Designing for children allows creative types to lose their inhibitions and re-live their own childhoods, suggest Rianna Fry

CHILDISH ANTICS

Launch by Design
Wizardology room

Like many little ones, I loved nothing more than playing make believe as a child. Carting Baby Born and Tiny tears around in my red-checked buggy, with my pocket-sized purse filled with plastic pennies in tow; I'd spend many an afternoon busying myself. Many children live in homes with a designated space filled with their birthday and Christmas gifts – the golden 'play room'. But, when it comes to the wider world – hospitality and leisure environments in particular – how can children's interests translate within the design of grown-up establishments?

Many venues opt for a designated area for youngsters, a space for them to retreat and have a break from the grownups or – more likely – for the grownups to enjoy a rest from them. In fact, its commonplace for venues, in particular restaurants, with play areas to be favoured over those without when families take a trip out.

From a design perspective, the same principles that apply to any other area of design are still prevalent. 'However, the underlining difference is that when you're creating for an adult, space is stagnant but for children it is continually evolving,' explains Ann Bada-Crema, president of Launch By Design, which creates innovative concepts for children's clubs.

A successful design will induce a child's eyes to light up, and draw them in – it must have wow factor. 'The wow factor is the joy on a child's face,' says Bada-Crema. It must be fun and engaging, and an environment that encourages users to learn without realising it. Incorporating fun colours can harmonise a design, while patterns and textures add depth – especially for younger ones. 'The strategic use of pattern and texture can be used as an educational tool,' suggest Bada-Crema.

With families visiting hotels and leisure establishments worldwide, the design of these areas must translate for all. To achieve this, it's integral for the designer to understand the natural development

stages of children around the world before choosing a concept, and to study their interests. 'Our designs are communicated by the exploration of the five senses, which cross all language barriers,' says Bada-Crema.

It's easy to take the simple option of pasting stickers and wallcoverings of popular figures over the room. However, this should be avoided at all costs because firstly they may not necessarily be interpreted globally and secondly it's unoriginal. 'I don't incorporate popular characters from children's programmes because they already exist,' Bada-Crema adds. 'It serves no purpose to recreate these characters because I want to stay current and respond to the interests of children today.'

Talking of interests, ask anyone below the age of 14 what their favourite game is and, unlike yesteryear, blind man's bluff won't be their response. Oh no, no, no. Not today. The 21st Century child is less a runner, more a sitter. Let's face it, most would rather transfix themselves in front of a screen of some kind and vigorously tap a games console controller. So where does this leave designers?

Well, it would seem that most creative types are embracing this trend, as Bada-Crema suggests; 'I believe that the introduction of technology has not changed the focus of design but had become a natural evolution.' When used effectively, the negative spin we often hear about technology can be erased and replaced with the image of engaging computer software that'll stimulate kids, and even encourage them to become active.

Aside from play areas themselves, other areas of the industry are enjoying the fun of the youth market. Yvonne Lembi –Detert pulled on an episode with her daughter when on vacation, to create kids suites within her hotels, named the Kids With Personality programme. 'With jet lagged kids on overload and crying 'I want to go home' I had a vision to create hotel room suites with reminders of home – plus a bottle of wine for the parents,' she tells us.

When designing these rooms Lembi-Detert, who has a bachelors in interior design, is mindful of ages and the tastes of all members of the family. 'I begin assessing the room layout and the hotel's personality, the coming up with a room design concept that would please the

Personality Hotels' Kids Suite

parent and their little ones.' There's also additional health and safety requirements to consider, foremost being security latches on the windows and a lack of treats in the rooms to avoid allergies flaring up. Aside from the wishes of the user, it's important that the children's areas maintain the branding of the hotel

This is achieved by using the rooms as a continuation of the design found in the rest of the hotel yet with a younger appeal. For example, Hotel Diva's kid's suite is aptly named Little Diva's Suite and has a clean style with introduced elements of colour. Lembi-Detert has incorporated flecks of 'diva' styling, such as pop-art images, feather bowers, jewellery and shoes for dress up.

A return on initial investment hasn't been a concern as, since the suites were implemented, they have proved to be a hit with guests – so much so, in fact that the plan is to incorporate the programme across all hotels within the Personality Group. 'My goal is that families will have

found memories in our kid's suites, and when the kids grow up they will return with their own children,' comments Lembi-Detert.

Regardless of the premises or nature of the space, when creating an area for kids, designers should embrace their inner child, rekindle the fire that sparked their imagination during play and relive the fantasies they once dreamt.

But be sure to keep in mind today's youngsters and their interests, and ensure that the investment is pumped into the right area of design – if it's worth splashing out for, it's worth the thought. Most importantly, don't jump in to the concept expecting it to be plain sailing - acquire the help of a professional – after all, it's not child's play. **hL**