

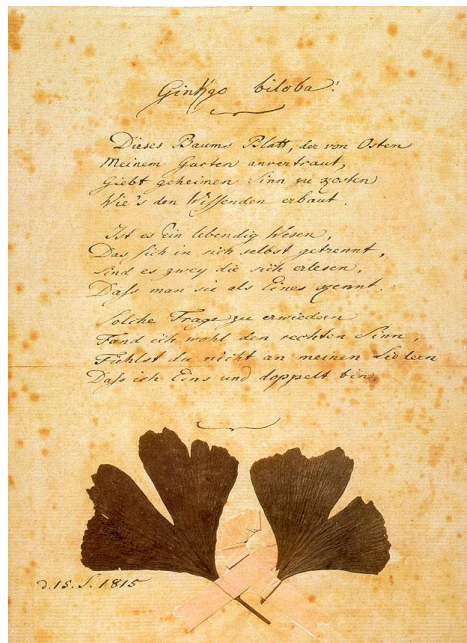
Community Report on the 2014 Waldorf School of Pittsburgh Place Study

-Denise Mahone

The Context for the Place Study:

At the beginning of this current school year, an opportunity emerged for a unique collaboration between our school and the eco-psychology research group I am a part of at Duquesne University called PlaceLab. Having focused for some years on plans for the building, our school was ready to attend to the grounds to discern a plan for the natural outdoor places that would be guided by a core vision and sustainable over time. In alignment with Waldorf principles that honor and respect the natural world, and see the time children spend outside as a vital part of the curriculum, the school wanted to go about this process in a way that respected the unique spirit of the place. The following tenets oriented us: the outdoor place should reflect the educational philosophy of the Waldorf School (that is, they should provide developmentally appropriate experiences for children pre-K-8th grade according to Waldorf pedagogy, and a healing quality should both be given and received from the place); we want to look at the place as a whole rather than the sum of its parts, and respect and enhance the qualities of the place itself by listening to what is there and what wants to live there; and, the process should involve the school community as a whole including the voices of both adults and children, as well as outside experts and friends.

Led by Dr. Eva Simms, a psychologist and former Waldorf parent, PlaceLab developed a method for a multi-part Place Study of the WSP grounds that would both engage the primary stakeholders—the children—as well as adult community members. The Place Study method that evolved was closely aligned with the existing Child Study framework already employed broadly by Waldorf teachers. This methodology is based upon Goethean science—a phenomenological approach that integrates principles of wholeness with close, non-judgmental observation, multi-perspectival conversation, and a sensitive appreciation of how forms change in time.



Poem by Goethe, 1815

Process and Findings:

The Child Map

The first step in our process was to engage with and learn from the children, so we could gain more understanding about their existing emotional connections to the place. In early winter, the 8th graders created a map of the grounds that was then mounted and placed in the front hall of the school. All parents of children from Little Friends through the 4th grade were invited to ask their children to take them on a tour around the grounds and show them their liked and disliked places. Parents were asked to observe and document what their children do there, any stories related to the place that the children may have offered, and include any drawings or other descriptors of relevance. Parents and their children were then asked to mark the map with special pins coded by age that indicated their favorite and least favorite places. Children in grades 5-8 visited and then wrote and drew about their liked and disliked places as part of a class exercise, and then marked their places on the map using their own pins. Parents of these children were sent information about what their children were doing and were encouraged to talk to their children about the places they identified. All parents were asked to provide voluntary feedback about the process and their own impressions of the grounds.

Many of the materials needed for this project were prepared with the invaluable help of the parent volunteers Peggy Yoo, Karen Keagle, Kris Klos, Zena Ruiz, and Katie, Martin and Caprice Kaasa.

Parents of 30 children in Little Friends through 4th grade participated, and all the children in grade 5-8 participated in marking the map and providing qualitative narratives that provided insight into their choices. All of the papers that parents consented to allow the school to archive will be bound into a book that will remain in the library for the community to access.



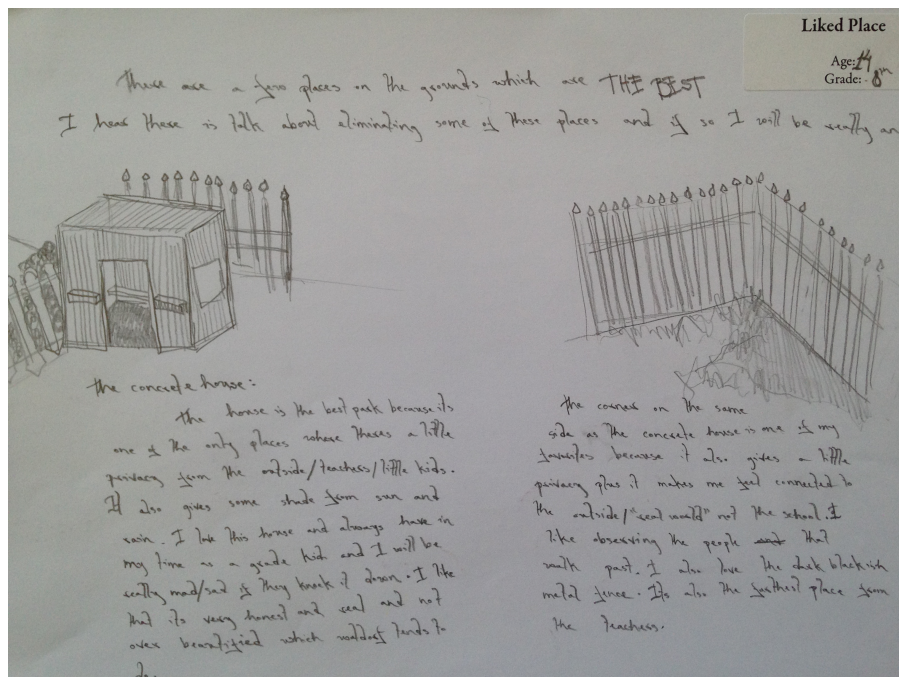
We learned many vital things from the children through this process about which places and qualities of places they were asking to be enhanced and which needed

protection. The following provides a thematic synopsis, organized by places the children identified.

Grades Play Yard

This place emerged overwhelmingly as a favorite place for Kindergarten children and early grades children (1st and 2nd), as well as some nursery children, who focused favorably on the available structures for climbing, jumping and swinging, along with opportunities to be up high, closer to the sky. Some indicated a wish for another swing that would go back and forth rather than spin, touching upon the differences amongst children who need distinct kinds of motion (i.e., some children benefit greatly from spinning, while others get sick). For the older children, 5th-8th grade, this play yard overwhelmingly does not suit their needs as they find it “boring,” lacking equipment suitable for them, and far too muddy when it rains. It also became very clear that the type of play that this place is conducive to is very loud, and the more introverted children seek out the northeast corner under the trees or (especially for the older middle school children) feel annoyed by not having a quiet place to go.

A very interesting thing occurred in terms of children’s feedback about the little yellow house in this play yard. Of the younger children who participated, this structure was identified as a disliked place because it is seen as dirty, claustrophobic, and problematic because teachers can’t see you inside of it and behind it. When the 7th and 8th graders saw all the red pins going up on this yellow house, they responded strongly with their own very different perspective. For them, the little yellow house provides one of the only places to go with friends during recess to gain some privacy from the younger children and teachers. It also provides cover from the elements as these children are not interested in playing in the snow and rain during outside time. They expressed very clearly their appropriate developmental need for a place of their own, and in the absence of one now, said they would be very angry if the yellow house was taken away!

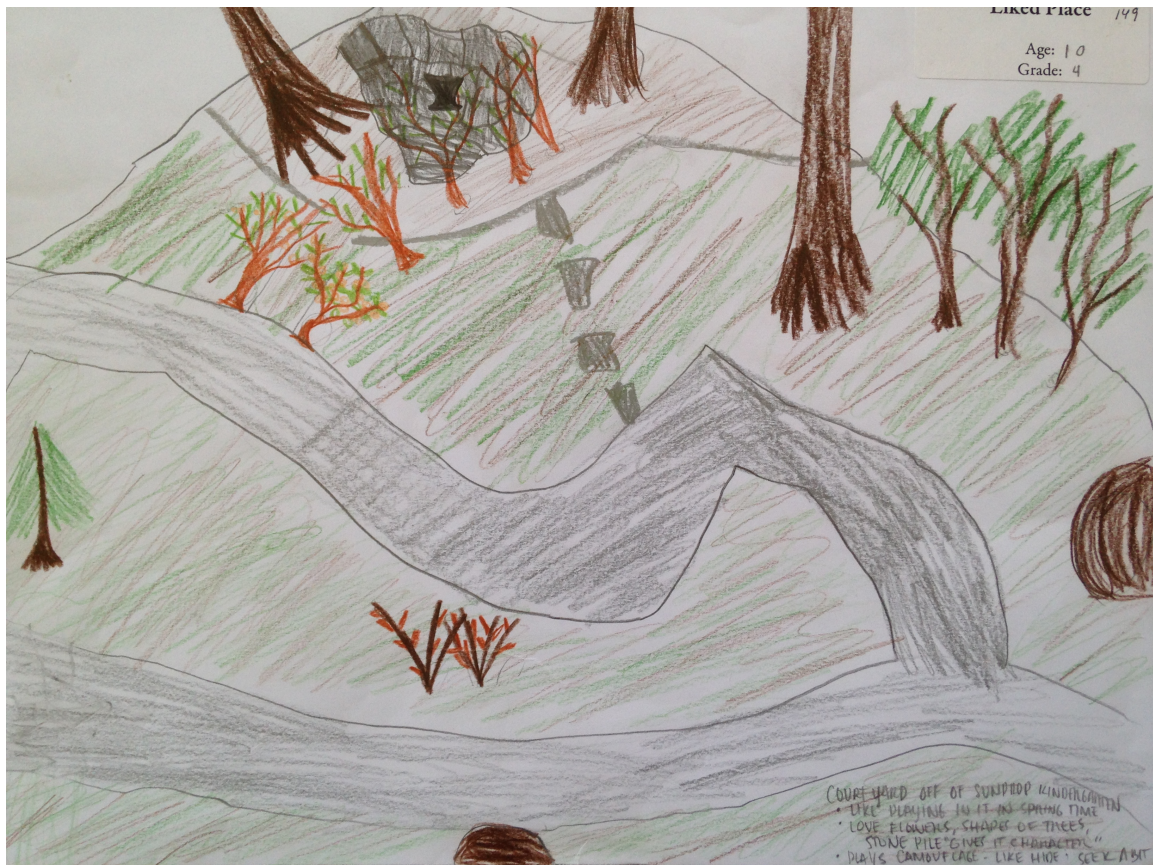


The Courtyard with the water pump and entrance to the auditorium/back of school

Early middle school children identified this place as ugly, boring, and needing to be more friendly and welcoming. At the same time, the catwalk above it was identified as a favorite place because of the point of view and the feeling of height that the space evokes.

The Secret Garden

The courtyard off the back of the Sundrop Classroom was overwhelmingly identified as a favorite place by children from nursery through the 8th grade. This “little world” feels itself to already be whole with its pathways, flowers, large trees and understory, and the favorite rock pile or old fountain that is there. Lately there have been many small fairy houses being built there, which is consistent with the children’s sense of the mood of the place as they reported it. This “magical land” provides some children with “a sense of security under the smaller trees” and a sense that one “can be just who I want to be there.”



The Wishing Tree (the large tree just to the left as you enter the main drive)

Very similar in description to the Secret Garden, this particular tree and its surroundings was also identified by children from 1st-8th grades as a favorite place to feel calm and relaxed, to just sit in and be with the flowers there, and also welcoming of climbing.



The Morning Garden Play yard (Fenced Southeast corner)

Of the children who identified it, only two disliked this place. As kindergarteners, the place seems too small to them. For the younger morning garden children however, this place is very loved because of its tools, its sandbox, and its sitting tree. Other nursery, kindergarten, 1st, and 3rd grade children talked about the sandbox there, the tree that is easy to climb and the climbing dome. Two first graders and a 6th grader named the pines at the back of the play yard there as their favorite place because of its mood as a “haunted forest,” how it was good for climbing and feeling one could hide in the forest there, and the sense one could “feel like a tree there.” Several 6th graders named this play yard as their favorite place on the grounds because of the memories they had playing there as younger children, especially playing in the sandy corner and playing restaurant in the little house.

The “Parking Lot”

5th and 6th grade children identified the compost pile, dumpsters and the southwest corner of the property as all being dirty or ugly. Some younger children talked about the gravel pile as being a favorite place because of the kind of play (digging, shoveling, collecting, etc.) that the gravel afforded. Two 5th graders said they loved the wood shed because of the activities they do there and because it is separate from the main school building, and feels like it is both indoors and outdoors.

The Pergola Area Connecting the Side of the Yellow House to the S Auditorium Entrance

Similar in descriptors used for the secret garden and the wishing tree, this area was identified by middle school children as a “peaceful and relaxing” place that “makes me feel comfortable,” as well as a place with “aesthetic splendor and serenity” where the child could envision seeing more flowers, fruit trees and berry bushes.

The Grey House

This house received no “likes”, and was identified by a 4th, 6th and 8th grader as a place that doesn’t seem to go with the school and even “offends my eyes.”

The Yellow House Play Yard

This play yard was identified as very loved by Morning Garden, Little Friend, Nursery, Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd and 6th grade children, weighted more toward the younger children. These children named repeatedly the mulch pile, or “mulch mountain,” as their favorite aspect, along with the “river” flowing through it that the children make bridges on top of. The 6th graders associated the place with good memories from the past and felt a strong connection to it for that reason. The children who disliked this area was due to the “gushy sand” there (because of the water flow in the area), the sense by an older child that it was more for younger children, and the feeling of a Morning Garden child that the cellar door on the yellow house was a bit scary—“I don’t like this secret passage.”

The Front Play Yard

Several children disliked the Ginko trees because of the smell of the berries, and noted the sense that it feels like “nothing is there” in this play yard—for younger children, this seemed related to the lack of shovels and tools, while older children expressed a sense of lack of care there. One 6th grader noted that the fence changed the space from feeling open and free, and expressed annoyance that some of the lower branches of the pine trees were cut so no one would climb them, taking away “the best part.” Morning Garden, Nursery, and Kindergarten children love the beehive, but one noted it is too scary to get down from.

Parent Perspectives

21 parents completed the feedback form and shared several very important insights of their own about the grounds and their observations of the children during this process. The following is a synopsis of parent perspectives:

-Many parents were surprised that their children showed them places parents had either not been aware of before or were not “designated” play areas, challenging parental expectations. Examples include the corners in the grades playyard, the courtyard (secret garden) area, the wishing tree along the front drive, the pines in the MG play yard, and small details such as one child showing his mom the rocks in the yellow house play-yard that are his favorite because he always can find bugs underneath them.

-Parents often expressed their own reaction to, or shared their child’s perception of, certain places as “ugly,” especially the parking lot area, the garages, and the grey house. Parents also noted that the play areas didn’t feel connected to each other, and there was a general problem with inhibited flow across the grounds as a whole. On the other hand, one parent expressed comfort with the feeling that the whole campus was held/enclosed by the surrounding fence.

-Many parents noted that “liked” and “disliked” had much to do with the kinds of activities that certain places afforded or did not offer. (For kids who love to climb, for example, all the favorite places were places that afforded this opportunity). Disliked places sometimes had less to do with the physical place than the fact that negative social interactions had happened in certain places (For ex., the sandpit in the MG playyard is where boys create fairy traps and so on).

-Parents expressed their own emotional connection to certain places, particularly the MG play-yard where they had spent many mornings with their child. One parent noted how her child had seemed to move on to the grades play yard and had sadly seemed to “forget” the MG one. As we saw with the older children, often nostalgia and love for those earlier places re-emerges strongly around 6th grade. As well, places like the grades play-yard that allow a space for parents to congregate after pick-up was seen as very positive and nurturing of parent relationships with each other.

-Parents expressed the sense that asking children about their places was an empowering experience for them, and parents were grateful for this.

-Some expressed a strong wish for grass and more gardens, and lamented the mud as well as the ginko berries.

-The process allowed some parents to enjoy spending time on the grounds again, and to notice the positive changes in the grounds over the past 3 years. Parents saw the grounds as both well loved and as needing more attention, with one parent being very inspired to look at examples of natural and Waldorf play yards and could really envision our grounds transforming.

Goethean Study of Place

The next phase of our process was to identify at least 12 (following Goethe) perspectives from adults both in our immediate school community and within our broader Pittsburgh community. We invited 22 individuals who came with a breadth of expertise ranging from landscape design, architecture, education, environmental engineering, artists, eurythmists, and so on. This diverse group participated in three successive gatherings, starting with a Saturday morning workshop in mid-March. This first gathering asked all of these participants to set aside their expertise and spend time individually on the grounds looking at what was there with new eyes, following the Goethean process. Participants noted their first impressions of the place and deepened their perception through non-judgmental description. They observed and journaled about the elemental forces at play in the place, including the material structure of the place (earth element), the flowing changing principle of the place (water), the moods of the place (air), and the warming, social aspects of the place (fire).

Before the next meeting, participants were asked to meditate on these aspects of the place and notice changes in their awareness, continuing with journaling. They were asked to put into a sentence what the place is saying and create a mandala on provided paper that symbolized and evoked the spirit of the place.



The goal of the second evening together in early April was for all of the participants to share the findings of their own individual research process with each other, giving space for each perspective to be heard. Each participant shared what they heard the place saying, described their mandalas, and placed the mandalas on what would become known as the adult map. At the end of the evening, consistent themes and areas of focus had emerged amongst the group, such as the sense that the place needed to breathe, that there were certain places that already felt whole, and that there were differences between places that invited children to play *on* them rather than *in* them.

The goal of the third meeting at the end of April was to take what the children had offered through the child map process, what the teachers offered in terms of insights into what children need developmentally, and what themes had emerged during the second meeting, and engage in an envisioning process. The participants broke out into three groups and went back out to three specific areas of the grounds to envision together, based on the multiple perspectives they were holding, what ideas wanted to live there (fire element), what

moods and activities were appropriate there (air), what kinds of spatial enclosures, relationships and gestures could achieve this (water), and what material changes could achieve this (earth).

Having proceeded first from direct observation of the physical phenomena into the being of the place, we then moved from the realm of ideas and imagination back to the material changes. This allowed us as a group to come to a communal consensus about what the grounds could be, guided by a sense of shared respect for the spirit of the place. We came away with a shared sense of clarity and commitment that gave the Green Team a clear working map of the vision for what the place itself wanted to be.

A full report of this process outlined by PlaceLab, with articulated steps, will be available to the Waldorf community as part of the Place Study Archive.

Holding the Vision

As the master plan develops, the following material changes and enhancements are being held: To enhance the existing sense of wholeness in the courtyard area behind the Sundrop classroom and along the northeast length of the fence and connect the two areas via a green pathway; To transform the courtyard area where afternoon pickup happens into a more welcoming space for meeting; To create a grades play yard with undulating topography, natural climbing opportunities, and various swinging and balancing opportunities; To provide a dedicated place to middle school children to congregate and commune that gives them developmentally appropriate privacy while also keeping them proximal; To transform the south parking lot into a commons for community ritual, performances and gathering, and a field for running play, sports, and Pentathlon practice; To create a swath of varied agriculture along the whole south facing side of the property, including gardening beds, the chickens, and an arboretum; To provide soft pliable earth for the children to dig into and waterways for the young children to dam on the west side of the property to enhance the existing water element there; To support a restoration of the front of the school grounds using native species and minimal engineering so the place can become a site for continual observation of ecological processes by the children; To soften boundaries and fences with climbing vegetation, create peek-a-boo opportunities between places and integrated archways; And, to eliminate or minimize as much as possible the presence of cars on the property.

Next Steps

Realizing this vision requires a phased approach over time, the Waldorf Green Team (Kirsten Christopherson-Clark, Ed Nelson, Devon Wood, Anne Clair Goodman, Molly Mehling, and Julia Sawyer) is beginning with a transformation of the Grades Play yard this summer, with the generous assistance of a grant gifted to us by our community neighbors, Ryan and Vera England, directors of Earth and Vessels. Ryan participated in all three meetings of the Goethean process and we are extremely grateful and blessed to be in such an exciting community partnership with him and his wife. Parents are invited and encouraged to help! If interested, please contact Brendan at bfroeschl@waldorfpittsburgh.org. A heartfelt thanks to the whole community for embracing this process and for your warm participation!