

LESS IS *More*

Transforming 956sqm of generic office space into a design-driven child care centre is a tough task, but The Caterpillar's Cove has done just that.

BESIDES PARENTS AND educators, the physical environment is often referred to as a child's 'third teacher'. This consideration was foremost in the minds of the design team behind The Caterpillar's Cove @ Jurong East, open since May 2014. Co-constructed by The Caterpillar's Cove Child Development and Study Centre and Lekker Architects, it represents a reimagining of the classic schoolhouse, with open-plan classrooms in the 'schoolyard'. Such openness reflects the centre's aim to empower children and to arouse their imagination. Lekker Architects, currently involved in early childhood projects, had no prior

experience in the early childhood (EC) sector when they were first approached by The Caterpillar's Cove Child Development and Study Centre. But that was a reason to engage their services. "Rather than build from a cookie-cutter template of a typical pre-school, we wanted to break boundaries," says Dr Geraldine Teo-Zuzarte, its Centre Director. "Dr Joshua Comaroff and Ms Ong Ker-Shing of Lekker Architects, and a husband-and-wife duo, were very open to new design ideas.

As parents of two young kids, they also shared our primary concern — to create a space that allows children to flourish."

The Jurong East centre has a cosy, home-like and welcoming

atmosphere. Its open concept encourages connectivity with the surrounding community, while bespoke furnishings permit flexible use of the space and open-ended play. "Children need conceptual space to foster their imagination and 'designing less' leaves room for children to 'fill in the blanks' and take ownership of the space," explains Ms Ong, director of Lekker Architects.

For its creative design, the centre was one of 13 projects to receive 'Design of the Year' honours at the annual President's Design Award in December 2015. "This marks the first time an entry from the EC educational field has been given Singapore's most prestigious design accolade," says the centre's Principal, Ms Cynthia Tan. "The award will further uplift the image and elevate the recognition of our sector." ♥

PHOTOS: DAREN SOH

The sandpit in the sheltered alfresco zone allows pre-schoolers of all ages to engage in open-ended play.



SAND PIT

Conical structures can be imagined as hills, trees or other outdoor elements.

OPEN BAY

Centre's office makes up the interior of the 'schoolhouse'

Open-plan classrooms reside in the 'schoolyard', with pillars made to resemble trees.

Big windows promote transparent boundaries.



A 'mound' with steps means all children can sit and see the teacher during storytelling sessions.

Shelving units are used as storage on one side, a whiteboard on the other, and to demarcate learning zones.



A sharing session with the children, conducted like a 'conference'.



Ms Siti believes in nurturing children by allowing them to model themselves on adults around them.

It's all ABOUT *Intent*

For an innovative learning environment, you need to refresh old routines and review existing practices, says Ms Siti Nurrafidah, winner of a 2015 ECDA Award for Outstanding Early Childhood Teacher.

RECOGNISED BY THE Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) last year for her efforts in creating innovative learning environments for pre-schoolers, Ms Siti, Level Head of MOE Kindergarten @ Tampines, is no stranger to innovation. What sets apart an innovative environment from a non-innovative one, says the 31-year-old who has been working in the early childhood sector since 2005, is simply "intent" built on well-

SITI NURRAFIDAH
31, Level Head of MOE Kindergarten @ Tampines

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOE KINDERGARTEN @ TAMPINES

researched principles.

"A standard learning environment is routine," Ms Siti explains, "but an innovative environment is one in which the teacher makes a conscious effort to make learning different every single day. I base my inspiration and innovative ideas on Jim Greenman's book, *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments that Work*."

Ms Siti cites a "conference table" in her classroom as an example. "The idea came about when I was thinking of how to encourage children to hold conversations and engage in discussions without inhibitions," she says. Ms Siti decided to create a meeting space in which the children could role-play as adults. "We created a conference table and set it up to look like [one in] an actual office. Children love the idea because they can model themselves on the adults around them and how they interact with one another." The meeting space is used to engage children in daily reflection activities and to discuss their learning experiences. To encourage

children to think out-of-the box, Ms Siti finds the 'See-Think-Wonder' routine by Harvard Project Zero useful — as phrases like "I see ...", "I think it could be ...", or "I wonder why you feel ..." help children to share, clarify and expand their ideas and thoughts.

The biggest challenge when it comes to creating innovative learning environments is getting the buy-in from the principal, colleagues, parents and even children. "When people don't understand why you're doing something different, they might not be fully open to the idea. It helps if you share with them your intent, the research evidence, methods and the outcomes you hope to achieve," says Ms Siti.

Since winning the award, she hopes to motivate fellow teachers to embrace innovation in the classroom. "For myself, I'm just glad for the opportunities to be able to share my practices with other teachers and centres," she says. ♥



AESTHETICS MATTER If you are looking to create an innovative learning environment at home, Ms Siti has some tips:

- Allow your children ownership of a clutter-free area.
- They should be able to access safe and developmentally appropriate materials (e.g. child-friendly scissors) at all times.
- Throw in cushions, rugs and potted plants, and suspend soft fabrics for an aesthetically pleasing environment. This invites children to imagine and create.