

Designing with Children

Kindergarten Lichtenbergweg

A new building for kindergarten Lichtenbergweg in Leipzig, Germany, was planned for approximately 100 children aged 3-6. The design was developed by Susanne Hofmann Architects in close collaboration with the kindergarten's teachers, its supporting body and the children in the existing kindergarten, over a period of three years, from 2009 until 2012.

Motivation

The initial driver for including children in the design process was educational and generated by the Saxony curriculum, which requires the architecture of kindergartens to stimulate creativity. This welcome context supported the architects in pursuing their preferred approach to design, which values creative collaboration with children. The children involved were invited to discuss their ideal worlds and how these might be reflected in the physical space of their school environment. The aim of the project was to create a school which invites its pupils to be creative, to explore and to experiment with their surroundings.

Children's involvement

The children were encouraged to tell stories about their ideal worlds, creating drawings and models of the settings that they would enjoy living in. Through the process of describing the ambiance and qualities they would enjoy, favourite weather phenomena (e.g. 'thunder cloud holding treasure') and fantasy worlds (e.g. 'rocket base with a cloud as view') were depicted. The fictional narratives developed through the course of workshops served to inform the architectural concept. Susanne Hofmann describes the value that the design team also found in being able to see the children's own creative explorations and their responses to material qualities: *'we had observed that the small kids loved reflection; how light reflects but also how they could see themselves in the reflective materials. They had used material which reflected light in their models. We later came back to the kindergarten with several reflecting devices (e.g. a helmet, see photo) to test whether they enjoyed to test how reflection might work in space.'*

Besides using models and drawings as tools for communication, a planning game was used in the process. The atmospheric qualities were analysed and some common issues were

What

A kindergarten building

Where

Leipzig, Germany

Age

3-6

Group Size

25

Project Stage

Brief, Concept, Design Development

Children's Roles

Clients, Creative Inspirers

Timescale

2009-2012

Partners

Susanne Hofmann (Architect)
City of Leipzig, Youth Welfare Office (Initiator)
Kindergarten children and staff (Participants)

identified from all models, drawings and narratives. The key issues and qualities provided by the children were joined by the main building requirements to make draft design proposals, which were later discussed further together with the children.

Outputs and outcomes

A new nursery building, jointly enjoyed by the children as well as their teachers, was designed in a way to include existing old trees into the play-spaces and shelters within the courtyard areas. The building invites children to playfully explore through its spatial arrangement, its views and minimisation of circulation space, encouraging learning through engagement with the built and natural environments. The atmospheric and material qualities depicted and enjoyed by the children in their workshops are represented in the varied material choices both inside and out, the manipulation of light qualities through roof lights, low windows, reflective louvers, light filtered through trees, use of mirrors and colours, which are, over all, intended to create an atmosphere of comfort and protection as well as encouraging exploration. The new building received an honourable mention in the City of Leipzig Architectural Awards, 2013 and was awarded for its 'strong participatory approach' (see Susanne Hofmann Architects and Die Baupiloten website).

Resurces

Personal communication with Susanne Hofmann (25 April 2013.)

Susanne Hofmann Architekten & Die Baupiloten 'Kindergarten Lichtenbergweg'

<http://www.baupiloten.com/en/projekte/kindergarten-lichtenbergweg-2/> (accessed 25 October 2013).



Courtesy: Susanne Hofmann



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