



HOW

TO DESIGN FOR CHILDREN

Being in love was like China: you knew it was there, and no doubt it was very interesting, and some people went there, but I never would... and then someone passed me a bit of some sweet stuff, and suddenly I realized that I had been to China. So to speak. And I'd forgotten it. -

The Amber Spyglass by Philip Pullman

Let's say you're over the age of 12. In growing up and growing on, you have gained much-- experience, extra pounds, taxes, and the ability to tie a Windsor knot. Let's say that now, as a young or not-so-young adult, you find yourself in a position to design an experience for people under 12. In trying to design that toy, lesson plan, mini-van or museum exhibit, you find that, like Tootles and his marbles in Peter Pan, you're missing something. You can't quite put your finger on it, but you know it's gone; like Dr. Malone in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, there's a mysterious dust that clouds your ability to feel what it was like to be a kid. You've been to China. But you forgot it.

Here, I'm going to let you in on a big secret, distilled from years of experiences that started when I was thirteen and designed a space station for my little brother. The secret to designing for kids cannot be found in a book, or in the following pages of tips, or in a seven-day wellness retreat at Kripalu. The secret is simply this: you must cultivate empathy for the experiences of children, people captive in an adult world.

That having been said, since I'm an adult and adults like to show they know stuff, I'm offering five characteristics of designing for children that, through this experience of empathy, have become guideposts for me. Let me know if they're helpful.

- Megan Dickerson, May 2013

SOME CHARACTERISTICS



WABI SABI

The concept of *wabi sabi* comes from traditional Japanese aesthetics. It is the idea of “flawed beauty” and impermanence; it might come in the form of a slightly ragged edge to a bowl, or a wilted leaf in a floral arrangement. Playful creatures-- such as human children and cats-- find and use these slight imperfections in innovative ways. A too-perfect toy will be discarded by a child in favor of the toy’s cardboard box. A tablecloth with a slightly frayed edge will be pulled and toyed with by my cat. The desire of the adult designers may be to create a smooth, orderly, cute and Etsy-ready product. That’s great if your main concern in the adult consumer of a product. If you are truly concerned with the reaction of the ultimate user-- a child-- then consider accepting elements of *wabi sabi*.



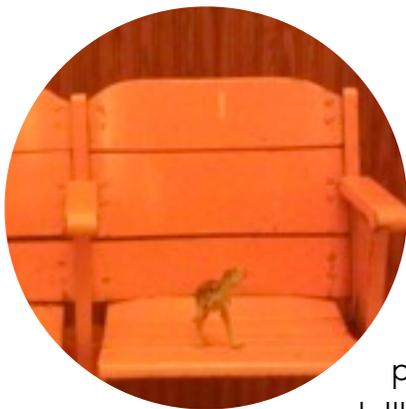
SECRET

When my family moved into a new house, my three-year-old brother took a look under the eaves and said “I think I could climb up there.” Unfortunately, he said that out loud and his secret was blown. Older and wiser kids learn to keep this stuff to themselves. The book *Children’s Special Spaces* by David Sobel explores the role of dens, forts and other personal spaces in children’s lives. Kids nestle in clothing racks at department stores. They pretend to read a book so they can think, unbothered by adults. They use available materials to create a room within the living room that has its own way of life. Adult designers cannot design a child’s experience of secret. That negates itself. However, they can design discoverability into products: A secret level behind the scenes of Super Mario World; An unadvertised ability or affordance of a toy. Discoverability built into design can create a moment of shared positive affect between the designer and the user, across space and time.



(HARD) FUN

So often we design to make kids feel “successful,” often according to our own measures. During a spy game I designed, a ten-year-old girl broke down in tears, saying “I don’t want to be a spy any more. It’s too hard.” I ordered her to go on vacation at our spy retreat in the Bahamas, and she came back to play the game again five minutes later. This is what Seymour Papert calls “hard fun”: we like to do challenging things, but they must be “the right things matched to the individual and to the culture of the times.” Kids are really good at figuring this out. Never underestimate the velocity of the child’s will to do something (my brother definitely got up on that roof despite my parents’ best efforts). And never dumb something down because you don’t think kids will “get it.” Offer a low barrier to entry, and then scale up the fun and challenge.



BIG AND LITTLE

Children are smaller than most adults. This may seem obvious, but big adults often forget it. Among the most memorable children’s museum exhibits have been Giant’s Desktop (a room with a working four-foot pencil, a giant phone, and toddler-sized paperclips) and Hall of Toys, dollhouse vignettes with thousands of miniatures. Design experiences that make small people feel big, and big people feel small. The subtle reordering of things allows kids a bit more power.



REAL

Give a kid a fake DJ deck, and he’ll pose for a photo. Show a kid real turntables, and he’ll stay for an hour. Adults might like the plastic, primary colored pots and pans, but kids are drawn to the ones that are or look like the real ones in the kitchen. A while back, I saw a BuzzFeed list of “innappropriate Playmobil toys.” It included my favorite hospital play set. Real-looking scalpels might offend adults’ concepts of kid appropriateness. Subvert this. Offer real stuff. Challenge the adults.