

# Home is where the art is: Creating healing environments

**Kerri Rasmaidh**

## **Abstract**

Residential care facilities are both institutional and domestic; they are homes but also places of work. Why is it that residential care homes for children are so generic and soulless, lacking warmth and love? We examine the nature of the individuals who live within residential homes to find an answer to this conundrum and then the resulting solutions, with some suggestion on how to create a nurturing and healing environment for all; a space that feeds the body, mind and soul of those within.

## **Keywords**

Steiner, therapeutic environments, art therapy, soul

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## **Home is where the art is**

Residential care facilities have the seemingly impossible task of creating a 'home', whilst simultaneously being an institutional environment regulated by policies, procedures and legal guidelines. Both children and workers reside in them. Therefore, it is both a home and a workplace, with the added challenge of a transitional population, as residents and workers come and go within the walls of these liminal spaces.

In my work I have visited and worked within many residential care facilities across Scotland. It astounds me, that even though the individuals are different within them, the care purports to provide different care options or care provision, the workers may come from varying backgrounds and philosophical perspectives, ultimately the homes remain formulaic, consistently cold, plain, institutional, unfriendly, drab and clinical. It is as if the walls are only skin deep and the disembodied objects within the rooms, merely floating upon the surface without any depth, connection or solid foundation. The objects that furnish these cut-out spaces may very well be brand new and shiny, but are usually mass produced, made in factories by machines, mostly with human made materials and of ill-construction; flimsy, easily broken, easily discarded and replaced.

What are these spaces telling us about the people who live within them? What are they silently, symbolically expressing about the experiences of those within? Are they speaking of value, worth, care and love?

## **The inhabitants**

The children who live in residential care facilities usually have experience of complex and severe childhood trauma. The trauma overwhelms their beings and senses; the traumatic experiences are indigestible and freeze the developmental progress of the child. As a result, the child cannot regulate their emotions or states of mind, and this leads the child to remain in a hyper-aroused and hyper vigilant state, perceiving all around them and including their environment as potentially hostile and dangerous (Diamond, 2015, p. 301; Carr, 2017, p. 10).

The children have never made a real bond with another human being, they have little or no inner world, they use their environment instead; they are in no position to establish communications because they have no inner equipment with which to do so (Docker-Drysdale, 1968, p. 36).

Barbara Drysdale-Docker explains that the child who has experienced childhood abuse is pre-neurotic, pre-object relations, that is, they have not developed enough ego strength to create defences, therefore exist in a more primitive state of being (Drysdale-Docker, 1968, p. 101).

Psychoanalytic theory describes the ego or soul as the sense of self, the part of the self that is known and can be defined as me. It is through this ego or soul that we make sense of ourselves and the world around us. Trauma inflicted upon children has been referred to as 'soul murder' by Shengold (1989, p. 20), that the child's very sense of self and identity is mortally threatened. Those who have not developed sufficient ego function have also been described as having a wounded or sick soul and the work of the carer is to repair or create a suitable environment enabling the wounded soul to heal or come into full formation.

Shamanic cultures throughout the world describe illness as a loss of soul. The shaman's task is to journey in search of the abducted or lost soul and return it to the sick... The soul cannot be lost in a literal sense because it is always present with us. However, we do lose contact with it's movements within our daily lives, and the loss of this relationship results in bodily and mental illness, rigidification, the absence of passion, and the estrangement of nature (McNiff, 1992, p. 21).

McNiff also offers art and artistic processes as being the most effective way of regaining the lost soul and healing the sickness associated with this. This resonates with what has been written about the power of 'creative psychotherapies', (art psychotherapy, music psychotherapy, dance movement psychotherapy and drama psychotherapy) working specifically effectively with those who have experienced childhood trauma and resulting PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), (Chong, 2015). Chong notes that trauma is not in

the past for those who are suffering from it, it is in their here and now; their feelings, emotions, body sensations, the relationships with others and including their environments (Chong, 2015, p. 117; Rothschild, 2000, p. 7).

Rothschild (2000) describes the somatic nature of trauma and its physiological and neurological effects pointing towards a somatic approach for its recovery, as does Chong when she writes that art is a somatic and sensory healing experience including its capacity to regulate emotion and body experiences through art making, whilst simultaneously working within the area of the brain where the trauma is located (Chong, 2015, p. 121).

## **The environment**

The space we live in is a reflection of the self; the home is an expression of the individuals who live in it; this is a reciprocal relationship. The environment has a large part to play in the healing process of those who have been soul wounded by childhood trauma (Clark, Cameron & Kleipoedszus, 2014, p. 3). 'The salvation of the soul comes when people engage in their environment. Depth is in textures, colors, and movements of actual things' (Mcniiff, 1992, p. 21).

Rudolph Steiner the prolific and revolutionary educator offered very specific directions and advice regarding the use of environment for the guidance, well-being and healing of those who live and work within Steiner viewed the space we live in as alive, stimulating thinking and shaping the possibilities of those within; that space consisted of matter and spirit (Uhrmacher, 2004, p. 98).

Moving deeper with this concept, the very objects within the space are also imbued with life and meaning; art itself is not only for decoration but is a living, communicating, physical manifestation of higher natural laws. The act of art making and the finished object allows individuals to participate and experience elements of the divine that are not possible to know through any other way. Art and its expression bring spirit and/or soul into the earthly world (Uhrmacher, 2004, p. 101).

In this way, forms within space stimulate thoughts and so it is important to examine or think deeply about environments and what is in them, as this

intrinsically affects the thoughts of those who live within. This correlates with the idea of environment as a reflection of how the inhabitants feel and think about themselves. If the environment is creative, wholesome and nurturing then this will make the individuals living in it feel creative, wholesome and well cared for.

Steiner went a step further, proposing that this very careful and thoughtful attention to the environment could create true healing and eliminate wrong doing, transform evil into good in a way that no institution or system of correction or care would ever be capable of (Uhrmacher, 2004, p. 103). This is a powerful thought and one we must earnestly consider when designing, living and working within spaces that care for others.

### **How to build a healing environment**

So how then do we transform the residential care environment into a space of healing and growth? Firstly, we must hold in mind we are not only nourishing the body and mind, but also the soul of the individual; the sense of self that has been wounded through childhood trauma.

The soul is the bearer of our thoughts and feelings, our moods, and artistic inclinations and with its mobility and flexibility we make friends, learn and express ourselves. What feeds the soul is art and beauty, and imagination (Van Duin, 2000, p. 70).

Objects that are made by a person are imbued with the being who made them, the essence of the soul of the maker is transferred into them and they therefore become ensouled objects – emanating soul. This is something mass produced objects do not have or do. In art psychotherapeutic theory there is a concept of an embodied object or image, it holds a feeling state that cannot be communicated in any other way, it is symbolic and has meaning beyond linear thought or expression (Schavarién, 2000, p. 59.) This is the essence of why institutional spaces are soul-less, void of soul, because there is nothing in them that is ensouled and therefore can heal the souls of those within.

If we view the workers as home-makers, they must involve the home community in the task of creating the home. In this way, the home becomes an

expression of those who live within it, reflecting and mirroring back so that one can learn about and know oneself (Van Duin, 2000, p. 82; Bettelheim, 1960, p. 70). Whilst holding in mind the transitory/liminal nature of the house community, the home effectively becomes an identity in its own, a culture of its own; those passing through it can partake in, be nourished by, and contribute to it.

The home-maker becomes a filter for those who live there, thinking about their senses and how they may be affected by the things in the house, such as lighting, sound, smells, touch and taste, as a mother does for a baby; this also includes the aesthetics of the space, how it flows, the colours used and what materials the objects are made of. Furniture and furnishing that are made of natural materials such as wood, pure cotton, pure wool and clay. These emanate honesty and integrity; they are sturdy and solid, resonating with the simple truth of nature and the intrinsically healing power of natural things.

Food, and our relationship with it, is also intrinsically important:

For children who have never had enough food, love or attention from adults, a plentiful amount of good food on the table in the same place, at the same time, and with the same care each day begins to offer the experience of a world which will sustain them. Well prepared, well presented food adds layers to this experience of being truly considered (Carter, 2003, p. 138).

Simple acts of care and attention include holding in mind the preferences and individual needs of each person in the home. This is not a tick-box sheet to remind staff of who likes what, or from a care plan file, but actually held in mind and thought of by someone – this act of holding an individual in mind is an extremely powerful way of communicating esteem and value.

Most homes share a meal together but how is this meal set-up? Eat from beautiful crockery, use linen napkins, light a beeswax candle in an attractive candle holder, place a small vase of flower in the centre. This is feeding the hungry souls as well as their stomachs.

In order to create beauty in the home one enters into a relationship with the inner quality of things... most homes, like all workshops, have their mechanical aids, which can be compared to the craftsman's (sic) basic tools of the trade. They perform the hard and rough groundwork, but they cannot replace the sensitive touch of the human hand. In the home, housework may have become like a poor Cinderella, but it can be transformed into its true value as the Princess of all gestures of love (Van Duin, 2000, p. 82).

Examine how media is used in the home, how much screen time is used. Although information technologies can be helpful in moderation, they dull the imagination, stultify human communication and are often not a productive use of time. '...Such tools and their messages lead children towards materialism, consumerism, competition, and addictions in a variety of forms' (Uhrmacher, 2004, p. 113).

Provide a space for creative expression such as a studio or corner of a room with free access to art and crafting materials and a variety of paper and notebooks; always buy the best quality materials available. Creative tasks help children to overcome feelings of helplessness and passivity and begin to establish a sense of safety in their bodies and their environment (Carr & Hancock, 2017, p. 10). One can consider learning new skills such as gardening, knitting, woodwork, pottery, anything that involves natural materials, the hands and imagination.

We can read a chapter book aloud for others to hear at a regular time of the day, perhaps children can take turns with this, or it might be that a staff member reads aloud as an act of love for the children. Fairy tales have a particularly powerfully positive effect on the healing child.

While it entertains the child, the fairy tale enlightens him about himself, and fosters his (sic) personality development. It offers meaning on so many different levels, and enriches the child's existence in so many ways, that no one book can do justice to the multitude and diversity of the contributions such tales make to a child's life (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 12).

Working with our hands nourishes the soul and can be applied in a variety of creative tasks for the home including cleaning, cooking, mending, making and baking. We can think more deeply about these tasks in relation to the soul. We can use organic natural cleaning products and cloths made from 100% cotton, wooden sweeping brushes with metal pans; we can cook with organic vegetables, fruits and grains; we can mix our food with wooden spoons in ceramic hand-made bowls; we can serve our food on beautiful serving plates with wooden serving spoons all can help themselves to.

Furniture should be made of unpainted solid wood, be sturdy and strong. This demonstrates to children that their environment can hold them, that the home/container can support and withstand the force of their fledgling beings. This is an essential symbolic communication that needs to be made in order that the individuals living in the home feel safe; the environment and psyche of the workers can withstand the children's inevitable attacks and full force of their wrath and rage that result from their loss and betrayal, by those they have a human right to be loved and cared by and for (Carter, 2003, p. 146).

Referring back to the individual who has experienced childhood trauma and the way the environment becomes an extension of the self, the child needs to be able to damage the environment and then seek reparation and healing through this cycle of destruction and creation/repairing (Docker-Drysdale, 1968, p. 12). The environment must be strong enough to withstand these attacks and at the same time be made of a material that *can* be repaired rather than discarded and replaced.

If we are taking seriously the psychological importance of the symbolic nature of the child's relationship with their environment, then to discard things and replace them is not communicating value or worth; it is not demonstrating to the child that they can have suffered damage but can indeed be repaired and in doing so the repaired objects often, just as the child does, exhibit the scars of this damage but are still needed and part of life.

**To conclude...**



The list of ways to create healing environments is inexhaustible, but I hope I have provided a sense of what is required to begin to establish a healing environment. A way of engaging with and entering into the nature of the environment in such a way that provides a deeper sense of holding and nourishing, delving deeper than just the surface façade of a space, and reflecting upon the way the environment is used by the individuals within it. Often we are providing an environment that was not there for these children within the mother/child dyad; a kind of 'intensive care' is being provided that can be a critical issue of life or death for these children (Lanyado, 2003, p. 67).

Every physical element of a home is an opportunity to communicate care, value, and a sense of belonging to the children, that 'they are worth caring for and deserve good things' (Carter, 2003, p. 146).

We can walk into a space and experience it on a more profound and meaningful level. The children and staff who transit through these spaces deserve this level of care and attention; let us never forget the work happening within them is truly profound and potentially life changing.

Children are spiritual gifts from heaven... every single child becomes for us a sacred riddle, for every single child embodies this great question – not, how is he (sic) to be educated so that he approaches some 'ideal' that has been thought out – but how shall we foster what the gods have sent down to us into this earthly world (Uhrmacher, 2004, p. 105).

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## **About the author**

Kerri Ramsaidh is an Art Psychotherapist, Chair for BAAT Scotland, Director of Somerville Enterprises CIC. This organisation has been established to create therapeutic residential schools for care experienced children. Kerri has worked in Community service creation and provision for over twenty-five years. Kerri is working towards revolutionising the care system and the way we provide care for those who have experienced childhood trauma; so that there is equality of opportunity for care experienced individuals.