

Lesson Plan: Great Place/Lousy Place

Audience

Adaptable for students in grades 1 through 12.

Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to increase students' awareness of the design of the places they use every day. They will gain insight into their reactions to their environment and the emotional and physical (design) criteria they use to evaluate places.

This activity enables teachers and students to participate in the City Gallery [<http://www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity/citygallery/index.htm>] section of the APA website. This section is dedicated to posting student artwork and ideas about their communities. Specific technical requirements for submission, including information on permission slips, are found in number 5, below.

Introduction

Becoming aware of the places we use every day, their design, and our reactions to them is the first step in the process of becoming active citizens who can intelligently contribute to shaping the future of our communities. While some places we visit provoke an immediate and strong reaction, more often than not we become so used to the places in which we live, work, and play that they become almost invisible. We learn to tune out our environment, which can result in our not reacting to negative changes until it is too late.

Every place has been designed by someone for a specific purpose, and some places accomplish their goals better than others do. It is important for students to learn how to articulate their feelings about places and understand that there are criteria they use, consciously and unconsciously, to evaluate these places. Some of the criteria is based on feelings and can be the result of positive and negative emotional experiences (e.g: "the place where I had my most embarrassing moment").

Other criteria are more objective: the physical, design elements. Designers use a tool kit of things like color, lighting, scale, materials, and shape to evoke emotional responses. They also consider things like how people will use the space in determining its design. This determines things like whether you are able to easily move about or whether you can see when you need to read. All these factors intertwine to make evaluating a place a bit tricky, but definitely worth doing.

Once students learn to pay attention and articulate their reactions to places in their community they can begin to offer ideas for improving them and effectively work with planners to achieve them.

This activity meets the following two Performance Standards for the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards in Theme III: People, Places and Environments:

- Describe how people create places that reflect ideas, personality, culture, and wants and needs as they design homes, playgrounds, classrooms, and the like.
- Examine the interaction of human beings and their physical environment, the use of land, building of cities, and ecosystem changes in selected locales and regions.

Objectives

Students will:

1. Identify and articulate the emotional and physical/design criteria they use to evaluate places;
2. Identify a place they like and in their neighborhood;
3. Sketch or photograph a place they dislike in their neighborhood;
4. Write a short caption describing their feelings about the place and why it works well or doesn't work well;
5. Interview others to compare perspectives.

Materials

- Select materials appropriate for students to draw or photograph. Paper should be no larger than an 8.5 x11 sheet.
- Pens, colored pencils, or crayons.

Procedure

1. Have the class generate a list: of their favorite places. These can be anywhere in the world — a vacation cabin, Disneyland/amusement park, a restaurant, etc. Record them on the board. As students call out a place ask them to give one or two reasons why they like it. One way to do this is to have them use key words or adjectives to describe the place (e.g. fun, peaceful, lots of action). Ask them if they think their parent and sibling or friend would agree with their assessment.

2. Have students look for patterns in the places they listed: Were similar types of places chosen? Why? Do they like the place because of an experience they had that affected their feelings toward it (e.g. special occasion, fun things to do, good things to eat)? What physical/design characteristics were listed (e.g., the building had a really neat looking entrance, there was a wonderful fountain)?
3. Initiate a discussion about factors that contribute to making a "great place." As students discuss, incorporate the idea that developing generic criteria can be challenging because each place is designed to accomplish a specific task. Places with similar functions can have different degrees of success in achieving their goal. Discuss how the physical/design criteria can affect our feelings about places (e.g. the sound of the fountain in the park makes me feel calm; I loved the amusement park because everything was so easy to find). Discuss why other people may feel differently about the place.
4. Then, focus on places that students dislike. Repeat the first two steps. The places some students dislike might turn out to be places that are other students' favorites.
5. Repeat the discussion in number three using a "lousy place." An example of how design can affect feelings is: "The library was so badly lit that I couldn't read; I walked into a glass door."
6. Give each student the assignment to identify two places in their neighborhood: one that is great and one that is lousy. Ask them to draw a picture (by hand or computer) or take a photograph of the place and write a short caption of about 40 words each describing his/her reasoning. Encourage them to include feelings/emotions and physical/design issues. Have them note where the place is and its purpose (e.g. movie theater, park, and supermarket).
7. Click here for information and requirements for submitting student work to the American Planning Association for posting on the Kids and Community Web page. Students will need to send permission slips, which are described on the site.
<http://www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity/citygallery/howtosubmit.htm>
8. Have students look for patterns in their choices. Did several students pick the same places? Was their reasoning similar? How much of their reasoning was based on feelings or design factors?
9. Have students generate suggestions for improving both the great places and lousy places.

Extensions

1. Have students interview their parents and siblings or friends to see how they feel about the places the students chose. Discuss why other people may feel differently than they do.
2. Take a walk with students to several places in or around the school and ask them to evaluate them.
3. Ask students to list places in the school that are good for:
 - Hiding
 - Relaxing
 - Running
 - Feeling important

Evaluation

Compare the reasons and criteria students generated in the initial discussion with those described after doing the assignment. Note any changes in their ability to articulate their descriptions of what makes a place work well or poorly and the factors that are emotional and design based.