

ARCHITECTURE FOR CHILDREN. RESEARCH OF SELECTED CASES OF SEPARATED PLAY ZONES FOR KIDS IN THE PUBLIC UTILITY INTERIORS

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Abstract

The changing lifestyle makes that children become equal users of urban spaces and more and more often participate in social and business meetings. Shopping malls have long ceased have purely consumer functions, becoming places of entertainment and relaxation. This generates the need to provide child with at least a small recreational space and general adaptation of public spaces to their needs. The paper focuses on free children's corners in the interiors of selected public premises, presenting the issues from the point of view of an interior designer, as well as based on interviews with their users, equipment manufacturers and owners of premises. The main aim of the study is to explore the issues of separate zones for children in public utility interiors and to define guidelines for the process of their shaping. For this purpose, field studies were carried out, on the basis of which the criteria for the evaluation of objects were prepared. Among others: safety, general impression, adaptation for children with disabilities, equipment, visual attractiveness, educational value, linking the play area with the location, the presence of modern technologies.

Keywords: Children's corners; Interior design; Public interiors; Architecture. Design for kids.

1. INTRODUCTION

For many years it has become natural that urban spaces and public interiors are adapted to the needs of disabled and elderly people. However, there is one more group in society – children – whose needs differ significantly from those generally accepted. The undertaken research was an attempt to find answers to the questions: what facilities for children can be found in public spaces, what they look like and what are the characteristics of separate play corners in public interiors.

The preliminary survey research allowed to define the degree of adaptation of public places for preschool

children. This resulted in narrowing the research topic to free, separate zones – the so-called children's corners in public utility interiors.

Corners are small, separate and free zones for fun, education and relaxation in public interiors, usually constituting a small part of a service or commercial premises. The playroom, on the other hand, is a much larger space, often paid, being a separate premises, employing staff, focused on active play. More and more often, especially in large cities (eg Katowice, Warsaw), we can find premises dedicated to carers with children, where the corners even become playrooms and may constitute a significant percentage of the premises (even more than 50%).

The research was conducted from the following perspectives:

- architectural – where the following research methods were used: literature research, site visits of 94 public facilities located in Polish cities, user observations and interviews;
- sociological – during which an interviews with the owners of premises [1, 2], an online survey with users of public spacer [3], including closed and open-ended questions, an interview with a representative of a company offering equipment for children's corners [4] and interviews with children were conducted [5].

The aim of the study is to explore the issues of separate zones for children in public utility interiors and to define guidelines for the process of shaping them through learning the needs of the youngest, guardians and other users, child development, safety rules and the opinions of premises owners and producers.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN THE CHILD'S LIFE

Play is a natural entertainment activity known for centuries, regardless of the situation it means an activity that generates positive emotions and smiles of participants [6]. In the first years of life, play is extremely important. It is a natural, necessary and important stage in a child's development, serves education, exploring the world, and preparing for adult

life, and has a huge impact on the growth of intellectual, social, physical and emotional skills [7].

Play is a form of physical activity that develops motor skills by engaging the muscles of the whole body, improving the child's mobility, flexibility and agility. Having fun helps you to deal with difficult emotions and stress. By imitating the behavior of adults in difficult moments for the child, the youngest give way to emotions and get used to the new situation, practice behavior and prepare for future possible and problematic circumstances. Playing helps to discharge energy, improves mood, preventing anxiety, neurosis and depression [8].

One of the basic meanings of play is education. From the first months of life, children learn shapes, colors, textures, objects, their meanings through play. They get to know the world and the surrounding reality, and at a later stage they learn everyday activities. By carrying out trials, "experiments", observations, research and correlations, they gain knowledge, learning about cause-and-effect relationships [9].

Playing allows to free from fears and tensions, which are very often generated by the environment, causing suppression of emotions. Later play helps the child to get used to the situation, to express his feelings, fears, opinions, and to satisfy desires that are not always possible. Having fun influences better information transfer, enriching vocabulary and better communications [10].



Figure 1. One of the kindergarten groups with the author [5]. Author: one of the kindergarten employees, November 2019



Figure 2.
Drawing of 6-year-old Wiktoria entitled “my dream play corner”[5]. November 2019

The child in the peer group is the best at assimilating moral norms, unlike adults, children are much less tolerant of deception and non-compliance with the rules. Playing teaches social behavior, rules governing the group, control over emotions, but at the same time it can increase self-confidence by being satisfied with winning or own efficiency. Playing teaches collective responsibility, helping others, establishing relationships, friendship, and resolving conflicts. Belonging to a group reduces selfish endeavors. Scuffles and small fights have a beneficial effect on the development of social skills and emotional self-control [10].

Play is also a great opportunity for an adult guardian to observe the child’s behavior. During play, the child is able to convey his problems, views and thoughts, and we can notice disturbing behaviors in time and react accordingly. It is also the best moment to share experience, see maturity and build a lasting bond between an adult and a child. Moreover, play has a very good effect on concentration, increases learning efficiency and memory. It requires repeated creativity, thanks to which the mind is creatively developed and the imagination is enriched [8].

3. CHILD-FRIENDLY PUBLIC INTERIORS – A SURVEY

Playrooms in shopping malls or mini-corners for children in restaurants and pharmacies are currently a common phenomenon. Their presence is especially appreciated by parents and guardians, e.g. when shopping or dealing with official matters. Research conducted on 109 Internet users showed that 99.1% of respondents met with special children’s corners in public places [3]. Most facilities for the youngest and at the same time the most diverse educational and

entertainment spaces are located in shopping centers, although their area does not matter here. The location of the facility has a significant impact on the presence and variety of equipment – the most interesting examples can be found in large cities such as Warsaw, Wrocław, Krakow and in the cities of the Silesian agglomeration.

The survey research was carried out in the Silesia Voivodeship, in such cities as: Zabrze, Gliwice, Katowice. 55 objects with various functions were analyzed, of which 22 did not have corners and other amenities for children. The information collected during the initial survey allowed to define the main groups of facilities most often equipped with children’s corners. Among them, apart from the above-mentioned facilities, we can distinguish interiors such as: offices, pharmacies, furniture and interior design showrooms, cultural centers, hotels, libraries and reading rooms. Interesting examples of single children’s zones were also found in bakeries, clothing and footwear stores, jewelry stores, airports, transfer centers, hairdressing salons, car dealerships, travel agencies, opticians’ shops, insurance companies, garden stores. Internet users also indicated, inter alia, cinemas, private health care facilities, gyms, employment office [3].

4. GROUPS OF OBJECTS SELECTED FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

Corners located in selected Polish cities were selected for the main research and divided into groups according to the function of the facility:

- shopping malls (15 facilities in Silesia and Wrocław),
- restaurants (10 establishments in the provinces of Silesia, Lodz and Warsaw),
- pharmacies (10 facilities in the Silesia Voivodeship),
- hairdressing and beauty salons (5 facilities in the provinces of Silesia, Warsaw, Tomaszow Lubelski, Zywiec),
- medical clinics (5 facilities in the Silesian, Warsaw and Poznan),
- furniture and interior design showrooms (5 facilities in the Silesia and Wrocław),
- town hall (10 facilities in the provinces of Silesia, Lodz, Warsaw, Debica, Wadowice),
- other (34 facilities not qualified to the above groups, but constituting interesting examples of

Question 10. What equipment is the most common?

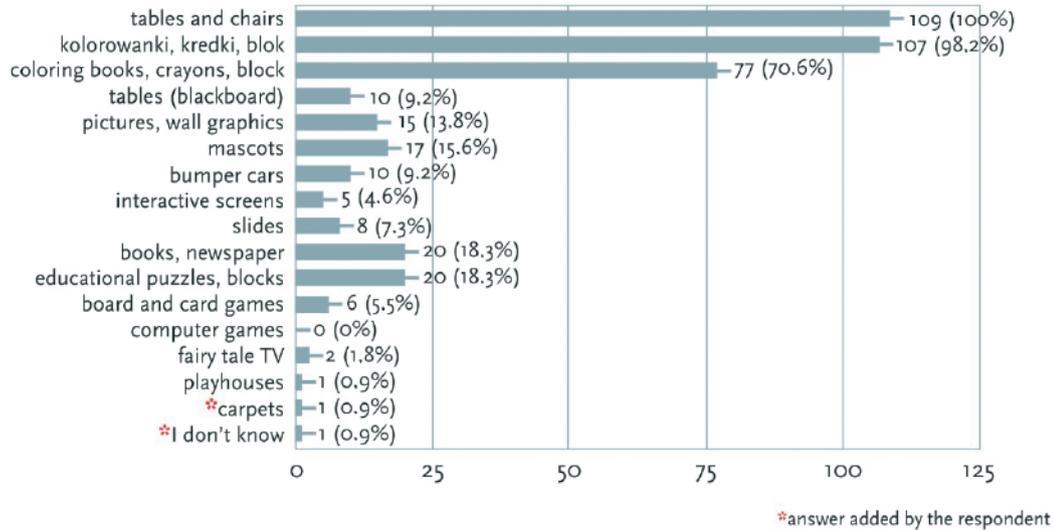


Figure 4. Examples of responses given in an online survey, multiple-choice answer [3]. November 2019

games requiring cooperation with other users of the corner (3 play zones). Out of 94 corners analyzed, 47 places are adapted to group play.

When planning children’s zones, you cannot forget about adults who not only look after the kids, but also very often participate in play.

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

Assessment criteria have been defined for each group of objects, the most important ones are presented below, along with a description and examples of solutions encountered.

6.1. Criterion 1: Visual appeal and equipment for children’s corners

The spaces in which we stay have a huge impact on us: colors can stimulate action, calm down or cause anxiety, long-term lack of access to daylight has a negative impact on our well-being. In the case of the youngest, the places they stay, the surrounding objects, and the materials significantly influence their sensitivity.

When asked about the visual attractiveness and aesthetics of the playroom, the vast majority of Internet users answered that they were unattractive (i.e. 45% definitely not, 18.3% rather not). The survey was expanded to include open-ended questions. Here are some examples of respondents’ statements:

- *I have the impression that the corners are made of what was left in the house by the employees and the owner.*
- *Usually, such places are designed as if under duress. They lack a deeper understanding of the nature of a child and his needs. Children's corners are usually limited to broken crayons and previously colored coloring books [3].*

The great majority of respondents indicated repetitive furnishings (70.6%) and unsightly appearance (61.5%) as the biggest problems of the existing corners, with random colors and artificial materials (56.9%) in the third place [3].

Most of the small-area children’s corners are dominated by unplanned spaces saturated with color of questionable aesthetics, equipped with repetitive and limited accessories. They usually constitute an unattractive element in the interior, have a negative impact on the reception of the premises, and are overcrowded with random objects. The dominant material is plastic, the corners are filled with colors. Equipment in many places is limited to a table, a chair, a few toys, crayons and coloring books (21 out of 94 corners). We can often find various types of blocks, puzzles, puzzles, mascots, cars, children's books, there are also wall boards, board games, playhouses, in shopping malls or chain stores you can see touch screens with games or fairy tale screenings. Larger corners are equipped with slides, large spatial blocks for creating own play areas (7 out of 15 shopping malls). In small corners, the cold hard floor is

Question 17. Do you think the children's corners and playrooms are visually attractive and aesthetic?

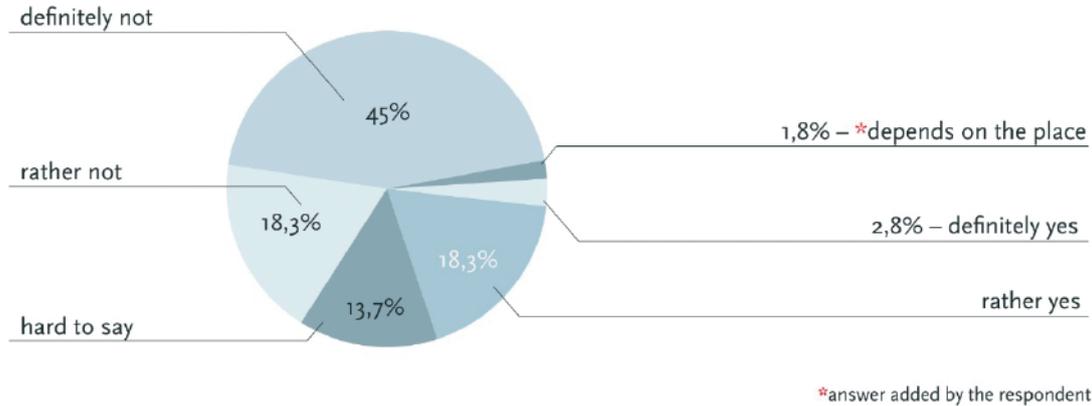


Figure 5.
Examples of responses given in an online survey [3]. November 2019



Figure 6.
From the left: a boy arranging furniture on a tablet screen in the Ikea store in Katowice; a colorful slide in the form of a mine shaft at the Silesia City Center Shopping Center in Katowice. Author: A. Pluszczewicz, November 2019

often covered with a small rug or a colorful foam mat in the form of large puzzles (seen in 22 corners). Out of 94 corners, only 17 were assessed as visually attractive, 11 facilities received a neutral assessment, and 66 negative.

6.2. Criterion 2: The leitmotif and reference to the function of the facility

Playing a little chemist during a visit in a pharmacy, playing dressing up in clothing stores, interesting facts in the field of optics in an optician's shop are examples of thematic diversification of activity in the corners and visual and thematic coherence with the space in which the youngest are located. Unfortunately, there are only a few places that can be cited as an example of how a corner connects with the

function of a restaurant, among the corners covered by the study, only 6 referred to the function of the facility in terms of their appearance and offered attractions.

Interesting corners are offered to children by Powszechny Zakład Ubezpieczeń (PZU), specially created graphics – “Niestraszaki” creatures can be found in the form of attractive and friendly wall graphics, puzzles and toys in many insurance institutions. The original characters were created to teach children appropriate behavior and develop positive safety habits.



Figure 7.

Left: characters created by PZU, source: niestraszki.pzu.pl, accessed on October 11, 2019. On the right: PZU facility in Gliwice. Author: A. Pluszczewicz, October 2019

6.3. Criterion 3: Safety of the corners

Products specially dedicated to the corners should meet the requirement of flame-retardant, when planning them, we should remember to locate the zones in a place that does not interfere with the traffic route [4]. This applies to both everyday situations and emergencies requiring rapid evacuation. The observed problem of corners in gastronomic establishments is their random location: a place to play in the vicinity of waiters passing hot meals, unfortunately, is not uncommon. Among all analyzed corners, as many as 34 places where serious threats appear were found. The conducted research has shown that play corners in shopping malls (10 out of 15 corners) are the safest.

An important issue is also the location of children's zones in such a place that allows caregivers to look after children during play. When designing larger play areas, e.g. in shopping arcades, elements of small architecture such as seats, armchairs with tables intended for adults should be an inseparable element of the corners. In public places, you can come across children's spaces additionally monitored with a preview in a zone, e.g. in a cafe (4 corners).

Proper selection of equipment and materials is very important, in this case sharp edges, slippery floor surfaces, glass tops will not work. Equipment not attached to the ground, easy to move, does not require technical tests, which are subjected to, for example, outdoor playgrounds covered by separate regulations [4]. Remember to use products and materials that are easy to clean. The location of the corners should be thoughtful and safe. During the field research, individual places for children were found at the exit of the catering premises, near glass invisible windows, behind the door, which makes the safety of the corners in these facilities doubtful. A number of opinions on the safety and cleanliness of the nooks can be found on internet forums, below is an example

of an internet user: “[...] my child comes back sick every time from a restaurant with a playground. [...] Restaurants do not care about these places, unfortunately, the whole room is important except for places where children play” [11].

During planning play corners, it is also important to introduce safe balustrades and handrails at attractions located at heights, e.g. in the form of safety nets. It is also worth resigning from thresholds, steps, and different floor levels, unless it is justified in terms of design and thought.

6.4. Criterion 4: More than fun

The blocks are an excellent form of developing fine motor skills, blank sheets are a huge field for creative activities, but only when they find the right person. Certainly, when they are the only equipment, they will not interest too many children.

Increasingly, spaces offer more than fun. In the corners, we can find equipment conducive to the development of children and education (manipulation boards, toys to develop motor skills, maps, globes, abacus, skill games). This solution became very popular, the mentioned equipment was observed in 41 corners. There are spaces dealing with the subject of ecology and safety, in which good patterns of behavior are communicated while spending time pleasantly (2 corners). Internauts, when asked about their opinions on the educational role, answered in the vast majority that the corners did not convey good models (i.e. 43.1% definitely not, 10.1% rather not), one of the people added that designing space in cooperation with specialists could affect positively on this fact [3].



Figure 8.
A corner in the Libero Shopping Center in Katowice with numerous interactive attractions. Author: A. Pluszczewicz, December 2019

Education is not all that modern children's corners offer. Some of them also feature zones of relaxation, tranquility or peaceful play (12 corners), and examples of permanent or temporary exhibitions dedicated to children were found, where original graphic designs complemented spatial play expositions (temporary traveling exhibition in a shopping mall – 1 corner).

6.5. Criterion 5: Adaptation of corners for children with disabilities

Field research and interviews with the owners of the premises showed that disabled children are almost completely ignored when it comes to planning children's corners [1, 2]. Among the examined places, single examples of places fully adapted for disabled children (8 corners) were found. During the observation, the following factors were taken into account: amount of space (maneuvering area), no thresholds, steps and other barriers, general adaptation of the facility for people with disabilities, location of items in places accessible to people with reduced mobility, possibility of accessing attractions, equipment that affects the senses (e.g. for blind children or visually impaired). Companies offering corner equipment very often offer products from the categories of sensory integration, motor exercises and rehabilitation [4].

7. THE HIDDEN FUNCTION OF THE CHILDREN'S CORNERS

A variety of themed games, attractive equipment, interesting graphics, unusual solutions, well-thought-out colors and combinations of materials affect not only the image of a service or commercial premises, but also the desire to have fun of the youngest. Offering remarkable activity will attract children and their guardians to the premises. Depending on the role of the interior, the corners can become a kind of marketing tool, a showcase of the premises, or help for carers during the necessary official visits, improving the work of staff. A child fascinated by a new object will allow you to complete formalities, eat a meal or do a quick shopping at a pharmacy. As many as 58.2% of respondents often take children to public places, such as offices, pharmacies, banks. The responses of the respondents showed that many people highly appreciate the presence of children's corners in the premises:

- *Such places are a must, nowadays. Many parents have problem what to do with children when they have to do errands. Oft – times it is not approved by other people, the little ones get bored quickly, and standing in the queue is a punishment for them. The possibility of staying in different places gives them a chance to get to know new places, learn what can be bought in a given store or what to do in a given office. At the same time, they also feel more “welcomed” and respected. Unfortunately, kids are sometimes socially treated as “unnecessary ballast”, and such a feeling is not at all uplifting. When they receive acceptance and understanding, they are able to repay the same [3].*



Figure 9. Examples of kids corners: on the left a shopping mall in Wrocław, on the right a little corner in the restaurant interior. Author: A. Pluszczewicz, December 2019

According to the representative of the company, which offers furnishings for the corners of the gallery manager, public spaces are no longer used only for purely consumption purposes. The creation of a zone for children is a “hand stretch” towards families, the desire to make their time more pleasant and relieve the caregivers. According to the respondent, spaces for children greatly increase the company's image in the eyes of customers and enjoy longer and more frequent visits [4].

During the interview, the owner of one of the cafes in Warsaw justifies the growing need to allocate space for children in public places by changing the family model and by taking the children to business meetings more and more often [2].

The above fact is confirmed by the data collected in the online survey, respondents with children, when asked about the importance of the presence of corners when choosing a place, in the vast majority (70%) replied that they are more likely to choose a place with a corner. Completely different answers are provided by childless people, here the proportions are opposite [3].

8. SUMMARY

The changing lifestyle makes children's corners more and more popular and appreciated in everyday life, serving as a showcase for public premises. Children's zones have both their supporters and opponents, but the majority of people asked for their opinions agree that the vast majority of the children's corners known to them do not look attractive. In this context, the owners and managers of public buildings, when deciding to place children's corners in their interiors, should take steps that will allow to create a space that

is not only visually attractive, caring for the image of the premises, but above all, safe and adapted to the current needs of the youngest. To this end, they should:

- introduce thoughtful and original equipment as well as the theme of the corner, which may relate, for example, to the function or location of the facility;
- separate a safe zone in the premises;
- enrich the corner with additional value, eg educational;
- adapt attractions for children of different ages and with different levels of mobility;
- ensure a positive visual reception of the corner, consistent with the interior design;
- seek the help of a specialist, such as an interior designer, industrial designer, educator, when planning space;
- take care of the cleanliness and order of the zone and the completeness of the equipment.

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