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THE ASSOCIATION OF DAY CARE OPERATORS OF ONTARIO



CREATING THE IDEAL ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN: WHY YOU NEED AN ARCHITECT & HOW TO CHOOSE ONE

By: Andrea Hannen

The Ideal Environment is an internationally recognized architecture and design firm based in Toronto. For over 25 years, architect Brian Lee and his colleagues have painstakingly crafted architectural design solutions to reflect the dreams, aspirations, and practical needs of their clients. Over the years, designing and renovating child care facilities has become one of The Ideal Environment's specialties. Some of the properties Brian Lee and his colleagues have transformed include: Hagermann House Child Care in Markham; the Family Day Care Services facilities in Mississauga, Markham, Don Mills, Scarborough and Thornhill; and a number of Ontario Early Years Centres. Late last year, The Ideal Environment contacted *Childcare Today* about writing articles on child care design and *Childcare Today* readers have been benefiting from them ever since. *Childcare Today* recently caught up with Lee to learn more about how he became interested in working on child care centres, how this work differs from other kinds of projects and how child care operators and architects can work together to keep building and renovation projects on time and on budget.

Q *How did you come to be interested in designing, building and renovating child care centres?*

A In 1993, Maria de Witt of Family Daycare selected our firm to do a renovation and addition on a heritage building for a child care centre. There were many challenges dealing with a heritage building and a very tight project budget, but we realized that child care design was interesting and required a different kind of creativity. The result won a design award and began a long relationship with Family Day and other programs such as the Ontario Early Years Centres. Our firm, The Ideal Environment / Brian Lee Architect enjoyed the challenge of working within such tight budgets, while at the same time creating facilities that were colourful, simple to maintain and were easy to operate.

Ultimately, the partners at Brian Lee Architect opted to change the firm's name to The Ideal Environment, because we realized that we were designing a certain "feel" into our interiors through the use of colour, environmentally safe materials, full spectrum lighting, and high quality clean air systems. Low en-



Architect Brian Lee and colleague Marilyn Lake enjoy the challenge of child care design, noting that the tight budgets, regulatory requirements and need to create uplifting spaces for children call for a different kind of creativity than most other types of projects do.

ergy consumption and using building materials that are as "green" as possible are important approaches that we bring to all of our projects.

Q *How does working on licensed child care facilities differ from working on other types of projects?*

A The play environment needs to be very specific to the physical capabilities of young children. Spaces have to be scaled down so that everything the child needs is accessible, including lower counters, and window sills that are low and safe. The spaces need to have a residential quality to them so they feel familiar and friendly. At the same time, the building materials used in the interiors have to withstand serious wear and tear, and be easy for staff to maintain without the use of noxious chemicals. For child care spaces we use colours that are similar to those found in nature, but turned up a notch to create either a stimulating or calming effect, depending upon which room needs those particular qualities.

Q *What's the most challenging part of child care design?*

A Child care facilities are highly regulated with specific requirements for room sizes and supervision, which could potentially lead to repetitive,

standardized solutions for the interiors. While meeting very strict budgets, we must still provide creative solutions that make the spaces feel unique and attractive.

Q *What's the most rewarding part?*

A The design of child care facilities provides an opportunity to create stimulating and interesting environments that make children feel happy, parents feel comfortable and confident in their choice of centre, and staff feel proud to be part of the facility.

Q *What is the role of an architect in the building or renovation of a licensed child care centre?*

A The building code requires child care facilities to have an architect involved if there are any physical changes to the entrances, exits, and building systems such as lighting, heating, air conditioning, or structural changes to the building. Most projects will have these requirements.

Once detailed drawings are prepared, the architect can obtain competitive bids from reputable builders, obtain permits and approvals and oversee construction to ensure that the child care program is getting what it needs, what it is paying for, and what was accurately designed and specified on the drawings. Architects also usually approve the payments to the builders and negotiate any extras or credits.

Basically, an architect should be involved at the very beginning when choosing a property or a building to determine its suitability. Once a location is selected, the architect can prepare preliminary plans that will help the child care operator develop realistic budgets and get the required approvals from the regulators. The architect chooses materials and colours that create an atmosphere of delight and excitement for the children, as well as calm areas for reading and relaxation. The architect also considers the space from a practical perspective, including areas for things like removing children's shoes and outerwear to keep the winter slush and summer dirt from spreading past the entrance. The spaces are laid out to accommodate different wet and dry craft and play activities, with furniture and flooring designed to accommodate these different areas.

Special lighting is key: children and staff perform better and are happier under full spectrum lighting conditions that avoid glare. Often, we design special lighting systems to accomplish this, sometimes with cloud or butterfly themes that are friendly to small children.

Q *How can having an architect involved in a project save a child care operator time or money?*

A An experienced architect can help right at the very beginning with the business decision of whether to choose a particular site or building. We can quickly size up a space and tell whether it is suitable or if it has difficulties which will substantially increase the cost. Experienced architects can create efficient designs that minimize expenses, and choose materials that are cost effective and energy efficient. Architects that specialize in daycares bring an accumulated experience that is gained from creating spaces with child care operators who often have many fine ideas that need to be brought to fruition in the design process. Architects can provide budgeting information throughout the design process to help the project stay on track as decisions are being made.

The detailed drawings and specifications prepared by an architect experienced in child care facility work will encourage project savings through competitive pricing for equivalent materials, helping to get the best possible price. Well developed plans that are thoroughly understood by the child care operator also minimize costly changes during construction.

Q *What types of qualifications and professional affiliations should child care operators watch for when selecting an architect?*

A All architects in Canada are regulated by their provincial associations. Look for a firm that has proven experience with child care facilities, is adventurous with colour and materials, cares about the lighting and quality and feel of spaces, and is small enough that you will get the personal involvement of the principals on a day-to-day basis.

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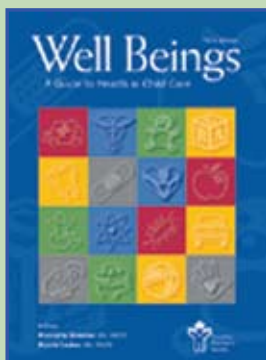
RECOMMENDED READING

WELL BEINGS: A GUIDE TO HEALTH IN CHILD CARE

EDITED BY: DANIELLE GRENIER, MD, FRCPC & DENIS LEDUC, MD, FRCPC

448 pages, Third Edition, Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS), 2008

Available in soft cover from the publisher for \$69.95



First published in 1992, this newly-revised third edition features useful diagrams, forms, checklists, tools and resources, as well as visual clues to alert readers to key points. It is a well organized reference work and offers sections about both physical and emotional health. Some of the topics covered include: healthy activities; nutrition; dental health; injury prevention; transportation safety; infection prevention and management; how to deal with common and chronic medical conditions; and steps for documenting and reporting suspected instances of child abuse. Of particular value are the step-by-step instructions for dealing with various kinds of medical emergencies. The CPS has also developed online resources to support the use of *Well Beings*. You can find them at www.cps.ca

The Canadian Paediatric Society is a voluntary professional association of paediatricians, paediatric subspecialists; paediatric residents and others who are committed to working together to advance the health of children and youth.