

Peru Projects: Parque Mágico de la Aviación

The village of Aviación is situated on flat and barren earth with few areas for children to play or get together out of the sun. Rarely can the children express themselves creatively or be actively involved in decisions or initiatives that shape their community. In summer 2010, during a two-week project, the children of the Aviación *comedor* (community kitchen) together with a group of Canadians from Heart-Links, designed and built a children's play and gathering space adjacent to the comedor. By employing a participatory approach, this "design/build" project enabled the children to be the primary decision makers. On the first day, they were told they were "the bosses", the project leaders. After acquiring the necessary learning the children were able to dictate and shape the final design of their play space. They were given the tools to craft their designs and then to see their imagined space come to fruition. This allowed them to feel pride and a profound sense ownership in the completed playground.

Over 6 days, they were taught some of the principles of play space design. They evaluated and measured the building site and worked together to develop designs for the space. They showed their work to each other, and kept working to refine their ideas, and then each of them voted, through 'dot democracy', to choose the final design. Two additional tasks completed the design stage. First, after voting unanimously to include a mural in the play space, the children worked with one of the interpreters, who is also an artist, to outline the mural content. A frenzy of ideas was presented, all of which were included in the final design. The mural also had space for each of the children to paint their own portrait as they saw fit. Many ideas were put forward and the children agreed as a group that the name should reflect not just those who created it, but rather **all** the children of Aviación. By an overwhelming majority, they voted to call their wonderful space '*Parque Mágico de la Aviación*' – *The Magical Park of Aviación*.

With the design complete, it was time to start the build! Over the next 5 days, the children, mothers and fathers of the community worked long days side by side with the Canadians to make the 'magical park' a reality. Overcoming the many challenges associated with transportation, materials, costs, and communication, the group was able to complete the build – with about 5 minutes to spare! After a joyous inauguration celebration, and the naming of two of the children as the 'godmother' and 'godfather' of the park, the ribbon was cut and all the children of the community rushed to enjoy the fruits of their labours.

The power of the **participatory process** inherent in this "design/build" project was equally, if not more, important than the final result. No child was excluded. Young and old worked together. Even the youngest of the group carried materials, watered plants and helped to paint the mural. This truly was the children's project in every sense.

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