Designing
with
Children

Gubceva playground

The renewal of the nursery's playground was fully initiated by children's parents, two of whom are a practicing landscape architect and an architect. The school grounds were in such a poor condition that the nursery staff, the teachers, other parents and children were all happy to get together and join forces towards designing and building a new playground. Due to poor condition, the existing play equipment was condemned by authorities prior to the intervention. Therefore there was no usable play equipment on existing grounds, while the fences, benches and edgings were all outdated and degraded as well.

The playground redevelopment is an on-going process and the project timing had been attuned to the nursery activities and sessions every year starting from 2011. The design development phase took place between February and April 2011, while the interventions are planned to happen between April and May every following year.

Motivation

The idea of designing and building a new playground on the existing nursery grounds was completely user-led, with the children's parents being the initiators. The whole process aimed to engage more parents as potential sponsors, while the teachers wished to see some educational aims also fulfilled – including architecture-related ideas included in the curriculum.

What
Nursery playground

Where
Ljubljana, Slovenia

Age
1-6

Group Size
11 groups of 14 – 24 children (all from the nursery)

Project Stage
Concept, Construction

Children's Roles
Builders, Creative Inspirers

Timescale
February 2011 onwards

Partners
Urška Kranjc (Landscape architect)
Andreja Štrukelj Sinčič (Architect)
Marko Repovš (Civil engineer)
Children, teachers and headmasters in Najdihojca Čenča Kindergarten (Participants)

Children's involvement

All children from the nursery were actively involved in the process, adding up to 11 groups of 14-24 children. Nursery teachers were the main actors in the work with children, and they helped gather the ideas developed by the children. The generated ideas were prioritised through criteria such as frequency (how often an idea emerged) and difficulty in realisation according to budget and safety standards (easy to realise and according to standards came into consideration). The ideas were transformed into programme features that the two spatial designer parents put together in the design proposal.

Children's ideas about their new playground were developed and talked about through play activities. Play was a major part of the creative process; for example, when some boys were pretending to make fire, it developed into the idea of a fireplace feature, while girls' role-play of sunbathing at the beach resulted in a wooden podium labelled as 'the beach terrace' in the final design proposal. The nursery teachers took the opportunity to introduce educational purposes as well, talking to the children about architecture, construction, the life and work of a famous Slovene architect Jože Plečnik, plus other related subjects.

Although the children were not kept up-to-date with the design proposal development, they were actively involved in the construction of the playground. These 'building workshops' were organised as lively social events, with whole families joining in to spend an active day out while helping their nursery get a better new look.

The level of activity intensity depended on the involvement of the teacher and the age of children – the most involved was the preschool group of children aged 5 and 6. The equipment used for engaging children mainly consisted of the existing arts and crafts accessories at the nursery. Types of activities also depended on the age of children – the 1 to 6 year-olds were engaged in creative conversations, using examples of children's literature and drawings. The slightly older children aged between 4 and 6 also actively expressed themselves through modelling, and they visited and tested various existing public playgrounds, evaluating how good they were for playing.

Outputs and outcomes

The main and most important output of the workshops is of course the newly built playground, since the nursery had no play equipment available before the realisation of this project. It made everyone feel proud of the work they had put into it – the parents who are used to more intellectual jobs felt good about doing physical work during the workshops, and the children found new ownership of the playground, using and talking about it more often. To show the generated work and ideas, the teachers set up exhibitions showing the playground design development, photos from the workshop and written narratives after every workshop. After the finished construction phase, a report on the process was published and used as a fundraising application document (unfortunately no funds were received). Towards the end of the process, a Facebook page was set up as an additional communication platform about project progress. Several official noticeboards were set up at different locations in the kidergarten, and they were kept updated by the children, their teachers and the designers.

Transferred by the headmaster as a model case study to other nursery units, the project was assessed as successful by all the participants and other members of the public, including some architects and other professionals dealing with space.

Children had an opportunity to learn more about nature and architecture in a relaxed social setting, and their families got to know each other better through spending more time together outside nursery activities.

Resources

Igrišče Gubčeva on Facebook https://www.facebook.com/Gubceva (accessed 9 December 2013).

Personal communication with <u>Urška</u> Kranjc (July 2013).

Courtesy: Urška Kranjc (photographer)

A model of Gubceva playground exhibited in the kindergarten hall. Courtesy: Urška Kranjc (photographer)

Courtesy: Urška Kranjc (photographer)

A model of Gubceva playground. At the front: vegetable garden, water and sandpit. At the back: pergola with growing trees. Courtesy: Urška Kranjc (photographer)