

Reggio Emilia– Inspired Pedagogies of Listening and Inclusion: Advancing Children's Rights

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Chapter 10

The Right to an Amiable Space: Re-Designing Prison Family- Visit Spaces Through the Reggio Approach

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ABSTRACT

The chapter describes the research diStanze in gioco, a research-intervention project on the relationship between incarcerated parents and their children. By drawing on educational philosophy which characterizes the Reggio Emilia Approach, the project redesigned the spaces dedicated to children visiting their relatives in the penal institutions of Reggio Emilia. Multidisciplinary reflection has led to a paradigm shift, creating a meeting space dedicated to the whole family, in which play becomes a way to create and strengthen the relationship between detained parent and children, upholding children's right to a relational space. The redesign of visitation spaces dedicated to children could be replicated and implemented in other correctional institutions both in national and international contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how the Reggio Emilia Approach can help rethink prison family-visit spaces by recognizing children as subjects with rights and by treating space as an active participant in relationships and learning. In this perspective, the environment is not a neutral container but a “third educator” that can support dialogue, play, and emotional well-being. Building on these principles, the chapter presents the *diStanze in Gioco* project in the Reggio Emilia Penitentiary Institutes, where visit spaces were redesigned to strengthen bonds between incarcerated parents and their children. The chapter argues that a pedagogically and aesthetically designed environment can transform prison visits into more humane, relational, and child-centered experiences.

CHILDREN AS SUBJECT WITH RIGHTS IN THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF REGGIO EMILIA

The epistemological foundation of this work draws on a core constructivist principle of the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy: the child understood as a subject with rights. Such a perspective finds its most relevant outline in a publication titled *A Charter of Rights* (Malaguzzi, 1993), which states that

Children have the right to be recognized as subjects of individual, legal, civil, and social rights; as both source and constructors of their own experience, and thus active participants in the organization of their identities, abilities, and autonomy, through relationships and interaction with their peers, with adults, with ideas, with objects, and with the real and imaginary events of intercommunicating worlds (p.3)

In 2021, two publications further developed the perspective articulated by Malaguzzi. In the first publication, the Reggio Children Foundation, which promoted the project outlined in this chapter - along with Unimore and the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia - published a charter titled *Quality Education, a Global Challenge* (Reggio Children Foundation, 2021). The charter states that children are citizens and holders of rights and competent to learn from birth, in a co-shared relationship with the community of all living beings. Caral Rinaldi, in the second publication, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia*, wrote about “the rights of the child to a quality environment” (Rinaldi, 2021, p.50), and, more importantly for the project described in this chapter, the importance to “persevere in declaring aesthetics as an element of rights, part of children’s rights” (Rinaldi, 2021, p.71).

THE RIGHT TO RELATIONAL SPACES

In the 1970s, as underlined in scientific literature, attention to aesthetics became a central and visible aspect of the physical environment of Reggio educational environments (Moss 2016, p161). The attention paid in those years to the theme of the learning environment emerged in a 1975 speech by Malaguzzi, given at a regional conference dedicated to the promotion of preschools for social education. In his speech he stated that, in educational experience, “the environments represent an integral part and play a decisive role in the co-existence, coherency and intensity of response to the requests by children to be and to do” (Moss, 2016, p. 236). Moreover, in the same year, he wrote an article dedicated to the theme of design, in which he stated that furnishings should sustain vitality and creativity and support a “free and happy education for human beings¹” (Malaguzzi, 1975, p. 14).

In the 1980s, Malaguzzi developed an ecological and constructivist theory of children’s development, based on the idea that the child-environment interaction is conditioned by interconnections (Rinaldi & Manera, 2021). In fact, by drawing on Bateson’s idea of aesthetics, intended as an element “responsive to the pattern which connects” (Bateson, 1979, p.9), and on his ecological theory, which referred to a unifying connection between individuals and their environment, Malaguzzi further developed a systemic idea of learning environments. This concept was made up of elements aimed to facilitate inter-relations by developing the idea that children had a “right to the environment”, meaning the possibility to access complex and rich spaces, a kind of education which “can be realized only when the environment is a fully participating element” (Malaguzzi, 1984, p.26).

In the 1990’s, several architects took part in research project promoted by Reggio Children, titled *Metaproject for an Environment for Young children*, together with a group of people who worked in different fields, such as art, design, and pedagogy.

During the project, the research group defined various concepts and design tools which were collected and published in 1998 (Ceppi & Zini, 1998). In their presentation of “Relationship”, the second concept discussed in the book, the authors wrote that the development of an architectural project “produces relational signs and aesthetic qualities” (Ceppi & Zini 1998, p. 12). The idea of a relational space refers to the relationships that an environment enables, as well as the information that can be activated within a space. Furthermore, according to Ceppi & Zini, in the relational space, “the aesthetic quality depends on the quality of the connections” (p.12). Carla Rinaldi, who participated and contributed to the Metaproject, underlined the conviction that the aesthetic element acts as a connecting element in and between concepts. Furthermore, she developed the concept of *shared aesthetics*, which refers to the idea that, in learning environments, the aesthetic dimension needs to become part of “a pedagogical quality of the educational space” (Rinaldi 1998: 60). Such

concepts, values and principles guided the project presented in the next sections, “DiStanze in Gioco”², a research-intervention project centred on the relationship between incarcerated parents and their children, starting from the redevelopment and redesign of the spaces dedicated to children visiting their relatives in the penal institutions of Reggio Emilia.

THE PROJECT “DISTANZE IN GIOCO”

The project’s objective was, on the one hand, to enhance the quality of relationships between incarcerated parents and their children and, more generally, the quality of family relationships during the so-called “visit” moments (Kremer et al., 2022), starting from a redesign of the space. The space dedicated to visits, where inmates met with their children and families in the penitentiary context, was thus the subject of a case study and was restructured: on one hand, as a tool for the resocialization of the incarcerated individual, aimed at their social reintegration and reducing recidivism; on the other, as a tool promoting the psychological and physical well-being of children, fostering their healthy and harmonious growth.

The project thus developed as a research and multidisciplinary intervention pathway focused on the pedagogical design of space, bringing together intervention methods aimed at inmates and architectural languages.

Among the involved parties were also the primary users of the reimagined spaces: the incarcerated individuals, who personally oversaw the redevelopment work and the construction of furniture in the carpentry workshop within the Reggio Emilia Penitentiary Institutes, thus creating an original, innovative, and targeted action that could be effective and sustainable over time. Rethinking the spaces for encounters between inmates and their children and families meant placing the quality of their relationships at the center. By creating opportunities to play, to (re)connect, and to listen to one another, the project safeguarded children’s right to maintain a relationship with the incarcerated parent and to feel comfortable in the new environment, upholding the incarcerated parent’s right and duty to preserve and strengthen their role of parental responsibility and participation in the child’s growth.

From the “Playroom” to a Relational Space

The project aimed to redevelop and pedagogically redesign the space known as the *ludoteca* (Playroom) in the Reggio Emilia Penitentiary Institutes so that it could become a space capable of generating educational opportunities both during regular visitations and other designated moments. The theoretical reflections that led to the development of the project concept prompted considerations on the meaning of

the term *ludoteca* (playroom) whose etymology refers to a space designed to store, preserve, and/or lend toys and other items specifically for children. The redesign of the spaces invited consideration of a paradigm shift: from *ludoteca* to a meeting space dedicated to the family as a whole, where play, far from being merely an object for the child's entertainment and self-referential enjoyment, became a tool to foster dialogue and relationships with the incarcerated parent. The project was continued to be inspired by the pioneering experience of the schools and preschools of Reggio Emilia, rather than taking place in isolation.

The research led to the definition of possible guidelines for the participatory design of spaces for children dedicated to prison visits, which could serve as a reference for all penitentiary operators and those interested in the subject. In the specific case of the *diStanze in Gioco* project, the Reggio Children Foundation contributed its experience in designing educational environments, which originated and evolved in the schools and preschools of Reggio Emilia and later expanded into extra-school contexts. This experience merged with the penitentiary context, with the goal of creating spaces that could facilitate interaction between parents in prison and their children. Thus, the pedagogical approach was not limited to designing physical spaces, but extended to the promotion of a relational and emotional environment that supported the psychological well-being of all family members

The fundamental idea was that space could help transform physical and emotional distances into closeness. The environment was designed not only to facilitate dialogue and play between parents and children but also to offer opportunities for healthy and harmonious growth for the children, who were often indirect victims of incarceration. At the same time, the project aimed to support the social reintegration of incarcerated individuals by valuing their parenthood and familial role. This multidisciplinary approach, combining pedagogy, architecture, and social sciences, was a distinctive feature of Reggio Children Foundation's contribution.

Pedagogical Focus on the Concept of Space as “Third Educator”

One of the most important elements of the project was the concept of space as the third educator, a key principle of the Reggio Emilia Approach (Cavallini et al., 2017). According to this view, space was not merely a container for activities (Senent et al., 2022), but an active agent that could facilitate or hinder interactions and educational experiences (Dominguez, 2024). In a prison context, where spaces were often perceived as oppressive and restrictive, redesigning the environments dedicated to visits took on even more significance.

The project was based on the construction of micro-places, spaces designed to host individual family units, offering a sense of intimacy and, at the same time,

security while maintaining the necessary transparency to ensure supervision. Each micro-place was designed to encourage the active participation of both parents and children. For example, the furniture was designed to allow adults to join in the children's play, promoting dialogue and interaction. Furthermore, the space was designed to be flexible, capable of adapting to the varying needs of families. The furniture and objects present in the micro-places could be used for joint activities that not only engaged the children but also offered the opportunity to share meaningful experiences with the parents.

Play became a means to facilitate dialogue and strengthen the parent-child relationship, thus reducing the emotional distance that often-characterized family relationships during incarceration. The redesign of space as the “third educator” also involved a change in how the space was used. Prior to the intervention, the visit space was organized in such a way that it separated adults from children, with enclosed play areas that ultimately isolated the children from interacting with their parents. Now, the space encouraged joint participation in activities, allowing parents to actively play with their children and share moments of intimacy and complicity that would otherwise have been difficult to achieve in a prison setting.

From an educational perspective, the project emphasized the importance of providing children with spaces that not only met their play and learning needs but also embraced and nurtured the emotional dimension. In this sense, the project served as a concrete example of how architecture and pedagogy could collaborate to create spaces that were truly child-centered and that, at the same time, supported families in their growth and relational journey, even in difficult contexts such as prisons.

Educational Spaces and the Pedagogy of Listening to Promote Children's Rights

The concept of space as the third educator, as previously stated, is related to the idea that the physical environment is not simply a passive container for activities, but a true co-participant in the educational process. Space has the power to influence how children and adults interacted, how they experienced their surroundings, and how they grew, both individually and together. In the *diStanze in Gioco* project, this concept was particularly relevant as the space became a facilitator of relationships between incarcerated parents and their children, a place that welcomed and nurtured dialogue, play, and the building of family bonds in the complex prison context.

A central aspect of the concept of space as the third educator was its relation to the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi 2001). Indeed, space had to be metaphorically able to “listen” to the people who inhabited it, embracing their needs, emotions, and relational dynamics. The space was configured as an environment that not only welcomed children and adults but also listened to their relationship. This meant that

the space was not static but was capable of adapting and transforming based on the interactions that occurred within it. The pedagogy of listening, a foundational element of the Reggio Emilia Approach (Rinaldi 2021), manifested in the design of environments that were sensitive to the voices and experiences of both children and adults. In the context of prison visits, the space designed for meetings between incarcerated parents and their children did not simply provide a place for encounters, but became a dialogic space where the relationship between parent and child could develop in a more authentic and profound way. Through the arrangement of furniture, the organization of micro-places, and the choice of materials, the space stimulated interaction and shared play, offering both children and adults tools to express themselves, build new possibilities for dialogue, and support their relationship.

Play became central, the means through which the space listened and responded, allowing children to express themselves and parents to rediscover their role within the relationship. Thus, space was actively participatory and participative: through its capacity to listen, it created an environment that facilitated interaction and the expression of emotions, thoughts, and desires. In this way, the project transcended the traditional view of prison space, transforming it into a place of meeting and growth, not only for children but also for the adults involved.

Another crucial aspect of space as the third educator was its adaptability and transformation. In the *diStanze in Gioco* project, this principle translated into the co-design of spaces that were not static but possessed the ability to evolve and adapt based on the specific needs of the context and the people who used them. The redesigned spaces for prison visits were aimed to be flexible, capable of accommodating different modes of interaction, depending on the family dynamics and the specific needs of each encounter. The micro-places within the rooms offered various opportunities for play, dialogue, and relationship-building but also left room for personalization and creativity.

This flexibility reflected the idea that space had to be able to grow with its users. Relationships between parents and children, especially in a difficult context such as incarceration, were dynamic and constantly evolving. Therefore, space had to be able to adapt to these transformations, offering new stimuli and opportunities that could support the development of family relationships. For example, carts with artistic and play materials, which could be used during visits, allowed families to create meaningful moments together, transforming the visit into an opportunity for mutual learning and growth.

REDESIGNING THE LUDOTECA (PLAYROOM)

The spaces known as the *ludoteca* (playroom) in the Reggio Emilia Penitentiary Institutes were created in 2005 to accommodate visits from families with children and adolescents. These spaces consist of two non-contiguous rooms, accessible via a corridor that also leads to the interview rooms for all other visits. The smaller of the two rooms communicates with a green area, which runs along the entire side of the building and is also accessible from the two interview rooms for meetings between adults. Over the years, however, these spaces underwent gradual deterioration, mainly due to structural issues.

The working group conducted two site visits to the spaces designated as the *ludoteca* within the Correctional Institutions of Reggio Emilia on 21 September and 15 October 2021. During the first visit, the team met with the Director of the Correctional Institution and officials from the Legal–Pedagogical Area. During the second visit, the team met with officers of the Penitentiary Police. These two occasions made it possible to study the spaces and to discuss visitation procedures, the time available to incarcerated persons and their families, and the affordances and constraints of the settings. In parallel, information was gathered regarding how incarcerated persons make use of the space and the sensory perceptions associated with it. The spaces available at the beginning of the project are presented in Figures 1. and 2. below.

Figure 1. Space at the Beginning of the Project

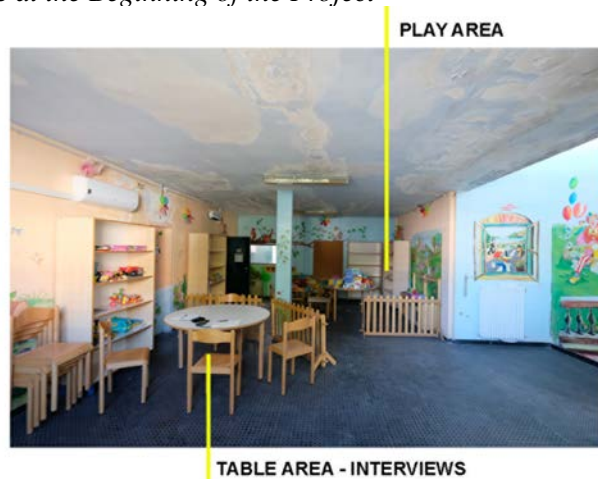


Figure 2. Second Space at the Beginning of the Project



Site Visits and Critical Environmental Analysis

During the site visits and meetings, several spatial criticalities emerged. The simultaneous presence of multiple families, together with the constant presence of Penitentiary Police personnel and volunteers, precludes any possibility of privacy.

From a criminological standpoint, the potential for families to establish relationships with one another constitutes a risk factor to be monitored rather than a positive opportunity for socialization. This risk is compounded by the limited time available, which would be better invested in nurturing intra-familial rather than extra-familial relationships.

The presence of volunteers, contrary to their own objectives, may produce counterproductive effects: during visitation sessions, children engaged in volunteer-led activities may interact only minimally with their incarcerated parents. In turn, the incarcerated parent may feel legitimized to delegate entertainment and childcare to others.

Prior to the redesign, the environment was unhealthy and generated a pronounced sense of confusion and discomfort. The micro-climate had deteriorated in recent years, primarily due to significant water infiltration and dampness that had rendered the rooms nearly unusable. During visits, the proximity of a large number of people

within the same spaces made the air scarcely breathable. The setting was characterized by a strong visual impact arising from murals that covered the entire wall surfaces with vivid colors and shapes; moreover, an overabundance of furnishings and objects continually diverted attention. Individuals were visually overwhelmed by an environment that felt saturated.

Prior to the redesign, the spatial layout comprised an adult zone and distinct, separate play areas for children.

The site visits and meetings revealed that children, drawn to the play areas, diverted their attention from engaging with their incarcerated parent, isolating themselves or playing with other children present in the space and/or with volunteers. Incarcerated parents, seated at tables with other relatives and absorbed by the pressing matters that typically structure the visit, often failed to perceive their children's actual needs and the demands arising from their lived experience during the visitation. Beyond the initial moment of welcome and the final leave-taking, interaction between the incarcerated parent and child was limited.

The furnishings consisted of adult tables and chairs alongside child-height tables and chairs, positioned so as primarily to occupy the central area of the room. The play areas, as well as the shelving, were placed flush against the walls. The shelving, consisting mainly of bookcases and open units of varying heights, held books, stuffed animals, and games of every kind, amassed in a chaotic, disorderly manner and left to unregulated use by visitors. Finally, it emerged that children were prompted to wander chaotically around the room in search of ever-new stimuli, entering a state of uncontrolled excitement generated by the sheer abundance of inputs. The approach to play was characterized by a "use-and-discard" mode applied to whatever objects were within reach.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DESIGN CONCEPTS

Based on the discussions of the multidisciplinary team and observations of the space, a range of insights and associated suggestions emerged. Firstly, the idea that in the *ludoteca* it would be beneficial to create three or four stations (as opposed to the existing five) in response to the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and to enhance the relational and environmental qualities inherent in the space was considered. It was suggested that the stations should be strategically positioned to foster family intimacy while simultaneously ensuring ease of inspection, thereby balancing the right to privacy with the imperative of security. The concept of privacy, which holds significant value for incarcerated individuals, is nearly absent within the Reggio Emilia penitentiary context. This lack of privacy mirrors broader trends identified in national reports on prison spaces designated for children. It was further

suggested that the design of a space could suggest and encourage opportunities for interaction between the child/adolescent and the incarcerated parent, overcoming the previous arrangement that included areas with tables for adults and separate play areas.

These latter spaces attracted the children's attention, diverting them from engaging with their incarcerated parents seated at the table with other family members.

The goal was not to foster relationships between different family units sharing common spaces, but rather to strengthen relationships within the same family, particularly between parents and children. In the penitentiary context, interactions between different family units could have represented a negative element, potentially reinforcing inappropriate behaviors arising from a shared identification with a criminal subculture (Bellair et al., 2018). Furthermore, given the limited time available, focusing on relationships between distinct family units could have diverted attention from the primary objective, which was to nurture the parent-child relationship.

REDESIGNING THE SPACE

The first phase of the work saw the Penitentiary Institute engaged in the restoration of the premises through an intervention to protect the roofing, preventing further deterioration of the ceilings and internal walls. Following this intervention, and thanks to funding from the Emilia Romagna Region several inmates participated in the refurbishment of the spaces, involving tasks such as stripping, plastering, and repainting.

The interdisciplinary group shared the spatial design concept with the Penitentiary Institution, including a specification of the works to be carried out and the materials to be procured. This exchange yielded observations and considerations of various kinds (technical, pedagogical, etc.) that were instrumental in defining the detailed design.

Initially, the option of dedicating the smaller room solely to a “laboratory” or “atelier,” thereby differentiating the spatial configuration, was considered. However, discussions with correctional staff highlighted the risk that, in the absence of personnel and workshop activities, this room would remain closed and unused, and that it would not be organized to receive families during routine visitation. Retaining the idea of micro-spaces (*micro-luoghi*) even in the smaller room would make it possible to offer equivalent spatial opportunities to a larger number of families with children. In this way, both rooms could serve a dual purpose: they could be used freely during regular visits, or they could host workshop activities as needed.

First Implementation Phase

The first implementation phase focused on refurbishing the spaces (the most recent interventions dated back to 2005). Primarily, the Penitentiary Administration repaired the roof, as the two rooms designated as the ludoteca had been irreparably damaged by significant water infiltration. Work then proceeded with the remediation of deteriorated walls and ceilings, followed by plastering and painting. These interventions were carried out by a group of incarcerated people within a vocational training course in construction. Additional work included the refurbishment of the bathrooms and the replacement of lighting fixtures, undertaken by other incarcerated persons employed in the institution's routine maintenance activities.

Realizing Micro-Space for Inmate-Family Visits

The insights gathered during the meetings, together with the reflection on the values deepened in the first part of the chapter led the architect Valentina Conte to develop with the research group a new space concept, with the idea of realizing micro-space for inmate-family visits. Following the refurbishment, custom wooden furnishings and structures evoking the form of a "little house" were designed, built, and installed³.

The implementation of the project was made possible through the work of incarcerated people, drawing on the expertise developed within the institution's internal carpentry workshop. These individuals contributed actively to the project's realization, offering their own ideas and input.

The stations were positioned adjacent to the walls, with each equipped with basic materials (e.g., markers, paper, etc.) to facilitate direct interaction between children and their incarcerated parents, without the mediation of other staff members. This setup aimed to preserve the authenticity of the parent-child relationship while addressing both security and privacy concerns.

Each micro-space was arranged to elicit and support situations of interaction and symbolic play drawn from everyday life (e.g., a small play kitchen where one can "brew coffee"), as well as opportunities to draw together, play board games, read a story, share a meal, and converse. Every component of the setting was therefore designed to foster these forms of relational engagement and to create a welcoming environment that prioritized people's well-being. For example, inside each "micro-house," adults and children can sit at the same table thanks to the provision of varied seating that allows the child to reach, ergonomically, the height of an adult table.

The micro-spaces were organized so that they could be used autonomously and so that children can interact with their incarcerated parent without the mediation of other operators. The layout features custom-crafted furnishings that prompt and

sustain everyday interaction and symbolic play, including a small kitchen and a workbench joined by an adult bench. The innovative placement of the bench between the two small play structures was intended to “bring” the adult into the child’s play, thereby facilitating communication and mutual exchange.

The Second Phase of the Project

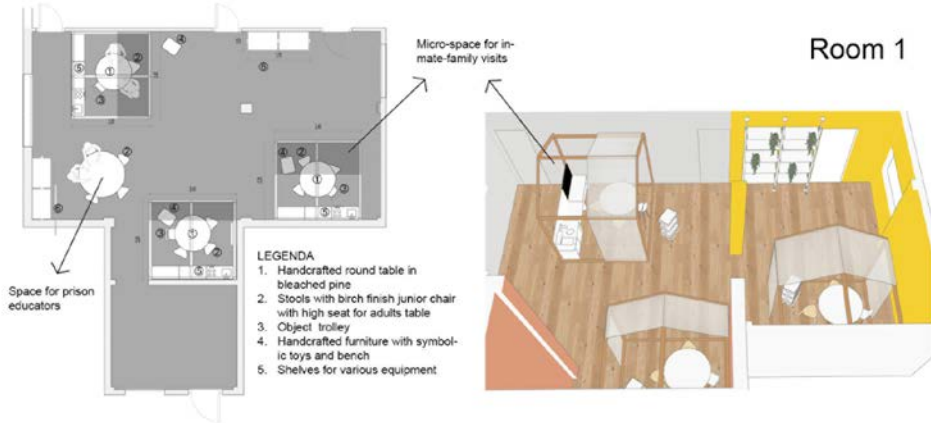
The second phase of the project involved a collaboration with the “SemiLiberi” initiative, aimed at creating employment opportunities for inmates who were not eligible for alternative measures. During the various design phases, and through numerous discussions focused on the project’s aims, a significant contribution emerged from the incarcerated individuals involved in the woodworking and renovation phase. The nature of this meaningful contribution is illustrated in Figure 2. below. A particularly meaningful example is that of an incarcerated parent, who played a leading role in creating the furnishings within the prison carpentry workshop and was able to transform a moment of intimacy and connection with his child into a piece of furniture designed to enrich and support their shared time together. Specifically, he crafted an inlaid table featuring a chessboard pattern, conceived as an opportunity for interaction and play with his son, who is passionate about chess.

Figure 3. An Inmate Working on the Furniture



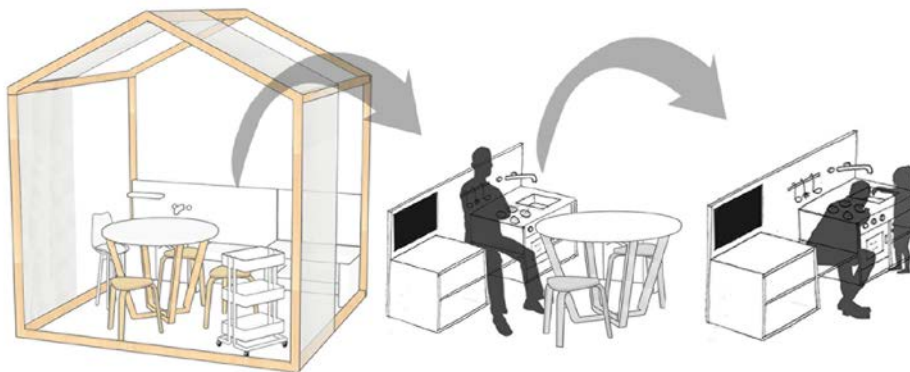
Leveraging the skills and experience gained by the inmates in the prison's internal carpentry workshop, the custom-designed furniture for the newly renovated spaces was successfully crafted. Inmates actively contributed to the project's realization, offering their ideas and insights, thereby playing a key role in its development. The concept of the room is detailed in Figure 4. below.

Figure 4. Concept of Room 1



The spaces designated for visits are required to accommodate multiple families simultaneously and are designed as a collection of micro-spaces with a form that evokes: safety, shelter, and family. The etymology of the word “home” in its most literal and elementary sense refers to that which provides shelter, the shell that protects and comforts us, in which we can feel secure and find respite from the daily grind. Figure 5. Illustrates the micro-space available for inmate family visits.

Figure 5. Micro-space for Inmate-Family Visits



Each micro-space was arranged to suggest and encourage situations of interaction and symbolic play related to everyday life (such as a small kitchen for making coffee, etc.), but not exclusively so. Within these spaces, it is possible for individuals to sit together at the same table, facilitated by the selection of differentiated seating that allows children to ergonomically reach the height of the adult table. Activities such as drawing together, playing board games, eating, and engaging in dialogue are all possible.

Theoretical reflection led to the conclusion that, in spaces designated for visits between families and children, child-height tables—such as those found in preschools or other child-specific settings—should not be provided. The primary objective is not for the child to sit and play alone in a self-referential manner or with other children present in the room, but rather to enable the child to sit together with the parent in a way that is comfortable for both. Conversely, the parent can be immersed in the child's play thanks to comfortable adult seating positioned adjacent to the symbolic-play elements.

One incarcerated person reported, for example, that in the previous *ludoteca* space, in order to speak with his child who was absorbed in play, he was forced to sit on a small child's chair in an awkward position, which made him feel uncomfortable throughout the visit. The micro-spaces are also equipped with a wheeled utility cart for storing and positioning drawing and art materials—such as markers, paper, watercolors, and paints—thus enabling staff to set up micro-stations for proposing educational and family-bonding activities.

Materials and Experiences

Along the room's walls are several shelving units holding containers of various sizes. These can accommodate both structured materials (books, objects, games) and less conventional, open-ended materials—for example, natural items gathered from the green area (leaves, pinecones, pebbles, etc.) and/or creative recyclables such as those sourced from the REMIDA Creative Recycling Center⁴. Most games and materials are stored inside boxes/containers labeled with the corresponding age range to facilitate use. Each family can bring to its station the container consciously selected according to the age of their child(ren). Volunteers/operators can thus support families and children in choosing the most appropriate container.

One of the treatment-oriented proposals envisioned within the project foresees that the incarcerated fathers themselves prepare a personalized “box” (*cassetta*) of objects, materials, and setups to be used during visits with their child. The box serves as a symbolic, private, and intimate space between parent and child, which can be retrieved and resumed in subsequent encounters as a witness to the continuity of the experience—not only practical, but emotional, affective, and imaginative.

The stations provide a common basic micro-context for all, yet they can be inhabited, organized, and experienced in entirely different ways by each family. Children, together with their incarcerated parents, are able to exercise their creativity by devising an open-ended range of games and/or activities, rather than engaging with rigidly predetermined options. For this reason, certain transitional areas in the two rooms are intentionally left clear so they can temporarily accommodate materials and furnishings for “special designs” carried out by staff and volunteers, or installations/decorations related to particular holidays.

Each room includes a small station with a bottle warmer and other essentials for infants to be used as needed. In the bathrooms, two changing tables are provided to enable diaper changes, and foldable mats are available for setting up soft corners for younger children and/or infants. The walls feature bulletin boards where visible “traces” of encounters between parents and children can be displayed—for example, drawings, photographs, letters, and mementos—constituting documentation that supports the creation of precious shared memories and imbues the experiences with meaning.

Sensory Qualities of the Environments

The research prompted a rethinking of the environments' aesthetic and sensory qualities, both within individual spaces and across the setting as a whole, including chromatic and material choices for horizontal and vertical surfaces, furnishings, spatial layout, lighting, and the acoustic dimension (voices, sounds, noise). Each

micro-space is enveloped by a specific color and tone that both distinguishes it and creates a sense of embrace within the overall setting. The decision to keep toys and materials out of sight, organized in containers by age group, creates an orderly, and thus calming, environment. This responds not only to hygienic and functional requirements but also to an aesthetic aim of supporting psychological well-being.

The use of multiwall (honeycomb) polycarbonate to infill portions of the micro-space structures absorbs vocal reverberation and ambient noise, thereby reducing acoustic pollution in a small, enclosed room that accommodates many people simultaneously.

The spacing between micro-spaces, together with the option to remain within a semi-enclosed, partially protective structure, improves air quality in a confined setting and fosters a more temperate microclimate. Plants, in addition to enhancing visual appeal, purify the air and invite contact with nature. Such contact promotes well-being and calm, mitigating aggressiveness.

THE ACTIVITIES

The pedagogical design of spaces dedicated to family visits constitutes a complementary intervention alongside rehabilitative activities addressed primarily to incarcerated parents but, through them, extending to and positively engaging children. The overarching goal is to make incarcerated person, especially parents, authentic protagonists during visitation, with the opportunity to contribute actively to shaping the experience shared with their children. The intention is to cultivate a sense of belonging to the environment in which they participate. Rather than remaining passive subjects, incarcerated parents become agents within the space, learning to organize and manage it, to care for it, and above all to recognize the educational opportunities the environment can generate. In this way, they activate capacities, competencies, and skills that can be invested with their children to imagine and construct ever-new experiences of play and dialogue.

A range of rehabilitative activities is envisaged, flexible in timing and modalities and sustained over time so as to yield a durable, visible change. These activities unfold along two tightly interwoven pathways and are coordinated by the Legal–Pedagogical Officer within the scope of their competencies. The first, reflective in nature, encourages incarcerated parents to adopt an orientation of active listening to the child through individual and group meetings. Facilitated by correctional staff, by parents from the Municipality of Reggio Emilia’s Early Childhood Centers and Preschools, and by trained volunteers and university interns, these conversations create an open setting in which participants can speak about their parenting experience. Incarcerated parents, in particular, are invited to reflect on what it means to

be a parent in prison and, at the same time, on what it may mean for a child to have a parent who is incarcerated. The aim is not only to elicit the adult's perspective but also to make room for the child's point of view as construed by the adult, thereby encouraging a stance of active listening. Topics are defined collaboratively as needs and insights emerge from the group, often focusing on the difficulties of maintaining relationships with children while in custody and on how rehabilitative activities can strengthen not only parenting competencies but the very idea of parenting.

The second pathway is practical and experiential. Through individual and group workshops led by trained staff, volunteers, and *atelieristi*⁵ from the 0–6 educational services of the Reggio Emilia Schools and Nurseries, parents acquire concrete tools to propose and share with their children during visitation. A central device within this pathway is the personalized “box” (*cassetta*) of objects, materials, and small setups prepared by each parent for use with their child. Serving as a symbolic, private, and intimate space between parent and child, the box can be retrieved at each visit as a testimony to the continuity of the experience: practical, emotional, affective, and imaginative. Stored on a dedicated shelf in the children's meeting area, subject to institutional security requirements, the box may be personalized and decorated jointly by parent and child so that it becomes readily recognizable. To protect privacy, conspicuous labeling with the parent's or child's full name is avoided; if needed, identification can be placed discreetly inside the box.

The box may include structured materials—books, symbolic objects such as a stuffed animal or small doll, board games, and drawing or art supplies—as well as less conventional, open-ended materials, for example natural items gathered from the green area or creative recyclables sourced from the REMIDA Center. Workshops held outside the formal visitation period invite parents to familiarize themselves with available materials, to select them according to their children's ages and characteristics, and to explore, construct, and invent creative projects to realize for and with their children. The process is designed to prompt sustained attention to children's needs and specificities and to encourage self-reflection in relation to those needs. The assortment remains dynamic and can be modified and adjusted as new insights surface.

By design, the projects are open and flexible, achievable at varying levels of complexity and continuously rethought through the ideas and inspirations of staff, incarcerated parents, and children in a participatory spirit. During visitation, children may receive objects crafted by their parents and, at the same time, create new ones together. The box thus becomes a repository for work in progress, allowing projects to unfold over multiple visits rather than being compressed into a single encounter. Parents and children are free to decide to whom they will gift their creations, including other users of the *ludoteca* space. Over time, books, games, constructions, and artifacts will form a living documentary heritage that helps furnish and enrich

the setting. In this way, the environment is not predefined once and for all but continually assumes new identities.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to a collaborative design process and shared project goals with the penitentiary police, despite the security constraints that necessitate unobstructed visibility of the inmates, a system for positioning the micro-homes was developed. As evidenced in Figures 6. And 7. below, this arrangement allowed for the integration of a semi-transparent partial enclosure, aimed at providing families with a greater sense of intimacy during their visit.

Figure 6. The Final Result: Room 1



Figure 7. The Final Result: Room 2



The process was not without difficulties. Chief among these was the need to strike a balance between stringent prison regulations and the flexibility required to design spaces that foster family relationships. Security concerns and the need to monitor visits at times necessitated modifications and adjustments to the project so as to ensure safety without compromising usability. In certain instances, the differing sensibilities and priorities of the actors involved—such as institutional requirements *vis-à-vis* pedagogical aims—demanded a protracted process of negotiation.

Another critical issue was the need to raise awareness among prison staff regarding the pedagogical function of the spaces and the importance of an approach that promotes affective bonds rather than focusing solely on surveillance. Although the Penitentiary Administration showed openness toward the project, the culture of control and security that pervades the prison context at times generated resistance to altering traditional spaces in favor of a design more centered on family relationships. The space was not simply a neutral backdrop but an active element that participated in the construction of educational and relational experiences. In a context like prison visits, space became a fundamental ally in fostering positive relationships between incarcerated parents and their children, offering an environment that welcomed, stimulated, and grew with them. Through play, creativity, and dialogue, space be-

came an educational and emotional mediator, capable of transforming the visit into an opportunity for growth and the building of meaningful family bonds, therefore upholding the fundamental right of children to a relational space.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Translation of the authors from the original Italian.

² A wordplay which can be translated as “Distances at Play”. The project stems from a doctoral research study completed by Dr. Carmela Gesmundo and Professor Susanna Pietralunga within the PhD program in “Reggio Childhood Studies” (Unimore and Reggio Children Foundation), with the collaboration of the Infant-toddler centers and Preschools Institution of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. Among the actors involved were also the detained people, who personally took care of these new spaces.

³ The domestic reference has already been employed in notable projects within Italy—for example, the *Casetta Rossa* initiative by the Politecnico di Milano implemented at the Bollate Prison in Milan, and *MaMa* (the Module for Affection and Motherhood) by Renzo Piano, realized at the women’s prison of Rebibbia in Rome.

⁴ <https://www.remida.org/>

⁵ Educators with an artistic background who support and develop children’s expressive languages as part of a complex knowledge building process.

