



*Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia*

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“Zone C”: A Place for Children

Salli Ramsden and Tania Strebl (Australia)

[Submitted Paper]

Synopsis

Australian presenters Salli Ramsden and Tania Strebl led a fun, memorable one hour workshop which examined the process of creating beneficial systems around (western) children via slide presentation, roleplay and discussion formats. The role of children in cultures around the globe, and their place in permaculture, was considered with interest. Reader input is invited as part of an ongoing exploration of this important global theme.

Design against children (slide show)

From a (western) child’s point of view, conventional homes, schools and gardens can be alien, inhospitable places with hard surfaces, straight lines, sharp angles and tall structures. Plantings, if any, are often inappropriate, sometimes toxic; animals may not be found at all. The real needs of the child may be denied in the pursuit of cheap efficient structures and safety first.

Needs analysis and childhood reverie

Why not begin to explore those ignored needs with a needs analysis for children, just as you might for any ordinary element in a design? Basic human needs of food, water, company and shelter head a list of physical, emotional and spiritual needs which are often far more pronounced for, and sometimes specific to, children.

Many of these needs suggest companion elements, as can the products and inherent behaviours of children. A reverie into your own childhood will reveal your favourite places, activities, animals and plants, and how those varied as you grew.

What elements match? Ask any child! “What do you want to play?”, “What do you want to do?”

Unusual elements (slide show)

In design for children we find additional , often invisible factors:

- Now-ness. Rapid results needed.
- Change. Rapid – in scope, needs, likes, size, habit, etc.
- Distance and energy – Zones of activity move outward; some as far from home as possible become an important daily ritual (they forgot to read the permaculture text on efficient energy planning).
- Risk and challenge.
- Imagination. Transforms surrounds (rock becomes steed, hollow becomes lake).
- Adaptability is a must.
- Nature a teacher.
- Awe and wonder.
- Size and line of sight.
- Ownership and sense of place.
- Increasing need for shade.

Designing with children (slide show and roleplay)

The slide show and roleplay were developed by Tania and Salli to inspire a fresh look at design for children, and at the art of adapting permaculture features or concepts to make them fun for children and “child-stacking”. Is it not true that children are our most precious resource, and that we can design systems around them, even better with them, to the benefit of all concerned?

An Ideal Childrens’ Garden

A couple of delegates (each in touch with their inner child) play the children who design their own garden. The group suggests appropriate companion elements and the “children” place delegates (each volunteering to model an element) around themselves to satisfy their needs, rearranging with the help of the group to maximise positive interactions within the system and with neighbouring systems. At this point we usually have a diverse system teeming with life and interest, a rich cooperative learning space with connection to the outside world.

Roleplay as a Learning Tool

Up to this point the role play is a fun way to demonstrate principles of permaculture as well as exploring design for children. We can go on to look at how the system evolves with time. Which elements act as pioneers, which are climax species? Does the design provide for possible changes in needs ,and changing climate, as years go by and children grow? Can features evolve from function to function?

(The author uses a similar roleplay with adult permaculture students to design a model property or village. Students roleplay appropriate elements and place themselves in relation to each other. The design is tested and adjusted by the “designers” who model going about their daily routine according to season – to ensure energy efficient design.)

The Average Backyard

In the second part of the “Zone C” role play, your wonderful garden is reduced to a conventional home environment. Which elements no longer exist? (Those playing elements which don’t belong in the average Australian suburban backyard, for example, are asked to step out of the roleplay.) There could be a swing or a sandpit without shade, maybe a misplaced tree, a flower or two, a birdbath the cat drinks from and the odd worm.

Are you having fun still? Gone are the slopes to roll down, the pond brimful with life, the frogs and animals to watch, the fountain, the strawberries and peas to pick, edible climbing trees, shady spaces, flowers of all colours...

The Teachers’ Schoolgrounds

Now imagine your yard is a conventional schoolyard! What elements remain now? (Those playing elements which don’t belong are again asked to step out.) The animals and plants have all moved out – there are no worms now that the soil is compact and dead. A “do not climb” tree struggles in a bare part of the “keep off the grass” lawn. A sandpit cowers in a cage. Concrete, wind tunnels and carparks abound. What is there left to do – fight?

Learnsapcing schoolgrounds with permaculture (slide show)

Fortunately, permaculture is bursting into life in schoolgrounds around the world, thanks to visionaries working alongside children to improve the quality of life and education in the school environment.

In Australia outcomes include sheltered, rich learning spaces and gardens that bring the entire school, the curriculum and the school community together. Food forests and gardens can provide a focus for education as well as cleaner food, air and water. They have been shown to improve morale, integrate varied cultures and generate income for schools. Everyone wins!

Permaculture and children: mutually beneficial?

That permaculture design has much to offer children the world over is quite clear! What are the unique qualities children bring to permaculture in return? Does the role of children vary between cultures, climates or nations, or is there a common thread? This discussion is open ended; your participation is actively encouraged!

- Around the world children learn and they teach – each other , their parents and their communities. Their schoolground models may impact on national landuse practices, food security and quality of life.
- Children care for animals the world over.
- They have excellent memories, and attend to minute detail.
- They walk and run, share their joy, sing and grow together.
- They gather in groups, providing wastes for biogas for fuel.

- Children are harvesters, sometimes hunters, for themselves alone, for friends, for family and community according to situation.
- Most children overflow with energy. In some cultures they use it to work and in others to play or cause nuisance. How can we harvest the surplus energy of children with care and respect?

A place for children

Across the global nation, please design with children, not against! Give them their rightful place in home systems and our communities.

Design your children back into your lives. Children, take your place. “Zone C”!

Author Salli Ramsden is an Australian permaculture designer/educator involved in projects in schools, community groups, child care centres and backyards. As well as facilitating “Zone C” workshops around Australia, Salli develops programs for school-children, and is bringing permaculture schools and volunteers in contact with each other through a comprehensive listing of projects in Australia. Please mail your comments and requests for directory, bibliography or relevant mail order books and resources to: Salli Ramsden Windover , Mt Darragh , via Bombala, NSW 2632, Australia.