

Barbara E. Hendricks

Designing for Play

Second Edition



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BARBARA E. HENDRICKS

Play Environment Designer and Consultant

ASHGATE

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Foreword

This book is aimed at the designer who would like to design well for the children. It is intended as a reference to introduce current issues and ideas relating to children in public spaces. The large body of literature and expertise relating to child development and child psychology may seem inaccessible to a designer; in this book I hope to whet their appetite to come to know more about this important population.

This is a book, but I hope it is not a typical book. A book about play should also signal that it is to be played with, it is for people who play, who play seriously. It is not necessary to start at the beginning and read to the back. You can also start in the middle and read to the front. Boxes of information and highlighted ideas that catch your attention can be the starting point. Some statements that are important to me are repeated – this is not a mistake in the editing – it is deliberate. Repetition is part of the way we play and the way we learn and remember; the repetition is part of the rhythm of this book. The whole aim is to increase the quality of designing for play – and we can only do that when we feel freer as adult designers to use play as a tool for our own further development as well as enjoy it for the fun of it. Enjoy!

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Chapter 1

Designing for Play

Designing for play has been the rightful field of work for anyone who wishes to set themselves up as a playground designer. There is neither clearly identified body of knowledge required nor any particular design skills. Architects, landscape architects, sculptors, engineers, technicians, builders, gardeners, sportsmen, educators and former children all have tried their hand at playground design. The multitude of angles from which we approach playground design could be seen to bring in a wonderful diversity to this field. Unfortunately that is not so. Public playgrounds have been part of western cities for a little over 100 years now and yet as we enter into the twenty first century there is no other aspect of public provision that has changed so little over the past century and is so boringly the same around the world as public playgrounds.

Why is this so?

Is this because there is so little professional competence in the design of play areas?

Is it because designing for children has little or no prestige in society?

Is it because societies do not prioritise good quality space design for children as a public service?

Is it because children have no political power?

Is it because the adults are too busy taking care of their own needs?

The list of questions could continue – there is no simple answer to the problems in public playgrounds design. The solution lies in the will of society to want to offer children a quality childhood, where children are recognised as citizens and not extensions of their parents. To date there are few role models to follow when trying to establish new levels of service for children. We need to look to the basic characters of play and of childhood. Yet if there is no agreed upon body of knowledge – where do we start?

How do we know something?

We recognise as right or accurate pieces of information that seem to make sense to us. When we are new to a subject and learning about it for the first time we tend to accept without question the first pieces of information we are told about that subject. After that all further incoming information is filtered through the first set of knowledge we have.

When we are learning about children's play out of doors, a subject where there are a multitude of meanings and theories, we need to consider carefully those first pieces of information we have accepted and identify our biases; otherwise we are

in danger of discarding salient knowledge about children and children's play in favour of that information we first received.

Some excellent articles and books have been written on designing for children's play – and there have been many nostalgic and romanticising publications as well. The design profession have been busy contributors – mostly landscape architects or architects, however the majority of reference books have been written by pedagogues and early childhood experts.

Many of the playground design books now published are a type of do-it-yourself playground design guide. Playground design has been seen to be a distant cousin of garden design at the amateur, home-gardener level. Anyone can do it, if they just follow a few technical tips and guidelines. This book takes playground design seriously – like play itself. It is a book aimed at bringing the issue of designing for play up to a professional level – a subject for designers about design.

Looking through the literature on designing play areas I have renewed my acquaintance with Arvid Bengsston's *Environmental Planning for Children's Play*. I have enjoyed the text and photographs every time I read the book and I have found that at different stages in my professional development I would find more material for thought and inspiration. This last time with the book I was struck with the sections dealing with the problems facing children living in cities – it sounded so immediate, as if he was writing about the situation today. Actually it was 1970 when he wrote it.

What has happened in these intervening years? Little has changed to alter conditions in public spaces in cities in favour of use by children. In fact, Bengsston starts the book by referring to a 1958 European seminar on the problem of playgrounds. Fifty years later the list of problems is almost the same and just as long. Is there a real intent on the part of society to provide well for children's use of public spaces? There seems to still be a great gap between people like Arvid Bengsston and other advocates of children's welfare and right to play and those professionals who are responsible for the form and content of the everyday public spaces used by children. Often the technical literature intended to inform these professionals only seems to widen the distance because each new text increases the height of the mountain of opinion and ideas we are trying to get an overview of.

I hope this book will help give perspective over the mountain – and give designers an overview of the current ideas and knowledge about children's interaction with their environment and about play as a cultural activity.

The century of the child: Children as VICs

The twentieth century was early on called the century of the child and the United Nations has celebrated the International Year of the Child and made a declaration

of the Rights of the Child. Yet have conditions for children improved over this century?

In the western world children today have better access to medical care, protection by law from physical punishment and many children have bedrooms filled with mountains of toys – paradise on earth for children, you might think. Children are celebrated in the market economies as **Very Important Consumers** – they have a great influence on how the family income is used. But do children really have it better? Why then are there so many children with symptoms of stress and related problems?

Children today in most western societies have rights as individuals established and protected by law, although they are not permitted to vote for their governments. In this book I will address one aspect of western society that seems to be going in the opposite direction relating to children’s rights, the children’s right and freedom to use outdoor public spaces and the opportunities children have to come to explore in their own terms about living on Planet Earth.

The Right to Explore Planet Earth

This planet has rhythms of day and night, the sun moving across the sky, the moon’s phases, the stars, and the rise and fall of the tides, the seasons as well as local geography and living things. All these items are part of our human heritage. Yet modern urban children are kept apart from the planet and its forces – we need to make a Charter with our children and give them the freedom of this earth.

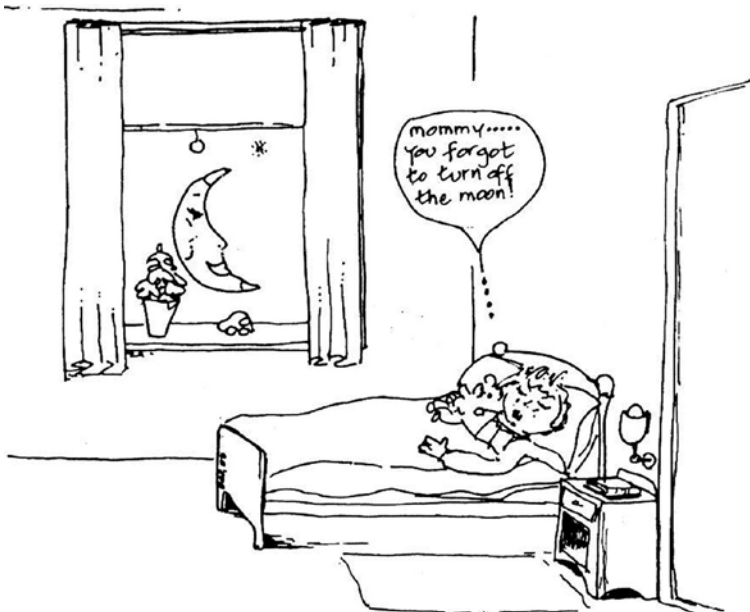
In many traditional societies and developing countries children have better conditions relative to access to outdoors and exploring the world around them than do children in many modern western cities. Not that children in developing countries have access to designed playgrounds – they do not; but they have the freedom to explore the outdoor environment around them and come to know about it in their own terms and make it their own. Children in modern western cities are not so free – they are very restricted by traffic and fears of violence. Their movement is often so restricted throughout their childhood that they become adults with little or no understanding of how their city is organised. They are taken to public playgrounds and supervised while at play and then escorted back into the adult private sphere of the home. They have no sense of the lay of the land around them and may even have a fear of animals, birds and nature. Many city children do not ever see the stars in the sky and have no idea how to determine north from south – they are cut off from the planet and its rhythms. This situation has given rise to a modern childhood health problem – the “Nature Deficit syndrome”

I am not suggesting that all is negative in western cities for children – cities are grand places to live. They are the epitome of our culture and civilisation. They are treasure houses of ideas, architecture, art, music and spiritual developments. The problem is that children are not permitted to use much of the city as children or to get the most out of city living. Children are not content to just be driven past and



Children really are not so dangerous. It is the perceived dangers in the outside world this gate is to protect them from.

One mother of a five-year-old boy tells the story how one night in the winter when she put him to bed the full moon was shining into his bedroom window. After kissing him good night and turning off the light she left the room. A short time later a little voice called to her “Mommy you forgot to shut off the moonlight.”



look at the city, they want to touch, to feel, to interact with things; and the way in which we now organise city living and childhood access to public spaces severely limits the child's possibility for exploring city on their own terms. They should not need to be bussed out to the forest to be able to play freely in the outdoor environment. In the twenty first century, if we adults act wisely on behalf of all our citizens, children in cities can enjoy the best of city living and those cities that take good care of the children will be seen to be the best cities for all to live in.

Play environment design requires reasonable competence in both the natural sciences of the environment and the social science of childhood, as well as design. Theories of play area design all too often are based in adult mythology and clichés – not in knowledge. It seems the more available knowledge about natural sciences and about childhood the more we cling to myths and clichés when dealing with design for children. What we need is to develop skills where science and childhood are used to inform the design process.

“Those with little experience have little wisdom” (The *I Ching*)

Playing means it is possible to take risks that would otherwise be too dangerous. Designing play areas requires a playful approach to designing, to taking risks, to testing the boundaries of trends in design; it means to risk being seen as not serious. Play area design should be executed with humility, recognising that we adults are but tourists in the land of children; we are not experts in their culture and their ways. Childhood experts are experts in an adult definition of childhood – not in life as experienced by children. While we have played as children we lack the experience of contemporary childhood.



Cities are grand places to grow up in – they are the treasure houses of our civilisation.

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Chapter 2

People Play

About the role of play in our lives

“Play is a constant happening, a constant act of creation in the mind or in practise” Arvid Bengsston, 1970

The twentieth century has been the first century in this civilisation where children and childhood has been under the microscope. In the nineteenth century the state started to differentiate between children and adults with laws against child labour and requirements for school attendance. Children’s and mother’s medical care became specialities of experts. During the twentieth century we saw an ever greater expansion of expert professions who specialise in children and childhood, in parenting and child care – psychologists, educators, and educators of early childhood educators, childhood historians, sociologists and anthropologists. Children and childhood are now acceptable as an adult profession but not yet as prestigious as being in the business of automobiles, computers or aeronautics. It is an area of expertise that is often connected to “women’s issues” and one where the value to society is not recognised in the pay packets those experts receive. And those professions that are experts on children are also seen to be experts on play and play spaces. This is an expertise arrived at by association – not by a competence in the subject itself. Play area design is often carried out by persons who know something about educating children but nothing about physical space design, or by physical space designers who know very little about children or play.

Children and childhood are now acceptable as an adult profession but not yet as prestigious as being in the business of automobiles, computers or aeronautics.

Play is a phenomenon that is exceptionally complex and not so well understood – as witnessed by all the unsuccessful attempts to scientifically define play. Play is such an intrinsic part of being human that it is difficult for us to get the scientific distance to study it. Play has often in the past been associated with childhood and free time – something people do when they aren’t working or producing something useful. Play wasn’t seen to produce anything useful.

The environment of play

Not so long ago we discovered that play could be made useful as a tool for learning and as a means for forming children into useful adults. As a result some kinds of play became more acceptable – and it was even acceptable to spend tax money on such things as playgrounds. The kind of play opportunities provided by public funds needed to be defended in terms of child development and building up physical skills and good health. Children’s play is still, however, somewhat of a black sheep in the herd of useful sheep.

When early childhood psychologists or educators focus on play it is always with the explanation that play is so important to the development of the children – and what they, as specialists, are interested in is the process of acquiring knowledge and skills – i.e. moving the child from the realm of childhood into the realm of adulthood, not in the act of play. Research on child’s play has often been carried out so the adult expert could discover more about the development of human intelligence and the process of education.

Views of childhood	
The Science of Childhood	The Poetry of Childhood
Hierarchical development, children develop into people through education/a series of progressive developmental stages.	Romance of children as closer to nature, ideas of Rousseau, children as pure, as inherently competent.
<i>Source:</i> Adapted from Chawla, L. (1994).	

Playgrounds are promoted as places for outdoor learning, such as the “Landscapes for Learning” on school grounds. Play area design is seen to emphasise and promote those kind of play activities that are most understood by experts to be developmental, or – in the jargon of the commercial play equipment manufacturers – they have “play value”.

Today we are beginning to realise the importance of play and a playful attitude toward life, both as an intrinsic healthy human drive and as a means of developing and growing in a complex and stressful environment. Developing through play, not just in terms of developing muscles and physical skills; but also developing in terms of spiritual, intellectual, creative, social and emotional growth. The twenty first century should be the century when it becomes acceptable to be a lifelong player – and when it is recognised that players often enjoy a long life.

Playing is living!

Children’s play occupies all aspects of young children’s lives and many modern homes are fitted with play rooms and play yards to accommodate the activities of the children. Many adults however have difficulty when the child doesn’t stop playing

when they are in other environments – at the table, in the car, shopping and so forth. While children are very quick at picking up the understanding that in different places and with different people one behaves differently – the urge to play still comes to the surface.

Children are well known to play everywhere and play with everything. The recognition that children play everywhere has led one or two local politicians to ask out loud why it is necessary to spend money on playgrounds – after all the children are all over the streets and corners and not in the playgrounds. In 1982, I was asked by a city councillor in a Canadian city, “Those little buggers are everywhere but on the playground, so why are you recommending that we spend money on these playgrounds?” My best answer then was – and still is today – that city governments have a duty to create special, outdoor play places for children. Today, I will add that they also have a duty to make places where children like to be and where they find challenging play possibilities.

Playing at life

Asking “why people play?” is like asking why we breathe. Both are essential activities that satisfy needs. “Play is life for young children” writes Cosby Rogers in *Play in the Lives of Children*. There are some big questions that must be lived out – not answered. These are questions like “what is the meaning of life?” and similarly “what is the meaning of playing?” When we are young our verbal language may not have words for this yet, but we are still developing as human beings – at all ages.

How people play reflects the multiplicity of human nature and is a forever fascinating study. People never stop playing – not really. Adults tend to have absorbed the play into their daily life and give it important and serious sounding labels – but if seen as play many of the activities of adults can be better understood.

Playing is an expression of the joy of life

- Playing alone or together?
- Playing alone, permits one to explore the environment and find out about being alive on this planet, it can be fantastically satisfactory when the playing takes place in a richly varied outdoor environment.
- Playing alone, when the play is about social interaction and finding out about what it is like to be human, can be most unsatisfactory.
- Children must be permitted time to play alone in a varied environment and also time to play with others – with children of all ages and with adults.
- Play is about the pleasure of functioning – the joy of being alive and able to do things.
- Creativity is born in children’s exploration of and relationship to the natural world and it is to this place that creative people return again and again for inspiration. (Cobb, 1977)

Playing at “Office”

I have found great insight into the adult working environment – particularly the office environment – when one views it as another form of group role playing. I have come to understand my feelings of frustration and anger with a dictatorial and non-communicative supervisor when I realised that as a play leader he was not able to keep the play going, as he was not able to integrate the ideas and demands of all the players into the play. Children who are accepted as play leaders are very good at this (Kampmann and Andersen, 1996). Perhaps these children will also be better managers when playing “office”.

Also when I play/work at “office” I want to be able to negotiate what role I am to play in the game and I want to know what role others are playing. I don’t want to spend a lot of time guessing what role I have been assigned for that day. Good working environments can be developed using the model of how groups of children keep a role play going. Adults who are good leaders are using similar behaviour models. We have studied play as a tool in child development and there is a future potential to using play as a way of understanding adult behaviour. Play too is a tool for further development of our culture.

Playing brings insight

One of the benefits from children’s play is that it gives the person insights into the nature of people and the world around them that last a lifetime. Not only do most people have fond memories of those places and things that were part of their childhood play, these memories can help them through difficult periods later in life. Some countries, like the Scandinavian ones, have put an emphasis on the importance of play in young children’s lives – and have very little organised, formal educational content in the early childhood centres – much to the surprise of early childhood specialist from the USA and Japan.

In countries like Denmark and Sweden it is recognised that children need to play with the world around them. They need to find out about the physical environment and the people they live with through using their whole bodies and minds before they are ready to sit still in an indoor classroom situation and learn in a more conceptual way. In these countries children start kindergarten class at six years and first class at seven – and if the parent chooses the child can stay out of the formal education system until seven years of age – kindergarten class is not mandatory, although almost all children do attend. Recent studies show however that there is no advantage or edge gained by children who enter kindergarten class earlier at age four or five or six. Seven year olds entering the school system for the first time very quickly are on the same learning level as their peers who have been in school for a year already.

People play – but so do other living creatures

While play is an important drive in people – and one that shows our most human abilities in terms of body and verbal language and our use of symbols – we are not unique in playing.

Animals too, play – we have all been aware of this watching young lambs in the spring or a group of puppies or kittens – and have passed it off as just part of being young – and practising using their bodies. Today we are becoming more aware that there is much more to animal's play than just instinctive reactions and learning to hunt for food. Animals that have become domesticated also seek to get

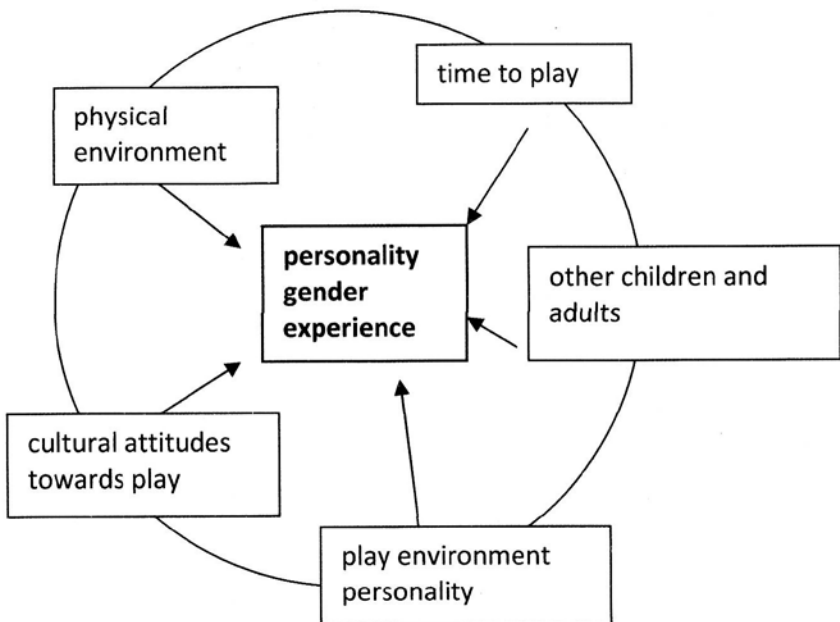
The shape of play

Each child's play is unique, as is each play activity. There are a variety of factors which influence the form play takes.

There are the influences from within the child – the child's personality, gender and experiences.

There are the external influences – the physical environment, time available for play, other children and adults, the play environment personality and the cultural attitude toward playing. It appears that the influence of other children is greater than previously understood – this is perhaps a greater influence than the others.

When examining or discussing children's play behaviour or pedagogical aspects of play items it is necessary to recognise the interconnectedness of these influences – and that play cannot be separated from the internal and external influences.



people to join in play with them. How do we know when an animal plays? Its body language clearly spells it out – if we know how to listen to the animals. During the twenty first century I expect we will also discover a lot more about our fellow human beings by being more alert to non-verbal communication, much of which is learned and reinforced while playing.

The advantage of playing is that you can test out actions and emotions that would be too dangerous to act out in real life. This is why play fighting is so important to young children – often boys, but *not* confined to boys. Role playing also serves as a way of testing out rejection of a friend or playmate and feelings such as anger, revenge and a curiosity to see what it feels like to hit or hurt. To keep the play going all this must happen while all the players clearly know that it is “just playing”. And children are for the most very good at keeping the play going and avoiding getting serious – unfortunately adults misread what is happening and put a stop to the play. Adults even forbid this kind of play. Perhaps as a result some children never really find out how to send out positive signals, to avoid getting into difficult situations with other people, how or why to avoid violence, and how to make and keep friends. Play is important in our socialising – and I will go into this more in the following chapters.

Playing at Designing #1

The advantage of playing is that you can test out actions and emotions that would be too dangerous to act out in real life.

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