

## *Can I Speak to the Monster?*

### *The Transformative Power of Therapeutic Spaces and transitional objects: A Jungian Perspective*

Dr Keith Winter + Joanna Parker

#### Introduction

The interplay between therapeutic environments and ‘transitional objects’<sup>1</sup> examines the relationship between everyday things and their significance as tools of the unconscious. This paper departs from an interview of integrated art therapist Joanna Parker by artist Dr. Keith Winter and as such quotes the authors in third person from the transcription.

In dialogue with Parker over the last four years<sup>2</sup>, Winter asked to examine Parker’s practice and in particular her use of objects, their sentimentality and symbolism. Winter asked ‘How are the objects, furniture and elements of your studio affording your clients transformational power in their healing?’ Winter took photographs of Parkers studio (Fig\_01) in a spatial study and noted her anecdotes of the items her clients have used in the past, both expected and unexpected.

A few of these elements and objects are outlined in this paper and pushed through a lens of Carl Jung’s profound observations from a chapter called ‘The Work’ in his 1963 autobiography ‘Memories, Dreams, Reflections’. Using Jung’s work on the unconscious alongside his ‘sand-play’ techniques, this study delves into the transformative capacity of spaces for healing and psychological metamorphosis. While Carl Jung did not directly use a sand-tray, his ideas formed the basis of sand-play therapy. These spaces, as physical, symbolic, and emotional vessels, act as active agents in the journey toward self-discovery



and emotional balance.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Transitional objects’ are those which help aid the the unconscious *journey* rather than being the *destination* (Parker). Winnicott s (1971) theory of transitional phenomena, offers a framework in the therapeutic space to engage with a client s internal world and relational patterns and work on them in this living workshop space, offering an explicitly transitional experience.

<sup>2</sup> Between 2020 and 2022 Parker and Winter initiated an online book club during pandemic lockdowns around the psyche, heroes, the Fourth Way and more. In April 2024 Winter invited Jo Parker to present a lecture and constructed a Sand-tray at University of East London that was demonstrated in theory to the visual arts students using objects, postcards and fruit.

## The Space as a Psychological Tool

Therapeutic environments transcend their role as mere backdrops, becoming pivotal participants in the healing process with 'transitional objects' to aid a client. Activated 'domestic elements' are at times the amplification of the physical attributes of a space—surfaces, furniture, fixings and fixtures—all available as apparatus to support shaping a client's psychological experience. These spaces serve as controlled environments where emotions, traumas, and memories can be safely explored. Jung's assertion that "*the unconscious is the source of all that is creative in the individual*" (Ibid, p. 213) resonates deeply here, as therapeutic spaces become extensions of the unconscious mind, inviting creativity and self-reflection.

Wilfred Bion (1962) introduced the idea of psychic containment<sup>3</sup>, which can be understood as a parallel to the physical containment of the therapeutic space. The physical containment of a tangible environment could be seen as akin the holding arms of the mother, providing a constant, where raw feelings can be accessed. In dialogue, Parker reflects, '*The space holds the unspeakable, the monstrous parts of ourselves that we fear to face.*' This insight captures how therapeutic environments serve as sanctuaries for the 'shadow self'. Jung's philosophy of embracing the shadow aligns with this notion, urging individuals to engage with the '*person you are not willing to be*' (Ibid, p. 213).

## Transitional Objects as Gateways to the Psyche

### 1. The Sand-tray

Objects within therapeutic spaces hold dual significance: functional and symbolic. Over time these items can be pushed further than their usual functions, a couch can *afford* more than just sitting on it<sup>4</sup>, a window can become an instrument, or a floor becomes an ocean of lava. These tangible interactions bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious, fostering emotional integration. As Jung articulates, "*The environment is a reflection of the inner world of the individual*" (Ibid, p. 269).

The first object described here is a purposeful tool, the Sand-tray (*Fig\_02*), an enclosed prescribed volume developed by Margaret Lowenfeld in 1929. The tray itself is a hardwood box with a set dimension based on the 1:1.61 ratio of the golden mean<sup>5</sup> and permits the action of Jungian Sandplay within a formalised setting:

*'In Sandplay, clients are presented with a rectangular, shallow tray halfway filled with sand with particular dimensions related to the golden ratio (i.e. 28.5 x 19.75 x 2.75 inches for the inside measurement), and a large selection of small and large item images. The client may work solely with sand forms (Steinhardt, 2000) or may choose the toys and miniatures to symbolically represent their struggles and make places, worlds, and dreams manifest in the sand.'*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bion's term 'Psychic containment' from his 1962 text 'Learning from experience'

<sup>4</sup> JJ Gibson's affordances act as a glue to this process by linking objects to agents through possible action. What can a space afford to an artistic agent? Greeno, James G., *Gibson's Affordances*, Psychological Review, American Psychological Association, Inc., 1994

<sup>5</sup> The golden ratio, also known as the golden number, golden proportion, or the divine proportion, is a ratio between two numbers that equals approximately 1.618, <https://www.adobe.com/creativecloud/design/discover/golden-ratio>

<sup>6</sup> <https://worldsandtherapy.org/page/history>

This process taps into Jung's insight that *"the symbol is the best means of representing the inner world"* (Ibid, p. 173). Clients use childlike objects (*Fig\_03*) to construct symbolic representations of emotions, fears, and traumas, fostering a controlled exploration of the unconscious playing out an unlocked memory. This, Parker insists, causes 100% of clients in her experience to emotionally break down.

Parker states:

*'I have seen 'murders 'in the sand-tray, through the use of the objects. An enactment such as this is permitted, and is a way of working with murderous fantasies and violent rage in a safe way. It doesn't mean that this will be acted upon in reality, in fact quite the opposite. By working on the image you are working on the emotions, rather than them proliferating in the dark.'*

In material terms the tray is a miniature domain, by using fine sand for land, a blue painted bottom as water and mirrors as lakes the tray acts as a heterotopia<sup>7</sup>, a 'coming-of-age' island that is at once everywhere and nowhere. This permits a new set of rules. Parker's concept of 'micro-borders' in the sand-tray mirrors Jung's observation that *"What you do not make conscious, will make you. And what you make conscious, you will no longer be its victim"* (Ibid, p. 234).



Fig\_02\_Parker's Sandtray with shark, dinghy and palm tree. Fig\_03\_Small selection of Parker's objects available to clients.

## 2. 'The Floor is Lava': Domestic Elements

<sup>7</sup> Foucault's **heterotopias** are "other spaces" that lie outside the norms of daily life—isolated yet meaningful, like cemeteries or hospitals. These spaces merge time and space, evolving as they absorb the impacts of extreme activities and changes. Their histories shape their present, they are often a space permitting a 'coming of age'. The ultimate heterotopia is a boat at sea, which is everywhere and nowhere.

Incorporating domestic 'normal' everyday elements within therapeutic spaces fosters a sense of security, bridging clients' inner and outer worlds. These familiar elements enable clients to explore their vulnerabilities in a safe environment. Parker's description of a client interacting with the 'floor as an ocean of lava' led to the treatment of this blue/grey painted surface as a real danger. The client squirted fairy liquid all over it and subsequently Parker and her started cleaning it up. This inadvertently created a huge foamy volume in and around large areas of the studio that became a confusing cloud for the client. The removal of this cloud as they cleaned and demolished it, symbolised a psychological journey from infantile to adult processes.

Parker poignantly observes, *"There is healing in the mundane, in reclaiming the ordinary as extraordinary."* This sentiment underscores how clients practice self-acceptance by freely engaging with both familiar and chaotic elements, rehearsing transformative ways of being. Jung's assertion that *"the most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely"* (Ibid, p. 266) underpins this process.

### **3. Sensory Engagement: Windows and Radiators**

Sensory elements in therapeutic spaces—sound, texture, light—act as portals to the unconscious. Parker's tales of clients scattering marbles on the floor, producing sounds of pouring water and gurgling, evoke visceral associations, meeting clients in their sensory experiences. Jung's notion that *"the environment is a reflection of the inner world"* (Ibid, p. 269) echoes here, highlighting how sensory engagement deepens emotional connection.

One anecdote from Parker recounts a young client who was so frustrated he started rattling the window frames which generated a loud reverberated sound channelled through the neighbouring radiator (*Fig\_04*). The result of this sensory accident caused the teenager to continue making the noise until they started to play with the sound and its dynamics. By moving through a physical process the client had shifted gears and journeyed through an emotional process at the same time. These fixed domestic elements afforded much more than just heat, light and views, they enabled sound and a small victory for the client.

Parker emphasises, *"Furniture is not just for comfort—it's a medium for engagement. The way it's designed can invite curiosity or provide solace."* For instance, a modular sofa that can be rearranged reflects the adaptable compartments of one's mind, while curved edges and soft textures create an atmosphere of safety. Similarly, storage units with transparent sections invite clients to observe and organise their environment, mirroring the process of making unconscious elements conscious.



Fig\_04\_Jo Parker shows the window and radiator in the studio next to furniture and percussion basket.

## Conclusion: The Implications of this study

The study of therapeutic spaces is not merely about the mechanics of healing but delves into the philosophical underpinnings of human existence, transformation, and the spaces we inhabit. Why do certain environments facilitate growth while others stifle it? This question speaks to a fundamental aspect of human nature: our intrinsic relationship with the external world as a *mirror* of our inner lives.

Spaces are not inert they have a type of consciousness. They breathe, hold, and resonate with the stories and emotions we bring to them. This philosophy aligns with the Jungian view that the psyche and environment are intertwined, each shaping and reflecting the other. The therapeutic studio becomes a liminal space where the boundaries between self and world blur, offering clients a unique opportunity to reimagine their identities.

The interplay between space, objects, senses and psyche has implications far beyond therapy. By understanding the psychological impact of environments, one can design spaces—from homes to urban landscapes—that promote well-being and resilience. Jung's insight that "*I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become*" (*Ibid*, p. 271) serves as a guiding principle for creating environments that support healing and self-actualisation.

In conclusion, therapeutic spaces are far from static; they are dynamic, symbolic entities that actively shape and support psychological transformation. By integrating stability, sensory engagement, and symbolic elements, these spaces invite individuals to confront and integrate their shadow selves, transforming pain into strength and insight. As Parker states in our interview: "*The space itself becomes a witness, a holder of stories and potential.*"



Fig\_05\_Artist impression of a life-size Sand-tray in a fictional gallery setting 1

Fig\_06\_Artist impression of a life-size Sand-tray in a fictional gallery setting 2

## Further investigations

### 1. Transitional object affordance rubric

A rubric that measures affordances of both *domestic elements* and *transitional objects* in psychological terms can be drawn up using variables matched against their physical properties. These might then be assigned to various emotive releases and drivers that the client exercises and transitions through, thus creating a powerful all-encompassing measurement to the domestic elements and deliberate objects placed in the therapeutic space.

### 2. Future transitional objects

Proposed designs that collide the above physical and emotional affordances together might enable a fusion of everyday elements and transitional objects, creating a singular furniture item that can be many things at once; a mobile type of ergonomic seat, acoustically playable, whilst generating heat and light at the same time. Multiple senses would be stimulated by these 'Frankenstein hybrids' which could create a multi-layered experience for the client. Perhaps smell, taste and touch are incorporated into some hybrids also, touching on the idea of ASMR-producing objects.

### 3. Lifesize Sandtray (Fig\_05+06)

Lastly, this proposal imagines a purpose built human-sized sandtray, inviting participants to engage with oversized objects and elements on a human scale. The puppeteer instead enters the arena and at once becomes an active participant. Towering teddy bears, huge plastic dinosaurs and papier-mâché sharks lie amidst a desert oasis within the scaled-up version, still relating to the original where the large mimics the small. Such an environment would not only showcase the transformative potential of therapeutic design but also inspire broader applications in education, urban planning, and beyond.

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