

Play Installations for Children: The Aesthetic Dimension in Pedagogical Proposals of Future Educators

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Abstract

The article analyzes the aesthetic dimension of play installations designed by university students of Early Childhood and Social Education in a Spanish inter-university project. These installations respond to the complexity of children's spontaneous play by highlighting its pedagogical value and the importance of the aesthetic dimension. The approach chosen is arts-based educational research. Through iconographic analysis, 20 play installations created during the Covid-19 lockdown are analyzed. Proposals located in interior domestic spaces, but seeking spaciousness, are highlighted. Circular, vertical and cave-like scenarios linked to children's movement, encounter and protection stand out. Color is often used with a definite aesthetic intent. Texture, and especially light, are the least used elements, although they highlight the high sensory value and the playful potential of the

proposals that do use them. The importance of educating these future teachers and educators on the influence and aesthetic possibilities of the visual arts in their didactic designs for children's play is emphasized.

Introduction

Childhood and art share common elements linked to the use of the five senses, sensitive observation and the capacity for discovery and wonder. Starting from sensitive observation makes us pay attention to detail, feel different nuances, pause where we do not usually look, use other senses and languages, be fascinated, and allow ourselves to be amazed (L'Ecuyer, 2013). These processes are particularly significant in art and also in early childhood, when children begin to explore their immediate environment by manipulating different objects and exploring different spaces in order to understand the world around them. Sensory-motor exploration and symbolic play become the main mechanisms of learning and development for children under the age of seven, enabling access to different codes and symbols of the social and cultural context, especially from the age of two onwards. Spontaneous play is also the most natural way for children to obtain pleasure and to express their creative capacity, as they feel free to create (Winnicott, 1982). On the other hand, aesthetic pleasure, understood as stimulation of the senses, emotion, amazement (Carson, 2012) and pleasurable subjective experience that is directed toward an object without being mediated by an imposed intermediate reasoning (Reber et al., 2004), enables us to establish connections between ideas, concepts and metaphors through the constant abstraction and interpretation we make of the immediate environment, allowing us to learn to perceive and intuit empathically through multisensory perception (Webster & Wolfe, 2013).

From that perspective, authors such as Abad & Ruíz de Velasco (2021), Álvarez-Uría et al. (2022) and Chapman & O'Gorman (2022) advocate the need to connect spontaneous childhood play with aesthetic pleasure and propose play scenographies inspired by art installations. That is, to take art and the aesthetic dimension into account in all pedagogical and play proposals for children under seven years of age in order to promote practical and functional polysensory experiences of exploration and spontaneous play (Andrade-Guirguis, 2021; Birch et al., 2016), so important for child development and learning (Nilsson et al., 2018; Sanderud & Gurholt, 2021; Winnicott, 2018) and for their creativity (Blanco & Cidrás, 2022; Sternfeld et al., 2024; Vecchi, 2018). Thus, the didactic project, in addition to encouraging playful initiative, favors the acquisition of an aesthetic knowledge that allows a greater appreciation of the senses and facilitates a more subjective appropriation of reality (Kraus, 2008; Pérez-Valero et al., 2024). Children come closer to the beauty, criticism and poetry that emanate from artistic works and are thus offered better opportunities for exploration, development and learning.

Contemporary art, being more conceptual and formal than the art of previous periods, valuing experimentation as a fundamental value and mixing various disciplines and scenarios, invites us to reflect and re-signify the work to go through, interfere and even transform it by interacting with it and creating new spaces, relationships and meanings that can be projected onto childhood play. In this sense, contemporary art installations are undoubtedly a source of reference for conceptually understanding the interactions between aesthetic concepts (lighting, organization of the pieces, color, textures...) and for finding plastic ideas that can be applied in the construction of spaces for spontaneous play (Ardenne, 2006; Bilir-Seyhan & Ocak-Karabay, 2018; González-Vida & Limperi, 2021). In this respect, some of the most significant antecedents are the works described below. All of them stand out for their nature as installations, their invitation to play and explore, the use of aesthetic aspects as fundamental factors of inquiry and the application of unstructured materials, increasing the possibilities of formal, tangible and conceptual transformations. All of these aspects, in turn, are central to childhood play. Long (2004), Whiteread (2005) or Miura (1989) propose different installations in natural or museum spaces through which they encourage us to change our vision of the world by reassigning other meanings. Their elements and structures stimulate visitors to *play* with ideas, sensations and meanings. One example of this is the work 'Five Paths' (Long, 2004), where the trajectory, occupation and arrangement of natural elements are key terms that invite movement, contact with and playful and personal rediscovery of the natural world. Likewise, in the installation 'Embankment' (Whiteread, 2005), the arrangement of multiple white polyethylene blocks, molded from cardboard boxes, forms a labyrinthine landscape symbolizing the relief of the mountains or an urban skyline where the spectators lose themselves in order to imagine the multiple interpretations of the labyrinth structure. Something similar occurs in the work of Miura (1989), in his work on calligraphic exercises, using colored ribbons hung from the ceiling to materialize the concept of Japanese writing. The verticality and the enveloping elements, which expand and blend together, symbolize harmony between color, form and movement, fundamental conceptual elements to be considered in a playful installation. In turn, Soto (1982) uses nylon threads hanging in front of a background and different optical and sensory effects to fully incorporate the viewer into the installation 'Penetrable', by playfully experimenting with spatial perception, generating a changing and ethereal environment. Serra, in turn, in the work 'The Matter of Time' (2005), organizes different sculptures that transform as the visitor walks through and around them, creating a dizzying sensation of space in motion and sound, together with the expanding temporal dimension, just as in playful action. In the same way, the work 'Dhatu' by Turrel (2009) shows us how, through light, the artist transforms color and generates new visual spaces that encourage us to meditate and find ourselves within an immersive and transformative environment. The energetic and unrestricted nature of the installation by Creed, 'Work N°. 370 Balls' (2004), encourages visitors to casually kick and throw the balls of different sizes, colors and materials that make up his work, which accentuates the more

impulsive and cathartic facet of free play. From a diverse conceptual perspective, González-Torres, in his work 'Untitled' (1991), places sweets in a corner of an exhibition hall where viewers can move, pick up, eat and return the wrappers. Gradually, the work diminishes, symbolizing the passing of life and a critique of consumerism. At the same time, on the basis of common materials, it refers to childhood and the happiness of pleasure in correlation with the taste of the sweet. In this respect, art installations turn out to be a form of expression, with clear playful overtones, that respond to and reflect on the present time, its context and its contradictions (Vial Kayser and Coëllier, 2021). These artistic structures use natural and sensory elements to create immersive experiences that evoke landscapes, shape time and encourage symbolism or social critique through interaction. This places them in an ideal framework from which to conceptualize and design spaces related to contemporary childhood at a pedagogical and research level (Vecchi, 2018; Thompson, 2007).

The creation of play scenarios based on artistic installations (Gómez-Pintado et al., 2022) and the analysis of the role of the aesthetic dimension in childhood exploration and play can provide a valuable learning and research space for future education professionals (Soto & Ferriz, 2014). The installation's preparation allows the imaginary projection of what children's play can be and how the different aesthetic elements can enable their interaction in a constructed space (Luostarinen & Schrag, 2021). As in an art project, university students of Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Social Education must think about the context of space, seeing its potential in terms of light, size, route, etc. On the other hand, they must choose materials, shapes and textures to transform the space for the specific purpose of children's play. Through construction of the play installation, the student becomes an artist who creates an unprecedented work, confronts the materials, investigates the form and decides the composition, etc., placing themselves in the shoes of a set designer. Through observation and subsequent analysis, the students learn the implications of their decisions in the pedagogical task. Nevertheless, as noted by Bautista et al. (2018) and Marín Viadel et al. (2020), it is still necessary to improve the artistic training of educators and teachers, and adopt an interdisciplinary approach that brings together play, pedagogy and art in the didactic proposals for children (Gómez-Pintado et al., 2022; Schulte & Marmé Thompson, 2018).

Arts-based educational research (Franks & Thomson, 2019; Schulte & Marmé Thompson, 2018) opens up possibilities in this respect. According to Barone & Eisner (2008), this type of inquiry 'improves our understanding of human activities through artistic means' (p.95). Artistic language, in all its forms, allows a sensitive inquiry into the contents studied because it highlights its aesthetic qualities. For Marín-Viadel & Roldán (2019), educational research based on the arts may consist of an object or a visual image (or series of images), regardless of their support (photographs, drawings, comics, paintings, films, performances, sculptures, furniture...) that is analyzed based on the domains of visual languages from its approach,

development process, mode of argumentation and final conclusion. Play scenographies, therefore, can also form part of this field of study (Ruíz de Velasco & Abad Molina, 2011; Callejón Chinchilla & Yanes, 2012). Nevertheless, there are few initiatives in higher education from this perspective, and they are clearly insufficient. For all these reasons, it seems appropriate to reflect on the design of play installations by university students of ECE and Social Education in Andalusia (Southern Spain) and to analyze, from the visual arts standpoint, the aesthetic dimension of their proposals. After all, these future ECE teachers will have to design scenarios and play proposals in schools and analyze their pedagogical value. And social educators may be faced with the challenge of promoting aesthetic, playful and educational experiences for children under 7 years of age in museums, cultural associations and different contexts other than schools.

Research Methodology

This study is part of an Andalusian inter-university teaching innovation project on the configuration of symbolic play installations for children¹. It responds to a line of research focused on the interrelations between symbolic play and the analysis of educational spaces, such as the school and urban environment, from which two doctoral dissertations in visual arts and pedagogy in ECE are derived². The aim of this project is to improve the training of university students of ECE and Social Education in the design, implementation and evaluation of such installations, taking into account their aesthetic dimension. The study involves the participation of university students of the subjects ‘Symbolic Play Workshop’ at the University of Huelva and ‘Art and Culture’ at the University of Granada (Spain), coordinated by their respective lecturers. The project was carried out from October to January in the 2020-2021 academic year in virtual mode, as a consequence of the Covid-19 lockdown. The main project phases were: 1) theoretical grounding; 2) students' design of play installations; 3) assembly of the installation; 4) experimentation of play installations; and 5) analysis and evaluation of the proposals.

To help the students formulate the play scenographies, which would be the object of evaluation in their respective subjects, the teaching staff specialized in pedagogy and

¹ Play installations for children. Improving the initial training of future teachers from the Didactics of Visual Arts and School Organization". (PID-ED202021). Director: Inmaculada González Falcón. Funding agency: Training and Teaching Innovation Service of the University of Huelva, Huelva, Spain.

² The doctoral dissertations to which the project is linked is "Childhood landscapes in the daily educational journey between the city and school: A collaborative ethnography based on visual arts with children in the Municipal Early Childhood Schools of Granada (Ages 0-6)" by Cinta Báez, Doctoral Programme in Arts and Education, University of Granada (FPU16/05973), and "The school environment as a space for life, relationships, and learning: A participatory ethnography with three-year-old children during the COVID-19 pandemic", by Katia Álvarez, Doctoral Programme in Educational Sciences, University of Huelva.

symbolic play educated the students of the two subjects on the importance of symbolic play in childhood, the types of play and the meaning of play installations as a pedagogical resource; while the lecturers in didactics of the visual arts did so on artistic references of play installations and scenographies and the use of photography as strategies for registration and narrative construction of the project. In both cases, emphasis was placed on the aesthetic dimension of play installations to promote children's curiosity, exploration, culture and learning. The students analyzed a set of art installations that served as a reference for them, paying attention also to the use of aesthetic aspects (color, textures, shape, form, etc.). They could use them as inspiration but were not allowed to directly copy them in their proposals for playful scenographies. The students were also able to benefit from lectures and tutorials from the university teaching staff of both Faculties of Educational Sciences, thanks to the use of online teaching. In this sense, in addition to the explanations given by the lecturers during the classes to guide them in carrying out their practical work, the students had three hours of tutoring per week to request revisions to their work and to resolve any doubts or queries. In all cases, emphasis was placed on the importance of reflecting on how the aesthetic aspects of the materials and scenography of play could favor children's experiences of exploration and play.

A total of 20 play installations were designed. It was the students, organized in working groups of four to six people, within the framework of each subject, who decided which scenography to create and carry out. Initially, the aim was to allow them to experience them with children in schools and museums or cultural associations, but due to the continued lockdown due to Covid 19, the play installations took place in the homes of university students, by selecting the resources available to them. Only some of the play scenarios could be experienced by children from the students' families. Each group of students included in a final written work the sketches and preliminary designs of their installation, photos of the final setup and scenography of play and, where possible, photographs and analysis of the children's interactions and play.

In this article, we investigate the design of the play installations implemented by university students in both subjects, analyzing their aesthetic dimension and intentionality. That is, the aesthetic elements they take into account and highlight in their designs and the artistic references they draw inspiration from. The material we analyzed was the work carried out by the university students in both subjects and the play set designs that illustrate the photographs and videos taken by the students themselves.

Arts-based educational research (Franks & Thomson, 2019; Schulte & Marmé Thompson, 2018) was applied, focusing, in this case, on the interpretation of the visual, material and aesthetic elements present in the installations of the university students and, more specifically, their semiotic-aesthetic approach (Beardsley, 1975). In this sense, the play installations were

analyzed according to the main categories that define the aesthetic dimension of artistic (Lara-Escobedo et al., 2011) and pedagogical proposals focused on childhood (Abad & Ruíz de Velasco, 2021), and which we understand as follows:

- Location: corresponds to the place and shape of the site where the installation is set up.
- Space: specifies the spatial organization of the installation.
- Form: the elements of the installation are related to each other thanks to an intention based on the way in which they are arranged.
- Color: the proposal includes color or chromatic choice as an essential and significant element of the installation.
- Texture: textures act as a fundamental interaction element in the proposal and are defined for aesthetic and pedagogical reasons.
- Lighting: the lights and their possible shadows are part of the play installation design and are taken into account when setting up the scenario.

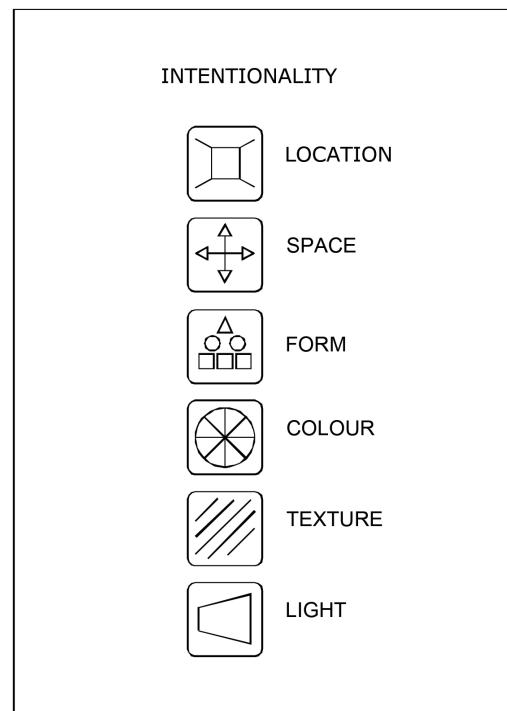


Figure 1. Legend of conceptual icons according to aesthetic intentionality.

To this end, we used both graphic—creation of iconography—and photographic—sample series—instruments (Egas, 2018; Marín Viadel et al., 2020). This research approach allows the appropriation of quantitative and visual data from an aesthetic perspective that gives a sensitive value to the results. The creation of icons allows us to symbolize the categories of analysis or visual concepts that correspond to the aesthetic-pedagogical intentionality of the

students. In this respect, we have taken as reference the contributions of Eslava (2018) and the semiotic application to architecture according to which architecture is action, movement from the children's game and what this means for them (Bürdek, 2002). The features of the installations are thus analyzed through a set of icons that precisely designate aesthetic and structural decisions and intentions (Franks & Thomson, 2020; Lara-Escobedo et al., 2011) and which allow access to a global and overall view of the 20 proposals designed by the students. Figure 1 presents the list of the icons created by the researchers for analysis of the students' work.

On the other hand, the sample series was chosen as a photographic composition to group images from different authors and 'show different cases or elements of a set' (Marín Viadel et al., 2020, p. 215) - our study, the common or disparate elements of the students' proposals. Iconographic creation therefore favors a greater understanding of the concepts studied and the creation of visual series and an aesthetic appreciation of the classified results. After clarifying the meaning of the analysis categories, the researchers analyzed the 20 proposals in pairs and triangulated their results. The process consisted of a detailed analysis of each project, represented by icons, to quantify the categories present in the projects. Subsequently, each of them was analyzed to expand the study of the types of intentionality of each group of students and to compare them with the artistic references that had served as examples in the online training sessions and which are subsequently commented on in the discussion section. The aim was to find out the categories that the students had taken into account and the artistic proposals that had inspired them.

Results

Figure 2 summarises the design intentionality of each proposal, but at the same time affords an overview of the whole.

	LOCATION	SPACE	FORM	COLOUR	TEXTURE	LIGHT
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20						

Figure 2. Installation intentionality analysis.

Analysis of the set lets us demonstrate the most outstanding categories in the aesthetic configurations made by the students. In this sense, the location, space and form in the intentionality of their proposals stand out. Approximately 50% of the students (11 of the 20 proposals) seem to take into account the dimension of color. It is striking that only seven proposals highlight texture as a significant element and that only three of them consider light as a configuring and aesthetic element of the play installations.

Location

The places chosen by the students to set up the play installations can be classified in five categories: 1) inner corner (isolated space of approximately 2m²; 2) medium-sized interior space (middle of a room); 3) large interior space (an entire room or more); 4) medium exterior space (center of a more open space); and 5) large exterior space (open space). As shown in figure 3, most of the students opted to place the installations in interior spaces (16 of the 20 proposals), except for four groups that placed them outside their homes, but always in spaces located in the common areas of the neighboring dwellings (courtyards, corridors, hallways...).

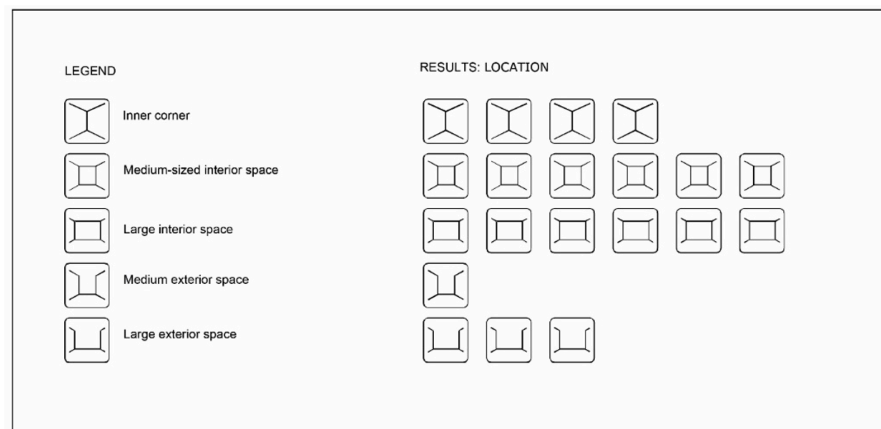


Figure 3. Play installation location analysis.

It is necessary to show that, when setting up the installations in the students' own homes due to mobility restrictions due to coronavirus, the choice of space was affected and surely for this reason highlights the choice of interior spaces rather than the exterior of the residential areas themselves to set up the scenario. In both cases, the medium-sized and large spaces were chosen, as they allow greater room to maneuver when setting up the installation and moving around it. However, there were also four groups of students who chose to set up their installations in an interior corner, indicating that the location of installations was not always neutral.

Space

Spatial intentionality corresponds to the general use of space and can be subdivided into three categories: 1) vertical, 2) horizontal and 3) covered installation. We note that the intention corresponding to the use of space is also predominant, sometimes even combining several purposes. This shows that interaction with space is fundamental in this type of proposals, as it conditions the action of play and orients it toward a specific end. A visual analysis of the facilities presented below was carried out through three series of samples that summaries the set of proposals at the visual level in terms of verticality, horizontality and covered space.

Figure 4, titled '*Mainly vertical play installations*' presents six of the 16 scenographies that have a spatial intentionality. As shown, verticality is the main axis of the installation in them, represented by hanging elements from the roof of the houses. In many installations, this formal and organizational concept is associated with horizontal elements on the ground that are usually associated with circular structures. Figure 5 shows some of the less frequent, preferably horizontal installations corresponding to enclosed corner spaces. They include some hanging elements, although the space that predominates is the square or rectangle of the floor. The formal composition is essential to generate a dynamic of interaction. On the other

hand, closed and covered scenographies are more amorphous due to the need to adapt to the elements that support the cover of the installation, as shown in figure 6.



Figure 4. Mainly vertical play installations. Sample series from students' proposals.

The other four proposals analyzed are not included in this category because they did not demonstrate a symbolic intent or a defined structural criterion. These are proposals in which the scenographic space shows the absence of an aesthetic-spatial decision based on the students.

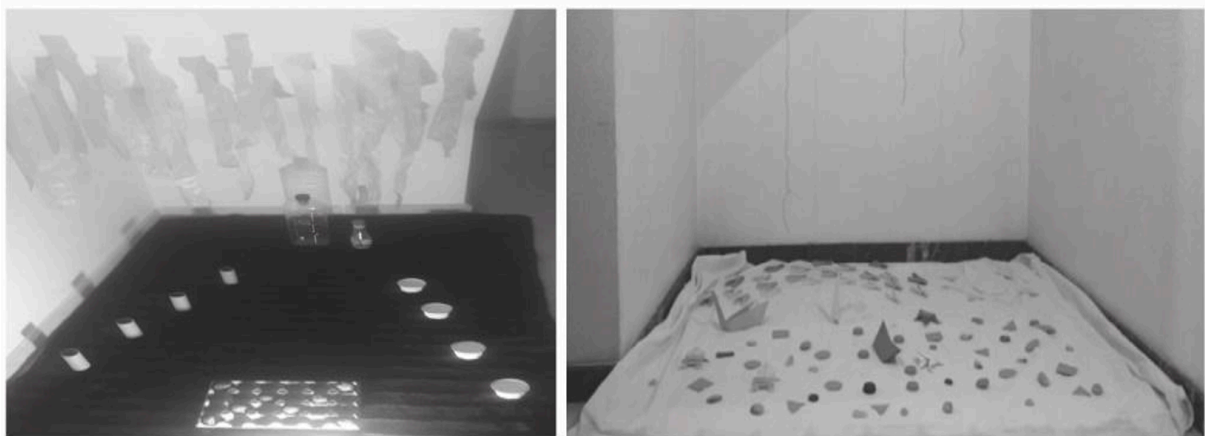


Figure 5. Mainly horizontal play installations. Sample series from students' proposals.



Figure 6. Covered play installations.

Form

Formal intentionality is the third most common intention after spatial and location intentionality. It shows the interest of the students in creating a coherent whole that respects composition and organization criteria among the different pieces. Of the total of 20 proposals, 14 recreated a specific formal organization. We observed how many student groups opted for a circular organization based on spherical or spiral elements, so that the children are attracted to a place that accommodates them. Others chose a more complex geometric composition structured from small elements that are organized in many occasions in an orderly and symmetrical way. Only in a few cases was linearity the dominant element of the proposal.

As in the previous case, there are six proposals that do not respond to any clear criterion in terms of form. They have a very heterogeneous structure, and there are no objects that relate to each other, or the composition has no intention of form or precise symbolic meaning.

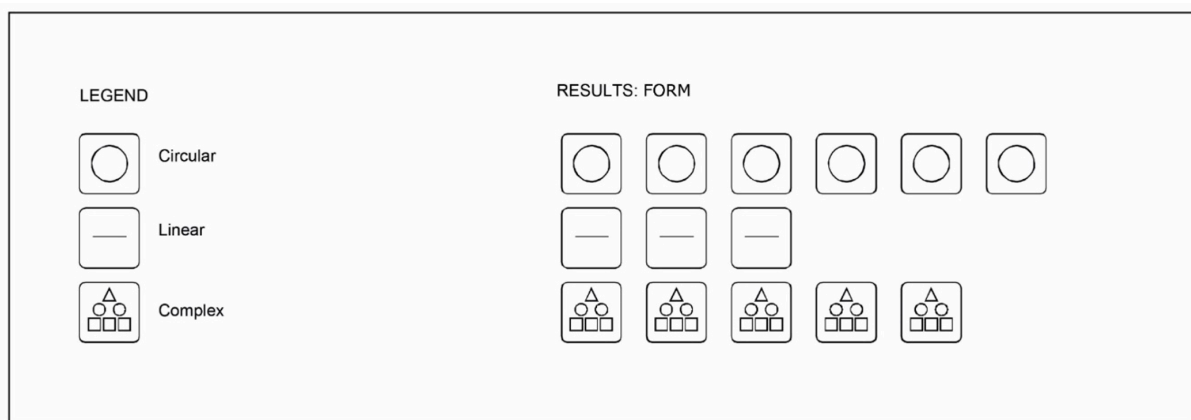


Figure 7. Play installation formal organization analysis.

Color

Of the 11 sets that use color as a key element of symbolic representation, four use a polychromatic representation associated with various elements of the installation, four use three colors (yellow/orange/brown, blue/orange/yellow, orange/brown, white, shades of green) and three use the association of two colors (black/pink, orange/yellow, red/white).

Color is therefore a key point in several projects. It provides a symbolic value to the scenography and aims to focus the children's gaze towards aesthetic aspects, as its importance is evidenced in these proposals.

Figure 8 represents a sample of the scenographies that share the predominant colors of the selection, i.e. brown, orange and yellow.



Figure 8: Play installations with predominance of yellow and orange. Sample series from students' proposals.

Texture

We see how textures are present voluntarily in seven installations and appear in several elements of the composition. Analyzing them all is complex, as they are multiple and present in numerous elements, but we can distinguish two significant typologies: those coming from natural elements (stones, pineapples, sand, leaves...), others from prefabricated/artificial objects usually of stationery (silk paper, cardboard, cellophane paper...) and other objects recovered from everyday life (fabrics, bottles, toilet paper rolls...). The leaves stand out as one of the main resources, with a leading role in many proposals, reinforcing the presence of the natural environment in the proposed playful actions and the high symbolic value of them being easy for children to catch, touch, feel, manipulate and play with.

Light

The use of lighting to build shadows and modify the space was the element least considered

when drawing up proposals. However, the three scenographies that did so gave rise to new possibilities for childhood play. With the changes in the intensity of light (natural or artificial), the scenographies acquire different shades and invite the children to explore the installation in different ways and on different surfaces. In this sense, the lighting has helped highlight other structural elements, such as the walls. In most installations, the students focused on the ceiling (hanging elements) or the floor (arrangement of elements with different shapes). The lighting projection made it possible to highlight the wall surface and incorporate it into the set design to create new games and explorations from the shadows, light contrasts and the child's own action to create effects and characters with their body and hands.

Discussion

The results analyzed allow us to establish some relations and analogies with some of the contemporary artistic references that served as a guide for the spatial projection of the play installations proposed by the students. There is a greater presence of interior spaces of medium or large type and to a lesser extent use has been made of open natural spaces, as we can perceive in the Land Art works by artists such as Long (2004) or Christo & Jeanne Claude (2016). The use of the corner space, as in the work of González-Torres (1991), made it possible to concentrate the symbolic action in a reduced space that confers more intensity at the point chosen and then intentionally generate a spatial expansion of the proposal. In terms of spatial intentionality, it is predominant compared to the other factors and highlights the use of verticality by hanging or stacked elements, as reflected in the Whiteread installation (2005). We also observe the use of primitive forms such as huts, and the presence of horizontality, but unlike Creed's proposal (2000), it focuses on a single space through a circular or concentric layout. However, other formal intentions of linear type were not so frequent, even taking special importance by use of the curve or rectilinear forms in the works of Kapoor (2007) or Serra (2005) in the search for the sound experience.

Some proposals, however, do not respond to a spatial or formal intention. In these cases, no clear correspondence with references to artistic installations is observed. These groups of students seem not to have understood the point of the activity or the meaning of the aesthetic dimension. Their proposals were based on the selection of a series of structured objects decorated with advertising for Walt Disney and other companies, without justifying the aesthetic sense and choice of these objects, emphasizing a consumerist and impoverished vision of childhood and its play. These cases were observed, above all, in future ECE teachers, perhaps due to the more critical spirit that tends to characterize students studying Social Education in Spain. The fact that the design and implementation of their proposals took place during lockdown may also have affected the quality of the papers submitted by the students. Undoubtedly, it had an impact on the lesser presence of natural and outdoor spaces and also limited access to resources that were not present in domestic spaces.

On the other hand, the chromatic intentionality of the students' proposals is mainly characterized by inclusion and subject presence which, occasionally, is presented with some artifice. However, paying attention to some installations such as Miura (1989), Soto (1982) and Kusama (2003), we observe a chromatic use characterized by abstraction, decomposition or the visual force of color reflecting the essence of the forms and the various chromatic ranges. In terms of tactile elements, most proposals are governed by a variety of materials that facilitate body and sensory experiences. Everyday elements that build patterns and textures, such as boxes that open spaces and connect interior-exterior and are destructible as in the works of Zimoun (2020), or threads that allow wrapping, or are connected to suspended elements such as balloons in the style of Marketou installations (2007).

Finally, the luminous intentionality that characterizes Turrell's (2009) proposals was almost non-existent, except for three installations in which lighting was a central point at the level of spatial distribution and the concept of the scenographic context itself, a set of lights and shadows very much in the line of the contemporary artist Ross (1979). This fact makes us reflect on the need to highlight the possibilities of light as a sensory, playful and symbolic element in the educational proposals of ECE and Social Education students. In this respect, interesting avenues of future exploration are opened, focusing not only on light but also on natural resources as objects with great symbolic, aesthetic and sensory loads.

In this way, it is still necessary to advocate a university education that enhances the configuration of the aesthetic-pedagogical sense (Egas, 2018; Lindsay, 2021). Although we observe the predominance of some categories over others in the different proposals created by the students, they do not always seem to consider the importance of connecting the different sensory elements with each other and sometimes lack a clear intention, an initial conceptual argument that gives meaning to what is created and projected aesthetically and symbolically. We observed a certain difficulty in these university students in understanding the symbolic value of the aesthetic dimension. In many cases, they try to reproduce the elements or categories of different artistic references in a single proposal, without finding a common thread that connects them. In other cases, they do not even allude to an artistic antecedent, with some of them even presenting a rather artificial view of play and aesthetics. Once again, the Covid-19 lockdown may have influenced the different results achieved by the students, since to the limitations of space and resources we must add the affective climate and the impact on health that this pandemic had on the students' families. Another influential factor was the use of online tutorials. The best outcomes were observed in the groups of students who regularly requested sessions to clear up any doubts and queries.

For Blanco & Cidrás (2022), the lack of artistic competences of a large part of university students of Education Sciences is evident, given the generalized tendency to reproduce

stereotyped, homogeneous and pre-designed commercial models in didactic and artistic proposals. In this way, there is a lack of intentionality, with little documentation, reflection and analysis. As stated by Abad & Ruíz de Velasco (2021) and Percy-Smith & Carney (2012), the creation of installations can help us do this by serving as a laboratory for reflection, action and plural construction of play, beauty and didactics. Aesthetic play processes are, according to Rüsselbæk & Herdis (2020) and Schulte & Marmé Thompson (2018), vital for learning and participatory understanding of the contemporary educational environment. Despite this, and notwithstanding the interesting contributions and experiences addressed in the studies of Gómez-Pintado et al. (2022) and Marín Viadel et al. (2020), this aspect still needs strengthening in the initial training of teachers and educators.

The application of visual arts-based methodologies opens up avenues in that sense (Blanco & Cidrás, 2022). The outcomes of the present study, as well as those carried out by Blomgren (2019), Barone & Eisner (2011), Hickey-Moody et al. (2021) and Mesías-Lema (2019), emphasize the use of this approach to incorporate meanings that would be impossible to access through conventional languages, making it possible to express the ineffable or unspeakable with words. The construction of a semiotic framework through iconographic concepts from the works of Eslava (2018) has proved useful as a tool for reflection and interdisciplinary dialogue among researchers, being signaled as a road map for future studies. This framework can also serve as a resource to be used in the training processes of future ECE teachers and social educators, thus reinforcing the visual and lighting aspects and their study in the artistic proposals analyzed. Similarly, some aspects linked to the meaning of art and its relationship with the aesthetics of educational spaces, pedagogical proposals and play scenographies are presented as areas for study and exploration. Previous ideas and already constructed conceptions are detected, especially among university students of ECE, which deserve to be approached with greater analysis. The use of compulsory tutorials to monitor the work carried out by the students will also help us to do this, with more individualized advice that will result in a better quality of their proposals.

In short, it is necessary to highlight as key elements for future similar proposals: a) the need for artistic education of the students based on the understanding and appropriation of artistic works; b) the previous analysis of the different configurations of spontaneous play; and c) the understanding of forms and space through experimental exploration. The aim is to contribute to the outlook of future teachers and educators from the perspective of the arts (Cahmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017). Ultimately, they should enhance the imagination, creativity and projective and interpretative potentialities of play installations as aesthetic and educational scenarios for childhood.

Note

Project of teaching innovation and educational research ‘Scenographies of play for children. Improving the initial training of future teachers from the Didactics of Visual Arts and School Organisation’ (PIDIE 20-21). University of Huelva. Coordination: Inmaculada González Falcón.

Disclosure statement

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