

## The Design of Nursery Schools Today

By Margaret Lowenfeld February 1946

The 1944 Education Act, for the first time in English history, accepts the idea that it is the child that matters, and that schools and curricula should accordingly be so designed.

The buildings erected by any generation embody not only the taste of the time but also the “design for living” of the people of the period. Thus the massive basements and steep stairways mounting past lofty first-floor and medium second-floor rooms to attic bedrooms expressed the supremacy of the social life of the adult Victorian London family over the needs of the children of the family and its devoted domestic staff. The stratification of society was expressed in the stratification of domestic buildings, the children’s share of that society being, for the most part, a world within a world behind a four-foot gate on the top floor.

In the social structure of the world of today, there is embodied a fundamental change in values. Children, rather than adults, have become the focus of new conceptions. This is illustrated by the evolution of the Nursery School.

Modern understanding of children has made such rapid progress that only in schools is it possible for its development to be expressed. But the care of children, which is worked out in their school handling, is transferred back to the children’s homes through the parents’ participation in the children’s school life. Thus, improvement in feeding, hygiene and play introduced by technicians into children’s school conditions filters back into the parents’ provision for the same children at home. Experiments can in this way be carried out in the adaptation of recent knowledge to modern conditions that are a benefit to the whole of society: and a new focus of community friendliness be created which benefits mutually both children and parents.

The modern Nursery School, therefore, should not only be a place where small children spend part of their day to release their mothers for shopping and housework (as, unfortunately, many of the war-time nurseries were planned to be), but a centre where the parents of the neighbourhood can co-operate to secure the best for their children and learn from each other and the technical staff what that best can be.

How best these functions can be embodied in a building it is the architect’s work to design; but to be effective, to create the kind of centre to the young child community that a nursery school should be, the building should have the following characteristics:

1. A site that can allow for a building which has its main rooms facing E. or S. and upon part of which bushes and plants can be grown. Uneven ground and small irregularities in surface in the areas to surround the buildings are a positive asset here.
2. A building friendly and unpretentious in style, not so conspicuously different from the surrounding domestic architecture as to intimidate parents.
3. A proper balance in the distribution of accommodation provided between the needs of parents and staff and those of the children. This should include a parents' room where both fathers and mothers can meet other parents at any time; where they can make and repair toys and equipment; read, sew, and share patterns for the children's clothes. A staffroom for senior teachers and a room to themselves for younger helpers give much needed opportunities of rest and reading away from the children. And there should be a kitchen for the preparation of meals so arranged that children can watch the processes of the preparation and cooking of food.
4. Playrooms designed to serve the special needs of children.
5. Facilities for keeping pets and growing plants.
6. Plenty of outdoor space of varied nature so that the needs are met both of the shy child and the rowdy one; and adequate storage space for larger toys.

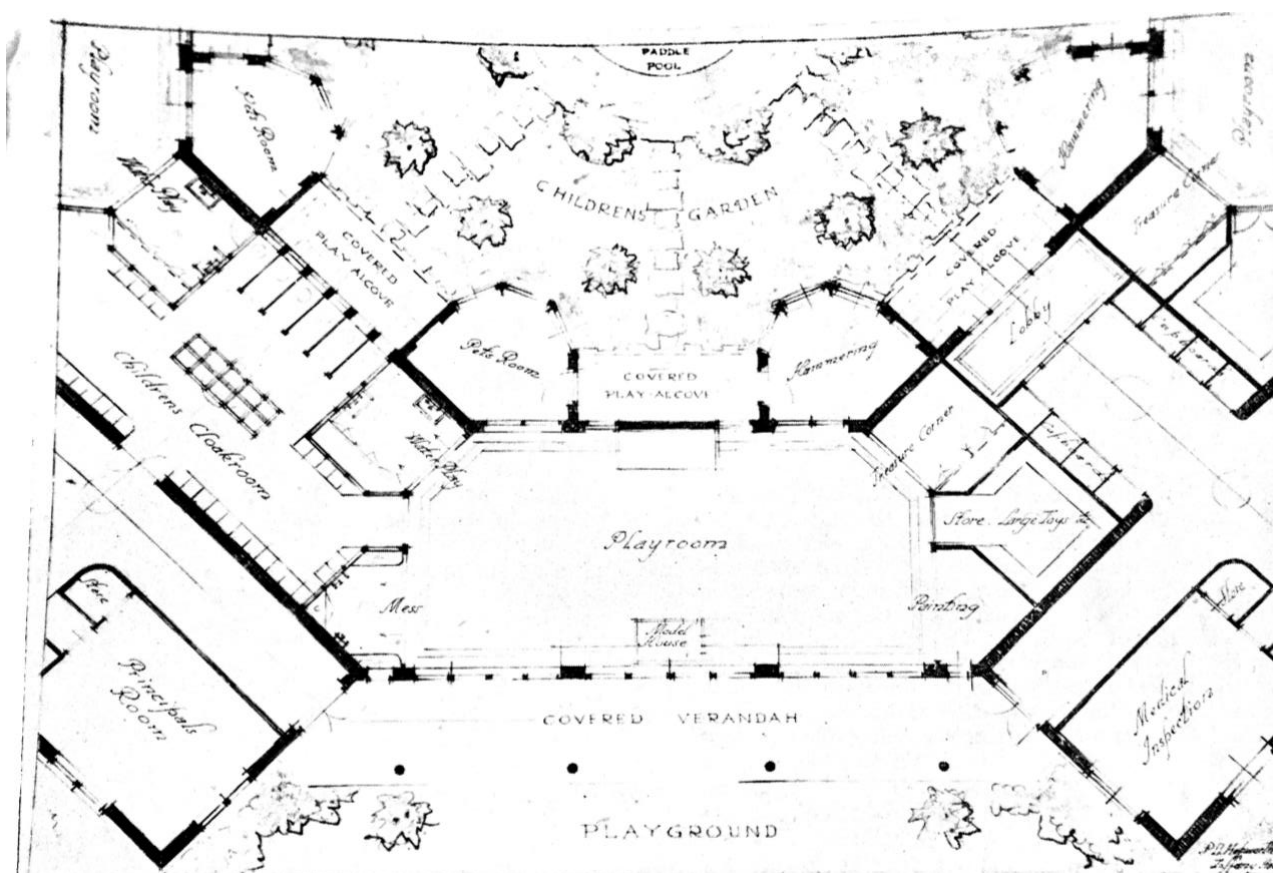
Sites vary and no building designed for a particular site will suit the needs of all towns. Instead of setting out a complete plan for any one school building, we therefore propose to give units of design to illustrate those portions of these proposals which have not yet reached embodiment in any existing building.

As was set out in the first of these two articles (Building, November, 1945), a living democracy is the voluntary association for a common purpose of individuals of widely varying characteristics, and the time for the development of these characteristics is best from two to seven, not at 11 years of age.

A playroom to give scope for firm foundations of differentiated character should be so designed as to give appropriate facilities for all aspects of childish temperament and interest. It should have the following characteristics:

A. Facilities for playing with water and making a permissible mess without adding to teacher's work.

The suggested plan for a nursery school provides for all aspects of childish temperament and interest. Separate alcoves permit the children to play with water and make a mess without adding to the teachers' work, to make a noise without annoying others, to retire to quiet corners to paint or look after pets, and so forth.



Play with water is an essential part of every child's development. Permission to discover the qualities of substances, in other words, "to make a mess." is a second essential, and "messaging" at school will make it far easier for children to be co-operatively tidy at home. The plan above shows a suggested design for a new type of playroom which makes permanent structural provision for these activities in separate alcoves opening out of the playroom.

The sketch shows details of these alcoves as follows: On the right will be seen an elevation of the suggested arrangement of the water corner. In order to make adequate supervision possible it is suggested that the posterior wall and the screen which forms one side of the entrance corridor should be 3 ft. of solid wall surmounted by toughened glass. The floor of the alcove should be of brightly coloured washable material sloping towards

the cloakrooms at an angle to ensure adequate drainage. A 6 to 9-inch parapet separates the alcove from the main classroom.

It is suggested that the alcove be fitted up as follows:

(1) Two sets of taps (H. and C.), fitted if possible with a mixer, on back and side walls.

(2) Two sinks, one 10 in. deep by 30 in. by 10 in. on the floor, and the other 6 in. deep by 36 in. by 18 in. fixed 1 ft. from the floor.

(3) A set of metal shelves in the corner between the sinks, the bottom shelf of which should be a removable tray to permit tipping out of water. and the other of perforated zinc. These shelves permit toys after use to be left wet to drain into the bottom tray.

(4) Against one of the other walls should be a low metal cupboard for rubber boots.

The alcove on the left side of the entrance is intended for messy play. Walls and floor should be identical with those of the water alcove. There are two sets of taps on the back wall, and two slate slabs fitted to the other walls at different heights. A metal cupboard in the corner accommodates materials.

B. Small children take keen interest in the natural processes of cleanliness, and lavatories and washrooms should be both easily accessible and readily kept under supervision by the teacher. It is in order to make this possible that it is suggested that the larger part at the back walls of both alcoves should be of glass.

C. All children make for themselves treasures, and experience in the care of beautiful things is part of the foundation of culture. A treasure-corner should house lovely things—crystals, ivories, beautifully bound books that are the corporate possession of all the children, which each has a right to see and handle, under supervision. A personal and corporate pride in these treasures lays the foundation for proper respect and care of public possessions in later years. The opposite end of the classroom, therefore, should be constructed to provide a treasure corner and facilities for painting.

D. It is difficult for small children to distinguish between walls at school which may be painted and scribbled on and walls at home which may not, if school walls are specially prepared to make this possible. It is difficult also for teachers to allow that free experiment in paint and chalk which is necessary to secure friendliness with pencil and paint in later years, if everything must each day be put out and cleared up again. The painting corner

makes this unnecessary, because here the walls and part of the floor should be especially adapted to take paint. Children's painting activities can then be strictly confined to this area. Since children often prefer to paint in a prone position, panel heating of the floor of the painting alcove would be a great additional benefit.

When children are destructive they are so because of lack of opportunity to work through this stage harmlessly. To many other children the noise of hammering is unendurable. Both types of children are necessary to society, both have their right to be catered for. In the plan, a suggestion is made for a special recess where all noisy and destructive play can be freely carried on without disturbance to the rest of the class.

The Nursery School Association rightly stresses the need in these days of urbanisation for children to have the care of pets and the opportunity to experiment with growing plants and to watch the evolution of water creatures. These both need to have access to the open air, and yet not to be too far removed from the classroom. The plan suggests a balanced design which would meet these requirements.

Too many schools provide a single asphalt space for playground and this is a torment to shy children and harassed teachers, besides making more difficult one of the central purposes of the nursery school which, is, to enable the child to find his feet with his fellows. Playgrounds, therefore, should be divided up assisted by protruding parts of the building—into spaces suitable for noisy play and games, quiet corners where plants grow and seeds can be sown and tended, bushes and trees for playing around, and flat spaces for a protected sandpit, climbing frames and wooden chutes.

The interior equipment of nursery schools should be small but solid and undamageable and of a kind that can be used in corporate structures like "the sea—side" or "a railway station"—for as a 4-year old child said the other day to its literal-minded mother, "Mummie, Mummie, must a chair always be a chair?— can't it sometimes be a bear? Not even on Sundays?" Low bookcases and shelves around part of the room, with tables of the same height and a few loose planks in the noise room, can be the foundation for first-class constructions of this kind. Also, children learn far more easily to read and write if they do both as part of a corporate "project" they have themselves designed, such as the making of a seaside pier, with sideshows.

Playing "mothers-and-fathers" is the way children, like kittens, find their way from childhood to happy participation in family life, and a small solid "house" in the playroom is an invaluable aid. Here all the processes of ordinary family life can be carried out, ironing and washing, cooking and dusting, and putting babies to bed. If it makes part of the solid equipment of the playroom, it can give shy children a feeling of security, since within the

house they can retire from their noisier fellows. By themselves or with one friend they can develop that play which otherwise tends to get shut within themselves, rendering them in later years “reserved” and isolated and unable to participate in the larger life of school.

To sum up: A playroom of this kind would provide opportunities for corporate activities; experimental play with natural forces ; learning to take care of beautiful objects; interest in pets and growing plants; provision for noisy and destructive play without harm to other children; and provision for make—believe play upon which so much of growing-up is founded.

Suggested arrangement of the water corner- fitted with taps and sinks, the floor covered with brightly coloured washable material and sloped to ensure damage- and a similar alcove for a “messy” play.

