The Good Childhood in NYC

Monika Heimbold Discusses The Heimbold Family Children’s Playing and Learning Center

2020 marks the 20th anniversary of a unique Center at Scandinavia House that encourages children to exercise their imaginations. Here is an interview about its creation.

By Max J. Friedman

Monika Heimbold at the opening of the reimagined Heimbold Family Children’s Center on September 16, 2011.
Q: The Heimbold Family Children’s Playing and Learning Center celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. What made you decide, even as Scandinavia House was being developed and then built, that this kind of center for children was important? And how did those plans develop?

A: When I came on to the American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF) board in 1996, work was already underway on the new Nordic Center on Park Avenue. I remember putting on a hard hat and going to the construction site on East 37th Street to get a sense of what was to come. There I saw the shell of a building going up, with ambitious plans that included galleries, a restaurant, shops, meeting spaces and offices. Having spent so much of my life focusing on children and their needs, while also recalling my own special childhood in Sweden, I naturally decided to ask what was being done to focus on children or to display aspects of the Nordic childhood experience? Nothing specific had been planned. But there was some space on the fourth floor that hadn’t yet been allocated. So I had a thought. Why not?

I talked to Charlie, my husband, and he agreed that we might do something for and about children in part of that free space. I worked with Jim Polshek, the architect, to make that space work for children. It was a major step forward in highlighting the importance of Nordic childhoods in all five Scandinavian countries and encouraging young children—mostly between ages 1 and 5 (they had to be able to walk)—to exercise their imaginations. And we hoped some of what was experienced would spark ideas about taking the best of the Nordic childhood and exporting it to America.

Initially, at least for me, the Center would come to represent the best of my own childhood memories. I loved being on stage and acting when I was a young girl, so we agreed to build a place for a stage and put some costumes nearby for make-believe play. Some of my best memories also came from reading and being read to. The result: a very special reading nook, stocked with English and Scandinavian children’s stories.

Finally, we searched through all kinds of children’s toys and furniture catalogs, coming up with many of the initial furnishings for the Center, including imaginative toys and furniture.

We were thrilled when Queen Silvia of Sweden came to the opening in October of 2000, at the same time Scandinavia House opened its doors to the public. And I’m happy to say, she seemed delighted to be there as well.

Q: From the outset it seemed that the Center attracted a great deal of public attention and great feedback from the community and the children, parents and caregivers who came there. What else did the Center offer?

A: While we used the larger space for the Center, a second room right next door became a temporary place for performances, special exhibits and

A special Center exhibit featured the Moomins, white, round fairy-tale characters from Finnish illustrator Tove Jansson.
readings and other activities. We had a talented artist named Sarah Edkins paint designs and scenes from Scandinavian books and stories on the walls, bringing fairy-tale castles and Norwegian trolls to life. Special exhibits over the years included enchanting visual installations celebrating Sweden’s Pippi Longstocking and her friends, Norwegian fairy tales about trolls and billy goats, the folk myths of Iceland, a celebration of Denmark’s Hans Christian Andersen, the Moomin trolls of Finland and children’s adventures in the Swedish countryside as told by the author Elsa Beskow.

Q: How does this Center relate to some of the ideals and values expressed in the philosophy behind the Nordic or Good Childhood?
A: The Good Childhood stresses the opportunity to help develop competent, independent children, by emphasizing the idea of feeling free through play experiences that are largely organized by the children themselves. The environments that we sought to offer at the Center also focused, either directly or otherwise, on basic Good Childhood values like cooperative play, tolerance, consideration of others and gender equality. The idea is that these early experiences stimulate minds and inspire imaginations while also offering children valuable lessons in self-control and social awareness. The only thing the learning center didn’t directly allow kids to experience was playing outdoors in nature—a key feature of my own childhood in Sweden.

Q: Yet, after 10 years, you decided to redesign and expand the Children’s Center? Why did you do that and how did the Center change and grow as a result?
A: As it turned out reimagining the Children’s Center at Scandinavia House was an even more ambitious undertaking.

After a decade of seeing the Center grow in popularity and use, we decided that we needed more space to expand our horizons and reach for more possibilities. So we acquired that second room for more imaginative and creative play. But we needed additional inputs on how to do that. So I went on an exploratory trip to Sweden to begin to connect with those who could help.

I had also been talking to Sara Wilford, who was then the director of the Sarah Lawrence Child Development Institute, where I had received some of my early training working with young children in an educational setting. We had used imaginative and creative play in that work and thought we might be able to translate that knowledge and the breakthroughs made in preschools in the Nordic countries in an expanded center here in New York. We needed to do some research.

I traveled to Sweden with Sara where we met with preschool directors, professors of child development at Stockholm University and teachers at the Tappan School, a distinguished and pioneering preschool in Stockholm. At Tappan, we saw freedom at work as children were encouraged to make their own decisions. Those too young to talk would actually place dolls in model rooms to show what they would like to do. As one preschool teacher at Tappan...
said, “It’s very important they feel that they are listened to.” What a notion!

Then, I invited three teachers from the Tappan School to come to the U.S. They stayed in my house as we made preliminary sketches and planned a redesign working with two talented architects, Adam and Mishi Weintraub, of Koko Architecture. A few years earlier, they had helped design a gallery that a few of us had opened in lower Manhattan called More North, exclusively featuring the latest in Scandinavian fine and applied arts and designs, including a special floor just for children.

We all worked for two months to create a new vision. Two separate rooms were now to be primarily connected by a kids-only-sized tunnel. One was to be an active playroom for focused play and featured a special BRIO train table, a LEGO building zone, a traditional Scandinavian play country kitchen and a fully equipped Scandinavian play grocery store, complete with both American and Nordic play money. The cozy reading area would continue to feature English and Nordic language children’s favorites. The second would be a sensory room, including art and subdued soft lighting for self-directed play while also offering climbing toys, a giant mushroom playhouse, special light tables, racks of costumes and clothes, a larger stage and a “please touch” wall to engage the children’s tactile senses.

Importantly we added the word “Playing” to the name of our Center—to equate learning with play in a much more explicit way—all inspired by the Nordic preschool models we had visited. This reimagined Heimbold Family Children’s Playing and Learning Center opened in September 2011.

Q: Could you tell me specifically how this Center relates to the Nordic Childhood model?

A: I believe that trying to teach reading or writing—the letters of the alphabet or spelling—to children too early doesn’t make as much sense as teaching them about the nature of the communication process itself, so that children can see why we use letters and the alphabet to communicate in the first place. The Nordic child-centered approach doesn’t tell young children what to do. Instead, it allows children to guide adults to what they want to do. Their natural creativity stays alive and flourishes and becomes a great foundation for future learning. While some of the educational theories that were later implemented in the Scandinavian countries, especially after World War II, guided this philosophy, its implementation in the schools was a bit late for my brother Leif and me. However, undergirding this system was the freedom we were given early in our lives. That included the explorations we were exposed to in nature, the stories and books we heard and the free and unencumbered summers we experienced. All these were instrumental both to our future work and to catalyzing imaginative and creative approaches in many aspects of our later professional and personal lives. We took risks, because we

Children can explore new worlds, whether about elves from the Myths and Magic of Iceland (left) to what they may find at the other end of a tunnel.

A 2003 installation focused on Pippi Longstocking (left) and, in 2005, an installation (right) presented the Norwegian tale of three billy goats and an ugly troll.

Photos: Tina Buckman
were allowed or even encouraged to do so as youngsters.

Q: One of the hallmarks of The Good Childhood is developing in children a sense of independence and confidence. As you indicated, that sometimes requires allowing them to take chances—even risks—and to avoid hovering over them every step of the way. By demonstrating confidence in their ability to take care of themselves, perhaps that strengthens their ability to do just that. Can you give me an example of how you tried to instill that confidence in your own kids?

A: Several years ago, my youngest son Peter reminded me of how, as a mother, I had taken the concepts behind The Good Childhood to heart when he was still young, back in the 1970s. Though all our children were born in the U.S., we had kept our Swedish connections alive and well while they were growing up. We would regularly visit my parents and my brother and his wife Ann and their family. Among other things, I think it was in those visits that Peter developed a deep love of nature and with that, it seemed, of knife collecting. Now, these were not butter knives or even small pocket knives. These were the real deal—sharp and pretty large knives used for preparing food and hunting.

Anyway, Leif and his family had a cabin in Lappland in northern Sweden and we had come to visit one winter. Peter couldn’t have been more than six years old at the time. One morning, he showed me a large knife that had a reindeer carved on its handle. Leif had given it to him as a present. But there was a problem. “Mom,” he said, “this knife just isn’t sharp enough.” He had been busy carving pieces of wood and creating little toys with the knife. Now think about what a mother in the U.S. might have done at such a moment? Probably grab the knife away and warn the child not to go near such sharp objects again for his own good. And then consider instead my automatic response, as a mother, but born and bred in Sweden, where being close to nature and being able to survive harsh winters were critical to any youngster’s upbringing. Without a second thought, rather than warning him about the inappropriateness of playing with knives and instead trying to steer him to a much safer LEGO construction project, I picked up the knife, marched out of the cabin and went into town . . . to have it sharpened. I returned it to him as soon as possible.

I realized that a boy’s knife in Sweden was a part of his rite of passage toward becoming a responsible young man. My upbringing told me not to fear for his well-being, but instead to convey my trust in his judgment, to encourage his independence and to support his fearlessness. Being brave was good. We each had to build our own tool kits for survival in ways that were in tune with nature. Doing so deserved our respect and encouragement.

The bottom line was that whether you’re an adult or a child in northern Lappland in the wintertime, you’d better have some idea of how to handle a knife—simply to survive.

The moral of the story? Swedes and others in the Nordic countries have brought up their children for years and from an early age to respect nature
“These stories and fairy tales taught me that there was always hope . . .”

and to learn to navigate its sometimes-harsh requirements, with only the minimal interference or guidance from an adult that was truly required. We have long supported a child’s need for freedom to choose for themselves, to think for themselves, to stay in touch with nature and, in so doing, to learn about themselves and the world around them. Imaginative, independent as well as collaborative play is a central and critical tool for doing just that.

Q: Let’s back up a little. You were born in Stockholm in 1938, right before the start of World War II and at a time of great challenge for many across the Nordic countries. Can you tell us more about what your childhood was like—and some early memories?

A: Most of my early memories took place when we lived in southern Stockholm. We had an apartment across the street from the primary school that I first attended beginning at age 7. Unlike today, there were no state-supported systems of preschools and since my mother didn’t work, my younger brother and I didn’t go to day care.

My father worked for a meat company. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. She cooked and baked, sewed and knitted, and read a tremendous amount, coming home from the library with big bags of books.

In the summers, like so many other Swedes, we would treasure the warm summer months and the long sun-filled days by renting a house on one of the islands in the Swedish archipelago (or skärgård), enjoying the opportunity to spend summers out of doors, free and in nature. My father would come on the weekends. The property had a little enclosed gazebo (called a pleasure house or lusthus in Swedish) near the water, where I played for hours and kept my pet chameleon. Leif and I would play endlessly on the shore and in the water, in our imaginary games and by exploring nature. We could do whatever we wished. For a few months each year, it was heaven.

Pappa wanted me to be “hans käcka flicka,” a girl who was brave, strong and capable. Each night throughout the year, we would curl up with him as he read us fairy tales. There were stories by Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm and others, and that included Red Riding Hood, The Princess and the Pea, Thumbelina, The Emperor’s New Clothes and The Wild Swans. My childhood drawings were sometimes inspired by Selma Lagerlöf’s story, The Wonderful Adventures of Nils, about a mischievous 14-year-old boy who changed into a tiny being and transported himself across Sweden on the back of a goose. As a young girl, I also loved the idea of misbehaving with my friend Kerstin and our classmates, just like my idol Pippi Longstocking, a liberated, opinionated nine-year-old created by Astrid Lindgren. I would talk endlessly about Pippi with my older cousins, who would go out shopping with me to buy more books.

For the most part, these stories and fairy tales taught me that there was
always hope and that happy endings were possible. They often portrayed independent and competent young children who traveled to far-away places, setting a great example for all of us. In fact, a childhood drawing of mine of Lagerlöf’s Nils on the back of his goose, included a line I had written in Swedish, which in English translated to: “My dream is to make an overseas trip.” At age 22, I would do just that and emigrate to America.

Q: While your involvement with the ASF and Scandinavia House has long focused on the Children’s Center, you expanded the effort to educate and demonstrate the positive aspects of the Nordic childhood experience through a series of symposia that you sponsored and helped organize at Scandinavia House beginning in 2012. Can you tell us more about those symposia, what they sought to achieve and what they have explored to date?

A: We have held three symposia (in 2012, 2016 and 2019)—and hope to do another one in 2022. Each has taken place at Scandinavia House and has been co-sponsored by the Child Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence College, from which I received a B.A. in 1985. Each has explored the Nordic Childhood, the first to introduce its philosophy and practice in the five Nordic countries, the second to discuss possible adaptations spurred by the Nordic model in the U.S. and the most recent one, to focus on the challenges to The Good Childhood in these countries. Such challenges include the influx and integration of new populations from other cultures (including migrants and refugees) into Nordic schools, financing concerns, technology advances and pressures to adopt certain American and other non-Nordic practices, like more standardized testing and less flexibility in school curricula.

Monika Heimbold’s own childhood drawing of Selma Lagerlöf’s The Wonderful Adventures of Nils.

Q: Aside from establishing the Center and continuing to play a key role as it develops and grows, I know you have been involved in many other ways in advancing the values that underpin The Good Childhood. At Sarah Lawrence, you studied at the Child Development Institute, and then later, you went on to get a Master’s in social work at Columbia, becoming a clinical social worker, and focusing on young children who were facing a variety of learning or psychological challenges. Then you joined Queen Silvia of Sweden as one of the founders of the World Childhood Foundation, which has focused on sexual trafficking and the abuse of children around the world. How does all that fit together?

A: My psychology studies at Sarah Lawrence led to my continuing interest in child psychology and child development. That’s how I found my way into working at the College’s Early Childhood Center in 1981. Among other things there, I worked hard to help children become more confident and to function independently. I would use a box of colored tiles (468 pieces of...
plastic in 18 different shapes and sizes, including triangles, semicircles, circles, squares, oblongs and diamonds, all in many colors) to discover more about how children might be thinking or feeling, and later to help diagnose problems. For instance, the kids would build something with the tiles and then tell me a story about what that meant. That gave me a greater insight into their inner lives. After a stint doing research using these tiles at the New School, I decided that it was time to transfer all I had learned to help children in need, enrolling at Columbia’s School of Social Work and receiving an MSW.

After Columbia, I spent the next 10 years working in a therapeutic nursery in New Rochelle, New York, as a clinical social worker, trying to help young children, many of whom had been victims of physical and emotional abuse. They were often living in single-parent households, some with mothers who had been drug abusers, themselves victims of abuse or suffering from some mental illness.

I furnished my own therapy room at New Rochelle, creating a warm and safe atmosphere for the kids. We based everything we did on play, eventually expanding that play toward the boundaries of real life. I learned some important things during those years about play and children. For example, when playing with children one should not get involved in their play too quickly because they need time to gain some self-confidence and separation from adults by working things out for themselves. That actually was an important pillar of The Good Childhood approach in the preschool setting. Teachers stay at a distance from the children as they play, allowing them to lead the way.

As you pointed out, in 1999 I became involved with the World Childhood Foundation and today continue to work with Childhood in the U.S. and in other countries to helping combat sexual trafficking of children and other forms of abuse. The challenges are enormous, but the possibilities to make a difference are even greater. In my own fairy tale kind of life, I have discovered that there is always a way out of one’s dilemmas, however difficult they may be. Therefore, as that great Nordic hero Winston Churchill once declared: “Never give in. Never. Never. Never.”

Q: Are you optimistic, given the challenges—whether funding, the influx of new populations with different backgrounds, values, experiences and

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expectations—cultural and otherwise, the migrant/refugees crisis, the device revolution or most recently the climate crisis? The problems seem too serious, and they seem to be challenging children earlier and earlier in their young lives—in some respects shortening their childhoods and perhaps making them grow up too soon?

A: When I think of the Center, it is of course part of a larger world and cannot be totally insulated from what happens all around us and around our children. That said, I feel very good about what we have been able to accomplish to date and the trajectory on which today’s Center is traveling.

There are few rules or regulations. Play takes a shape all its own. I love that the little kids come in, take things, walk around with them, and then leave them here or there. So our little play shop is always delightfully empty. They laugh. They smile. They love it there. They create the shape and future of the Children’s Center and of The Good Childhood itself. I am proud of its esthetics, that it is so friendly and warm, so inviting and sweet. It is an intimate place, a small place for the youngest among us. The Center allows kids just to be.

The Children’s Center has taken on a life of its own. The kids are happy coming. It becomes their own little universe. And from it, other universes—positive places nurturing positive, creative and competent children, who respect others as well as the world around them—will take hold.

Queen Silvia of Sweden (left), sitting with Joanna Heimbold and members of her family, at the Center’s opening in October 2000.

Max J. Friedman is guest editor of this special Nordic Childhoods issue of Scandinavian Review.