

HOFMANN:
**'EVERY SCHOOL HAS
 A UNIQUE SPIRIT.
 I TRY TO FIND AND
 EMPHASIZE THAT
 SPIRIT.'**

Photo: ChungVu, 030DesignStudio

The Taka Tuka Kindergarten in Berlin Spandau has an architectural concept based on the Lemonade Tree from the stories of Pippi Longstocking. The architect Susanne Hofmann and a group of architecture students developed this narrative together with children from the kindergarten. 'It's a kind of *Wunschvorstellung*, an imaginary world the children would like or desire. They love the story of the Lemonade Tree because it appeals to their imagination in many ways.'



Kindergarten Taka Tuka Land, Berlin, Germany
 Photo: Jan Bitter

User participation takes a central place in the design process of Berlin-based architect Susanne Hofmann. For kindergartens and schools, this means among other things collaborating closely with children. But she casts her net wider than that. In a series of live projects called *die Baupiloten* ("Building Pilots"), she invites architecture students from the Technical University of Berlin to participate in her collaborative design process. She finds the input of ideas that are quite unlike her own enriching for the resulting work. Not that she is narrow-minded about her architecture: "Of course I am not totally free of preconceived ideas," she said in an interview at her office in Berlin, "but I don't believe in the one *veritas* of architecture. If there is any *veritas* at all, it is that you have to get to know the community that will use that building."

- Can you explain why you place so much emphasis on participation? Many architects would be a bit suspicious about it, because they do not think that users have enough architectural knowledge or understanding to participate productively. "They are absolutely right. The function of the workshops isn't to design the interior spaces together with the users. Different people bring different kinds of expertise into the designing process. We, the architects, are the ones who know about space – or are supposed to – and about

designing it. But we are not experts in how teachers want to teach, nor are we experts in the kind of space in which the users feel at ease. So it can help a lot when you talk to teachers and students or children, and hold workshops together with them. The purpose is to understand their ideas of a building, especially regarding the character and the atmosphere of the spaces. For instance, we can learn whether they prefer a rugged environment or a cosy one."

- There are many users of a school building, including the pupils, the teachers, the administration and the school board. Each of them may have a different view of what kind of atmosphere of the interior needs. How do you deal with these differences?

"We have to work quite abstractly. It's very important not to ask people outright what their preferences are. If you do you will get a list of wishes that you can never satisfy. A more successful strategy is to work out the atmospheric qualities together with them. Normally we try to talk to all the different categories of user at the same meeting. That helps us find a common ground, the 'socially robust knowledge' of the what we call 'Building Family', all the people involved in our collaborative design process."

- So when you talk with them, what exactly are you looking for as a designer? Can you be more specific? "I try to understand the programme of the spaces. When we worked with the Erika Mann Primary School here in



Kindergarten Taka Tuka Land, Berlin, Germany
Photos: Jan Bitter

Berlin, for example, it was important to the teachers that the hallways could be used by the children for working or just for hanging around, for communicating informally. After all, I have to know how they would like to use the school. That is where it all starts.'

"The Erika Mann School was our first project, completed about twelve years ago. They approached us because the children wanted the school to be more colourful. At first I wasn't really interested. I hadn't tried this kind of participation process before, but I wanted to have a project to work on with my students, but just making a school more colourful is not exactly a suitable project for students studying for a master degree. Then I met the school head, and she had some interesting things to tell me. She wanted to get the children involved in what the school would look like, although she wasn't really sure what would come of it and whether there would be enough money. Since it was my job to teach students, I took the opportunity to turn it into a university project in which the students worked with the children. This was the start of 'die Baupiloten', a series of workshops I held with a changing group of students from the Technical University in which they collaborate with me on my projects. Unfortunately the workshops are ending soon, because they don't fit in with the current university programme."

- What form did the participation take?

"The school had children from twenty-five different immigrant minorities, so we asked the children to draw pictures of their homeland. The school head considered it vital for these cultures to get together and have a positive exchange. The haptic element was also important, because the children's command of the German language was often very poor, so they needed other ways of communicating.

Unfortunately, the little exercise of drawing pictures of their homeland didn't work out very well. The children drew things like their football field or the little room they lived in. To them, their real homeland was in Berlin. So instead we started making collages. At the university, I tried out the same technique with my students. It was a good way for them to loosen up, and to get away from preconceived ideas about space. The collages worked in everybody's favour in the design process of the Erika Mann School. It gave the children a means to express what kind of surrounding they wanted, and for the students it was a way to stimulate unconventional thinking."

- What did you yourself learn from "die Baupiloten"?

"The best thing about working with the students is that they are not like me. Mature architects worry about the budget and all the rules and restrictions. We tend to exclude ideas from the outset in the interest of efficiency. But the students don't. They sometimes come up with what at first seem like absurd ideas, so you think 'oh no, that is going to cost far too much'. But I try to listen to them and give them the space to develop their ideas, and finally we find ways of working them out within the budget."

- You have often introduced stories into your designs. There's a dragon for the Erika Mann School, the Lemonade Tree for the Taka Tuka Kindergarten and the Dream Tree for the Dream Tree Kindergarten. What is the function of these stories in the design process?

"It is a narrative we developed with the children. That narrative becomes an ingredient of our architectural concept, one that we didn't have before. The narrative can be considered as a *Wunschvorstellung*, the representation of a wish, an imagined world they would like or desire. After



the initial workshops, we have feedback workshops. The *Wunschvorstellung* plays an important part in every phase leading up to the last one, the construction phase."

- What can go wrong in this process?

"The danger, especially with complex projects, is that some people don't trust this way of designing, and that there are changes in the people you talk to. It becomes really difficult if they are not part of the Building Family from the very beginning – if you are not part of the story we have already written together. They might well think that what we are doing is crazy!"

- New users will have to live with the stories of their predecessors. Isn't that a problem?

"Not in our experience. At the Erika Mann Primary School, new children coming in every year identify with the story and give their own interpretation to it. That has happened at the other schools too. The Taka Tuka Kindergarten was finished nearly seven years ago. The story we developed there, together with the children, was based on Pippi Longstocking's Lemonade Tree. Here in Germany, children use the word *limonade* for all kinds of brightly coloured sweet drinks. We did some experiments, and observed how the children and teachers reacted. The children loved this story. The Lemonade Tree appeals to their imagination

in many ways. Later the kindergarten continued changing their interior on the same visual theme, for example when putting up new shelves. As an architect I could get upset about that, but you can't expect them never to change anything. The kindergarten is accepting more and more children, and now there is even a waiting list. Maybe it sounds stupid, but we put a lot of love into that project. My experience is that every school is different. Individual children and teachers come and go, but the school remains a community with a distinct atmosphere and identity. Every school has a unique spirit. I want to find and emphasize that spirit."

The reactions of Susanne Hofmann's architectural colleagues to her radical approach are mixed. She first came into contact with the approach during her education at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London, which encourage an experimental outlook. But some people at the university of Berlin consider it outrageous.

"Most of my fellow architects don't take it seriously. I have even had a few insulting comments, such as that the result is merely decorative. Obviously I don't agree with them. Through this architecture we dramatically change the atmosphere of the spaces."



Erika Mann Primary School II, Berlin, Germany
Photos: Jan Bitter



KINDERGARTEN LICHTENBERGWEG

Rainbow and volcanic landscapes lie at the basis of the design for kindergarten Lichtenbergweg in Leipzig. For this first, entirely by Susanne Hofmann Architekten* designed building, participation of the pupils was also guiding. Together with her colleagues Hofmann observed that the kids showed, in their drawings, a remarkable preference for rainbow gardens and volcanic landscapes. Subsequently the architects asked them to build models from diverse material of the kindergarten's material boxes. After this model-making, the kids told them vividly about their imagined worlds. The identified atmospheric and spatial qualities triggered the design.

Later in the design process the architects communicated with the children through models, photomontages and stories. They did not discuss concrete problems with them, they were interested in their imagination and concerns about their surroundings. Their slogan was: form follows kids'fiction. At the same time the architects integrated the outcome of a specially developed planning game with the parties involved in decision-making: the city of Leipzig, the youth welfare office, the kindergarten's operator, head and teacher. The game was a tool to establish priorities regarding pedagogical, programmatic and building requirements, but also served to generate their ideas of spatial atmospheric qualities.

To maintain the park-like atmosphere of the site was another intention of the design, partly inspired by observing the children playing outside. The kindergarten has been carefully placed between the mature trees to create a distinctive entrance and frame pleasant views from the inside into the courtyards. Each of the courtyards has a different character, sometimes opening up to the outside, sometimes conveying a comforting and sheltering atmosphere. The volume of the building, its colours and the

mirrors mounted in the facade, create an integrated and simultaneously distinctive presence amidst the trees. By using a timber frame construction and load-bearing walls adjacent to each other, each volume has got a different character. This is further expressed by different colors and a playful variation of window sizes.

Although the design is colorful and intriguing, stimulating curiosity of the children was not the paramount concern of the architects. But it seems logical that the building does make children curiously exploring it. The windows are designed to match their scale. They offer views of the internal spaces through to the outside, and therefore establishing a relation with the surrounding trees. They are installed at a low height, so that their sills turn into benches. Roof lights provide orientation by opening up views – in the single-story volume directly to the outside and in the other areas through the upper floors and to the sky. On the upper floors, the windows provide close views directly into the treetops.

Some of the skylights are designed to refract the rays of the sun, creating a play of changing light. This idea has been developed further by using pivoting reflective sun louvers that encourage the children to explore and experiment with the effects. On the upper floors, the windows provide close views at the treetops. Some of the skylights are designed to refract the rays of the sun, creating an interesting play of changing light inside the building. This idea has been developed further using pivoting reflective sun louvers, that encourage the children to explore and experiment with different lighting effects. The colors generate an atmosphere of comfort and protection, but also encouraging exploration.

* Since the beginning of 2014 Susanne Hofmann Architekten is called "die Baupiloten".

- What can be learned from designing for children?
"Spaces have to be differentiated. Some children are shy and need their own protective surroundings. Others are extroverted and need a different kind of space: some of the young children need to burn off energy and run around all the time. Others like to sit at a table and learn. Some children learn best while moving, and others like to study while lying down. It is amazing how different their ways of learning can be. In the Erika Mann Primary School we made an abstract 'cave' where two children can sit together and read. We also designed *der Hochsitz*, a raised seat where children can enjoy an view over the whole space. Of course you can't make different furniture for each child, but you can offer them more possibilities than just one. The building that houses the Erika Mann School was built back in the days of the German Empire when the pedagogic system was totally different from today. Children were drilled to

act as soldiers, workers, civil servants and so on. Today we want to make them capable of thinking for themselves."

- What can architects learn from working with children in the designing process?

"The most important thing is how to communicate with children. But the same applies to communicating with adults. When we started making collages, the children told us about their imaginary worlds in a way that made us feel what they were like. They were able to communicate an atmospheric quality. When children tell a story they do so in a way that goes with their age, but adults have stories to tell us too. What I learned was how the children's or adults' story telling helps us to tune into the conditions of architecture better. I learned to talk more about activities than about the kind of spaces needed. So maybe this way of designing helps the architect to develop more appropriate spaces."



Kita Lichtenbergweg, Leipzig, Germany
Photos: Jan Bitter