What do parents of young children seek when searching for an early learning centre? At Mi Casita, a bilingual pre-school, the clue for pupils is in the name, "My Little House". Bridgitte Alomes (pictured, right), the CEO of Canadian learning furniture company Natural Pod, explains how she helped create a safe, welcoming and meaningful environment for the residents of Brooklyn.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME IN NEW YORK CITY

It all starts with the founder, and in this case it is Eva Ruiz, who was the inspiration and creator behind Mi Casita, a bilingual pre-school and cultural centre in Brooklyn, New York City (NYC). Ruiz left her position as the Director of Community Affairs at the NYC Department of Education in 2010 to follow her vision of creating an early learning space that she would be proud to have her own daughter attend.

As a teacher, researcher, policy advisor and parent, Ruiz had gained tremendous insights into the best industry practices. A speaker of Spanish and English, Ruiz saw the value of nurturing children's rich multi-lingual and multicultural identities. As a result, she wanted to offer a unique combination of place-based learning that reflected the many cultures that co-exist in Brooklyn. Key to this would be the value placed on community engagement and neighbourhood exploration.

This particular approach has been popular within the city. By 2019 Mi Casita had expanded to offer pre-school places and was growing into a community cultural space.

Inspiring through spatial design

The first impression upon walking into Mi Casita is that the space is visually stunning. A bold colour scheme, natural materials and thoughtful layout reflect an environmentally conscious and nurturing environment. With the proportions of a small child in mind, the spatial design encourages exploration and curiosity. Flexible furniture is used to transform the space as needed for additional creative activities or community events.

A child's-eye view

To create an interior to inspire and match the centre's pedagogical vision, Ruiz commissioned Barker Associates Architecture Office (BAAO) and 4|Mativ Design Studio – two Brooklyn-based architecture companies. The 2,500-square-foot (232-square-metre) ground floor, with its 15-foot-high (4.6-metre) ceilings, is divided into three multi-functional areas that can be used together or separately based on the activity of focus.

These areas are organised around an L-shaped trough sink that also becomes a social gathering spot. The focus on being a "home away from home" as well as a cultural community hub within Brooklyn, motivated the designers to incorporate graphic elements relating to home and the city, thoughtfully situated at a child's vantage point. Colour has been used to both delineate and connect the different spaces. The overall effect is one of calm and wonder, which sets the stage for the additional colour children create every day through their play and artwork.

WITH THE PROPORTIONS OF A SMALL CHILD IN MIND, THE SPATIAL DESIGN ENCOURAGES EXPLORATION AND CURIOSITY.

COLOUR HAS BEEN USED TO BOTH DELINEATE AND CONNECT THE DIFFERENT SPACES. THE OVERALL EFFECT IS ONE OF CALM AND WONDER...

A natural, sustainable learning space

Mi Casita is a Reggio Emilia-inspired, place-based learning centre. The Reggio approach values education as a learning partnership between children, teachers and place, with an emphasis on environmental responsibility.

Ruiz gave a lot of thought to the furniture the children would engage with and how it would influence their play and learning. In fact, it was as important to find the right furniture to fit out the space as it was to create the interior. Ruiz collaborated with our team with the intention of bringing nature through natural materials into Mi Casita.

The design of the centre's flexible, multi-functional pieces invites open-ended play, enquiry and curiosity: fulfilling both the spaces' needs, and those of the occupants.

Mi Casita illustrates how you can build and engage community through intentional, thoughtful design of space and place. The centre uses furniture and the built environment as an integral part of the teaching and learning experiences. ■

Bridgitte Alomes is the founder and CEO of Natural Pod. She hosts Natural Pod™ LIVE, an online conversation between a community of educators, students and architects. Bridgitte also acts as President of the Green Schools National Network.

For the full case study visit https://www.micasitabk.org/ https://naturalpod.com/projects/project-profile-mi-casita/