



# LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS  
MODOS DE HABITAR

**ABADA EDITORES**

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## ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD  
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# La casa y los niños: modelos arquitectónicos del Movimiento Moderno

## *Housing and Children: Architectural Models from the Modern Movement*

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### **Resumen**

Al largo del siglo XX, visto por Ellen Key cómo el siglo de los niños, diferentes eventos políticos, sociales y culturales ocurrieran en los países occidentales que fueran responsables por una nueva consciencia sobre la necesidad de espacios adecuados para los niños. Además de los espacios para la educación y los deportes, también los espacios domésticos fueron influenciados por las demandas de los niños, frecuentemente conectadas a las necesidades de las familias. La asimilación de las necesidades de los niños en la arquitectura de la casa pueden ser analizadas segundo múltiples perspectivas.

El artículo apunta a explorar el impacto de diferentes ideales de infancia y necesidades de los niños en el planeamiento y proyecto de algunos ejemplos arquitectónicos notables del periodo moderno, buscando la comprensión del lugar del niño en la arquitectura de la habitación. Para eso, casas unifamiliares y edificios colectivos, proyectados por arquitectos conocidos serán discutidos.

**Palabras clave:** casa y niños, espacios de los niños, movimiento moderno

**Bloque temático:** Arquitecturas de la casa: el espacio doméstico a través de la historia

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### **Abstract**

*During the 20th century, envisaged by Ellen Key as the century of the child, different political, social and cultural events took place in western countries were responsible for a new consciousness about the need for new and appropriately designed spaces for children. Besides spaces for education and sports activities also the domestic space was influenced by children demands, often linked to the families needs. The assimilations of children's needs in the architecture of the house can be analysed under multiple perspectives covering functional and programmatic aspects, spatial features, and urban, social and political factors.*

*The article aims at exploring the impact of different ideals of childhood and children's needs on planning and designing of some remarkable architectural examples from the modern period seeking to grasp towards an understanding of the place of child in the housing architecture. Therefore, single houses and collective houses designed by well-known architects will be discussed.*

**Keywords:** housing and children, children's spaces, children's playroom, modern movement

**Topic:** Architectures of the house: domestic space throughout history

## Introduction

The growing attention that is now being given to the rights and well being of children and the role that the environment plays in their upbringing had already been declared by Ellen Key in her book 'The Century of the Child' (1900). But it was with Philippe Ariès' book 'Centuries of Childhood' (1960) that an intensive debate began within the field of childhood studies. In his book, the use of spaces and material artefacts provided evidence for claiming that a new idea of childhood had begun in early modern Europe, drawing attention to the need for childhood to be studied from an architectural perspective. In the last two decades, this new field of research has been the subject of several articles published in journals, magazines and books, which have brought this matter to the attention of a wider audience, leading to a discussion of the material culture of children from a multidisciplinary perspective.

During the 20th century, different political, social and cultural events took place in western countries that were responsible for a new consciousness about the need for new and appropriately designed spaces for children, both for their public and private lives. In the beginning of the century, industrialisation process and urban growth, children's birth and mortality rates, the increased participation of women in the labour market, and the decline and regulation of child labour urged the rethinking of urban space to solve insalubrity and public health problems, and raised the attention for the need of safe and healthy children's environments. The Playground Movement in Chicago (1890s), the kindergarten movement, the pedagogical movement of Progressive Education (late 19th century), the establishment of free compulsory education, the recognition of the benefits of leisure and sports activities, along with the legacy of the work of educationalists and pedagogues all these topics contributed with new educational and social objectives that deeply influenced the design of modern facilities for children.

The period between wars was marked by the desire of building a new society where children will play a crucial role as they were recognised as symbols of an optimistic future.<sup>1</sup> Safe and healthy children's environments were considered essential to guarantee the transformation of society. The modern movement project, its functional and rational principles supported by the use of new construction technologies and materials, and the importance given to the design and quality of industrial production, embodied the necessary means to meet these challenges in creating appropriate and attractive designs for children's spaces.

In the period after the Second World War, different challenges were brought to discussion by the destruction of the city centres, the disintegration of social and urban life, and the consequent increase in birth rates and need of reconstruction. Children's needs were placed at the centre of the social policy of post-war welfare states, resulting in a new theoretical approach to urban and architectural questions.

Besides spaces for education and sports activities also the domestic space was influenced by children demands, often linked to the families needs. The assimilations of children's needs in the architecture of the house can be analysed under multiple perspectives covering aspects such as the housing functional programme, the definition of housing typologies, the interconnections between the private and social spaces, the need of protection and surveillance, the need of security and healthy conditions, or the outdoor conditions of collective

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<sup>1</sup> Juliet Kinchin and Aidan O'Connor, *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900–2000* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012) 89.

housing. They also reflect different political ideologies, ideals of societies, social and educational challenges and economical constraints.

The article aims at exploring the impact of different ideals of childhood and children's needs on the design of some architectural examples from the modern period, seeking to grasp an understanding of the place of children in housing architecture. Therefore, the article proposes two different approaches for the understanding of the growing attention on children's issues on the architectures of the modern period: the design of children's spaces in single-family paradigmatic houses, and the relevance of children in the design of collective houses.

## 1. Children's spaces in single-family housing design

One of the most remarkable spaces of the Oak Park Home near Chicago, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for himself, his wife Catherine and six children is the children's playroom extension. The original home dates from 1889, and was modified through three additions designed by the architect to accommodate different programmes: the playroom addition in 1895, the studio in 1898<sup>2</sup> and the garage in 1911. His own house served as the first test for a number of houses that he designed in Oak Park between 1900 and 1913, expressing a new form of American housing architecture known as the *Prairie Style*.

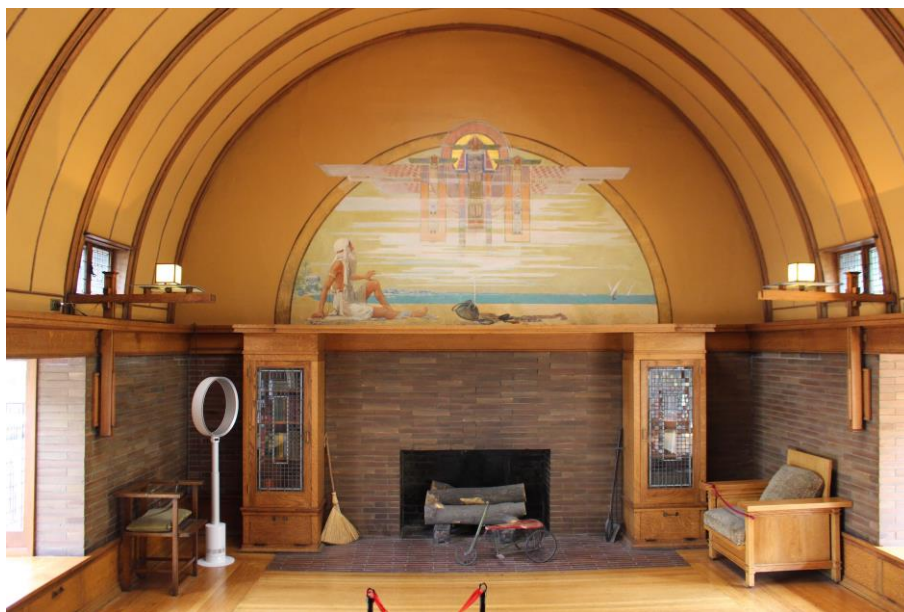


Figure 1: Frank Lloyd Wright, Children's Playroom in Oak Park Home (1895)  
Source: H. Farias (2018)

As the family grew, Wright expanded the house changing it from a compact organization to a multidirectional approach, a cross-axial plan that can be found in later Prairie houses. This extension provided the children's playroom in the second floor, a very flexible programmatic space that could be used as a gymnasium, a kindergarten, a concert hall or a theatre, and in close contact with Catherine's dayroom on the same floor. A narrow and low-ceiling corridor links these two spaces, which contrasts with the great barrel vault playroom ceiling, with a clear

<sup>2</sup> In 1898, Wright moved his practice from Chicago to his new home studio.

span of around 5,5 metres for playing activities. The wood and brick covering of the surfaces; the geometric pattern of the oak skylight that screen the day-light; the large mural over the fireplace, inspired in a tale from the *Arabian Nights*; the upper gallery on the opposite side with different levels of railings, wood bookshelves and a piano, and finally, the oriel windows on either side of the playroom specifically scaled for children that expands the interior to the surrounding garden, all contribute to the drama of the space. Wood and brick materials and geometric motifs in the details contribute to the creation of an internal space that «can still seem cozy and warm even though it is large and open».<sup>3</sup>

The strong spatial, functional, material, and decorative experimentation of the house can be found in the Prairie Houses developments throughout the following decade. Even if some of these houses also included a playroom, this does not mean that this space was part of their functional programme. Also the architectural significance and the remarkable interior environment of the children's playroom of the Oak Park House cannot be found in others playrooms such as the one of the Robbie House. However, it is interesting to notice the spatial organization and the flexible use provided by Wright in the design of the private spaces for children (bedrooms), connecting all the bedrooms in the Winslow House (1893), the Frank Thomas House (1901), and the Arthur Heurtley House (1902).

The significance of children's playroom in the housing programme will be a subject of debate almost fifty later, within the context of the post-war discussion on housing and domestic life in North America. Not so much by its architectural significance, in the sense of Wright's design, but as its educational, social and ideological value and as a new focus of the housing space.

Ogata's comparison between children's housing spaces of the ninetieth century at the attic or large upstairs bedrooms, and the ones from the post war period that were placed at the centre of the house (family rooms, playrooms or play courts) is extremely elucidative about the child-centred attitude not only for the American family,<sup>4</sup> but also their role in meeting American society challenges related to educational reforms, economic expansion and Cold War anxiety. The attributes of informality, cleanness, efficiency and aesthetic dominated the debate of domestic environment that elected the single-family house for middle-class suburban families with children the main target group.

The famous playroom of the 'The House in the Museum Garden' designed by Marcel Breuer (1902-1981) exhibited in garden's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 1949, was among the most appreciated aspects by the ones who visited the house during the exhibition period.<sup>5</sup> Breuer's House symbolizes the large investment on housing research published by architects, designers, and journal's editors in journal, magazines, or museums at that time. Design principles enhanced children's needs and family togetherness, providing distinctive zones of active and quiet spaces, in a more informal environment and open-plan approach, where children and parents shared the same spaces. Children's playroom emerged as one of the key ideas in the smaller middle class dwellings of the post war housing debate. It embodied the strong conviction of the time that play had beneficial effects on children's physical and

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Abernathy, *The Oak Park Home and Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Chicago: Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, 2017) 26.

<sup>4</sup> The post war period in America witness a strong rise in the birth rate between 1946 and 1964.

<sup>5</sup> A sample survey completed by MoMA revealed that the children's bedroom with adjacent playroom was liked by 84% of the people, while 76% were particularly interested in the children's furniture. MoMA, "Modern architecture favored in poll: survey of visitors to house in museum garden reveals majority like new designs". MoMA Press Release, n.º 325655 (1949). (Accessed 6 November 2018) [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_325655.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325655.pdf).

intellectual development, encouraging children’s imagination, and improving social aptitudes, sense of responsibility and self-esteem.<sup>6</sup> In most of the schemes the playroom is placed near the kitchen, where mothers could have a better surveillance and proximity under the children.

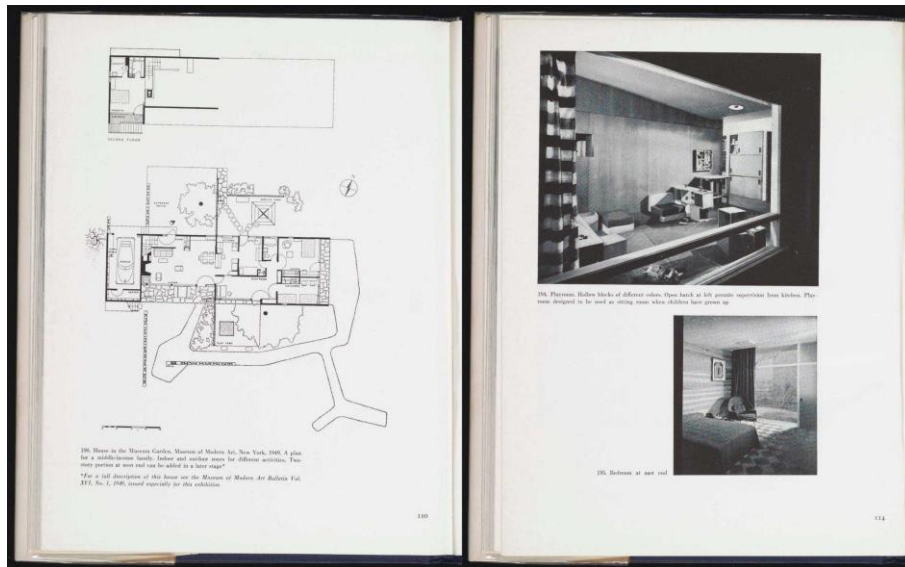


Figure 2: Marcel Breuer, House in the Museum Garden (1949). Plan and playroom (top)  
 Source: MoMA (catalogue online), [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_catalogue\\_3251\\_300090420.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_3251_300090420.pdf)

In the plans for binuclear houses from 1943, Breuer had already expressed his ideas about the needs of an American family living by clarifying the housing programme in an H or U plan organisation which allowed the separation of the day from the night areas. Breuer joined bedrooms, bathrooms and children’s play areas allowing the creation of a ‘separate chaotic domain of children’,<sup>7</sup> in a clear intention of separating it from the parent’s bedroom that was joint to the day area creating an autonomous ‘parent’s house’.<sup>8</sup>

Another example is the Idea House built by the Walker Art Center in 1947 in Minneapolis, designed by William Friedman and Hilde Reiss that became famous when *Life* magazine<sup>9</sup> documented one-week living experience by a local family. A well natural lighted playroom with two adjacent small alcoves, which could be closed off from the playroom by partitions, providing sleeping areas space, was representative of the contribution of children’s spaces for the housing debate of the time.

As Breuer mentioned:

Special consideration is given to the children. In the first phase of the house, stairs are completely eliminated. The children’s playroom has a separate entrance. In the second phase, if there are more than two children, they can take over the master bedroom of the first phase and use the

<sup>6</sup> Amy Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child. Playthings and Places in Midcentury America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 71-104.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Blake, *Marcel Breuer, Architect and Designer* (New York: Architectural Record, 1949) 87.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Armesto, “Fifteen American Houses by Marcel Breuer (1938-1965)” in *Marcel Breuer American. Houses 2G International Architecture Review*, Volume 17, (2001) 12.

<sup>9</sup> “How liveable is a modern house?” *Life Magazine*, 18 October, 1948.