



# Child Care

Day care centers — typically no more than efficient holding pens — designed to replicate the warmth of home can add a new dimension to “green” design and environmental sustainability: they protect a child’s emotional “ecotones.”

Imagine that in this setting there would be enough space for parents to set down their bags, catch their breath, and chat with the staff. This would be a place where children wouldn’t want to leave at the end of the day. They would be too busy wreaking havoc in the little woodworking shop, or splashing paint on the walls of the wet play bay, or perhaps reading quietly on broad, carpeted risers in a cozy corner.

This place actually exists. Located next to a restored wetlands in Bolton, Ontario, the Copper House, nicknamed for its sweeping, curved copper roof, is a revolution in child care, designed by Anita Rui Olds, Ph.D., Jacobson Silverstein Winslow/Degenhardt Architects of Woodacre, in Marin County, and Carla Mathis, a color and interiors specialist. Olds is the founder and director of the Child care Design Institute at Harvard, a week-long training program sponsored by Harvard and Tufts universities. Several years ago, Husky Injection Moldings Systems asked her to design a state-of-the-art child care center for its employees. For Olds, this was a chance to put three decades of research and thinking into practice.

“We need to transform the way we conceive of child care today,” says Olds. “Child care settings need to meet the unlimited potential of children’s talents and spirits. They need to nourish children’s souls, not just their bodies.”

If sentiments seem lofty, consider the stakes. It is estimated that by the year 2000, 40 million square feet of new child care space will be needed to accommodate our children. With both parents often working full time, children are spending 10 hours a day in day care, five days a week.

Child care is raising our children. Anita Olds wants to make sure we’re doing it right. To that end, she developed her innovative “residential core” model. She found the conventional “school”

building type — essentially identical rooms off a long, dark corridor — sorely lacking not only in basic space requirements, but in daylight, spatial variety and in a sense of community. She believes child care settings should feel as intimate and warm as home. She found a sympathetic voice in “A Pattern Language,” the groundbreaking critique of modernist design theory that, like an actual pattern book, presents hundreds of common-sense elements which can be combined to create good buildings.

So when it came time to design the Copper House, Olds looked up two of the “Pattern Language” co-authors, Murray Silverstein and Max Jacobson, and began work. The result is a gently-curved, undulating crescent of a building that creates sheltered outdoor spaces and playful rooms with bay windows, octagonal pop-outs and plenty of natural light.

The crescent is really two separate “houses,” each with an infant, a toddler and a preschool room, all clustered around a common living room, dining room and kitchen.

“These days with children spending 10 hours a day in day care, often siblings don’t even see each other except during the rush to get breakfast in the morning,” says Olds. “With the residential core, a parent comes over from the factory, he or she can see all their children there, have lunch with them.

“Those who arrive early or leave late can relax in the living room, have a snack in the dining area, without needing to be in their group rooms,” Olds adds. “Those who prefer not to nap can come into the core to play quietly while others sleep. In the course of using the common area, children of all ages, as well as the staff, come to know one another easily and informally.” That is the simple and sensible gist of the “residential core” concept.

Each of the age-specific rooms has four distinct zones — entry, messy, active, quiet — defined

# Packages

by different floor and wall treatments, and ceiling forms. The quiet spaces are small in scale, carpeted, tucked into corners. The wet play areas are tiled,

bright, with dramatic curved wood ceilings, low windows, built-in water tables, and long easels. The point is this: Olds wants to create buildings worthy of the underestimated developmental potential of children, rather than simplified containers which provide little more than protection from the rain and a legal exit door.

Of course, not every large company is willing to provide its employees with a state-of-the-art, on-site child care center, and not every government has the dollars to help. The underlying assumption is that it doesn’t really matter all that much, that, yes, having more space and things like wall tapestries and colorful banners are nice, but that kids don’t really notice that stuff anyway.

Olds couldn’t disagree more. “Children are very, very sensitive to aesthetics. You watch them outside, you see how much they appreciate a flower. They are very tuned in to that.” Her foremost concern, however, is first to provide enough space. She notes that most general licensing codes require a minimum of 35 square feet per child of play space, a number often used by designers as a reference point for planning child care centers. That’s a big mistake since it doesn’t address the need for storage, service, and common spaces.

“That number has absolutely no relevance to raising our children in day care,” she says. “It’s a minimum. That’s basically saying, go below this number and you’re seriously damaging the children.” At the Copper House, each child is allotted 125 square feet overall.

Not enough space means not enough opportunity to get away from the pack and read quietly. It means not enough space for a staff person to store her purse securely or enjoy an undisturbed lunch (in a profession with an annual turnover rate of 42 percent!). It means none of the crucial common spaces that fosters family, community and choice.

For a child care center to really work like a family home, it must be broken down in scale. Given the sheer need for more child care space, it is tempting to design huge warehouses for upward of 400 children. And in some cases, it may be the only affordable way to build. But it’s really not the size that Olds objects to, it’s the undifferentiated experience of it. “You’ve got to break it down,” she argues. “You can still have one administration and a very large facility, as long as children themselves don’t have to cope with anything more than 30–40 others.” She cites research that shows, not surprisingly, that in day care centers where more than 60 children are grouped together, the quality of care becomes more routinized, less nurturing and less individualized. Even though the Copper House is a 15,000-square-foot facility, it is broken down into two houses, which in turn are broken down into distinct, differentiated spaces. And the quality of those spaces is no less important than their scale. On the subject of sufficient daylight, Olds is adamant.