



Ecology of the senses

Building a new and different relationship with Nature discloses what J. Tanizaki defines as an “ecology of the senses”, which means reassessing all of the human being’s sensory properties, and not over-emphasising the importance of sight.

When the body and memory experience the formal properties of touch, sound and smell, and relate them to previous experiences, a “precious bond” is formed between thought and emotion. Materials both ancient and innovative mingle effortlessly rather than clash, each surrendering certain undiscovered properties to the other and yielding entirely new experiences. Even natural products can be broken down to their constituent parts and re-assembled using novel procedures, appearing among the “designer’s tools” with fresh new textures, vibes and physical properties that enhance the soul of the material and engender new physical attributes.

However, we are also well aware that high-tech materials like fibres, fabrics, plastics and so on, regardless of the relationship we have with our surroundings, stir our senses, bring back memories, and bridge that time and that place to the full gamut of human experience.

As children, we are what the Asian culture defines as Zen: our understanding of the world around us is instinctively mediated by the activities that adults call ‘play’. Children’s sensory receptors are open to everything new, be it looking, touching, tasting, feeling heat or cold, heaviness and lightness, softness and hardness, smoothness and roughness, colours, shapes, distances, daylight and darkness, noise and silence. For a child this is all new, it all has to be learnt, and play helps to hone memory skills (Munari).

Open spaces

Open spaces become a playground, and play is the child’s first approach towards learning. Experience in relation to the external environment encourages exploration and observation, so that an understanding of the environment reveals the intuitive laws of nature.

Sensory perception (i.e. sight, sound, touch and smell) is the earliest form of learning, allowing the child to acquire abstract concepts like space, time, matter, light, gravity, temperature, and so on. Observing and experiencing natural phenomena and their own bodies helps children to realise that the human species is a part of a much larger biosphere. An open environment where children can unleash their creativity.

Children thus acquire their sense of being an active subject, whose micro-actions inevitably determine change: the link between action and reaction begins to materialise and this realisation builds the foundations for the child’s creativity. Play and make-believe lead to forging effective communications, via drawing, telling stories, making things and understanding symbols.

Interacting with other children is essential for learning to socialise: it teaches the difference between autonomy and interdependence, individual and community, singular and plural.

Children learn that socialising means not only sharing life with other children, but with parents who are involved in forming shared experiences. This is a crucial aspect, because the family, teachers, and the community as a whole are what drive education.

In short, attention must be devoted to the physical and spatial role of this link between the child and society, and how the traditional set-up of schools is changing. Children are not packages to be stored somewhere for a few hours a day, but ... “an unseen person, an unknown child, an enslaved being that needs to be freed” (Montessori).

From the combination of the natural surroundings and man-made elements comes the creation of a culture medium in which the personality and identity of the child flourishes and grows into man as a social being.

Kindergartens must strive to become a new and perhaps experimental teaching environment where play, body language, the human voice and even silence are powerful forms of expression and communication, and an emotional activity that has to be interpreted and guided.

The Children’s House will need to feature space that suits not only the child’s smaller size but also their motor skills and mental abilities, to help them master the space. The surroundings also need to be orderly, because neatness and tidiness are reassuring and build confidence. The setting should be soothing and harmonious to encourage trust and the freedom to express their interests