

## Our Readers Write

# An Unschooling Landscape

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A recent article in *The Washington Post's* "Home" section, entitled "Live and Learn", delved into the architectural aspects of homeschooling. How, the writer wondered, does the decision to homeschool change the architecture of the home itself?

An interesting question, especially to one outside the homeschooling movement who intuitively expects to find a recreation of the schoolroom in the home, which is, not surprisingly, exactly what Mathews found, complete with chalkboards and desks.

One parent summed up this mentality succinctly, declaring, "You need a place for everything and everything in its place. There has to be order so that when you are done with home schooling for the day you can contain all of your stuff and not have the house look like a cyclone hit it." The families in Mathews' article do "Live and Learn", but for them, these activities take place in very distinct spaces.

The article's nod to the "unschooling" part of the homeschooling community suggests that unschoolers "leave the house the way it

is". While the sentiment that unschoolers live and learn in the same space is an accurate one, I began to wonder whether we, too, didn't change the way we live because we choose to learn from living itself. The answer for my family is that unschooling impacts and changes our entire landscape: no schoolroom at home, but a rich, full, exuberant landscape that

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ranges from room to room and spills out into our yard and the woods beyond.

Many folks walk into our home and feel instantly warm and welcome, as one friend observed about his daughter to his over-protective pediatrician wife, "How could she get hurt? This is a kid house!" Other people might walk into our home and be instantly put off by the child-centeredness of it. A particular aunt springs to mind – one of those people whose unsolicited advice always centers on how to

live life without the many inconveniences children pose.

Our home has brightly colored murals on the walls, lots of open shelving, but mostly, lots of stuff that most assuredly isn't always in its place if it even has one. As a type A personality who has given over to the three cyclones presently living here, I spend a fair amount of time rearranging and trying to find spaces for the many things necessary to fuel our current and potential passions. Instead of fighting the accumulation of stuff, I've become a student of stuff and a careful observer of the way my family interacts and uses space. I redirect my organizational energy to make all this stuff more accessible, more available, more enticing.

Shelves, cabinets, baskets and bins are filled with goodies to explore and excite. I accumulate and acquire stuff with an obsessive quality that rivals the above mother's obsession to control the stuff in her home. As life learners, we dive into topics with gusto, devouring all that we can get our hands on and then moving onto the next entrée. Many times, I'll see something that whets my own appetite with its future promise and I pick it up, waiting for just the right time to pull it out.

I also keep stuff forever, like the calligraphy set I picked up when I was probably 12 or 13. Its multiple nibs and colors fascinated my girls as we played with them and compared the pens to a quill my five-year-old daughter had bought at Colonial Williamsburg. My husband Jim's



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molecule model set from college chemistry has also proven quite interesting. It has offered hours of fun building in addition to illustrating conversations on water molecules and, most recently, chirality in nature spurred by Jim's work and Emily's recent interest in genetic mutation, thanks to the X-men.

Every square inch of our 1,800-square-foot home is put to use and often multiple uses. For a long time, the laundry room doubled as an art room, housing a four-foot art table and material-filled hoosier cabinet. Thanks to a wonderful new heavy duty, extra-long kitchen table, our art center has moved upstairs and taken over valuable kitchen cabinet space. Our priority was to have the art supplies where we could easily spread them out for four people to work, so walking downstairs for lesser-used or overflow food items seemed sensible.

Now, our laundry room triples as a pantry and dressing room in order to free my daughters' bureaus for toys and other items more important to them than clothes. All my children's closets have been reworked to incorporate play spaces, cozy nooks for their special activities – one even sports new recessed lighting. Our home changes as we adapt spaces to serve the needs of our children and ourselves, disregarding traditional uses of space and conventional constraints.

This attitude extends to our near-acre property, where we make use of every bit of land to enrich our lives. My passion for gardening has led to the complete re-landscaping of our yard to include vegetable gardens, berry gardens, herb gardens, flower gardens, wildlife gardens and a 3,200-gallon water garden. Throughout the growing season, my children and I harvest lettuce, beans, blackberries, strawberries, tomatoes and basil among many other delicacies.

We plant dill especially for the black swallowtails that flutter through our yard on which to lay their eggs. We plant native flowers and shrubs and nurture those that spring up on their own to feed the wildlife and preserve the native landscape. The native spicebush leaves turn a beautiful yellow in the fall after hosting spicebush swallowtail caterpillars all summer, then give way to glossy red berries, feeding the birds that overwinter.



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## Our landscape reflects the fervor of our passions and pursuit of learning through life.

Our pond, home to koi and comets, attracts many species of dragonflies as well as black snails, numerous frogs and the occasional snake and boxturtle. This past spring, we purchased 12 rare breed chicks to raise for fresh eggs. We designed and built the chicken house and the yard that protect them from local wildlife and our family dog so that it rotates frequently enough to allow free range grazing.

We're learning all about organic gardening, different ecosystems, wildlife and animal care, and our landscape reflects the fervor of our passions and pursuit of learning through life. However, we do these things not because of the many wonderful learning opportunities they provide but because we follow our passions with abandon.

Our individual passions overlap and infect others in the family without imposing upon them. Gardening is my love; the children are free to come and go as they please, participate or not. They are sometimes along for the ride when I stop at a favorite nursery to peruse the current offerings and attempt valiantly to carve one more inch for my current must-have. But, they, too, take us along for rides of

their own choosing – art, video games, Teen Titans and Egypt are among the current adventures.

The children's passions lead to all kinds of explorations through books, videos, toys, games and excursions. Our family room currently houses a model of the Nile River made out of sand and the Great Pyramids, step pyramid of Imhotep and Sphinx, all made out of polymer clay. Thanks to my husband's tech skills, we now have five computers, one of which doubles as a television, allowing us to capture favorite programming and burn it to DVD. This has enabled the kids to enjoy all their favorite Teen Titan episodes whenever they choose because their father was willing to fully support their passion. The bonus: I get great PBS documentaries on DVD that would otherwise cost a small fortune.

My husband's passion, rock climbing, has resulted in a nine-foot high, 15-foot long climbing wall addition to the kids' climber, on which we all enjoy playing. Climbing has become a special bonding activity for Jim and our five year old daughter because they share a similarly intense passion for the sport. After

work and before dusk falls, the two of them head down the hill with climbing shoes and chalkbags slung over shoulders to spend precious moments encouraging and loving each other as the sun begins to slip behind the trees.

Our climbing wall is attached below the kids' tree house, overlooking our pond as well as the wooded wetlands beyond our yard. During the winter months, as poison ivy and tangled brush give way, we head down to the silty stream to build dams, float sticks, dream and connect with each other over the lonely and distant sound of a woodpecker, wondering whether the sound might belong to a northern flicker, downy or red bellied woodpecker that so often visit our feeders. Once, very once-in-a-while, we catch sight of a pileated woodpecker, or we look for deer, fox and raccoon tracks as we make our way along the stream bank, musing on the unexpected gifts we find.

Embracing and following our passions, living and learning together, my family takes full advantage of the world around us and the spaces we inhabit as well as the creatures with whom we share those spaces.

Learning for us is unbounded, unfettered, undirected. Our lives and our learning are rich and overflowing, certainly not compartmentalized or contained within four walls of a "school" room. But neither do we leave the house the way it is – a description that's much too static to encompass the dynamic nature of our learning lives. As we grow and change and move to the next great interest, our space changes with us because our passions infuse it, molding it to our current needs.

Unschooling is not synonymous with homeschooling, in part because learning is not confined to the home or any particular space at all. It spills out into the world, embracing and making use of all that we encounter by living fully in the world.

School is an architectural space that can be defined, contained and controlled. Unschooling is a landscape, a panorama, a vista that changes with the seasons and direction of the wind, always fascinating, always offering new feasts for the mind and the senses for those who dare to live the adventure.

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