

What Northern Europe Knows

Leveraging a Legacy of ECE Design to Inspire a Typology at Home

November 6, 2026



Who I am

Tiffany Vieth | AIA

- K-12 Architect
- eRAD Member
- Mom of 2

Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, participants will be able to:

1. Understand the differences in funding, pedagogy, and approach to Early Childhood Education in Finland, Germany, and Denmark as compared to the United States.
2. Learn how legislative directives such as desired outcomes and proficiency standards trickle down into pedagogical approach and building design.
3. Explore how building organization, site design, and even whimsy impact young children, their families, and educators.
4. Learn about the building-blocks of European ECC design, and the details that support student and staff health and wellbeing in ECC facilities.



My Travel Grant

Offered annually by the Architecture Education Foundation in partnership with AIA Colorado

Awarded the Florence G. & Arthur A. Fisher, FAIA Travel Scholarship

Titled “A New Typology: What can Northern Europe teach us about Early Learning Facility Design?”

My Travel Grant

"The US is **facing a childcare crisis**, and we are on brink of revolution for how we think about educating & caring for our youngest citizens. In this climate communities are contemplating and investing in more robust early learning spaces, including large **publicly funded stand-alone facilities**, which represents a major change of course for the thinking about early childhood education in the United States. This puts architects in the unique position of setting the tone for a relatively **unexplored typology in the US** that will directly impact the lives of the next several generations of children. However, this 'new' typology is already well understood in other parts of the world. If we are about to build an Early Childhood Center typology from the ground up, how do we do so with the **very best information, reference architecture, and lessons learned** from those who are years or decades ahead of us?"



Travel Grant Overview

3 Countries

- Denmark
- Finland
- Germany

4 Architecture Firms

3 Facilities

A LOT of Research after-the-fact to digest what I experienced

What did I discover?

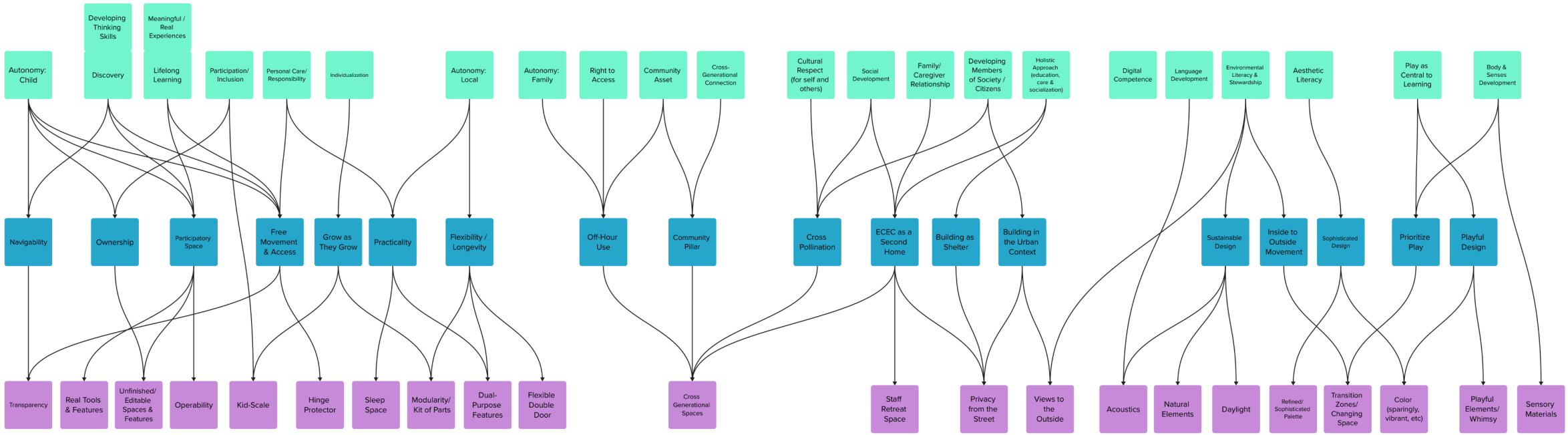
What did I discover?
How we envision Early Childhood Education **matters**

Pedagogy & Policy

Building Concept & Layout

Application & Details

What did I discover?
How we envision Early Childhood Education **matters**



Road Map

01 Intro (you're here!)

02 Pedagogy & Policy

- Background Info
- Key Themes
- Discussion

03 Concept & Layout

- Background Info
- Key Themes
- Discussion

03 Application & Details

- Background Info
- Key Themes
- Discussion

05 Wrap Up

A Few Housekeeping Items:

Attribution

This is an interactive session!

- Group chats (2-3 people)
- Share outs
- Pick Your Own Adventure



KU.BE in Frederiksberg, DK
Designed by MVRDV & ADEPT

Let’s Get Warmed Up

Introduce Yourself

Choose 1:

- What’s one thing you hope to gain/learn from this presentation?

- What do you think is the most important attribute of an ECE building?

- What do you guess is different about ECEs in Northern Europe?

Let’s Get Warmed Up

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2 Minute Timer



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2 Minute Timer



PEDAGOGY & POLICY

The Countries & Their Approaches





The Kingdom of Denmark

Capitol: Copenhagen

Size: 42,943 km^2 (16,577 mi^2)

Population: 6,002,500

Median Age: 41.3 years

Life Expectancy: 81.85 years

Urbanization Rate: 87%

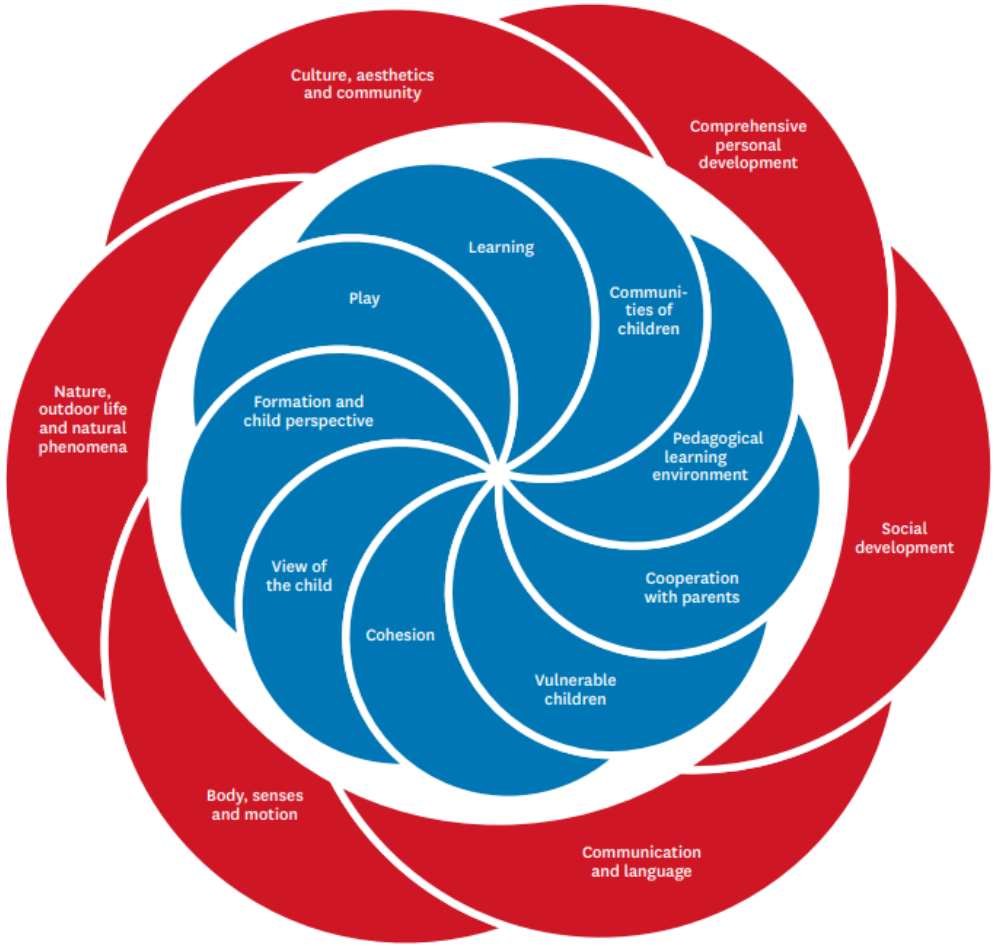
Relative Poverty Rate: 12%

GDP: $504 billion

GDP Per Capita: $83,445

Gini Index: 27.5

Danish ECE Policy



- Local Municipal Autonomy, National Right to Placement
- From 26 weeks until ‘school age’ at 6 w/ mandatory transition year
- Subsidized fee at no more than 25% the actual cost of care
- Participation: 62.9% 0-3, 95.7% 3-6
- Focus on high quality, flexibility, and familial autonomy and choice
- 6 Curriculum Themes & Common Pedagogical Foundation



The Republic of Finland

Capitol: Helsinki

Size: 338,455 km^2 (130,678 mi^2)

Population: 5,656,400

Median Age: 43.2 years

Life Expectancy: 81.6 years

Urbanization Rate: 85.9%

Relative Poverty Rate: 12.6%

GDP: $338 billion

GDP Per Capita: $60,130

Gini Index: 26.6

Finnish ECE Policy



- The Act of Early Childhood Education and Care -> national right to access
- From 9 months until 6 followed by a mandatory pre-primary school year
- Maximum cost set at €335/month
- Participation: 39.8% 0-2, 89.1% 2-5
- Focus on close ties & communication between carers and families, and individualized ECEC plan for all children
- 6 Transversal Competences



The Federal Republic of Germany

Capitol: Berlin

Size: 357,022 km^2 (137,988 mi^2)

Population: 83,600,000

Median Age: 45.4 years

Life Expectancy: 81.5 years

Urbanization Rate: 78%

Relative Poverty Rate: 16%

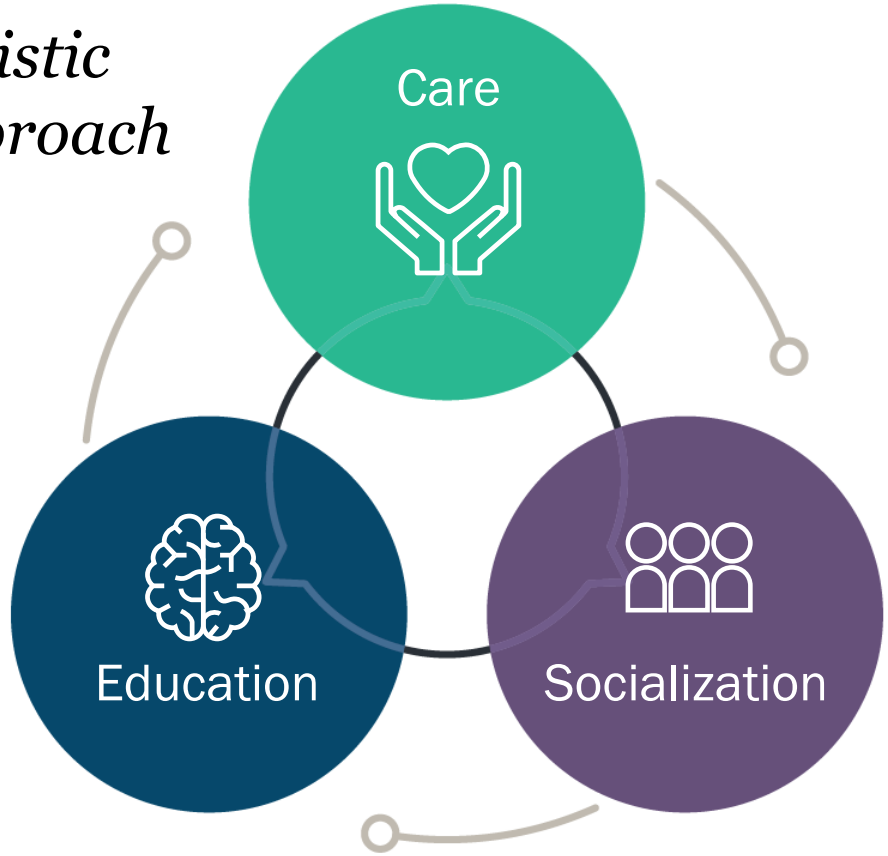
GDP: $5.45 trillion

GDP Per Capita: $65,303

Gini Index: 30.0

German ECE Policy

Holistic Approach



- Kindertagesstätte (Kita) composed of Krippe (0-3 years old), Kindergarten (3-6) and Holt (after school care)
- Legal right to both Krippe & Kindergarten
- System built on Subsidiarity
- Nation framework, local implementation
- Costs vary greatly
- Participation: 36.4% Krippe, 90.9 Kinder
- Pedagogical approach focused on learning through meaningful experiences & interactions w/ caregivers

Policy & Pedagogy



Discovery &
Critical Thinking



Child
Autonomy



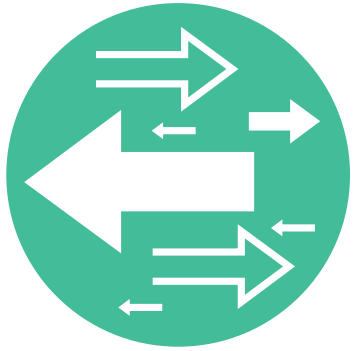
Aesthetic
Literacy



Play as the Root
of Learning



Environmental
Literacy



Individualization



Developing
Citizenship

Share Out

2 Minute Group Chat:

What surprised you?

What resonated with?

If you were designing a new ECE System from scratch, which policy or pedagogy themes would you pick to build into your system? (Write it down!)

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Design Concept & Layout

How Pedagogy & Policy Show Up in Practice





Christensen & Co

Met with Thomas Nørgaard (Partner)

Located in Copenhagen, DK

70+ architects, engineers, landscape architects, & interior designers

Work in sports, workplace, culture, housing, adaptive reuse, & education

Christensen & Co



Nørrebroparken Bermuda Triangle Playground in Copenhagen, DK
Designed by GHB Landskabsarkitekter

Leave Room for the ‘Hero’ in the Child

The Value of Outside

Create Playful and Unfinished Spaces

Christensen & Co

“We call it playful design. We are very inspired [by] creating something which is talking [at] eye level to the children.”

- Thomas Nørgaard



Dietrich Untertrifaller

Met with Helmut Dietrich
(Retired - Founder & Partner)

Offices in:

- Bregenz & Vienna AU
- St. Gallen, CH
- Munich & Frankfurt, DE
- Paris & Strasbourg, FR
- Beograd, RS

170+ employees

Work in civic, healthcare, residential, urban planning, culture & arts, and education

Dietrich Untertrifaller



Outside of Bregenz, AUT

Creating a Sense of Ownership

Designing for Longevity

Materials and Colors

Dietrich Untertrifaller

“You should leave a lot of space for the children and also for the teachers to create their space and to change it the way they like it. If you create a wonder world for the children, I think it’s not so interesting anymore.”

- Helmut Dietrich



Luutonen Palomeras

Met with Antti Luutonen & Francesc Palomeras (Principal Designers)

Located in Helsinki, FI

6 employees

Work in residential, commercial, educational, and kindergarten design

Luutonen Palomeras



Päiväkoti Lauttasaari Daghemmet Drumsö in Helsinki, FI
Designed by Luutonen Palomeras
Photographer: Antti Luutonen

Transitioning In & Out

Modular Thinking

Expanding their World

Luutonen Palomeras

“But then every year when they grow, it’s like going [out] to the world. And then you can start being here, but you can see what’s happening there, and then here still you can see what’s happening downstairs, and then we go outside… Then they see that when we will grow up we will be able to go there.”

— Francesc Palomeras



AFKS

Met with Mikko Liski (Architect)

Located in Helsinki, FI

10-15 employees

Work in Religious, Community, and Educational design

Winners of the Finlandia Prize for Architecture

Multiple-time nominees for European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture

AFKS



Lapinmäki Day-Care Centre in Helsinki FI
Designed by AFKS, Art by Riku Mäkinen
Photographer: Mika Huisman

Transparency

The Building as Shelter

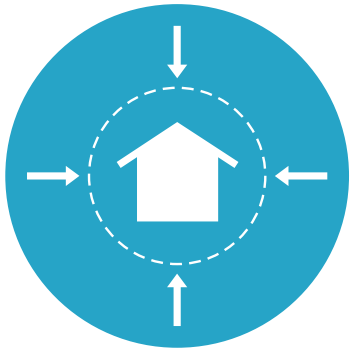
Sophisticated Whimsy

AFKS

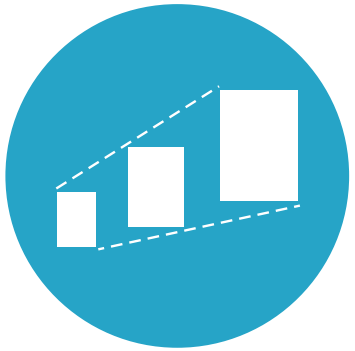
“Kids don’t need ‘kid things’, they need good things. Good design is enough.”

-Mikko Liski

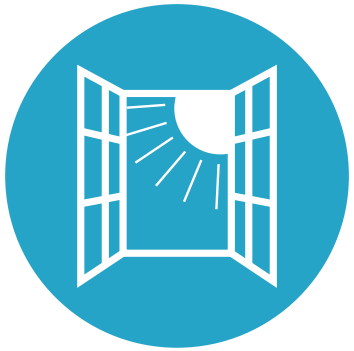
Design Concept & Layout



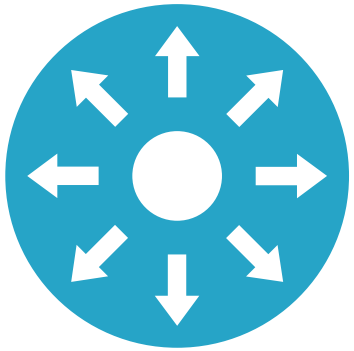
Contextual Responsiveness



Grow as They Grow



Indoor/Outdoor Connection



Free Access & Movement



Playful Design



Participatory Space



Sophisticated Space

Share Out

2 Minute Group Chat:

What surprised you?

What resonated with?

In your hypothetical new ECE System, which concept and layout themes would you pick to build into your system? (Write it down!)

Do they align with your policy positions?

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DETAILS & APPLICATION

How this Manifests ‘In the Wild’





Tikkurilan Päiväkoti

Vantaa, FI

Met with Inka-Amanda Leppänen (Educator)

3 Story Building
on a Tight Urban site

250 Children (1-6) & 30 staff

8 classrooms in 2 modules

Designed by Olla Architecture

Tikkurilan Päiväkoti



Tikkurilan Päiväkoti in Vantaa, FI
Designed by Olla Architecture

Playful Practicality

Clothing – Inside & Out

Visibility & Autonomy

Tikkurilan Päiväkoti



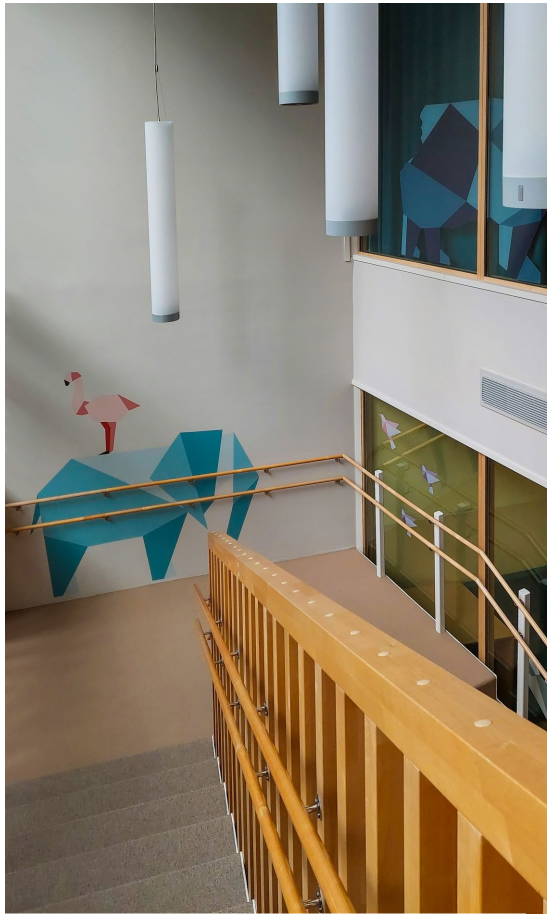
Tikkurilan Päiväkoti in Vantaa, FI
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Tikkurilan Päiväkoti





Tikkurilan Päiväkoti in Vantaa, FI
Designed by Olla Architecture

Playful Practicality

Clothing – Inside & Out

Visibility & Autonomy



Kinderhaus Riedlepark

Friedrichshafen, DE

Met with Brigitte Voit-Seewald (Director)

Centrally organized double-height commons, specialty and staff rooms on lower level, w/ classrooms above.

130 Children (1-6) & 35 staff

8 classrooms in 2 modules, each room specialized w/ built-in or furnished features

Designed by
Lanz Schwager Architekten

Kinderhaus Riedlepark



Kinderhaus Riedlepark in Friedrichshafen, DE
Designed by Lanz Schwager Architekten

Simple Palette, Big Moments

Enabling “I Can Do It”

Natural Connections

Kinderhaus Riedlepark



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Natural Connections



Kinderhaus Rümmingen

Rümmingen, DE

Met with Carina Rosenkranz (Director)

2-story L-shaped building set into a steep hillside, accommodating the slope with the building itself.

115 Children (1-6) & 20 Staff

6 classrooms, 4 dedicated activity rooms

Renovation & Addition designed by Rolf Bühler Architekt

Kinderhaus Rümmingen



Kinderhaus Rümmingen in Rümmingen, DE
Renovation & Addition designed by Rolf Bühler Architekt

The ECEC as a Second Home

Views Through and Between

A Community Pillar

Kinderhaus Rümmingen



Kinderhaus Rümmingen in Rümmingen, DE
Renovation & Addition designed by Rolf Bühler Architekt

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Application & the Details



Modularity & Kit of Parts



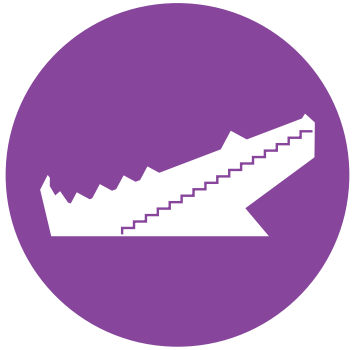
Kid-Sized, Real Elements



Perfected Transition Zones



Refined Palette



Whimsical Elements



Interior Transparency



Separation & Connection

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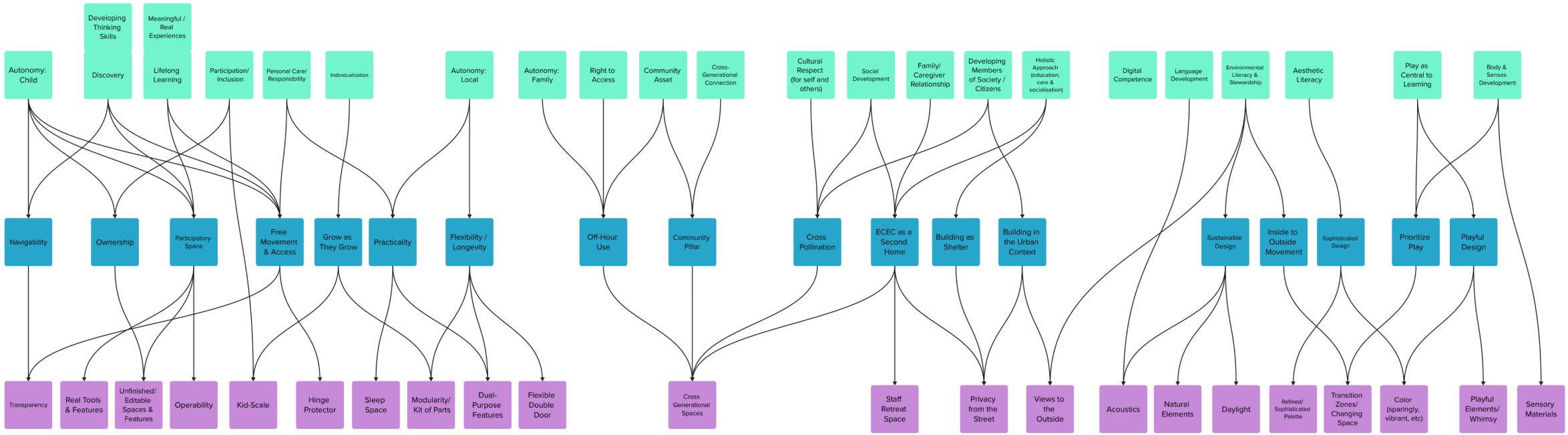


WRAP UP

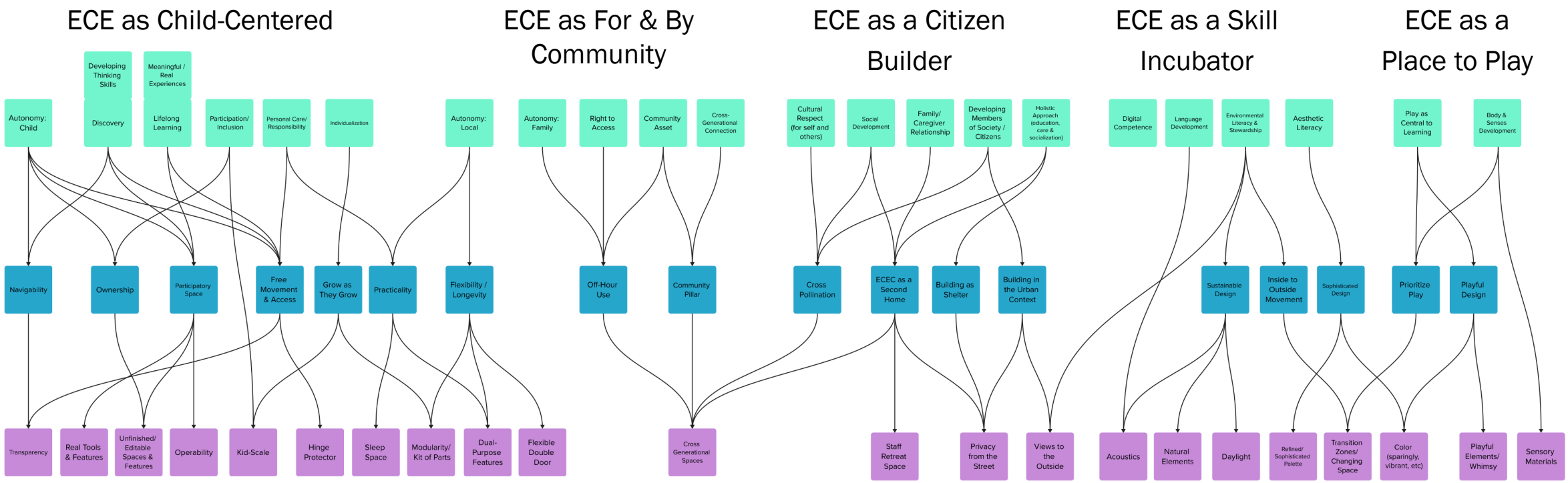
What does an Early Childhood System look like to us?



What did I discover?
Early Childhood Education **is a Societal Project**



What did I discover?
Early Childhood Education **is what we dream it to be**




Thank you!
To talk more, email me at:
tvieth@dlrgroup.com
bitly