

# Some Guidelines for Preschool Design

Sara Elizabeth Caples

Although both the preschool and architectural communities are passionately interested in the design of preschools, almost no literature bridges the interests and technical concerns of the two communities. As practicing architects—not researchers except in the pragmatic design sense—my husband and I offer this article as just such a bridge. We hope it will be a useful reference for both the preschool community and the designers they hire.

There are some great books and articles from within the preschool community, which we list at the end of this article. As starting points for your own planning process, we especially recommend Vergeront's two books on arranging areas within existing indoor and outdoor spaces; Greenman's *Caring Spaces, Learning Places* for a truly comprehensive and very pragmatic discussion; and Cherry, Harkness, and Kuzma's *Nursery School and Day Care Center Management Guide* as a great source of checklists and practical tips. A number of preschool projects also have been described in the architectural press that focus primarily on general planning and formal architectural issues and the physical "look" of the projects.

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*All photographs courtesy of Sara Elizabeth Caples.*

What seems to be missing is an architect's systematic descriptions of the issues of importance to *both* communities. So, we would like to share with you some of our own hard-learned lessons in creating physical environments appropriate for children. First, we describe some of our observations of children and their teachers that helped shape our design convictions on this issue. Second, we suggest some actual guidelines for preschool design.

## Motivating observations

Interestingly, we began designing preschools just as our own son, Esteban, was born almost five years ago. As architects and as parents, Everardo Jefferson and I have had the opportunity to observe how he plays, both passively and actively, both alone and with others—by himself, drawing and coloring; with a playmate, building a story through blocks; with a group of his friends, playing Power Rangers at the playground. We have had the privilege of watching the learning process in Esteban's preschool; of seeing the skill of his teachers in matching activities to children's abilities and attention spans; of seeing the children learn literacy skills and math; of watching the children learn about animals and plants, planets and weather, machines and presidents; and of enjoying the children's singing, dancing, painting, drawing, writ-

ing, and building—all their ways of creating and expressing themselves and extending their experience and their imaginations. As architects and as parents, we have seen how important Esteban's school is in children's learning to relate to others and in their learning how to share, how to cooperate, how to listen, how to choose a moment to contribute something of real value to a conversation, how to deal with moments of rejection, and how to offer companionship so that it is welcome.

In all of this, besides gaining detailed respect for the tremendous skill, concern, and wisdom of his teachers at the Bellevue South Nursery School, we, as architects, have constantly asked how best the physical architectural environment can support these activities. We have seen how our son and his friends find or create little zones, niches, and floor spaces defined by a box or a blanket—areas scaled to their bodies; places comforting, memorable, and comprehensible to them. We have seen how children love windows as a place to view the world, to see life going on outside, to gauge the weather, to mark the passage of night and day. We have seen how something as simple as a light switch becomes an important landmark. Our son gleefully points out that he has now grown tall enough to reach the switch; clicking it on and off for cleanup time at school is a moment of cherished responsibility.

## Guidelines

In our work, we have tried to translate a few of these observations into the design of spaces for preschool children. Based on our experience, we suggest and use the following principles for the design of classrooms, outdoor play spaces, shared places, offices, teachers' rooms, and places for parents to gather. (Don't forget to consult the references at the end of this article for additional sources of information.)

For all spaces, the guiding principles are, first, the safety and the health of the children, and beyond that, the creation of an environment for growth and discovery that is scaled to the needs of the children.

## Classrooms

Of course, classrooms are the heart of each day's world for both the children and the staff. As you've no doubt noticed, young children need a lot of space to try out the myriad of activities they must explore. And yet that space needs to be broken up in ways that allow the children to feel secure, not overwhelmed, and that permit organization, yet encourage exploration.

We believe the most desirable configuration is a differentiated "shell" with distinct spatial zones for teachers to arrange and personalize. Spatial variety can be created through varied ceiling heights and lighting conditions, allowing the floor to be kept free of islands or fixed equipment. This shell allows teachers and caregivers to define activity areas tailored to children's individual preferences and developmental levels, the methods of instruction planned, and the actual furniture and equipment available—all the while helping to differentiate and individuate each area that the teacher makes. For example, at the Howard Haber Blue Feather School, we sloped part of the classroom ceiling in a form evocative of children's archetypal house drawings, while another part of the ceiling was dropped low and flat to provide a more intimate scale. Another way to create a memorable zone within a free-form space is to create a canopy or a grouping strongly defined by a geometric form such as a circle or a pyramid.

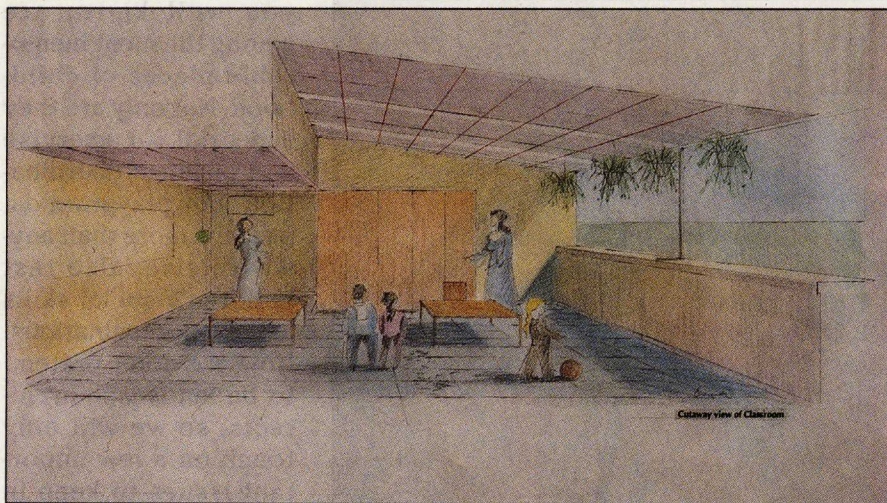
Within this variable space, teachers can make individual zones and territories by installing rugs or carpet in quiet and group

meeting areas, while maintaining washable flooring in messy art, playdough, and woodworking areas. Teachers can demarcate zones with bookshelves, storage bins, even tape on carpet, while keeping in mind the necessity to arrange zones so there are no long runways that tempt children to get too wild. The furniture used to create the dividers should be selected for "merchandising appeal," allowing children to see and select items, whether they be blocks arranged by shape, books with their covers facing out, or musical instruments on pegboards.

While activity areas should be only large enough to comfortably accommodate the maximum number of children involved in the activity, it is important to develop at least one area that can be used for meetings of the entire group, and for naps if they are part of the day's program. The space must be laid out not only to accommodate people but also activity-supporting equipment such as easels, tape players and speakers, or piano. Considering adjacent relationships is important in helping the space to function well; for instance, the cot storage closet should be near the rest area.

Furniture should include sterilizable tables and chairs; cubbies for clothing, diaper changes, pictures of families, completed art projects to take home, nap blankets, and toys from home; other art storage with drying racks marked with children's names, and shelves; bookcases both of the conventional and the display kind; woodworking shops with pegboards for hammer, saw, and vise, and bin storage for wood pieces and fasteners.

While most schools cannot afford the luxury of multiple rooms for each class, at larger schools separate rooms are desirable for especially noisy or dusty functions



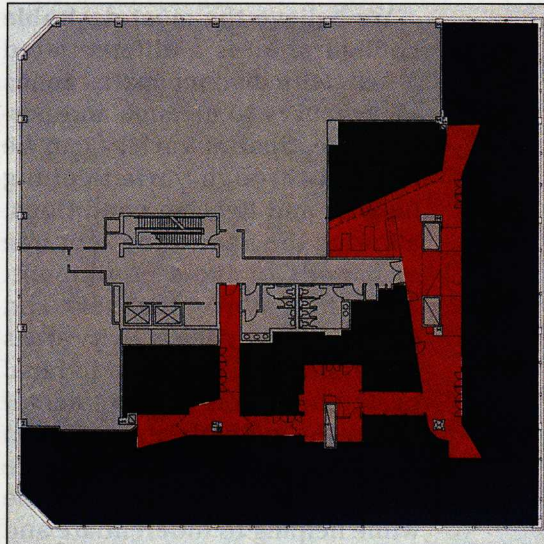
*The Howard Haber Blue Feather School* • varied ceiling planes

such a dramatic play, physical therapy, or woodworking. During the initial design stages, it is very important to think through these functions in terms of the school's mission, scheduling, and staffing.

Although many successful programs have been run from basements, we strongly believe that daylight is a necessity in each classroom, *especially* for full-day programs. Not only does sunlight destroy mold and bacteria and provide a needed source of vitamin D, it also contributes to a sense of optimism and offers connection with the natural world. It is important, of course, to be able to control all light sources, providing a range from full illumination to near darkness. One way to accomplish this is through the use of duo-tone blinds, dark on the inside and reflective on the exterior side (to minimize heat gain and cooling costs).

If you are stuck with no-light spaces, consider switching room functions to the maximum degree possible to capture any available light in the classrooms. At the Howard Haber School, a partial floor occupancy in an existing office building, we located classrooms along the only available window wall (see above). Offices, meeting rooms, gym, kitchen, and support spaces were located in the artificial light zone, supplemented by natural light "borrowed" from the classrooms through translucent glass panels along the shared corridor walls (see right).

While varying vertical scale of the ceiling is desirable, some elements in the classroom should be kept lower than normal, at a child's level. Window sills should be low enough to allow



**The Howard Haber Blue Feather School**  
Classrooms (blue) get light, hallways (red) borrow it

children to see the world outside—even when additional grilles and limit locks are necessary to ensure safety. Light switches, sinks, and toilets need to be accessible to children. Furniture clearly needs to be at the children's scale (and selected whenever possible by their teachers), yet there must be some *inaccessible* storage areas (closets and high bookshelves) for securely stowing supplies, nap mats and folding cots, teachers' belongings, medical kits, and cleaning supplies. We believe doors and windows should be the only architectural penetrations on the wall, since as much wall space

as possible should be left for pinups and display.

Wherever possible, provide more space than the minimum 30–40 square feet per child and teacher required by many building, health, and child care codes. In a classroom divided into activity zones, at least twice this amount is desirable. A more generous allotment of space saves teachers time in rearranging furniture and creates more permanent activity zones that the children can select by themselves.

Wherever possible, provide sinks in the classrooms. Not only do sinks permit a greater level of hygiene, but they also simplify preparation and cleanup for art activities, cooking demonstrations, snacks, and animal and plant care. Also, wherever possible, provide toilet rooms (with changing tables when developmentally appropriate) adjacent to each classroom or pair of classrooms; teachers and aides can spend more time in the classrooms and toilet training is simplified.

### Outdoor spaces

Outdoor spaces, as you well know, are among the most memorable places of childhood. Not only are they essential for exercise and physical coordination, but playgrounds, perhaps more than anywhere else, also test children's social skills and their imaginations. Now, we don't pretend to be landscape architects, so we will only touch on a few important issues to keep in mind. We strongly rec-



**Shurtleff School** • a secure courtyard for all hours

commend referring to some of the many wonderful references listed at the end of our article; there are all sorts of books, from tips on laying out your own areas to "dream books" featuring some of the most innovative and successful projects from around the world (Rivkin's book on outdoor spaces is comprehensive and very readable). As a second step, if you have a big project and need professional help, try contacting a good local landscape architect. And if you know of a great playground, find out who designed it and contact them!

Of course, playground equipment must be scaled to different levels of development and physical ability. Large areas of rubber matting are essential for safe play, especially areas around equipment and stairs. Equipment should be designed not only to allow an exuberant level of body movement but also to provide shapes and configurations that encourage children to project and play out the stories of their imaginations. The playgrounds that provide the strongest connections with the natural world and with the

imagination are those where the ground plane is varied, rising and falling, becoming part of the play landscape—not just being a "flat mat" platform for prefabricated equipment.

Create space sheltered from the sun and brief rain showers. Shade is an inviting place for role-playing games, as well as a simple relief from the heat and a medical necessity for some children.

If possible, provide an outdoor source of water, both for drinking fountains and for watering plants. If adult supervision is always present, shallow, elevated pools

can be a source of inventive play, especially for children with limited movement.

Provide planting areas whenever possible. Such spots can meaningfully extend classroom activities. Consider raised beds, which provide access for children in wheelchairs and which put plants at a protected level more visible to all children.

### Shared spaces

Indoors, shared places are more than obvious areas such as exercise room and meeting places. Hallways, the reception area, and



Howard Haber Blue Feather School • a place for stories

even restrooms are spaces where children also meet and gather. Corridors should be thought of as a series of activity spaces, physically different from each other, visually appealing even to small children, with benches where children can congregate to wait, meet in small groups, and hear stories (see above), with bulletin boards and pinup spaces located at their eye level. Different qualities of light, both artificial and natural, are preferable in hallways, as is variety of color and texture.

In the shared areas provide places, visible to children, for on-

going display of their work. There should be many places for changing displays centered around seasonal events and different learning experiences. There also should be ways in which the children can personally participate in the permanent decoration of their school; even small children can make ceramic objects and tiles, which then can be proudly mounted in hallways and stairwells.

As the first contact point in the school, the reception area should be a place for making parents and children comfortable, with furniture scaled for a child. The receptionist should be visible and welcoming, to children as well as adults, not hidden out of sight behind a tall ledge, as in an adults-only office.

### Offices

Offices provide a place for quiet, adult work, a place to secure confidential records, and a place for one-to-one meetings. Location depends on the occupant. If the office is for a teaching specialist whose work is frequently in the classrooms, then it makes

sense to be close to the classrooms. If the office is for the director, it might be better located near the reception area, convenient to parents and visitors, and in a place where the director can observe daily comings and goings.

### Teachers' room

The teachers' room should be a place for adults, where staff can relax and engage in informal writing, reading, or just day-dreaming. And, especially, the lounge should be a place for discussions among colleagues and

for professional training. Even though the greatest source of training and reference is interaction with fellow staff, space for a small professional library may be desirable. Outlets and storage for audiovisual equipment and easels are also important. And, once again, daylight and a means of controlling it are desirable. So is convenient access to a small refrigerator, microwave, water, and adult toilets.

### A place for parents

We've created three types of spaces that invite parents to become involved in preschool activities.

- In larger facilities set up a separate parents' association office, complete with bulletin boards, literature, and lending library of books and videos. A place for sharing food might be appropriate.
- In even the smallest facility, establish a zone where parents and caregivers can gather and trade information for a few moments during drop-off and pickup times. Most schools prefer to separate this area from the classroom proper so the children won't lose concentration during the last few minutes of the program, although family members should be welcome to participate in their children's programs.
- Also, whether there is one class or 50, designate an area separate from the classroom where teachers and parents can confer, if just for a few moments. This doesn't have to be a full-blown mini-conference room like we were able to provide for each group of six classrooms at the Early Childhood Development Center in Chelsea, Massachusetts. It could be an alcove or a small seating area in the hallway.

### General issues

In addition to location-specific concerns, there are some general issues that should be mentioned.

### Textures and colors

First, the use of varied textures and colors is highly desirable. A range of textures friendly to children's skins and bodies adds another level of experience with the physical environment. Appropriate textures include finished wood, ceramic tile, vinyl tile, plaster (smooth and indented textures), tear-resistant cloth and padding, rubber, leather, metal, safety glass, and tackable surfaces such as cork or painted homosote. Even small touches of natural varnished wood and decorative ceramic tile alleviate the endless expanses of vinyl and gypsum board often dictated by constrained budgets.

Colors can be vibrant and remain soothing if they are carefully selected according to their known psychological impact. While bright reds have been found to create excitement, deep purples and greens are very stabilizing and soothing. Yellows, as well as being restful, also are the first color that can be perceived by small infants. There is no need to limit children's environments to the three primary colors (the ubiquitous red, blue, and yellow of infant toys) or to pastels; indeed, where appropriate, extensive use of "ethnic" color palettes can be a source of pride and connection to the child's home community. For further infor-

mation on the psychological impact of colors, we refer you to the work of Gary Winkle and Lee Ann Rivlin at City University of New York's Department of Environmental Psychology.

### Materials

Materials that are durable and easy to maintain are of the utmost importance in creating facilities that endure and remain viable year after year. It is an ironic commentary on our times that when we converted a 120-year-old parochial school to a preschool in Brooklyn, we found the sturdiest materials we have encountered thus far in our preschool design work.

Gypsum board is the low budget wall material, par excellence, yet it is not inherently impact-resistant; indeed, it is highly susceptible to gouging, dents, and corner damage. For a relatively



Security playfully expressed

modest cost, a skim coat of "diamond-hard" plaster, applied at least to a height of four feet, can greatly increase gypsum board's durability and ability to withstand the bumps and bangs of normal use.

Corners deserve special attention. Not only are curved corners safer for children, they also are less likely to chip and discolor. Reinforcement with stainless steel or plastic guards that do not require repainting is often desirable.

Expensive cork tack-boards do not have to be purchased. Chalkboard manufacturers like Greensteel sell fabric-backed cork in rolls, ready to glue directly to the wall.

### Security and safety

The physical implications of security and fire safety need to be individually thought out at each facility. While fire safety and maintaining safe egress paths are well defined by building codes, security is not. The basic principles are a sense of well-being, the physical security of the facility, and a guarantee that no child will ever leave the supervision of an adult.

Creating a feeling of well-being and security, yet keeping the facility from appearing prison-like, is not a trivial issue in some of the neighborhoods in which our clients live and work. Even these issues can be solved imaginatively. At the Jennie Knauff Center in the middle of the Bronx, each skylight is equipped with steel bar



Howard Haber Blue Feather School • light & space markers

grillage and photo-sensitive night lights to discourage potential break-ins. We were able to maintain a spirit of playfulness by warping the grillage into triangular shapes and using vandal-resistant laminated glass (see left). At the center in Chelsea, extended-day-program outdoor activities take place in a festively landscaped, secure, gated courtyard, completely isolated from neighborhood drug dealers who might disturb the perimeter playgrounds (see above).

Another issue of concern for some of our clients is the possibility of supplies being stolen. This is easily and unobtrusively ad-

dressed by making sure all storage cabinets and rooms are equipped with locks.

The logistics of child drop-off and pickup must be completely thought through. The physical implications of where caregivers and children meet, how bus transfers work, and extended-day-program requirements must be solved with appropriately sized waiting areas (such as those at the Jennie Knauff Children's Center in the

Bronx, below), bus shelters, and voice and door security.

### Planning and budgeting

Even with the usual limited budgets, many of the amenities mentioned above can be incorporated into the school design by the process of careful planning, budgeting, and informed, prioritized decisionmaking.

Naturally, we are oriented toward projects requiring an architect. But if that's overkill for the project you have in mind—say, developing a more effective way of changing furniture layouts—you might try getting a parent or a high-school drafting class to measure and draw up your spaces and furniture. Then, through the magic of photocopies and scissors, make yourselves a "paper doll kit" for trying out different layout ideas and options. We are doing much the same thing in Chelsea, where some teachers are testing out the proposed classroom fur-



Jennie Knauff Childrens Center • bus waiting area

niture kit, trying different layouts, and helping to define the optimal set of equipment before the final purchase order.

How do you choose a designer or architect? First, make lists of all you want the school to contain and do—hopefully, this article and the references will help. Second, within your community and your network, ask who designed the preschools that function and wear well. If at all possible visit those places and judge for yourself. Another source of contacts is the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, usually very happy to supply a list of firms that have designed similar projects. Finally, interview more than one firm. Make sure that you are comfortable with the people who are going to work on your project and that they are alert to your concerns—you will be working together for many months.

During the design process, frequent consultations between the school's representatives and its architects are vitally important if the project is to be well planned. The better the architect understands the school's philosophy, schedule, and operations, the more likely the design will embody the school's fundamental goals. Planning together also helps identify opportunities for community involvement and donations, whether of labor, materials, or services.

During the bidding and construction process, a "partnering" relationship between client, architect, and contractor, in which all take responsibility for monitoring, consulting together, and adhering to agreed-upon budgets, is by far the most fruitful way of working that we can recommend. Perhaps the greatest potential for cost overruns lies in construction delays. By working with the client and the contractor to constantly keep the time and cost implications of all de-

isions clearly defined and by remaining open to suggestions from all team members, we have been able to keep change orders to 2% or 3% of the original contract price, when the industry standard is closer to between 10% and 15%. We cannot emphasize enough how essential it is to ensure that all contractors on the bid list be prequalified for reliability and honesty rather than being chosen simply for their low bid.

Finally, although a clear and federally mandated goal of the codes and of most clients is to create ADA-compliant schools, we would like to point out that there are almost no nationally accepted standards of accessibility for children. To create schools that are truly accessible requires knowledge of adult standards (which also must be met) and adaptation, where appropriate, for children's developmental levels and body sizes—for example, low-mounted lever-handle door-knobs make sense, whereas braille signs for 18-month-olds do not.

To address this issue truly successfully, the architect must have access to and advice from administration, teachers, and doctors and nurses familiar with the special needs of children who are medically fragile or disabled. At Jennie Knauff Children's Center, teachers suggested a special out-of-reach but accessible storage shelf over the sinks for bleach so that HIV-positive children could participate in the program yet be protected from infection by normal germ-infested contacts with their classmates and teachers.

In fact, in the development of all schools, the participation of the administration, the faculty, and the parents is most desirable. Enrichment through an interactive methodology can improve any single approach, and we strongly welcome it. As seasoned professionals, we bring many research, de-

sign, and technical skills to the process. Nonetheless, we have learned most of what we know of school planning considerations from extensive consultations with the people involved in them—from our many conversations with hundreds of enthusiastic participants (from maintenance people to seasoned educators) and, of course, from our observations of the children themselves. This has been and is an ongoing source of great inspiration. Perhaps the greatest moment of satisfaction in any project is when someone with whom we have worked closely examines the finished school and exclaims that it exceeds even their highest expectations.

### **For further reading**

Your local and state building, health, and child care codes.

These resources indicate the minimums necessary to provide safe, decent environments, especially with respect to fire safety, health, and operational standards.

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Bartholomew, R., S. McCord, H. Reynolds, & H. Stein. 1973. *Child care centers: Indoor lighting, outdoor play spaces*. New York: Child Welfare League of America.

Bengtsson, A. 1970. *Environmental planning for children's play*. New York: Praeger.

Outstanding playgrounds around the world.

Brett, A., R.C. Moore, & E.F. Provenzo, Jr. 1993. *The complete playground book*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Cherry, C., B. Harkness, & K. Kuzma. 1987. *Nursery school and day care center management guide*. Belmont, CA: David S. Lake.

Great source of checklists; very comprehensive, plenty of "make-do" tips.

Dattner, R. 1969. *Design for play*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

About playgrounds.

Friedberg, M.P. 1975. *Handcrafted playgrounds*. New York: Vintage.

Frost, J., & B. Klein. 1979. *Children's play and playgrounds*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Frost, J.L., & S. Sunderlin, eds. 1986. *When children play*. Wheaton, MD: Association for Childhood Education International.

Emphasis on understanding children's processes and interests.

Greenman, J.T. 1988. *Caring spaces, learning places: Children's environments that work*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.

Very comprehensive and pragmatic; a great source of checklists, do-it-yourself ideas, and helps on setting up activity centers.

Greenman, J. 1993. Places for babies: Infants and toddlers in groups. *Exchange*.

Setting up spaces for infants and toddlers.

Kaplan School Supply Corporation (no date on pull-out). How to open your own child care center. *Scholastic Pre-K Today*.

Briefly considers location selection, building selection, and design issues.

Kritchevsky, S., E. Prescott, & L. Walling. 1969. *Planning environments for young children: Physical space*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

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Lederman, A. 1959. *Creative play grounds and recreation centers*. New York: Praeger.

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Setting up classrooms in homes.

Moore, G.T., U.A. Cohen, A. Hill, C.G. Lane, & T. McGinty. 1979. *Recommendations for child play areas*. Milwaukee, WI: School of Architecture & Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

Department of Army study on what makes successful play areas for a planned community.

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*support facilities*. Milwaukee, WI: Author.

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Osmon, F. 1971. *Patterns for designing children's centers*. New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories.

Rivkin, M.S. 1995. *The great outdoors: Restoring children's right to play outside*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Practical ideas for bringing the great outdoors to schools and neighborhoods; good reference on accessibility.

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Features beautiful children's villages (architect C. Anjalendran).

Rouard, M., & J. Simon. 1977. *Children's play spaces: From sandbox adventure to playground*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook.

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Taylor, A., & G. Vlastos. 1975. *School zone: Learning environments for children*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 1976. *A playground for all children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Vergeront, J. 1987. *Places and spaces for preschool and primary (indoors)*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Great for classroom planning, very easy to understand, good diagrams.

Vergeront, J. 1987. *Places and spaces for preschool and primary (outdoors)*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Helpful for outdoor play spaces.

Weinstein, C., & T. David. 1987. *Spaces for children: The built environment and child development*. New York: Plenum.

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with Lee Walling

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