

Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.  
Visit us at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) or call (800) 221-2864.  
Multiple use copy agreement available for educators by request.

# Reframing children's spaces

by Sandra Duncan

At one time or another, all of us have taken photographs of people, objects, animals, and scenery. We may have snapped the picture without any more thought than wanting to capture the moment for tomorrow's memories. Or, we may have thought about the story behind the photograph and spent considerable time orchestrating the taking of the picture. Regardless of the time spent snapping the photograph, amateur shutterbugs typically frame their shots by precisely putting the main subject in the middle of the viewfinder. Professional photographers, however, understand how changing the perspective in the viewfinder creates a more compelling photographic story. Simply by moving the photo's main subject to the upper right corner of the viewfinder, for example, the photographer reframes the images and tells the story in a new and innovative way. Like professional photographers, early childhood teachers can reframe their perspectives to create

innovative and inspiring spaces for young children by concentrating on reframing two design elements: color and texture.

When thinking about designing spaces for young children, one of the first considerations is the equipment and its arrangement. We might also consider the flooring, wet and dry regions, quiet and active areas, and the locations of doors and windows. Or, we may contemplate the types and numbers of learning centers, where they will be positioned, and what kinds of materials will occupy each center. One of the most important considerations in classroom design, though, may be how we define the parameters of the spaces (i.e., learning centers, activity areas). According to Anita Rui Olds (2001), a pioneer in designing spaces for young children, there are five defining attributes of an activity area:

- 1) boundaries
- 2) location
- 3) play and sitting surfaces
- 4) materials storage and display
- 5) mood of area.

Many of these defining attributes, especially establishing space boundaries, may be accomplished by reframing our

viewfinder on how we use color and texture in the classroom.

## Color defines space

Color can be used to indicate meaning, attract attention, camouflage or highlight architectural elements and — most importantly — define space (DeViney et al, 2010; Libwell, Holden, & Butler, 2003).

## ■ Paint Defines Space

Color in the early childhood classroom is typically used to paint surfaces such as



Sandra Duncan is a co-author of two recently published books, *Inspiring Spaces for Young Children* and *Rating Observation Scale for Inspiring Environments (ROSIE)*. She is a co-founder of Creative Environments

Design Collaborative ([www.CreativeEnvironmentsDesign.com](http://www.CreativeEnvironmentsDesign.com)), a consulting team that is passionate about transforming ordinary environments into inspiring spaces for young children.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DEVINEY, Creative Environments Design Collaborative



walls and ceilings, and usually one color is applied throughout the room. While some attention is paid to the actual color, there is minimal regard given to the placement of the color. Rather than painting color on the walls to decorate, reframe your thinking and consider using color as a way to give visual importance or boundaries to a space.

Many times the impact of architectural features is not maximized because of the lack of attention given to the placement of color. By painting a contrasting color to the wall's foreground and background in this infant space, for example, the archway has a bolder and more impactful visual appeal. Also, in order to create a space that elicits a mood of peacefulness, a calming blue was used as the archway color. Painting the back wall with a crisp green paint added a pop of freshness. The neutral tone of the front wall enables viewers to look beyond giving full attention to the organic shapes and architectural elements of the curves. Most importantly, the paint colors define the space.

### ■ Fabric Defines Space

When thinking about using color to define classroom spaces and areas, it might be assumed that paint is the only effective technique. But, by reframing our viewfinder, we discover there are other techniques that may be used. Instead of using paint, for example, colorful fabric panels might define a space such as this library area. Attaching a curtain rod to the wall and hanging the curtains, pictures, and clock is a quick and inexpensive fix for a dull spot, yet it is also a wonderful solution for defining space in a small area.

Stretch your imagination and reframe your viewfinder a little more by envisioning a whimsical and colorful sail floating over an area in your indoor (and even outdoor) classroom (photo

## Savvy Idea for Infusing both Color and Texture

For a unique way to identify classroom areas with color and texture, replace the typical construction paper identifiers with colorful elements placed in acrylic containers. For example, these containers filled with red items beautifully define this table as the *red table*. When the children are asked to find a seat at the red table, they clearly know where to go. And, because the containers are acrylic, children can be actively involved in changing the containers' colors and contents.

Other ideas for filling the containers with color and texture include:

- Sand, seashells, and sea grass
- Small pine branches, pinecones, and moss
- Colored ribbons, buttons, and sequins
- Dried flowers, herbs, and colored feathers
- Colored shredded paper, tissue paper, and cellophane
- Glass beads, pebbles, and lava rock



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DeVINEY, Creative Environments Design Collaborative

next page). The process of creating this sail began with children's interest in the metamorphosis of butterflies. First, images of butterflies were sketched by the children. The children's drawings were transferred onto their own overhead transparency. Then, with the children's directives regarding desired locations, the drawings were projected

onto the canvas. Using a ballpoint pen, each child traced his own projected image. After all the drawings were transferred onto the canvas, the children painted the mural with vibrant colors.

With everyone's growing appreciation of the mural, there was much discussion on how the children's work could be further honored with a more prominent display. It was decided to have the children's completed work printed onto a large canvas to create a sail that could be proudly hung over the art area. This large sail has now become a glorious visible boundary that not only defines a space but creates "a mood that distinguishes it from contiguous spaces" (Olds, 2001, p. 268).

### Texture defines space

In the early childhood field, the word *texture* is often synonymous with sen-



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DeVINEY, Creative Environments Design Collaborative



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DeVINEY, Creative Environments Design Collaborative

sory tables where children enjoy exploring the world of soft, hard, bumpy, smooth, shiny, and rough (DeViney, et al., 2010). Although exploring textures is a well-accepted strategy for children's learning experiences, teachers do not readily think of using textures as a design tool. Reframe your viewfinder to

discover how textures can help define classroom spaces and areas.

Spaces can be defined by adding textures that reflect authentic scenes, such as this façade of an outside wall that creates a backdrop for a backyard picnic. In this example, the outdoor picnic scene was created by

mounting an authentic door and wood paneling to the wall, which helps define the corner space. A woven rug in the old window frame that has been mounted to the wall gives an extra element of texture while defining the area's boundaries. Adding a picnic table, grill, and another textured rug placed on the floor not only extends the dramatic play experience for children, but creates the space's boundaries.

Although texture can be added to

define space in many traditional ways (i.e., curtains, fabric panels, and rugs), there are other creative ways to incorporate this element (see photo below). With the Internet at your fingertips, there is an infinite supply of new techniques and ideas quickly available to you. For example, a new design trend, *wall flats*, is quickly gaining popularity as a wall treatment because of its flexibility. Made of renewable resources, wall flats are a great option to add texture since they can be easily mounted, painted, and removed. (You can find more information about wall flats at [www.allmodern.com](http://www.allmodern.com).)

### ■ Endless Possibilities with Reframing

Designing inspiring spaces for children requires that you reframe your perspective and view your classroom in new and unique ways. By reframing your ideas and changing the ways you use color and texture to define space, the possibilities are endless.

### References

DeViney, J., Duncan, S., Harris, S., Rody, M., & Rosenberry, L. (2010). *Inspiring spaces for young children*. Silver Spring, MD: Gryphon House.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DeVINEY, Creative Environments Design Collaborative



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DeVINEY, Creative Environments Design Collaborative

Greenman, J. (2007). *Caring spaces, learning places*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.

Libwell, W., Holden, K., & Butler, J. (2003). *Universal principles of design*. Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers.

Olds, A. R. (2001). *Child care design guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill.