

# THE CHILDREN'S HOUSE

by Lili E. Peller

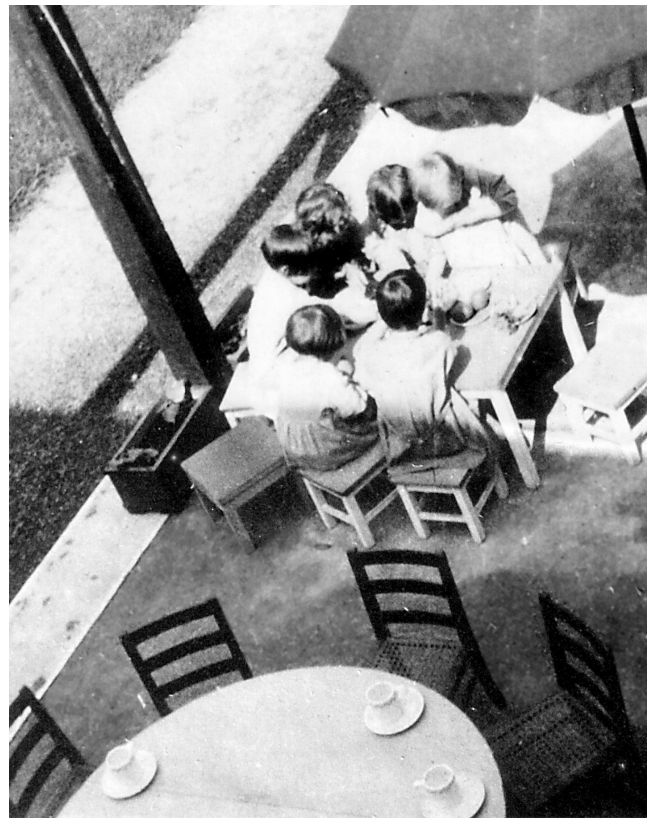
*Lili Peller's The Children's House essay begins where Maria Montessori left off in her description of space articulations. Peller does not name Montessori specifically as she always had a desire to become independent in her own right as a neo-Freudian child analyst. But the Haus Der Kinder founded in summer of 1922 suggests a total Montessori influence as it calls for "adventures in space" with house-like rooms for different functions, both for play and for work, for practical functions: library, kitchen, workshop, quiet room, alcoves, nooks, and terraces for special individual work, with all spaces focusing on the relationships between indoor and outdoor environments.*

Emma Plank's edited papers (1978) of Lili E. Peller (Roubiczek) provide an integration of Montessori and psychoanalysis which utilizes "such divergent disciplines as biology, modern art, dance, human ecology, and linguistics for an enriched understanding of child development." Ms. Peller's writings examine through both theoretical and practical detail a unique connection between Montessori's academic psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis which is indispensable to the awareness of every thinking Montessorian. The following is a paper excerpted from Peller's published works reflecting her unique understanding of Montessori.

We need in every part of the city units in which intelligent and co-operative behavior can take the place of mass regulations, mass decisions, mass actions, imposed by ever remoter leaders and administrators. Small groups: small classes: small communities; institutions framed to the human scale, are essential to the purposive behavior in modern society. (Lewis Mumford *The Culture of Cities*)

## INTRODUCTION

We take it for granted today that "form follows function," as Louis Sullivan has said, or, rather that good form crystallizes from use. The planner of a home should know well the kind of people who will live and work in the house he is to build. Our concern here is with the house where groups of active children will spend a large part of their day.



Haus der Kinder, Rudolfsplatz, Vienna, 1930

The house is a powerful agent contributing to the happiness or the strain of its inhabitants. There is no doubt that the teacher is the most important factor in nursery school. Yet even the most devoted teacher has a limited amount of energy and resilience. It depends largely upon the layout and the

equipment of the house whether her working day is a long chain of drudgery and repetitious toil, or a sensible sequence of things which can be done with dispatch and ease.

Before there can be improvements in nursery school housing in a community, people with imagination and courage must visualize them. To achieve better schoolhouses, all the teachers who are professionally alert must become interested in housing. Then it may well be that ten years from now photographs of today's nursery schools will be shown with a smile, just as today we smile at grandmother's kitchen.

Looking at some photographs hence, it will seem unbelievable that the houses had been especially adapted and planned for children, and that groups of active youngsters were brought to these buildings and lived in them for eight or more hours daily. Indifference, pessimism, and inertia are our real enemies, not discontent with present conditions.

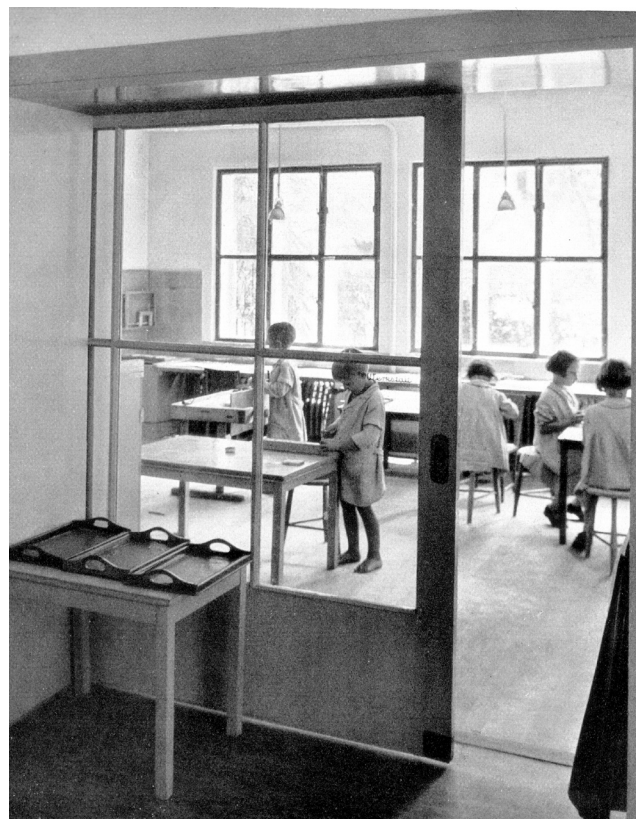
Modern engineering can help nursery school teachers. This means that we who work with young children must state comprehensively and in detail what group care of young children requires in a building. We, the teachers, cannot do it without the architect, the technician, the builder. Neither can they do it without us and our experience.

It is desirable that nursery schools develop in a direction that will fully preserve private initiative and personal responsibility. Kindergartens in public schools are today too often schoolish and regimented. They are more concerned with readiness for academic work than with the children's need for vigorous play. If cities would provide a number of buildings for nursery schools—possibly scattered over our city parks and along city river banks—and rent them to qualified persons or organizations, this would help tremendously toward improving standards without choking personal leadership. This plan is not revolutionary or unprecedented. Cities have long provided playgrounds for children. Recently these playgrounds have become more numerous and elaborate including large sand boxes, wading and swimming pools (and many, often quite creative opportunities for climbing, sliding, etc.), and simple rain shelters. In this way, the community has recognized its responsibility to provide for children's play activities.

Today most nursery schools are housed in rooms, yet we speak here about "houses." This term is not a figure of speech. We hope that in the future many nursery schools will be in detached units, in pavilions. However, even in our Utopia many nurseries will be in rooms in larger buildings. These rooms will take their pattern, their standards, from the houses built for children.

#### CHILDREN'S NEEDS DETERMINE THE PLAN OF THE HOUSE

We want the children's houses to be small, unpretentious, and semi-permanent structures. The young child's needs are our guide in planning his house. He has the great urge to play; in order to play well, he needs protection from danger as well as from unnecessary interference, and he needs judicious help. The young child should have surroundings which he can explore, understand, and use. He needs an environment which is a complement to his intelligence, permitting him to be self-steered, to use his abilities, to make a choice, and to make mistakes without endangering himself or others. At home, the emphasis is necessarily on the things he



Woodworking shop, Haus der Kinder, Vienna, 1920s

cannot do for himself. In the children's house, the burden of being small in size, weak, and impotent can be effectively lessened.

Visiting a children's house in the evening after its daytime inhabitants have gone home, we can read "off the walls" the educational philosophy of the teachers. Some schools seem to acknowledge the two main functions of the nursery school as protecting young children from danger and giving them an opportunity to play with peers. Such a school needs shelves for toys and space for play and that is all. The children are not supposed to move freely among the rooms. The adult will call them to the door when it is time to go to the toilet or to go outdoors; she will tell them when it is time to rest and when to go from one room to the next. Thus, the knobs on the doors can be high. It is even advantageous to have them out of the children's reach. The teacher can give her attention to studying, observing, and recording the children's imaginative play. She need not worry about a child wandering away. The adult "takes" the children outdoors as a group and they come back as a group. The basic principle underlying this type of nursery school is: children should enjoy the maximum freedom in their play using materials and toys as they please.



Pantry, Haus der Kinder, Vienna, 1920s

In issues pertaining to their physical welfare, the adult knows the child's needs far better and bids him what to do.

A nursery school centering its program around the children's need to play, as well as their need to gain an intelligent use of their environment, should have a building which enables the child to move from one room to another without asking the adult's help. All the rooms used by the children are connected by doors which the children can open. A cluster arrangement with a main room in the center gives direct access to all satellite rooms such as lavatories, workshop, cloakroom, kitchen, and quiet room. This arrangement also has the advantage of doing away with long corridors. Two, three, or four units can be housed under one roof. The rooms for the adults—office, kitchen, and staffroom—serve the whole school. The outdoor play space should also be directly connected with the play room. French or sliding doors connect the play room with the play space outside (be it yard or roof) giving the teacher and children an unobstructed view from the inside out and vice versa. The plan of the house should be so simple and so compact that a child can quickly gain a sense of orientation and the teacher can give unobtrusive supervision to all rooms while being in one.

The children whose nursery day is longer than three or four hours need several rooms. For the child who comes for a half-day only, the company of others is the main need; but if he comes for a longer period, privacy is as important as company. Both are needed for social and emotional balance by children no less than by adults. It seems hardly necessary to say that the seclusion must be self-sought in order to give the child relaxation and serenity. The main room may have alcoves or nooks which can be partitioned off with a sliding door disappearing into the wall when not in use, or with a door of transparent plastic. Transparent doors do not cut off the child from the group yet give him quiet if he wants to look at picture books, to rest, or to play with only one or two children. Or an alcove can be used the other way around: to protect the majority from the noise of a minority. With the carpenter bench in there, the lusty hammering and sawing need not disturb the other children. There is a notion that young children are mob minded and that when given a chance, they will always flock together into a big noisy crowd. Observation of children, for whom the company of



other children is nothing new, disproves this; they often like to play in very small groups.

#### THE YOUNG CHILD'S ADVENTURES IN SPACE

The qualities of space—the feeling of spaciousness or of nestling in a small enclosure, the sensation of being high up and looking down—are a source of delight for the young child. Children love a wide open place where they can run with abandon; they like to huddle in a corner or under a table covered with a blanket, or to sit squeezed in a dolls' house. The more cramped and crowded the quarters, the greater the enjoyment can be. The adults' attitude toward space is usually quite utilitarian. They cannot derive from spatial perceptions, as does the young child, the joy and the whole gamut of sensations. If children were studying adults, they would put into



Walking the balance beam, Haus der Kinder, Vienna

the textbooks that most adults are "color blind" in regard to space.

Children like to be high up and look down on objects and places which are familiar.

Every nursery should have a kind of balcony, or as we like to call it, a "treehouse" in the play room. The young child enjoys climbing, and he should have ample opportunity for it inside the nursery as well as outdoors. The raised balcony also gives a chance to get away from the group and, last but not least, it adds a number of square feet of play space.

Good treehouses can be reached in various ways: by a ladder, a rope ladder, or notches cut into the wall. The child can leave his treehouse also by means of a slide. Each approach presents a different hurdle to the child. He may have to crawl into the tree house through a narrow opening or to climb over a couple of rungs. Children are so taken with this "adventure in space" that they will take the trip many times in succession.

There are other spatial experiences the young child cherishes. The nursery school can offer many as the average home cannot. One school has on one side of the stairway a slide instead of a bannister. It seems superfluous to describe the delight of the youngsters, but we might mention the skill they acquire and point to the clever principle of making legitimate a pleasure which generations of children could obtain only by stealth. Of course, the stair must have a certain incline and the landing at the bottom should not interfere with other traffic in the house. Swinging up and down, gliding down a slide, climbing on the jungle gym and ladders, or on a tree with low branches, constitute the more thrilling "adventures in space." The physical exertion, the sense of daring, add to the experience of space as a medium.

#### The Room

*Floor.* Today the usual arrangement is to leave one side of the room free or to keep the center part of the room unencumbered. It would seem better to provide several decentralized floor areas. A part of the room can be elevated with one or two steps. The very young child loves to practice walking up and down and all children love to sit on steps. Besides the steps leading to the platform, there

might be a step leading up or down to one of the alcoves; or an alcove might be separated from the main room by a doorsill high enough to serve as a seat for a child. A good place for stationary steps is underneath a window. The children enjoy standing or kneeling there and looking out. Platforms, balconies, steps, and ladders are variations of the theme "floor." At this point, we might suggest the use of a soundproof ceiling to reduce the noise level.

*Walls.* No matter how one plans a room, one will always desire more wall space. The main nursery room is simultaneously a workshop and a display room, so wall space is needed for a number of purposes. Low screens and protruding shelves, variations on the theme "wall," help to subdivide the room and give a certain degree of privacy to groups of playing children. If many children eat in one room, screens may serve as partitions to form a number of booths. They can also be placed to help direct the traffic of children who carry plates and food back and forth. Encouraging children to help in this way allows them a legitimate opportunity to break the strain of sitting at the table throughout the entire meal. At rest time, the setting up of enclosures giving privacy is even more essential than at meal times. At play time, the children will soon discover that screens can create various enclosures or may even become part of their play equipment on occasion.

*Windows and Doors.* Windows admit light and their coverings (blinds, curtains, or shutters) diffuse it. Both are needed at different times of the day. The room will usually be darkened for rest period. Occasionally a darkened room may set a better stage for a story period or for the game of "listening to all the little noises." A southern exposure and a bright orange or blue curtain will, when the curtain is drawn, fill a room with color and subdued light—a pleasant and quieting effect. In a one-story building, a skylight of plain or colored plastic will admit additional light. Children love to look out of the window. This function of windows is as important as the admission of light and air. We must remember that the motionless child who is listening or gazing with all his might is mentally a very active person.

Children like the experience of opening and closing a window. In homes, this is usually a privilege reserved for adults. A nursery school window may



Looking out, looking in, Haus der Kinder, Vienna, 1920s

have one or two small panes for the child to open without endangering himself.

With little expense a door can be inserted in the doll corner or a gate can be installed on the playground or indoors. One door can be constructed as a Dutch door, i.e., it is divided and the upper and lower parts open separately. The amount of experimentation, that is the alternate opening and shutting of the upper and lower part, indicates how much learning goes on in relation to "open" and "closed," or "connected" and "separated." After a time, the playful repetitious handling gives way to an intelligent use at the appropriate occasion.

Children also love to pass things through an opening in the wall which can be closed with a door sliding sideways or upwards. Such a counter window with a shelf on both sides may be permanently useful in connecting the children's room with kitchen or workshop. The child who manipulates the Dutch door or the counter window establishes contact or withdrawal between himself and others. Here the perception of spatial relations and of social relations

intertwine. This may explain the fascination which these gadgets hold for the young child.

In planning the house, we also should remember that water is an essential plastic material. There should be at least one low faucet with sink and drainboard in the main room.

*Indoor Furnishings.* Several nursery school manuals give good detailed descriptions of the sizes and proportions of chairs, tables, and shelves, the main pieces of furniture. Usually chairs and tables in a nursery group are of two different sizes. This is a commendable practice although it does not always lead to our goal, namely to provide each child with a comfortable seat. Children will draw a higher chair to a lower table, and some children will always hunt for the larger sized furniture, although they cannot put their feet down on the floor when seated. The prestige of being taller apparently more than compensates for the discomfort. As the children do not remain seated for long periods, this does not matter and the teacher need not interfere. It is not advisable to use different colors for the different size chairs and tables. This will only make the larger furniture more conspicuous and more coveted. The light weight of a chair is important, for the child likes to carry a chair to different parts of the room or outside.

A nursery for twenty children requires twenty seats, but not all the seats need to be identical. Straight chairs, rocking chairs, armchairs, small stools, straddle-seats, a bench, and floor cushions (hard cushions covered with oilcloth or plastic) give variety. Some chairs will be more appealing than others. The variety will lead to little squabbles among the children. A child who never would have cared for the armchair will become eager to sit in it when he sees how much another child treasures its "possession." The ensuing negotiations, pleading, or violence are important social experiences and necessary in group adjustment. Chairs may be painted in two or three pastel shades or some may be polished wood or aluminum (plastic chairs have excellent contours and are less heavy than wooden ones).

Only in our western culture have we given up squatting or kneeling positions which bring us nearer to the floor than the average chair. Children like to sit tailor fashion on the floor, or to kneel on a flat cushion, sitting on their heels as the Chinese do. Both positions are healthful for the child. Flat

floor-cushions match low tables, some of which may have hinged tops to prop up for painting or drawing.

Tables, too, should not be uniform. The majority will be the rectangular type seating two children. In addition, there can be a large table for eight to ten children. Large and small tables have their specific advantages and disadvantages. Large tables facilitate supervision. A group of children, each one working with the same material (clay, fingerpaints, paper) or on a joint project, is better off seated at one table. Interest is contagious and the enthusiasm of one child spurs the others. Individual tables discourage copying a design or a clay figure. Round or half round tables are practical for meals. They take up more space but the number of children seated at one table is more flexible. One table may be a dropleaf table, or a small table can be hinged to the wall and dropped when not in use. Incidentally, silence domes on all table and chairlegs are an asset.

The variety of chairs and tables plus the fact that some may be taken apart or folded instigate the child's interest in these parts of his daily environment. His attention is drawn to those qualities which constitute the "chairness" of a chair or which are indispensable in a table. The child's discovery is a source of great joy. Soon he tries his hand at making a table or a chair out of large blocks or empty boxes. This shows initiative and intelligence.

The youngster who takes two pieces of wood, nails them together and calls them an airplane can be sure to get recognition from his teacher. Yet his intellectual accomplishment may be very small. Few teachers are equipped to see this. Their perceptiveness is geared to achievement resembling the work of an adult artisan or artist. There are glimpses of intelligence of another order. The child observes, compares, and by some kind of short circuit, discovers that things can be put to a different and new use. The more children are accustomed to help themselves and not wait for adult assistance, the greater the probability of such discoveries.

We stop here to assert that educators who want the younger generation to accept conventions without questioning have no reason to foster an experimental attitude towards chairs and tables in early childhood. If we consider it the task of education to fit children into existing molds, then it is logical



to expect the child to use each piece of equipment in the conventional way and to make it clear that any other use is a misuse.

Our goal though is a flexible and sensible use of all equipment. Most pieces of furniture can be used in several ways; they also can be abused. The child who is encouraged to observe and to experiment will soon be able to differentiate between use and abuse. All furniture for young children should be sturdy and well built and a certain amount of breakage must be expected. Children who are with well liked adults and who take an intelligent and active interest in their surroundings will rarely be deliberately destructive even when they are on their own.

All material and toys should be accessible to the children without their asking the adult's help. Here again is the recurring theme: The nursery school should lessen the discouraging burden of dependency which in our culture is heavier than in others. The primary purpose of all equipment, toys and furniture is to provide an arena for the child to build intelligence, imagination, initiative, perseverance. Another important reason for making tools and play materials directly accessible to the child is: A young child's intentions or plans are not well defined or fully conscious. He cannot put them into words with ease or precision. The layout of the nursery school enables him to translate into action impulses which are vague and fleeting. This, too, is part of the "self expression" offered in nursery school. To emphasize this point, we make a corollary statement: A child, for whom verbalization of what he wants to do no longer presents a hurdle, has passed the stage where he belongs in a "nursery."

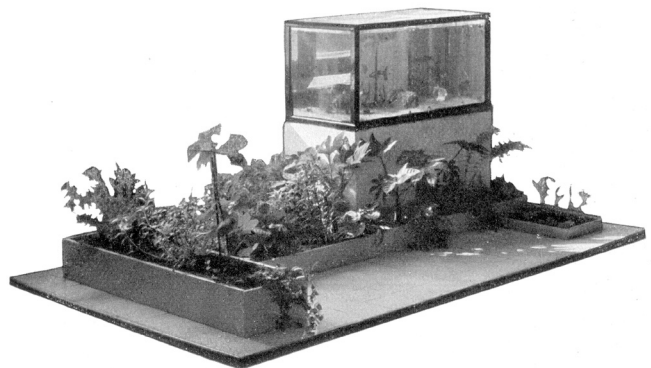
The order of the room should be simple and easy to remember. The child has a feeling of ease and competence when he knows where to look for a thing. Our direct guidance is a burden for him; our subtle indirect guidance gives wings to his conquering steps. Thus, we will take as much effort to display things attractively as a good storekeeper takes with his wares. The color of the open shelves should be neutral and unobtrusive in order not to distract attention from the bright colored toys.

Too many things are confusing. The child cannot find quickly what he wants so he gives up and turns to the adult for help. He feels the burden of

his own inadequacy. Only functional things have a place on the shelves in a room of active children. Toys or materials which have not been used for some time by any child should be removed. It may be advisable to remove them permanently, or to bring them back after a few weeks, placing them in a different spot.

Some teachers follow a definite "hands off" policy. They ignore youngsters who mill around obviously bored and mentally undernourished. Other teachers are quick to spy an idle child and make alternate suggestions. We believe that a good deal of idleness is a prerequisite for plunging with whole-hearted interest into the next enterprise. If we interfere with the valleys, we will have no peaks. Before resorting to a verbal and direct proposal, the teacher should try an indirect appeal through a piece of equipment.

For children who are accustomed to finding their materials in plain sight, things which have to be taken from a closed cabinet or from behind a curtain have a special attraction. Toys kept in a cabinet locked with a key have a particular appeal. Most young children are fascinated with a key which they can insert in a keyhole and afterwards return to its hook on the wall. Of course, a key which is so freely accessible to a group of youngsters will sometimes get lost, or be taken home by a child. One may argue: why should the teacher add another concern to her full day? There are so many things children like to play with, would not the teacher do better to concentrate her effort on satisfying the children's emotional needs? We do not say that a pre-school child who has no chance of handling a key is deprived of an essential experience. Yet he



Indoor garden and aquarium, Haus der Kinder, Vienna

does miss something. The more all “perishable” items, anything that can be lost, soiled, or pocketed, are removed from the children’s reach, the more grows their destructiveness. The teacher who looks for help in stemming the tide of carelessness which requires “eternal vigilance” on her part, will usually try to eliminate more and more things which can be broken, swallowed, taken home, or ruined in some way. But some times the opposite approach is more helpful; children are delighted when trusted with “special” things.

It should be possible to move almost everything outdoors—chairs, tables, shelves, screens, and easels. Often the children are glad to do most of the moving; after acquiring a certain amount of experience, the planning can be theirs, too.

The teacher needs some place where she can keep things not intended for the children. A regular desk takes up too much precious floorspace. We have found a cupboard receding unobtrusively into the wall a very good solution. In a room for a group of active children, an adult’s furniture should not take up space. While we feel this way about a desk, we would like the teacher to have a comfortable chair where she can sit without cramping her knees. Her work is physically tiring. She is on her feet for many hours. A few minutes relaxation in an easy chair can do much to restore her resilience. When she leans back in her easy chair, her eyes are at the level of the children’s eyes. She has a better vantage point



Combination brown stair, pink tower, red and blue rods, red rods, Sèvres, France, about 1936, courtesy of Margot Waltuch collection

for observing the active community than when she stands up and “looks down” on them. But the teacher’s big chair is even more important as a haven for the children. It is a special treat to be invited to sit there and look at a picture book, or an upset child will snuggle into the chair and watch the others for awhile from a safe distance. As a rule, at first a child is fascinated with all the furniture which is just his own size, but the sight of so many other children may be frightening. In this case, the big chair carries the message that there is a comforting adult in the room. A comfortable chair should be part of the standard equipment in a place where children and an adult live so closely together. Of course the teacher will take on her lap a child who asks for this either by word or deed. However, when she is too busy with the group, then sitting in her chair is the next best “Ersatz.”

The room can become the teacher’s most valuable assistant. The teacher who wants to give her group a great deal of freedom yet does not want this freedom to degenerate into chaos, and one who wants to make her guidance more and more subtle, will find that time spent with the room and equipment pays ample dividends in improving her work. The teacher has to feel comfortable in the room and it has to satisfy her aesthetic sense. The color scheme makes the room pleasant and cheerful for children and adults. We think that children’s color preferences should be carefully studied. Colors certainly stimulate or have a quieting effect. (The effect of colors would be a worthwhile study in an experimental situation where the set-up would allow comparison undisturbed by other factors). Strong colors should be reserved for those things which we want the children to pick up and manipulate, e.g., toys and tools. For tabletops, walls, shelves, and other large surfaces neutral colors are more advisable.

In arranging the room one will, as a rule, put all the materials used at one time in one corner or along one wall; under some conditions, a certain amount of decentralization might be preferable. Frequently all the children’s lockers for wraps will be in one part of the room. Yet there may be less general rushing and pushing if the lockers are in two places. Experience shows this may also be true for building blocks. When blocks are stored in two distant parts of the room, groups of children playing independently will be less disturbed by one another.



*Outdoor Equipment.* As mentioned before, the playground should be directly connected with the main rooms. The ideal schoolyard offers not only space for running and apparatus for climbing, swinging, and sliding, but also several areas or, as we may call them, “rooms,” with varying degrees of openness. The yard itself should either be partly hardsurfaced or girded by a paved walk for tricycles, roller skates, and other wheel toys. The hard surface has the advantage of drying quickly after a rain. It has the disadvantage of harder falls. The ideal surfacing for children’s play yards remains to be invented (though rubberized concrete and tanbark are good solutions under climbing equipment). Part of the yard should be shaded by trees. A pavement of bricks of hardwood or rubber is good, but the expense is prohibitive. Children spend long hours at the sandbox and it is desirable to have it shaded in the hottest part of the summer, yet every sand pile must at intervals be exposed to direct sunlight.

In warm weather, an area for water play is indispensable. A tube for crawling through and a jumping board are both desirable. New pieces of outdoor equipment are being tested in various housing developments. Some lend themselves to imaginative play. Although a good selection of

outdoor equipment is available today, an observant teacher will be able to pass along valuable tips to the manufacturer.

Blocks, pegs, planks, and tricycles are heavy and cumbersome and should be stored directly on the playground. A simple large bin with a padlock will do, yet a child-sized playhouse which the children can use in their play with a storage space on one side is better. The flat roof, surrounded by railings, can be accessible with a ladder.

#### CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

It seems that the public takes more interest in nursery education than formerly. If true, this may be ascribed to a kind of escapism. That is to say, an audience may be more eager to listen to problems concerning little children to escape temporarily from problems of a badly muddled adult world. We have seen evidence of this interest and we should not let it dribble away in sentimentalities. We must channel it into concrete action to achieve the well planned modern school which can provide an environment which is a complement to the child’s intelligence (whether he is three or thirteen) and which can give him the opportunity to develop the independence so needed in our society today.

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*Ms. Peller (1898-1966) founded the famous Haus Der Kinder in the summer of 1922 when she was twenty-three years old and was a close friend of Montessori. Emma Plank trained under Lili Peller, Maria Montessori, and Anna Freud and was a member of the Department of Pediatrics of Case Western Reserve. Reprinted from The NAMTA Quarterly 3,1 (1978 Spring): 47-55.*

