

After Berlin...

Not many designers, let alone young designers have the opportunity to venture beyond their usual sphere of work to join innovative firms that set the standard for the rest of the world. Last September I was given the incredible opportunity to be sent to Berlin to join one of Europe's leading practitioners in progressive Early education design, Baukind. The driving force behind the scenes is Nathalie Dziobek Bepler, an extremely kind and energetic character that is passionate about designing for children. Here I saw what it meant to find pure child-like joy in kindergarten design. My personal disposition is that in order to design for children, you often have to become a child yourself - and at Baukind, I for the first time felt a shared consensus that not only the design but also the design process should be playful and joyous. I watched people use Lego on floor plans to make decisions, I saw a deep appreciation for colour and material and its sensory effects, around the office there were remnants of sticky notes and child-like sketches from previous brainstorming sessions. With years of specialised experience under their belt, progressive pedagogies, experimentation and some child-like play, Baukind's success is something to be studied for any young designer and practitioner.

One gleaming difference between Early education design in Germany versus Australia is how we as a society view children and how we choose to guide them as they discover the world and themselves. In each country, the quality of Kindergarten often provides insight into the attitudes of each culture. For Germans, the idea of *selbständigkeit* (self sufficiency) is celebrated by allowing a greater degree of responsibility into society's smallest of hands. For a culture that is known for taking things seriously - they have seriously prioritised the need for fun, play and competence to be of high priority for each child. A typical child in a German Kindergarten can be expected to have the responsibility to explore wherever they want to go in the centre (a rule that came into effect by the Senate a decade ago). All door handles are accessible to children, floor plans are designed to encourage movement, corridors are opportunities for children to charge up and down, 'plazas' or 'courtyards' are designed in between rooms to encourage active social engagement between group rooms. The same rules for urban planning that we apply for ourselves as adults, ie. street engagement (designing interfaces that are appealing- attracting people to explore), active community building (setting up scenarios for citizens to cross pollinate ideas and conversations), spaces for socialisation (liminal spaces, third spaces) all of these cornerstones of public life are replicated into the best of kindergartens in Germany - not only to roleplay the outside world, but to build self agency and a promote curiosity for the child about participating in the world in their own way. The idea of self sufficiency is the idea that every child is highly competent to be able to mitigate risk for themselves, and that from birth, they not only have the right - but the talent to influence the world around them even as children - regardless of how big or small their contribution is.

In Australia, Early education design seems to tell a different story. Corridor length is reduced as much as possible and all door handles are set 1200mm above floor finish out of reach for children. Line of sight between children's amenities and the outdoor spaces must be maintained and the building design must reduce any possibility for blind spots where an educator cannot maintain supervision. Despite the strict nature of its interiors, one of the most celebrated aspects of Australian kinder is its outdoor spaces. Here is where a love and respect for the natural world fully flourishes. These spaces are rich and intricate with an abundance of stimuli and ambitious in its execution. Isabel Henderson Kindergarten is an urban forest which is an extension of their nature based pedagogy. Located in North Fitzroy, the centre thinks about the smaller scale of nature, the height of branches to create obstacles instead of removing them (with healthy risk involved), celebrating the microworlds found on logs, stones and branches, using Wurundjeri seasons to teach about seasonal flowers blooming. In comparison to Germany, Australia prospers due to its mild and temperate weather where children are, if possible, outside even more than they are inside. And lastly there are programs like Bush Kinder where it is integrated into the curriculum to take children out to parks, beaches and bushland and use nature as a foundation for educational lessons. Apart from Landscape design, Interior design and Architecture in Early education design is in its formative years, and perhaps it comes back to recalibrating our perspective of how impactful these space's can be for a child's development.

Returning back home and having the privilege of experience and perspective, it takes a particular passion to call out our ways and express that there are always things we can improve on. Having seen a plethora of meaningful and impactful design in Early education, and experiencing the process and philosophies first hand has given me the foundation to continue to navigate in search of this in my own work here in Australia. With that being said, the most effective lesson from Baukind that I learnt is how great of a responsibility it is to take on as a designer the growth and development of young children. It's important to recognise the profound impact these spaces have on a child's development, they are landscapes for imagination, arenas for making great discoveries, a stage to see themselves interacting with other children, we should appreciate and marvel at the novelty that everyday they come to a kindergarten session, an educational journey is waiting.