditure on new pieces of play equipment that included a large climbing structure and a sand pit with a cover. There were plans to incorporate children’s designs from the drawing activity in the soft-play surface but unfortunately budgetary cuts resulted in these features not being added. A grassy area under trees has been maintained which could provide opportunities for quieter activities and the climbing structure has a hideaway space big enough for a couple of children to hide in together.

The architect’s final designs for the exterior of the building included alcoves for groups of children and adults to be together. Practitioners and children have identified this feature as a popular addition to the school.



External view of the learning resource centre with alcove seating

PHOTO BY JOHN PARR

Whole school conversations

Older children’s views

The participatory research with the youngest children in the school supported the on-going consultative process with the older children and the rest of the school community. The head teacher, practitioners and architect had discussed with the older children in the school about their hopes for the ‘new build’. The maps produced by the young children after their tours of the school were used to promote more discussion with older children about the future. These maps were on display during a whole school consultation day, organised by the architect and the school. Each class in turn came to the school hall to see the young children’s maps and to review the architect’s plans and model. Members of Year 6, the 10- and 11-year-olds who were the oldest children in the school,

led this session. Later in the day the consultation was opened up to parents and members of the local community for their comments.

Older children have also been involved in planning ideas for the outdoor space. Alison and adult members of the school community including practitioners and the estate manager have worked with children from the School Council, which is made up of 5- to 11-year-olds. The young children's maps provided the starting point for this older group to think about their existing playground, to conduct their own audit of the space and to visit other schools. This work is intended to inform future development of the outdoor areas, once funding has been secured.

Dialogue with practitioners

The primary aim of this study is to involve young children in the design process. However, the context for the case studies is early childhood provisions that are shared environments for children and the adults who work in these spaces. This highlights the two-fold reason for dialogue with practitioners. It was important to review the material produced by the children with practitioners in terms of understandings about the environment and individual children's current interests and priorities. It was also essential to discuss practitioners' own views on the new building project. A 'slide show' was compiled of children's images taken on the tours. This was shown individually to the early years' practitioners in charge of the nursery and the reception class, together with individual records of the children involved.

The level of competence displayed by the children surprised both practitioners. The nursery practitioner commented:

"I guess you knew that they could do all the visualising, remembering, vocalising. To know what they are thinking now is very important."

This last comment reinforces the value of listening to young children's perspectives in on-going pedagogical practice as well as for future-orientated research (Kinney 2005; Carr, Jones and Lee 2005; Rudge and Driskoll 2005).

Dialogue with parents

Slideshows of the children's images facilitated exchanges with parents. The children's photographs provided an immediate and concrete way in to discussions about the children and the parents' insights into their children's views and experiences of the nursery and reception class.

Several of these discussions took place in school but on one occasion the interview took place with a mother and her nursery child in their home.

Parents may have experienced frustration with trying to find out from children of all ages 'What did you do at school today?' and seldom receiving an informative reply. The children's photographs provided another way into such a conversation.

One of the benefits of talking to parents was to hear their own experiences of the school environment. One father commented that

a particular walkway was difficult to pass through in the morning, as the gap between the classroom and fence was very narrow. This useful piece of information was prompted by an image of this passageway taken by his daughter. It is possible that without this visual catalyst he wouldn't have thought to share this information.

Dialogue with architects

Dialogue with the project architect, Jennifer Singer, took place through the different phases of the case study. The architect sat in as an observer during some of the activities with the children to see and hear for herself how the young children shared their knowledge of the environment.

A seminar was arranged with Jennifer and her colleagues at Greenhill Jenner Architects to discuss the first phase of the case study. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss particular issues raised about this building project but also to look for more general insights gained through reflecting on the children's material.

A slide show of digital images was chosen as a possible appropriate method to begin this meeting. Thus a similar format of a slide show of the research process was explored with each participant group in the study (see Figure 4).

Later in the study a selection of these images were shown and discussed with policy-makers at a local and national level in seminars and conferences.

The architects heard a presentation about the study that was followed by the opportunity to look at a sample of copies of the young children's photo books and maps. These maps were displayed in the architects' office alongside the initial plans and photo montages prepared by the architect. This positioning raised the status of the children's work, acknowledging they had a contribution to be made.

Figure 4
Groups who participated in a review of the research process

Nursery children	Children in the reception class	
	Review of the research process	Parents
Architects	Practitioners	Advisory group

Reflection on the children's material led to a debate among the architects about specific aspects of the design of this nursery as well as wider aspects of the design process. The general reaction from the architects was one of surprise at the environmental competency expressed by the children. The material produce by the young children demonstrated

that they had built up layers of knowledge about their immediate surroundings including how the nursery was part of a detailed ‘cognitive map’ of the site, which the children had assembled. This linked to the theme of legibility discussed earlier.

A discussion about scale raised the question of whether an early childhood environment should provide ‘affordances’ for children where they can aim to achieve new milestones such as sitting on adult-sized chairs, climbing steep steps or whether the environment should be fine-tuned to the size of young children.

The architects debated how privacy could be provided within the parameters of an early childhood environment, which led to the central issue of making explicit the values on which early childhood practice is based. It is far easier for architects to work with clients who are explicit about how they see children and childhood and the other values on which they base their practice. Reflecting on projects undertaken, the architects in this discussion group felt that in the majority of cases the clients’ values had remained implicit, which made the task of design more difficult.

Summary: creating contexts for thinking about design

This chapter has described how participatory research methods may provide one way of

involving young children in the early stages of the design process. Rather than beginning by asking children for a wish list, the research approach has been to create a context where children can explore their existing environment and share these understandings with adults.

The design themes which have emerged, such as privacy, legibility and the importance of personal markers, are not new concepts in the field of early childhood design. What is more unusual, however, is having these design issues reinforced by material gathered by young children, thus bringing to life the reality of living in such environments for young ‘users’.

The original aim of the Living Spaces study was to involve young children in the design process. One of the methodological questions raised after the first year of the study was how could practitioners be supported in reflecting on their working environment? Discussions with practitioners and architects underlined how complex a task it was for practitioners, whether new to their role or experienced, to make their implicit feelings about an existing environment or desires for a future space explicit. This question is explored in the next chapter by involving both adults and young children in a post-occupancy evaluation.

Chapter 3. 'Finished beginnings': reviewing a completed building

"The consultation process is a way of drawing out the tacit expertise in children as opposed to the explicit expertise of the professional."

(Prue Chiles 2005).

This is the challenge in involving children and practitioners in the design process. The intention is not to oust professional design expertise but to enable those who work in a space, whether adults or children, to draw out their experiences to inform future provision.

Chapter 1 began with a quote by Vea Veechi:

"Children, and the way they live in places, build relationships, and learn are not always the primary starting point of reference guiding the various phases of school design and construction."

(Veechi 1998)

A vital but sometimes overlooked or underplayed part of the design and construction process is the review of completed buildings. It is still not common practice in the building of education provision that the 'end users' play an active part in the review of the completed building. Against this background the Living Spaces study set out to achieve a difficult task by involving users—both adults and young children—in reviews. This chapter documents how a range of people including young children, early childhood practitioners and multi-agency teams can be involved in a post-occupancy review.

Case Study 2

Case Study 2 is in area of social disadvantage in North London in a borough that has one of the highest numbers of nationalities represented in a local authority in the country.

The building project involved creating a Children's Centre to include facilities for young children and their families. The Children's Centre incorporates an existing nursery school for children from 3 to 5 years old with new office facilities for a multi-disciplinary Sure Start team and facilities for children under 3. Additional community facilities on the site have been refurbished. There have been changes to a courtyard and other outdoor space.

Reviewing a Children's Centre

There has been an increasing number of 'new build' and refurbishment projects involving early childhood provision in the UK since the Labour government was elected in 1997. This has included government-funded initiatives including the Sure Start programme and Children's Centres. These centres for children under 5 years old and their families aim to provide integrated services with access to multi-disciplinary teams of professionals.

Despite the scale of the building programme there have been few documented post-occupancy reviews of such provision and at the time of writing very few if any published examples of reviews that have included young children.

The second case study in the Living Spaces study was chosen as it presents an example of a review of a recently completed Children's Centre. This centre, in keeping with others in the country combines a refurbishment project with 'new build' elements. The Head of Early Years in the London borough concerned identified the centre as a potential partnership where the practitioners and architects would be interested in a project which centred on listening to young children.



External view of the completed Children's Centre
PHOTO BY DAVID SPERO

Selecting the architects

The choice of architects has been crucial to the completion of the Living Spaces study in both case studies. The architects' practice for the second case study has an established reputation for both its innovative early childhood provision and its consultative approach to the communities with which it works. There

had been considerable consultation between different users and the architects at earlier stages in the design process, before the research began. This was a time-consuming commitment on the part of the architects as this was partly a refurbishment of premises that housed many different community groups and was partly funded by a government-funded regeneration grant which involved additional consultative procedures.

The architect had run a design workshop with a group of young children in the existing nursery school. Children's play with boxes was one element, which was translated into the final design of the 'new build' component of the project.

Participant groups

Over a 9-month period young children, parents, nursery school and Sure Start practitioners and architects were involved in the research.

Each group of participants, whether of children or adults, contained a range of experience. The children's groups included 3-year-olds who were in their first few months of being in the centre together with more experienced children who left the centre to start school during the research. Similarly the nursery school practitioners included a group of three women who had recently joined the centre together with others who had worked in the original nursery school for over 10 years. The Sure Start practitioners were representative of the multi-agency composition of this staff

Figure 5
Participants involved in Case Study 2

3- and 4-year-olds in the nursery school (over 30)		Architects (8)
	Participants in the research	Sure Start practitioners (10)
Parents using the Children's Centre (6)		Nursery school practitioners (19)

Figure 6
Research activities with nursery practitioners and Sure Start team

Tours of the centre		Group reviews in staff teams
Interviews	Research activities with nursery practitioners and sure start team	Collaborative workshop nursery practitioners and Sure Start team
	Map making	

group. Sure Start participants included crèche workers, a social worker, a speech and language therapist and a midwife.

The two main architects to be involved were Fran Bradshaw, the project architect, and Anne Thorne of Anne Thorne Architects Partnership. There were, however, other architects in the practice that took part in seminars about the research. In addition to the numbers of practitioners who are quoted above there were others who took part in workshops which increases the total of those involved in this case study to approximately 80 adults and children.

There were three phases to this review. The first phase of 3 months focused on preparing

for and gathering the views of practitioners in the nursery school. The second 4-month phase focused on working with children, Sure Start practitioners and parents. The final 3 months of the case study involved children and adults in workshops about the outdoor play space.

Starting with adults

This second case study began by working with adults. This decision was taken after discussion with the advisory group. The aim was two-fold: to familiarise the practitioners with the research tools before they used them with the children and secondly to give practitioners the opportunity to stop and reflect on their environment. The hope was that the combination of the visual and reflective approach would provide a necessary

space to think and to make their implicit knowledge explicit. There was an unexpected level of engagement and reflection provoked by the tools.

Tours and map making

Practitioners were asked to take time to walk around the centre, including both the parts they were familiar with in their day-to-day work and less familiar spaces. During the tour the practitioners were asked to take photographs to illustrate what was important to them in the centre. Some of the images were positive and others showed negative aspects that they wished to raise.

The practitioners then met with Alison to discuss their developed photographs and to make a map using a selection of their images. The nursery school practitioners had access to digital cameras but were not necessarily familiar with their use. It was decided to support the practitioners in using this technology and the skills gained could subsequently be applied with the children. The Sure Start practitioners did not have access to this technology so it was decided it was more practical to use single-use cameras with this group.

Examples of the maps

The maps produced reflected a range of personal and shared meanings, as had been detected with the children's maps in the first case study. The format of the maps was highly individual, particularly among the nursery school practitioners. Some practitioners decided to make separate maps for positive



Example of a practitioner's map

PHOTO BY CLARA THOMAS

and negative images. Others made their maps into a collage of images and comments.

Examples of nursery practitioner maps

Three practitioners decided to make map making a collaborative exercise. They were each new members of the Children's Centre staff having started work in the nursery school 3 weeks before taking part in the research. They



An image from the midwife's map entitled 'we are in the community'

PHOTO BY ALISON MEINEL

were therefore still in the process of becoming familiar with their new environment and with each other. One of the three had only recently moved to the United Kingdom so she was adapting to a different culture at the same time.

Having discussed the activity together this group of women decided to each take photographs and then produce two maps

together. The first was to illustrate the places which they 'liked most' and enjoyed working and another map of places they disliked, highlighting specific areas they thought could be improved.

The positive images, which they arranged in an oval includes many spaces where direct activities take place with the children such as the 'home corner' for role play, the sand tray and the garden. Other places on their map related to their use of the space as adults. They drew attention to the staff room, the security system on the main door that made them feel safe and the staff information board which as new members of the team helped them to know what was happening each day.

The four negative images highlighted very specific areas in the nursery school which they felt could be improved: the outdoor toy store, the area for spare clothes, the music cupboard and the children's cloakroom. This group added a written description of their own solutions to each of these problems onto the map.

A midwife, who was one of the health representatives on the Sure Start team, made one of the maps. She had a desk in the new offices that were part of the 'new build' element of the project.

She demonstrated a great level of sensitivity to the space and was able to express the positive and negative aspects of the building. This awareness included professional and personal insights. The nature of her work meant that

she used a number of rooms in the course of her working week including the shared office, the interview room and a community room for a post-natal group. The midwife had been a wheelchair user in the past and currently came to work on a bicycle. Both these factors seemed to be important factor in her interpretation of the completed centre.

Gathering parents' perspectives

We decided to explore whether the tools used in the Mosaic approach might facilitate discussions with parents about the children's centre. A group of six parents participated in this part of the study. Each had experience of the children's centre in some way. Several came to parent groups as well as having children in the nursery. One of the parents was a member of the parent council and also a cleaner on the premises. We asked the parents to go on a tour of the building taking photographs of what was important to them, including if appropriate positive and negative images. Following the tour, Alison met with the parents individually to interview them about their choices and to make a map.

Each map represented an individual account of their experiences in the centre. Some of the parents concentrated on the few rooms they were familiar with whereas others illustrated the relationship between the centre and the wider environment.

Design issues emerging

It is a complex task to present different perspectives about a completed building. We have chosen to refer to a model for including

user perspectives in the design process. In conjunction with other organisations including the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the Design Quality Indicator (DQI) was launched in 2002 by the Construction Industry Council. This provides a tool for assessing the design quality of buildings, including a version produced for schools.

There are three critical areas of the DQI: function, build quality and impact.



Practitioner maps on display in the new building

PHOTO BY LIVING SPACES STUDY

It appeared from the practitioners' and parents' maps and interview comments that they had comments to make about each three of these aspects of design quality.

Function

Room use

Practitioners were articulate about how the way the spaces were working in practice. Here are

some quotes from discussion about what was the most important space for them in the building.

NURSERY ASSISTANT – You can see cars and legs and at children’s height. I spend time there. I feel connected to the outdoor space.

NURSERY OFFICER – You can look out. There are lots going on. You can see the road and the different sounds from the environment.

SENIOR NURSERY OFFICER – It is big enough for big furniture. The glass doors mean you can look through to the main road. The patio doors mean the babies can see out.

Consistent references were made to the new under-3s rooms.

These quotes are from adults who spent a high percentage of their day in these spaces. The comments illustrate how the new design was perceived as helping both practitioners and children feel connected to the wider environment.

Practitioners’ maps also conveyed messages about multiple functions of spaces. There were photographs taken, for example, of an office door covered in notices. The room operated as a multiple purpose space including an office, a breast-feeding room and an interview room. The number of notices on the door represented these multiple, competing functions.

Changing functions emerged as a design issue. Some of the rooms were designed for generic community use and subsequently hosted specific activities that were not ideal for the space. This was highlighted by the example of

baby massage classes, which were taking place in a room with overhead strip lighting. This was, of course, not the function which the architect had envisaged for this room but was the result of the changing nature of community provision.

Accessibility

This was a major issue about which practitioners and parents expressed opinions. A platform lift had been installed which was creating problems for those with pushchairs. The lift needed to be operated by holding down a button inside the lift whilst it was in use. This was difficult for a parent to do whilst in the lift with a pushchair and young children.

Adults also discussed accessibility issues surrounding the entrances, which needed to cater for a large volume of buggies but also bicycles as well as wheelchair users.

Storage

There is an acknowledged need for sufficient storage in early childhood provision (see Chapter 1). There is an image taken by a Sure Start member of enormous beanbags used in a parent and baby class that shows the scale of the equipment that needs to be hauled around and stored.

Build quality

This is the most technical of the indicators and refers to issues such as the type of material used, sustainability and health and safety issues. However, practitioners and parents did have a considerable number of observations to make about these topics.

They were particularly positive about the new rooms for the under-3s. This included references to the high standard of design and materials used in this section of the building. Conversely some practitioners were critical when finishing off was not of the highest standard. As one practitioner remarked: “It’s the difference between the Savoy and a Comfort Inn!”

Practitioners displayed their acute awareness of temperature. Several people took photographs of room thermometers displaying temperatures of over 30 degrees centigrade.

Sustainability was an issue that had been taken seriously in this building project, both in terms of materials used and information to users. There were wind turbines for example on the roof of the new offices. This dimension to the building work was drawn attention to by several practitioners, including a participant who was a parent and a member of staff.

Impact

This third indicator refers to the influence the building has had in terms of perceptions of its ‘feel’ and special qualities. The impact may be in terms of its influence on the internal workings of an organisation and its relationship with its surrounding community. Practitioners expressed a sense of a special place in several ways. They depicted social spaces, liveable spaces for adults and children and personal spaces.

Personal spaces

It was important for the adults to have a space

to call their own. In one case this was identified as the adult toilet, which a social work student described as her ‘quiet zone’. One practitioner who had her own office since the building project photographed her new space. Others identified the outdoor space as a place where they felt relaxed.

Liveable spaces

A liveable space might be described as one that enables both adults and children to feel ‘human’. Practitioners emphasised this aspect of the new facilities for the children under 3 years old:

NURSERY ASSISTANT – *I enjoy going in there. It is calming.*

NURSERY OFFICER – *It looks relaxing and comfortable.*

HEAD TEACHER – *Warm and cosy, comfortable, comforting and safe.*

Ambiguous spaces

Other spaces emerged as ambiguous spaces with a range of perspectives expressed about the same space. The kitchen was one such location. It was liked by certain groups of practitioners who saw it as social space or a ‘chatty space’ but avoided by others. The boardroom received a similar mixed reaction. Some practitioners liked the formal style but for others, particularly the nursery practitioners, the oval table represented an alien work culture – of formal meetings. This illustrates one of the complexities of bringing together multi-disciplinary teams in children’s centres. The choice of furniture conveys implicit meanings about how work is viewed.

These examples are an indication that the evaluation of rooms relates to the social practices which take place there as well as to the physical characteristics of the space.

Gathering young children’s perspectives

The following research activities were used to review the indoor and outdoor environment of the children’s centre with groups of children. The tours, map making and interviews were common to each of the participant groups involved in the review.

Figure 7
Research tools used to gather young children’s perspectives

Tours of the centre		Workshop with boxes and chalk
Interviews	Research tools with young children	Observation
Map making		Story-based activity

Emerging themes

There were similarities in the design issues which emerged from the child-led tours, interviews and map making in this case study and in Case Study 1.

Scale and perspective

The children paid great attention to the ground, whether inside or outside, but particularly to the mud in the garden and insects discovered there. Several of the children also drew attention to rooftops and the sky. This has been a consistent finding across the three studies using these methods with young children – their awareness of the sky and of ceilings in buildings, perhaps partly as a result of how much of their day they spend looking up.

A sense of perspective was eloquently conveyed by one of the youngest 3-year-olds who took part. His photographs contained many images of corridors and doors taken from his height, which drew attention to the number of obstacles in his way.

Personal markers

Another consistent theme was that of personal markers. Children in this case study were keen to record evidence of themselves around the children’s centre. Children had their profile books that were rich records of time in the centre. Several children stopped and took many photographs of pages in their profile books. These included photographs of members of their family as well as photographs of themselves when younger together with examples of their drawings, painting and writing. There had recently been a new border established outside with seeds planted by some of the children, with the children’s names written on labels by the seeds. Several children included this border on their tour of the centre and added photographs of this on their maps.

The research activities for listening to young children's perspectives were part of long-established practice within the nursery school for engaging young children's views. The tours, interviews and map making were carried out by Alison and practitioners working together, which was an added advantage when working with some of the younger and more shy children.

Final stages of the review process

The intention of this case study has been to work alongside architects, children, parents and practitioners in reviewing a children's centre and if possible to feed into actual changes highlighted by the review. This has led to a final phase that has focused on changes to the outdoor play area. Dialogue with children and adults reinforced the importance of the outdoor area but there were aspects that were in need of change. The original design plans included changes to the outdoor play area but these had been waiting for other building work on the site to be completed before this phase could begin.

The study revealed that outdoor play space was being well used as a social and an active space but that there were fewer opportunities for private spaces, natural spaces and creative spaces. These categories have informed the final stage of the review process which has involved a series of workshops firstly with adults and secondly with children about the outdoor space.

Workshop with adults

This workshop led by Alison with the support of the architect, Fran Bradshaw, brought together

adults from different practitioner teams working within the children's centre. This included practitioners from the nursery school and members of the multi-disciplinary Sure Start team. In all, 25 practitioners took part.

The workshop involved:

- Tours of the building
- Activities about changes to the courtyard
- Reflecting on the essential ingredients of a children's centre.

Tours of the building

The aim of this activity was to broaden participants' understandings of how different members of the children's centre used and valued the building. Working in twos or threes, participants took it in turns to lead others on a tour of the building pointing out what they felt to be important places both positive and negative. Another member of the group took notes on the tour and then group members swapped roles, as time allowed.

Some of the brief comments on the tours echoed feelings shared in more detail in the maps and interviews carried out earlier in the research. Positive comments were made in particular about the new 'under-3s' part of the nursery, as a pleasant place to be for staff and children and the new outdoor garden. Negative comments included insufficient storage, the courtyard, the children's toilets and the lift.

Courtyard activity

The architect had identified the courtyard as one of the final areas to need further work. This was reinforced by comments made by

practitioners during the tours. This next activity brought participants together to discuss initial thoughts about the courtyard before dividing into groups to plan possible changes.

Although at the start of the discussion the feelings expressed were negative, the discussion revealed how many different uses the courtyard had and the range of different groups who walked across the courtyard, looked onto the space or could hear what was happening there. It was used by parents to socialise after bringing their children to the nursery and by youth users of the centre. The space was used for private talks as well as for mobile phone conversations.

After this initial discussion participants worked in small groups to explore possible changes to the space. Two groups made a poster with drawings and captions about changes to the courtyard. These became 3D rather than 2D creations. Two groups worked with a cardboard model of the courtyard, using plasticine and play dough to create sculpture forms. The final group worked outside in the courtyard, using chairs and chalk to try out different ideas for arranging the space.

Key features emerged. All five groups mentioned planting a tree or flowers and shrubs and introducing seating to include benches. Three of the groups designed a buggy park, one with an awning. Adding steps from the crèche to the courtyard was mentioned by three of the groups. Another common feature was an information board.

Design features included using mirrors and murals on the walls, adding a clock, placing animal models on the roof and adding floor markings in the form of footprints to show the way to different parts of the centre.

Considerable thought was given to how to making the courtyard more welcoming. One group showed how the reception door could show the word welcome in different languages or how a tree in the courtyard could be a ‘welcome’ tree bearing messages in different languages.

What are the essential ingredients for a children’s centre?

This last activity divided the participants into three groups to think about the essential ingredients for a children’s centre, for three groups of users: children, practitioners and families. This was a short brain-storming activity with each group asked to compile a list of factors.

Participants’ list of essential ingredients for children in a children’s centre

- 1 **To have fun** – Be bright and colourful
- 2 **Space** – To be able to move freely
- 3 **Child-sized** – Low-level windows, sinks and toilets, coat pegs
- 4 **Outside space** – Interesting and varied
- 5 **Security** – Be safe and feel secure
- 6 **Representative of local community** – Able to be adaptable
- 7 **Easy access** – Wheels-friendly light doors that can be opened easily
- 8 **Quiet spaces** – Can be made homelike
- 9 **Organisation** – Able to identify own spaces as well as well organised space with adequate storage
- 10 **Local** – Near where you live

Participants' list of essential ingredients for practitioners in a children's centre

- 1 Welcoming
- 2 Practical – Getting in – how children use it
- 3 To facilitate day-to-day routine
- 4 Staff room
- 5 Integration of physical space – (links with 13)
- 6 Parking
- 7 Storage, lockers, resources
- 8 Meeting room
- 9 Resource room – For staff working
- 10 Private spaces for working with parents
- 11 Secure throughout day – Staff arriving for early shifts or leaving late
- 12 Toilets – More toilets
- 13 Central reception area

Participants' list of essential ingredients for families in a children's centre

- 1 Parents room
- 2 Signage to be aware of accessible areas
- 3 Access to information
- 4 Physical impact to have a feel of a children's centre
- 5 Welcoming for whole family
- 6 Suitable furniture for all age groups
- 7 Booklet showing staff members

These lists are not intended to be definitive, but as a starting point for discussion by other practitioner groups who may be embarking on similar building projects.

Summary for the Case Study 2 review: a finished beginning

“When a new building is complete and the architect hands it over to the teacher the classroom can only be a ‘finished beginning’ in which adaptations will occur.”

(Horne Martin 2006)

This case study has been about providing a framework for both adults and young children to stop and reflect on their new environment, for these insights to facilitate changes to the centre and to inform future plans for new children's centres. Rather than be a review of a ‘completed building’ it has become an account of a ‘finished beginning’ as children and practitioners ease into their changed environment.

Whilst focusing on a review of the physical environment the case study has highlighted the interrelationship between the building and the professional cultures that co-exist within the shared space.

Chapter 4: Questions arising

This final chapter will discuss some of the questions raised by this study with regard to early childhood development and design.

What does it mean to be in this place?

A study that has set out to involve young children in the design process suggests research with an emphasis on future spaces. However some of the most enduring insights have been concerned with how young children view and experience their current environment. These understandings may support practitioners in reviewing their early childhood provision with the active involvement of young children. The question: ‘what does it mean to be in this place’ is as valid a question for early childhood practitioners operating in temporary provision as those embarking on expensive building projects.

Perhaps the most striking understanding gained has been about how important ‘personal markers’ have been to children in their early childhood environments. Children across both case studies and at different ages have drawn attention to details in the environment that are about themselves or their families. It is as if the nursery class or children’s centre is criss-crossed with invisible string which links the children to different objects, places and people within the space. This came across as of particular importance to the youngest children in the sample who photographed their name cards, pegs and pages of their profile books.

The example of profile books raises an important pedagogical issue- what early childhood practices could help reinforce children’s attachment to their physical environment? Profile books offer one way to reinforce children’s sense of belonging to a place by providing a visual record of themselves and their families that is a tangible object in their new environment. Children’s access to these records and their active involvement in the ongoing document is an important part of this process (for example Rudge and Driskoll 2005; Carr, Jones and Lee 2005). The accumulation of personal markers is about strengthening children’s sense of self-identity and place identity. This can be of particular importance where children are from different ethnic backgrounds from the majority of children in their early childhood centre. Profile books are but one example of how children’s ‘personal markers’ can be strengthened in a place. Personal hand puppets are another example (see Wunschel 2003) where practitioners have made individual puppets that look like each child and are embroidered with their name. As Ilse, a practitioner comments:

“Our children are now between 2.5 and 3.5 years old and they dearly love the little look-alikes that bear their names. For some children these have replaced the stuffed animals they slept with at naptime....”

“We have realised that the children love their personal puppets dearly. They are taken to bed,

to meals, to playing times and also on weekend trips. The puppets accompany the children in our group until they reach school age, and are then taken home.”

(Wunschel 2003)

How can design projects cross professional boundaries?

Multi-agency working has become an increasing feature of early childhood practice in the UK. This has led to early childhood environments often being the meeting point for individuals from an array of professional backgrounds including social work, health and education. The physical environment provides the arena within which these encounters take place. However there may be very different professional and personal ‘viewfinders’ being used to work with the same young children and families.

The review of the children’s centre described in Case Study 2 (see Chapter 3) brought together different professional groups to reflect on the physical environment. The visual task of taking photographs and map making provided an accessible common ground on which to discuss everyday practice within the shared space. This in turn revealed differences in work culture. The meeting room, for example, was familiar to some practitioners from office-based jobs but represented a ‘too formal’ approach to discussion for some of the early childhood practitioners. Gradually implicit views about children and childhood were made explicit. Sometimes these followed professional lines whereas at other times they represented different personal approaches to a similar role.

This raises the possibility of the Mosaic approach being adapted to facilitate exchanges between different professional groups working with young children.

Can documentation help to cross pedagogical boundaries?

It can be the case in learning environments with a wide age range of children that the views and experiences of the youngest children are less visible than those of the older children. One of the practice issues raised by the Living Spaces study has been how documentation produced by the youngest children in a school community can become the starting point for exchanges with older children. The work with the School Council, which took place alongside the first case study enabled children from 5 to 11 years old to engage with material produced by 3- and 4-year-olds in the school community. This reversed the hierarchy of knowledge that is embedded in most schools. The maps and photographs produced by the nursery and reception class provided the means to cross pedagogical boundaries and enabled children of different ages to co-construct meanings.

Can young children’s lives be made more visible to architects?

There has been a tendency within early childhood practice for the competencies of young children to be celebrated within the field but not beyond. This has been one of the contributions made by the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, whose travelling exhibition *The Hundred Languages of Children* has reached a global audience within and beyond the early childhood community.

The Living Spaces study has considered how the views and experiences of young children can be more clearly understood by those with responsibility for commissioning and designing early childhood provision. Considerable time has been given to presenting the young children's perspectives to a range of local authority officers, policy-makers and architects. One of the aims of these seminars and conferences has been to provide a series of 'viewfinders' on the children's everyday experiences within these spaces.

The reaction of the architects involved in the first case study describes their reactions to these new viewfinders:

JOHN JENNER – *What has come out of this is the way that children see compared to the way that we see.*

JENNIFER SINGER – *The structured consultation process has informed the process of design. It has allowed the architects to 'see differently' — to better understand spatial design from the perspective of the child through interaction with the researcher and children alike. It has allowed the architects to work with the children to understand not only what they 'want,' but perhaps more importantly, the thought processes behind these ideas. This becomes the 'window' into the child's way of seeing. This process has allowed the architects to move beyond the preconceptions of children's design (i.e. bright colours, spatial and functional organisation) to a new level of thinking about designing for children.*

It has become apparent that the opportunities offered by this study are not at present an established part of initial training for architects. There was an example of this during a conference at which the Living Spaces study was presented. Architecture students attended the conference, held in the Netherlands. The students were engaged on a project to design an early childhood building but their training did not appear to include material on how young children might experience these environments. Exchanges between early childhood centres and student architects could be one way of fostering such understandings.

Is there a role for researchers or facilitators in design projects?

This study has raised questions about the role of researchers in early childhood design. The study has involved the researcher in various roles including documenter, translator, facilitator and co-constructor.

Documenting has been an extensive part of the researcher role. However, this term suggests a passive role in the process. The role of researcher has been more direct than this, gathering views and experiences from different groups and making these visible to others.

A translator makes meanings known from one language to another. There has been an element of translation or interpretation in the role of researcher. One aspect of this has been listening to the children's own accounts of their images and then describing these accounts in such a way as to make the meanings

accessible to other audiences. The meetings with architects have included this role. There has also been an element of facilitation in taking ideas between children, early years' practitioners, architects and policy-makers. There are possibilities of extending this role.

Working within the framework of the Mosaic approach, the purpose of the researcher is not to 'pluck' disembodied facts from individuals, whether children or adults but to be part of the active process of a co-construction of meanings. This is a time-consuming process, involving discussion and reflection over extended periods. This process would not be appropriate for a brief evaluation, which sought quantifiable answers of 'what works'.

Summary

Conducting research with young children amidst the constraints of two building projects is a complex process. What has been reinforced has been the extent to which young children are acute observers and explorers of their immediate environments. One of the pleasures of the study has been to demonstrate this competency to designers and architects and by so doing to begin to open up new conversations about early childhood design. There have been many participants in these conversations. An increasingly important part of the study has been providing different contexts for thinking about buildings and the work with young children these structures support. The challenge remains as to how to continue these exchanges in the future.

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through “Strengthening the Care Environment” we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
- Through “Successful Transitions: The Continuum from Home to School” we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school. Through “Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity” we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

Information on the series

Working Papers in Early Childhood Development is a ‘work in progress’ series that presents relevant findings and reflection on issues relating to early childhood care and development. The series acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas, often arising out of field work, evaluations and training experiences. As ‘think pieces’ we hope these papers will evoke responses and lead to further information sharing from among the readership.

The findings, interpretations, conclusions and opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

