BOOK REVIEW:
DESIGNING FOR PLAY, BY BARBARA E. HENDRICKS. 2011.

Remah Y. Gharib

The aim that Hendricks addresses in this book is to provide a guiding manuscript for designers and decision makers on how to perceive the children play spaces. The author explicitly focused throughout the book on presenting methods of design which tie the free thoughts and imagination of the children with the built environment they engaged with. These design methods are expected to add to the architects, designers, and decision makers a new valuable approach of how to increase the quality of play spaces to suit children joy and freedom. Due to her ‘hands on’ experience as a play spaces designer, Barbara Hendricks in this book strongly attempts to relate the child behavior development with responsible key design decisions. This reflects the necessity to appreciate, understand, and grasp the children’s indirect input within the design process of play spaces. Throughout the book, the chapters are enriched by illustrations that provide diverse examples, simplifying the ideas presented comprehensively; these ideas are also emphasized through text boxes to draw the attention of the reader towards key issues and important statements.
In the first two chapters, Hendricks reviews the importance of designing for playing in an attempt to pull the reader out of the rational box of designing for children, and trying to allow the designer to understand the aspects that children are more aware of than adults. She argues that adults in general are strangers within the children environments and thus an attempt is made to push the designer to design utilizing different trends and approaches that put the child at the crux of the process. However, in order to understand how to design for children activities, the book also tackled the challenge of understanding the meaning of playing. The author offered a good deal of literature about the act of playing and its environment, describing play as a way of life and as an expression of joy and entertainment.

Chapter 3 presents the historical background of the play yard, originating from the public play yard as a conscious result for the need of free spaces for the poorer strata. Yet, it provided the different historical trends in designing the playground and how officials always comprehended the playground as space of children games and amusing swings with little attention to the social importance. This overview is followed by a discussion on the development of the educational playground and its impact on some of the public play areas. Chapter 4, as a continuation to the preceding chapter, explored the importance of aesthetics in the playground. Expressing, the lack of beauty and the explicit focus that the previous playgrounds were only serving a functional purpose, having to lose the essence of delivering joy and happiness with less aesthetical design.

The following three chapters investigate various criteria of understanding the children playground, starting with how society perceives the playful environment of children. The second focus was a real challenge, but a successful one, because the author tried to ease communication between children criteria and other key players, to achieve a better understanding of what children think and desire in their environment. The third focused on the tools of the designer and how they can be applied to the play area design. Nevertheless, chapter 8 merged the three different perspectives and the criteria discussed earlier into a thoughtful core of different factors, constraints, and parameters for designing for children’s play and the necessity for a highly trained team to work collaboratively in designing efficient and effective playgrounds.

Chapters 9 to 11 introduced key specific issues. First, investigate the design of play areas within early childhood institutions, and whether these play areas are separately defined, part of a school, or part of a public park. Hendricks concluded by listing several elements and design features which would foster the concept of ‘Playing is living.’ The second topic concerned itself with designing play areas at public parks with less supervision; to support the notion that children should live the city life and feel the natural topography with great playfulness, liberate and welcome experience. Then, it was important too, to study the playground at schools and how design of these play areas should reflect educational curricula in schools and the different social factors associated with different age groups.

Later, in chapters 12 to 14, Hendricks broadens the understanding of play within the outdoor
areas and other spaces inside the city life with respect to the environmental nature, city culture and surrounding diverse communities. In addition, she emphasized that play areas should engage the children enormous creative potential by introducing design elements, paintings, or even furniture which would provoke the children imaginations, dreams, and activate their brains. Finally, the author succeeded in the concluding chapter by emphasizing the importance of aesthetics relevant to play. In essence, this book is an important endeavor towards an invigorated understanding of ‘designing for play.’ It is an excellent guide for architects, urban designers, landscape architects, and those who make decisions about shaping children environments.

--------------------------------------

Remah Y. Gharib

Remah Gharib is an Assistant Professor of Architecture and Urban Design in the Center for Research on Islamic Architecture and Planning at Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies, Qatar Foundation. Dr. Gharib contributes to the Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies by teaching two courses at the Masters level; Survey of Islamic Architecture in the world and The Planning principles of the Muslim City. He received his PhD in Architecture and Urban Design from the University of Nottingham, where he developed his knowledge of revitalization and management of historic quarters. His research focuses on the aspects of public policy formulation and Implementation. Prior to receiving his PhD, he earned his Masters of Architecture in Urban Design at the School of Built Environment in the University of Nottingham. He received his Bachelor of Science in Architectural Engineering from Misr International University in Cairo - MIU where he was appointed as an assistant lecturer and taught Urban Design Theories and Urban Design Studios. He can be contacted at rgharib@qfs.edu.qa or remah_gharib@hotmail.com.