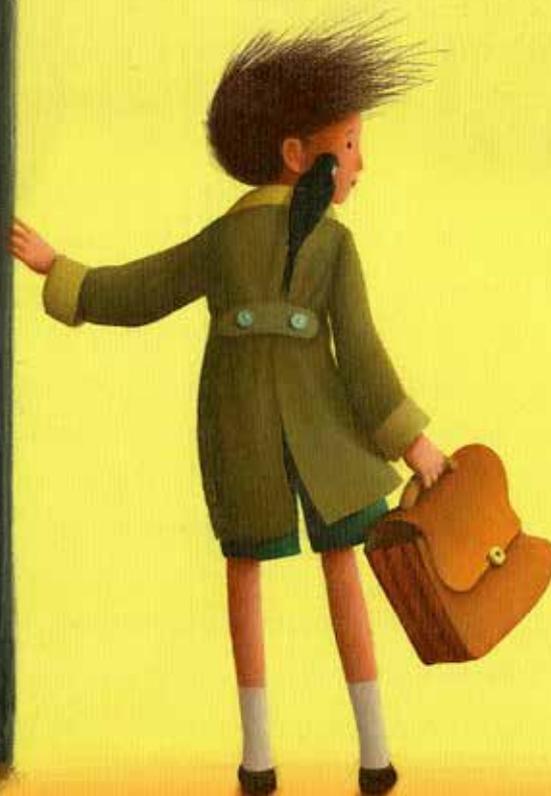


Celebrating childhood:

A journey to end violence
against children





Fuji Kindergarten by Tezuka Architects, 2007 (Photo: Katsuhisa Kida)



Children playing on the oval rooftop of Fuji Kindergarten (Photo: Katsuhisa Kida)

Nostalgic future



Architect, Association for Children's Environment Design Award

Tezuka Takaharu

Nostalgia is the word to describe a desire for a world that has existed in the past. I do not think the past is better or more ideal than the present because we are still experiencing a world with violence, poverty and war. Yet we humans continue to dream about nostalgia. I think this is because there are important things we are losing as time passes. I use the words "Nostalgic Future" to describe a world where we can access this ideal form of nostalgia in the future.

In the 20th century, the future was represented by images of computers and machines. These idealistic visions are featured in science-fiction movies such as Metropolis, Modern Times and Tron. The Matrix film shows a world where images and feelings in the computer are more real than real world. There is a programme to control everything, yet the technology is invisible like air. The world is getting closer and closer to the world portrayed in this movie. Technology is capable of improving our lives and freeing us from fear and disease. We can travel the world, or easily access the jungle because we have transport, technology and emergency backup. Technology has made these things possible. Now it is up to us whether we make use of the technology for an idealistic future, or for disaster. What is the ideal environment for humans in the future, and especially for children?

When I go to international conferences about pedagogy, I find that speakers often talk about the future of education being an integration of computer-aided technology and clean, safe environments for classrooms. Presenters often show projections onto walls displaying classrooms with computer screens and playgrounds with soft, colourful antibacterial plastic. If you look at many of the latest school designs, the modern school building is getting bigger and bigger and looking more like an IT company's headquarters. Sometimes I find there are very small playgrounds, while the structure itself is taking up most of the land. In these buildings, children don't walk outside all day so they don't get wet or feel cold. Many people believe that this is the future but I am always against these choices for children.

I think it is time for us to understand that we are a part of a bigger existence. These controlled environments are not the vision of the future anymore; they are slowly weakening the creativity of children. Just as a fish cannot live in purified water, children cannot live in a clean, quiet and controlled environment. Our life is a part of the surrounding environment and that cannot be disconnected.

Background Noise for All

A few years ago, while in Bali, my wife and I were invited by Dr Tsutomu Ohashi to see a Kecak, an Indonesian music drama and dance. Dr Ohashi is a molecular biologist, composer and neuroscientist, renowned for his outstanding research on the effects of hypersonic sounds on humans. I had the privilege to be with him only a short moment and I learned a lot from him during that time. I recorded the Kecak with my mobile phone but when I replayed it back in Japan I found the music was masked by background noise. I first thought there was a glitch with my mobile phone. I soon realized that the background noise was from the jungle. In the jungle, I did not pay attention to the noise. In fact, I did not feel the noise was distracting at all. Simply I ignored the noise and enjoyed the Kecak ritual. Humans have a natural noise cancelling system to selectively listen to what we want. We cancel the noise not by frequency, but by information. Of course, this effect did not work when I was back in Japan because I was not amid the same background noise.

Actually our body is full of noise too. When we dive underwater, it is possible to start hearing noises from our own bodies. The noise from our cardiovascular system is louder than that of a construction site, yet we are capable of only hearing the sounds of a Mozart performance. We have naturally learned to ignore the noise from inside of our body. In complete silence, we can be extremely sensitive. It is very natural to be exposed to high frequency background noise. It is not natural to be in complete silence. I think this is the reason why we hear about children having difficulties staying quiet in the classroom. I consider it only natural that they feel nervous in an enclosed environment without any background noise. I suspect that the design of modern, quiet school buildings could be the cause of many autistic symptoms in children.

In 2007, we designed Fuji Kindergarten and have received numerous awards in fields from architecture to education, including The Japan Institute of Architects Award in 2008 and Best of All in the OECD/CELE 4th Compendium of Exemplary Educational Facilities. Fuji Kindergarten is a large oval shape, well known to allow 600 children to run freely around the oval roof. The kindergarten's sliding doors are completely open between April and November. When these doors are open, the building functions as a roof. There are no clear boundaries between each classroom. There are only boxes, and 1.8-meter tall panels to indicate areas. Fuji Kindergarten accepts more than 30 autistic children among many other children. The principal has told me that these 30 children do not show obvious signs of autism when they are in the building. When some children have had a difficult time in other kindergartens, they transferred to Fuji Kindergarten and behaved no different to other children without mental disorders.

The key to Fuji Kindergarten was to design spaces as very open environments, filled with background noise. Not only is noise coming from other classrooms, but also from outside too. There are classes teaching basic mathematics while another class is playing piano nearby. The children are obviously selecting information from the background noise. Some visitors often worry if the children are able to maintain concentration. One time the kindergarten was featured on a television programme. The film crew told me that they were very surprised to find that the children were capable of ignoring the television camera and continued listening to the teacher. A visitor from Germany once questioned Mr Kato, the

principal of Fuji Kindergarten, “How do you make the children go quiet?” Mr Kato said it is quite easy. He whispered and they quieted down. The children always know he has something interesting to say, so they listen.

Children have different levels of personal space in order to feel comfortable. In nature, space is limitless and we are allowed to choose any distance we want. In the classroom, if a child must stay in a set area, they cannot define their space. It is expected that some students do not stay within certain boundaries. The classroom space only exists because the boundary exists. When the boundary disappears, the constraints disappear.

There is always a question made by visitors to Fuji Kindergarten on a rainy day, what happens if these children get wet. The answer of Mr Kato is very simple: “In Japan, children change their clothes if they get wet, they are waterproof. Unlike a mobile phone, children do not break when wet in a bathtub. They can be washed clean. Sometimes, I take my own children to the sea to chase turtles. When my son was 7 years old he was capable of swimming more than 1000 meters. Now he is 11 years old. He dives in the river and catches fishes. Children should be treated as a part of the natural environment.”

▲▲ School building is getting bigger and bigger... these controlled environments... are slowly weakening the creativity of children. ▲▲

Tezuka Takaharu

Natural Environment

Children are strong and capable enough to stay outdoors. Of course they need protection in extreme weather, though not all the time. When we think of old settlements, these buildings are comfortable enough for most of the seasons. Comfort cannot be measured simply by temperature or humidity. In 2001, we designed a house called Roof House, where the family enjoys living and inhabiting the space on top of the inclined roof. When we published the project we were criticized that the roof is too hot in summer and too cold in winter. The critics were saying that the roof cannot be used and the design is based on fiction that I had imagined. The owner responded saying that they use the rooftop every day. The answer was very simple. The roof is hot in summer: therefore the roof should be used before sunrise or after dark while the roof is still cool. The roof is cold in winter: therefore the roof should be used after noon when the roof gets warm enough.

In the past, humans found comfort through timing and location instead of controlling our living environment with technology. This is just like a cat finding its favourite place to laze. Human behaviour is full of contradictions. We go to the beach in summer. The sand is 50 Celsius (122 Fahrenheit). We go to ski in winter. The ski slope is -20 Celsius (-4 Fahrenheit). This is telling us that the comfort is about the level of pleasure, not temperature. It is possible a fisherman’s hut on the water could be much more comfortable than an expensive, air-conditioned, modern concrete structure. We can say the same thing about schools. A traditionally designed school hut in Bali could be much more comfortable than the latest, modern, air-conditioned school.

There are kindergartens and childcare facilities around the world with playgrounds covered with antibacterial plastic. This kind of technology is spreading. Of course such a technology is much needed in this world, for example, it can be very useful in a refugee camp where sanitation is poor. Yet we can easily go wrong. It is often said that the dangers of excessive use of antibiotics may create antibiotic-resistant bacteria. For children, a sterilized environment can be just as dangerous as a polluted one.

Children also need to be treated as a part of the natural environment. Dr Tsutomu Ohashi said we are a kind that has grown up in the jungle; we cannot deny what we are. When we overprotect children with artificially created environments, they cannot grow up properly. In Fuji Kindergarten, Mr Kato leaves the children on top of the roof. Some spontaneously run more than six kilometres in the morning. These children do not require any special training in order to get faster and stronger. They may get wet and sometimes fall down from a tree branch. They may tumble and get slight injuries. That is how they learn the way of life.

Whenever I see the smiles of children who were raised at Fuji Kindergarten, I get lumps in my throat at the thought of this joy being packed into a suitcase and sent to children all around the world. It is quite possible that the children who have access to the latest technology are not receiving a better education than the children with little access to the technology but learn in a natural environment.

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