

Chapter 10

Play Areas at Public Parks – Unsupervised

The only urban space devoted to childhood

Public parks often lack the presence of adult play supervisors although parental supervision is necessary for young pre-school age children. Unsupervised playgrounds in public parks are, in general, the public space with the most limited play potential. This does not need to be the case but it is a reality in most of the western world. The current interpretations and implementations of the demand for accessibility and play for all children in public parks threaten to make these areas even more boring.

While this chapter focuses on the designated play area inside a public park it must be kept in mind that no one play space can fulfil all the play needs of children – children need access to a variety of different landscapes to come to know about living and the place where they live. In fact, the use of public park play areas takes up a small fraction of the total of children’s play time today. When play areas are better designed and more interesting they will occupy a larger role in children’s play life but they must never be seen to fill all the children’s play needs, nor should they be the only places children are permitted to play in the city. They are of interest here because they are the only public space in the city where the space is solely devoted to childhood and playing and where the design should be based in the child’s view of the world. The rest of the spaces the children play in are spaces designed for adult purposes, where the play is a secondary use.

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The environmental personality in a public park playground

Play is active interaction with the surroundings. How we play is dependent on the environment we find ourselves in. Architects and landscape architects know how to design to send signals to the users of their spaces – for example to say “this is serious business”, as in a bank headquarters, or “here, one is to be humble” as in the head offices of a large corporations, or “focus your attention this way”. Often the message is something like “the person who lives here has power and money”, or “an important man works here”, and so on and so on. We don’t need written

signs to tell us these things, the environment does and we have learned appropriate reactions in such settings.

It is the same with public parks and playgrounds. The design will signal to us if this is a place where we are welcome and are valued visitors, where we can find comfort and refreshment. The environment will also tell us if and how we can play. Typical playgrounds with swings and slides and teeter-totters signal to children and adults that this is a space where children can play. Further, we have learned from experience that this is a place where the children play with or on a play item. There is very little social interaction between the adults and the children in these places; in fact adults are assigned the role of by-standers. Adults are not so comfortable in these places and so want to move on. Visits to typical playgrounds are often very short duration and this is built into the design message.

The environmental personality and role play

One of the puzzles of play environment design relates to the provision of play possibilities for social and role play. It seems that even though the roles of modern parents have changed enormously, with mothers having full careers and fathers taking more time to care for children, the family role play of children is still very much the old stereotype of mommy nurturing a baby and preparing food while the father is absent from the home, away at work. Perhaps the explanation or part of it is to be found in Judith Rich's work, *The Nurture Assumption*, where she notes that children are driven to keep their own personal home life private and are trying to find out what is a normal, acceptable public version of family life through role play in public spaces. They do not dare to use their own experience as the pattern for what is average; they do not wish to reveal private family matters to the world.

This urge on the part of children to keep family life private along with lack of time to develop complex play routines often results in very little role play taking place in public parks. Yet role play is perhaps the most vital play expression for children in modern times. Through this type of play they can test out ideas, interpret meanings and emotions and form their own thoughts and attitudes. Role play and socialising with other children to develop norms of behaviour that promote social interaction is vital to children's success with peer groups and these are skills acquired only through playing with others. Support facilities and play items for role play in public parks should perhaps focus less on family life and home and more on public life – not playhouses, but play vehicles, play castles, fire stations, schools and other structures that are not part of private life. They should focus on the possibility to practise ideas and emotions and not focus so much on representing the external world. Such play settings may stimulate the environmental personality to engage in playful activities they could not at home, and allows them to play with unrelated children without fear of revealing home secrets.



Facilities to support social play in public play areas should suggest aspects of public life – such as public transport or public places.

“If you want to do something good for a child ... give him an environment where he can touch things as much as he wants” (Buckminster Fuller, *Letter to Children of Earth*)

Communicating playfulness and welcome

Good quality playgrounds in public parks should, on first sight, signal that here is a place for children to play – and that adults are also very welcome to find joy and refreshment here. Play spaces in public playgrounds should celebrate the joy of living in this time and this place. They should uplift the soul and make one smile and feel happy. They can be seen to have the same effect on our spirit as spring flowers when they break out in bloom through the snow – a wonderful aesthetic experience that talks to that which is most human in us – our playfulness and our culture. Playgrounds should not visually “blend” in with the rest of the park environment, they should clearly tell their own story, but should be in harmony with the total experience of the park environment. There is a big difference between blending in something and being in harmony with something. To illustrate this let us go into the kitchen. When we plan and prepare a good meal to celebrate a special occasion we select wines that will complement and increase our appreciation of the flavours of the foods being served, we don’t put it in a blender with the salad and the main course and serve up a well blended mush that is unrecognisable. That would be most unappetising. The same with spaces in public parks. The park

experience should consist of a series of well planned and varied “courses” of spaces where each space has its own unique flavour or atmosphere, and where each subspace complements the other spaces and elements in the park to fully satisfy the appetites for refreshment and relaxation of the residents.

Public parks, like their precedents, the royal pleasure gardens, are intended to be places where the residents can find refreshment and positive energy through activities and experiences in fresh air and well designed park or garden-like atmospheres. The word recreation in itself suggests the intent – re-creation. Through interaction with a high quality outdoor environment the human spirit is renewed and uplifted. Those in sorrow find solace and comfort in the living nature and the closeness with people, while those who are exhausted and stressed are re-energised. Public parks are also spaces for maintenance of mental and physical health. Research today tells us how important natural daylight and sunshine are for maintaining good health, especially for avoiding depression.

For children, however, parks are places where they discover and play with aspects of the physical world. Play is what healthy children do. Children’s play is not a juvenile version of recreation, play is celebration and discovery. One could perhaps say more accurately that many typical adult recreation activities are aged versions of playing. For adults the sight of children at play is also important. Playing children and play places in parks, when of good quality, communicate the pleasure of living to the adults in a way that nothing else can.

Playing in public parks and established play areas in parks may not always occur in the same space. Ideally children should be able to use and play in most if not all of the park spaces while there will be play items in only a portion of these spaces. Where there are pleasant green grass open spaces of the right scale surrounded by shrubs and trees, spaces that the children can use for running, informal ball play, rolling and sunning, then there is no need for more grass space as part of the play area. In fact in a public park the boundaries of the play area are quite fluid and it should not be that children are permitted to play only within the fenced compound where there are play structures. The furniture and items provided to support the play activities of the children should be set in a well landscaped setting, where the furniture and structures are used as one of the elements to define subspaces. When children play much of the play takes place in the spaces between play items, and the play space designers should focus on the creation of playful spaces furnished by playful items and not just on the organisation of play equipment itself. All too often the spaces between equipment are treated as left over space after equipping. It is not a matter of finding room for play equipment; it is a matter of using play equipment to define and create rooms. To give a well designed character to the play area make these spaces with strong playful qualities and forms that harmonise. Spaces should have simple but clearly defined shapes with well finished edging.

There should be several spaces or subspaces within a public park play area. There would be at least one space where children can play with materials of the earth, like sand and water, and one or more spaces where children can gather

and socialise while moving their bodies. The second types of spaces in particular need to be furnished and defined with care to ensure that the physical challenges are appropriate for the skill level of the user. It is not recommended that there be only one physical play structure for all, nor should the several structures be placed in the same space. It should be clear to both parents of young children and to the older children which kinds of play items are appropriate for which age and skill. Children benefit from and enjoy playing with children of other ages and the neighbourhood park is one of the few places where age segregation is not imposed on the children – so children should be permitted to play together, however inter-age play is best when it is playing with sand and water, social play, hiding and chasing games or ball games. Physical skills required to enjoy the challenge in the physical movement equipment are often so different that the best way to provide for these opportunities is with separate play movement items.

There should also be a space with well selected play furniture where adults and children can play together – like swinging and seesawing. In many instances it is the weekend parent or grandparents who goes for a tour to the park with their child and they can all enjoy playing together if the space is appropriately designed. There should be places for comfortable sitting for adults and parking provision for strollers and baby carriages. Hard surface areas for roller skating, riding a trike or cycle, bouncing balls and skipping are also features that can be part of a play area.

Out of the sandbox and into the city

Public parks often also include separate playing facilities for children of the middle years where they are very physically active. This may include spaces specially designed for skate board and roller skating, challenging cycling paths or circuits. These should be located so that older children on bikes or other wheels do not need to go through the younger children's play area to reach their spaces. It should be possible and comfortable however for the younger children to watch the older children – they love to do so. Some of the play interests of older school age children seem to the adults to be just too dangerous to be provided for in public parks. Children of this age, when asked about playing, say they want more challenge. They find the types of movement possibilities provided just too tame and boring, especially many boys.

By the age of ten many boys want to climb higher, go faster, make louder noises, construct forts, go carts and wage “war” to protect their own territory. Not war, in the negative sense of gang wars, but playful games of attack and defence that has always been a healthy part of children's play. Such activities should not be seen as anti-social or inappropriate – they are also an important element in children learning how to socialise, the use of appropriate body language, to care for others and to deal with negative emotions. It is when children are not permitted to play out this aspect of humanity that problems of real aggression and violence



Once on wheels children can explore the whole of the local environment. Most often it is boys in smaller towns and villages who have the most freedom to explore.

occur. Bruno Bettelheim says it well when he describes the children's right to play with toy guns as an appropriate right for a child just as an appropriate adult right is to be able to read in peace (Bettelheim, 1980).

Spaces for these kinds of activities for older children should take on the appearance of almost being un-designed, like they just happened or that the adults have forgotten that the space was there. These children seem to prefer to play in spaces that are somewhat removed or enclosed from adult overview – playing in the shrubberies, and wild areas. They prefer informal spaces and don't particularly want to thought of as a "little" kid who still plays in the sandbox. Designs for this age of children should include some space of wilder, natural-appearing landscaping, away from where the adults frequent. If the ground is a bit hilly so much the better, and trees and bushes for hiding in are requirements. Such a space appears to be in conflict with our western image of an urban park being very much tidied up nature. It goes also against the trend in western urban planning for more structuring of the land, more formalisation of land use. To deal with these adults concerns keep the adults out of it, surround the space with high shrubs or hedging. This is working on the basis of "what the adults don't know won't upset them". Children learn this rule early, designers of spaces for school age children's play should remember it.

If there is a documented basis to any fear that the space will be used for criminal activities in the night, one solution might be to fence it and close the gates at nightfall. What is important for the children's play is that the negative uses of the spaces by others should be dealt with without removing the play possibility for the children.

Our children should not be the ones who bear the burden of the older generation's mistakes and crimes.

“Playgrounds should be renamed research laboratories” Buckminster Fuller.

Older children still like playing in sand and water – as long as it doesn't look like a place where the babies play. Watch them at the beach – nature's supreme sand and water play area. Even adults are attracted to these places. Sand play for older children can be a large sand pool with flat stones and wide raised surfaces like garden tables. The very best are high piles of sand – unfortunately the children's enthusiasm for playing with sand mounds means that the sand isn't in a mound very long. They also like all the engineering aspects of mechanically moving sand and water.

These are some of the types of play spaces that can appear in public parks, however I will repeat – no one play place should be seen to serve all of the children's play needs. This means that other places in the neighbourhood should also be open to children's play. But it also means that one public play ground does *not* need to fill all of the children's play needs. More than anything it needs to be a place where the children feel welcome and where childhood is inspiration to the design to the proportion and to the aesthetics. That children are found playing elsewhere in the neighbourhood is not necessarily a criticism of the quality of the playground – children as resident of the neighbourhood should be welcome throughout the whole area.

A sunny exposure

Play areas in public parks should be located in a sunny exposure and be well drained so that they can also be enjoyed in all seasons. Many designers imagine the play area as being used in perpetual summer time. In fact summer time may be the season when public parks are least used – many people go away out of the city on holidays in that season or it may be too hot in the city to go outside. Heaviest use of parks is in early spring and early autumn in many parts of the northern hemisphere, while good park design can also result in residents enjoying the parks also throughout the winter season.

Some characteristics of successful public playgrounds

- Enough space to allow a variety of subspaces, some big open spaces and many smaller, enclosed spaces.
- Includes spaces that are sunny and some shady places.
- An aesthetic that allows an immediate sensory response touch, taste, smell, sound.

- Is visually linked with childhood culture and signal free play in forms of colour and symbols.
- Visual contrast with the surrounding allows the child to read the play environment and understand its organisation.
- Invites exploration – by touching and manipulation and or exploration all over and throughout.
- Offers interesting movement possibilities like swinging, rocking, sliding, climbing and rolling. As children of a variety of ages and skills use public playgrounds it is necessary that these play possibilities be provided in several sizes and levels of challenge.
- Child friendly semiotics – a visual language of welcome and quality, things that are beautiful to the aesthetics of the children.
- Curving lines, flowing, waving or serpentine forms in correct proportion are both pleasant to the eye and invite play. Horizontals, verticals and straight lines predominate in the adult built world and have a more serious intellectual appeal.
- Allows children the freedom to choose a variety of ways to play and places to play.
- Enough space for a rich variety of play possibilities and still room for nature and good quality landscaping. Good play yards are first and foremost gardens for children's play. There should be living things – plants of various sizes and heights, bugs, worms and small animals like birds and moles. Living nature should be inside of the fence in a public playground, as well as in the rest of the park.
- Places that are comfortable and pleasant for the adults. Ideally there should be possibilities for adults and children to play together.
- Variations in elevation in the ground and a wide variety of different textures and materials in ground surfacing.
- Surprise and mystery. Good hiding/secret places.

The sameness of public park playgrounds

In 1971 Albert J. Rutledge wrote in *Anatomy of a Park*:

An example of standardisation run amuck is the “typical” playground. Always the same swings, the same teeter-totters, the same slides. Sameness dulls visual appetites, including those of adults who are there to supervise the kids or who pass alongside everyday. (Rutledge, 1971 p.21)

This sameness was also criticised by Thomas Burton (1976) and many others over the past 30 years who have concerned themselves with the quality of public parks, nevertheless this sameness is still apparent in public playgrounds of today. One of the things I have found fascinating in the critiques of urban playgrounds is that

Some essential ingredients in a neighbourhood park that will be used. Some, or maybe all, elements to appear in some form.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plaza/square • Bar/kiosk • Exercise area • Dancing • Seniors' gardens • Children's gardens • Game tables • Grills • Music/power source/speakers • Demonstration garden • Day care mothers meeting place • Play supervisors base • Play with nature sand/water/soil/fire • Fire ring • Water feature • Service facility/ • Toilets • Park-like landscaping furnished for quiet activities such as reading/writing and thinking • Open grass/green • Landscaping | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Nature"/wild lands • Playhills • Sports areas – ball, basketball, • Amphitheatre/ neighbourhood gathering • Picnic • Pavilion • Pet play/exercise (fenced) • Play equipment • Storage • Teen activity space • Play space for wheels • Hard surface games area • Soft surface games – rubber • Bocce/petang/bowling • Entry • Art • Lighting • Bulletin board |
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while this critique has been publicised frequently over the past 30 or 40 years, the quality of public parks and playgrounds seems to have declined into greater sameness and dullness even further during this same time period.

Those who have reacted to Rutledge and company's critique of play areas have tried to redesign the swing, the teeter-totter or slide – or just change the colour. In my analysis the problem is not that there are swings, slides and teeter-totters on playgrounds – the problem is that there is nothing else. If these play items were set within a uniquely designed and well landscaped setting there would be no problem of the visual sameness in the same way that few people pick up that the same lamp post, bench and litter bin reappear again and again on urban landscapes around the world. Similarly many urban parks use a very limited palette of landscape plants and these are repeated in city after city. I have yet to hear anyone complain that only green shade trees are used throughout urban parks.

Let's stop this nonsense about criticising playgrounds for having swings and slides and teeter-totters.

Let's stop this nonsense about criticising playgrounds for having swings and slides and teeter-totters, these are the movement possibilities the children like. Let us face the fact that playground designs, in general are too boring and do not include enough landscaping and variety in spaces. They are not welcoming to either adults or children. Innovative playground design does not mean throwing out the well loved play items or disguising them, it means making better quality play landscapes. In fact the absence of play items is confusing to the children – they don't know if they can play there. For the past two years now I have carried out routine observations at a so called “nature playground” in a public park where there are some very rustic assemblages for playful exploration and on the side they have set up several swing sets and some spring seesaws. When the children and the parents come to play in this space, the children run immediately to the swings, they ride on the swings, may or may not use the seesaw but only go on the other items if an adult takes them by the hand and leads them though or over the structures. When the adults tire of that the children try to play with the sand/gravel surfacing. Visits at the playground are short duration, not because there is the same old swing and seesaw but because there is little else to do and the adults are bored.

In general adults are far too fixated on playground equipment as equal to the playground.

There is another reason for this fixation of the sameness of swings and slides, this has to do with the minimal budgets and imaginations that most adult park administrators have when they approach the subject of playground design. Making better quality playgrounds demands more space and sufficient budgets. To date



This rustic structure is seen by some adults as a better play item than a teeter-totter or swing. However observations of the play area suggest that it is used mostly by adults and rarely by children.

it has all too often been more convenient for the adults to criticise the typical playground as being too boring – and there after do very little to improve the play landscape. Economy rules, and results in the substitution of dead tree trunks and rocks for well designed play equipment. These dead trees and stones, when they are seen everywhere as the only elements of the typical playground are just as visually boring to the adults as the typical swings, slides and teeter-totters of the more traditional parks and unappealing to the children. Sameness is a problem and is boring only when it is of poor quality.

This critique of the sameness must also be balanced with the fact that children have limited geographic mobility. They do not know that the same swing and slide are used everywhere – what they like is the swinging and sliding possibilities in their playground. We, as adults, must be very, very careful not to infringe on the children's needs just to satisfy our adult sophisticated tastes. There is no doubt that most urban landscapes are boring and it is true that sameness does dull the appetite as Rutledge has stated. There are many ways to bring variety and interest into the urban landscape by improving the quality of both the spaces for adults as well as those for the children. The typical urban park is a boring, functional landscape where ease and economy of maintenance has resulted in the removal of much of the shrub layer of the landscape and often there are few trees of any age left as well. Parks far too often are dull, boring places of flat level grass to be used by men for playing ball games or to exercise the dog. When the quality of the total park landscape is improved and made more varied, than we will no longer find a boring sameness in the swings and slides in the children's play areas. Our eyes will be enjoying the beauty of the rest of the landscape.

Each play area should be unique

Each and every playground should be designed as if it were unique in that it has a unique geographical setting and population. The character and perhaps history of the area should be reflected in the spaces, in the landscaping and in the furniture. Dramatic or prevailing natural features should be included. For example in northern Scandinavian and in the mountains everywhere – stone outcroppings can be a wonderful feature in a play area. Use native plants and trees rather than exotic grasses and landscape trees. This can be difficult to do in some places as landscape nurseries carry only the most sold landscape species. It is possible however, and a contact with forestry associations can lead to sources of native plants.

The urban park creates challenges for the design in terms of creating a comfortable scale and proportion for the children within the play area. These wide open spaces demand vertical elements but unless there are mature trees these are often difficult to obtain. Use of entry portals that one goes through into the play area can be one small contribution. Similarly sculptures and shade pavilions can help with the issue of scale and serve as space definers. Other space makers can be low, playful panels and fences, shrubberies and hedges, hills and mounds. Play structures should be

scaled to the child – where there is role play furniture such as a play train or ship, the spaces within should be no bigger than will accommodate two or three children and with roofs not much higher than the height of children. But they should have roofs.

The issue of enclosure is an emotional one with adults who fear that children can come to harm by nasty adults who hide in the bushes and in enclosed spaces. To prevent this they remove all of the potential hiding places. While crimes against children are heinous, they are not as prevalent as the media makes them seem and there are actually few attacks on children by persons not known to the child. To keep our children safe at play does not mean denying them comfortable and quality play spaces, it means we need to make these places attractive enough that many adults are there – eliminating the possibility of the criminal taking over. We need to change the attitude of adults towards who goes to the playground – adults must go also.

When you want to change how people use a landscape you need to change their perception of that space. Play areas should be seen to be places for play and for playful people of all ages, not just for children. Today it is the opposite; an adult who goes into the playground without a child in hand is immediately suspected. That is often because they are the only adult there. This absence of adults also creates problems for those of us who want to study children's play behaviours and their use of the play landscape, our interest in the children is often misread. Children have been warned about talking to "strangers" so that it is nearly impossible for a researcher to find out from children what they think of a playground. This is not a design problem but a problem of the socially acceptable use of the urban landscape – another form of environmental personality one could say.

Fear reduces children's access to play possibilities

The fear of crime or violence to children not only influences the landscape of the play yard it also directly affects who can play there and when they are permitted to do so. The children's need to use the outdoor public space is counteracted by the adults' perception of dangers in these places. Parents find it easier to limit the child's access to outdoor public space than to do something about the perceived danger in these spaces. They have grown up themselves with little or no experience of being involved in the decisions around public space use and now feel quite helpless to deal with issues like drug dealing and crimes against children. Traffic is another threat to the movement of children and parents are often the perpetrators of this threat.

One study in Denmark showed that the majority of drivers who exceeded the speed limit in the vicinity of an elementary school were parents whose children attended the school. Being a car driver is another one of those many environmental personalities that people have; and often the speeder in traffic is

irreconcilable with the responsible parent. The consequence is that the child is limited in where they can go in the neighbourhood and the lack of time on the part of parents reduces the children's visits to the public playground to one or two short visits per week.



Children like to play where things happen and often like to place themselves near or on the street if vehicle use is controlled.

Designated playground spaces in public parks are not well used in many countries. This is partly because they are boring and partly because children's use of outdoor spaces is restricted by adult fears of crime and traffic. There has been a marked decrease in the use of neighbourhood parks while at the same time an increased mobility of the family. Today when they have time to go on an outing with the children the parents will choose to go to some destination park, the zoo, an amusement park or perhaps one of the new indoor playlands. When at home the children are referred to home based activities such as television and computer games. This is not doing today's children any favours. They need to be able to move freely and unsupervised about their own neighbourhood. They need to come to know for themselves about the good places to play, the secret places, the places with special meaning for them and their friends. The insulation of the children that is occurring in large urban areas is another form of isolation – it keeps the children from knowing how a neighbourhood is built up. Children on their way to adulthood and in their role as future adults need to observe adults living a daily life and exploring all aspects of the adult world. Children who cannot experience at first hand neighbourhood life will not know what citizenship is nor have any skills in participating in local society as adults.



Play areas where all ages enjoy playing together such as at this playground give children opportunities to play outside with their neighbours and come to know their neighbourhood.

It is therefore imperative that we find ways to ensure that children can and do freely use the local outdoor spaces, including the playgrounds. One solution is to find ways to make quality public park spaces that are well used by people of all ages and interests so that there is the security of numbers, permitting parents to allow their children to go there to play more often. Parks should not just be outdoor facilities for sports jocks. Rutledge writes “Parks...should be developed to serve as exemplars of what is possible in terms of soul-satisfying environment and catalysts for promoting higher works in other types of developments, towards the day when everything which man builds contributes to positive physical surroundings” (Rutledge, 1971 p.8). Wise words written over 40 years ago yet still so rarely put in practice. Dare to imagine what our western urban centres could look like if for the past 30 years everything that was built was a positive contribution.

Another strategy is to get serious about traffic controls and introducing more traffic calming measures in the residential areas. With the threat of traffic injuries reduced, children can and do take up use of their immediate outdoor surroundings and are outdoors for longer periods of time. In this time the children come to know their neighbours, develop stronger social ties, and become more physically competent. This can only happen however if the fears of the parents are allayed.



Traffic reduction and control in residential areas such as this permit children to play in spaces near to home.

Children who cannot experience at first hand neighbourhood life will not know what citizenship is nor have any skills in participating in local society as adults.

Boys and girls at play

Whether we like it or not there seems to be some influence of gender in the way in which children play. And during middle school years there also appears to be a tendency to prefer playmates of the same gender – at least in public spaces. This has really very little influence on good play area design – other than there should be sufficient spaces for a number of different groups to be able to play without interrupting the play of others while they can keep an eye on what the others are doing. This is another argument against the single large multi-play combination as the only element in a playground. There simply is not enough room for different groups to find their own space. Such structures tend to be taken over by the dominant group – and the others may as well go home again. This dominant group is often a group of older boys but not always.

If there are possibilities for playing in less organised lands within the neighbourhood it is most often the boys who will take over this land – with the occasional girl joining these groups. This leaves the rest of the girls to use the



Girls in cities are often more restricted in their movements about the city play in or near the home most of the time.

designated play area. Boys are often permitted to travel further away from home – and when they have the freedom of their cycles or skateboard they may go at long distances from the home to specific play sites. Girls however tend to be more restricted in how far and where they can go without an adult and do tend to rely on the local neighbourhood playground as the main source of their play possibilities. On the other hand boys are outside more and many girls stay very close to home for much of their free time.

These kinds of variation in usage can be confusing to the researcher who is trying to map the children's use of the environment. To do so requires a longer period of time to come to know the children and their play habits – it is not enough to set oneself in the play area and observe usage over a matter of weeks – it is necessary to identify who isn't coming to the play area and find out why they are not. Typically because public lands are for all, play design criteria will include some demand such as appropriate play opportunities for all ages. On the other hand it can be very misplaced to be politically correct and design a play area for all if only one special sector will use the area.

Generalities can be misleading and research in one community on who plays where cannot be applied to other communities. Children's use of outdoor spaces varies much with the nature of the community and with the established play patterns within the family. The only general statement that applies to almost all western cities is that children are not outside and playing as much as they should be. Other generalities we read often include that children today are less fit than previous generations of children and that today's children are more often overweight and more show symptoms of beginning heart disease. All of these problems would disappear if children played outside more.

Dogs and children at play

Children today live for the most in small, nuclear families. After the age of ten they may often be the first to come home after school – to an empty house. Or an almost empty house. Many families are now being extended to include a family dog, often for the sake of the child or children. After school it may be the child's responsibility to walk the dog – or at the least let it out to run.

Children in small nuclear families have indicated that their dog or other pet is often the family member that they tell their secrets. Pets are a major centre for the emotional life of many children from eight to 15, and play a bigger role than previously known (Morrow, March 1999). While the dog may be the child's best friend, children are not permitted to take their best friend to the playground.

Think about creating a pet area in every neighbourhood where children could go with their pets – to walk them, to play with them, train with them and to meet with other children. "I walk my dog on a long cycle ride. In that way we're away from those that are always telling us what to do. We can decide for ourselves" says one 13-year-old boy. At 13, this boy has the freedom to move around the city at a great distance. But children, both boys and girls, at 10 or 11 years of age will also enjoy walking/running their dog, playing with them and maybe exercising with them on established exercise courses, if they within easy access from the home.

Fashionable trends in public park designs

Water

In their search to make playgrounds different from the usual swings and slides some larger projects have included elements such as mazes or water spray pools. In some designs these are successful additional play features that add visual pleasure, signal playfulness and, for the children, hours of fun. In the hands of others, such features have been a means of rewarding business associates with a profitable contract but very little given to the community of any lasting value.

Among the best of the best of the water play designers to my knowledge are the staff of the Parks Department in the City of New Westminster, Canada. Not only have these people created fun and attractive water play areas, they have solved many of the problems of water on an unsupervised public park and have developed techniques to reduce maintenance of the water spray features. They were doing this already in the late 1970s. This parks department has demonstrated how very important a group of well informed and dedicated staff are in the making of good quality park play areas. They have shown again that where there is a will to do a good job in terms of offering attractive play spaces it does happen.

Water play in public parks needs to meet requirements for safety and health but is by no means difficult or necessarily expensive. Simple sprays that are quickly drained away so there is no depth to the collected water add a liveliness



Such water play areas are well used when the water is on in warm weather. Even when there is no water the area is a fun space.

and human quality to a park that attracts all of us. The sound of water falling can soothe the crying baby and the cranky director. Water is such a fascinating element and humans value outdoor places where there is water. Lakes, ponds, fountains and pools signal prestige, wealth and power. Arrivals at prestigious sites like Buckingham Palace or other European palaces are tame and disappointing when the fountains are not turned on. But what an impression they make when they are in full display. It isn't surprising that tourists will travel halfway around the world to visit the most awe-inspiring waterfalls or that native peoples have attributed such sites with special powers. Today's children living in urban centres also need contact with water in playful ways, even if it is in a shallow pan.

Water features and water sculptures commissioned by artists can be attractive elements, if they are child friendly and it is easy for people to enter into and interact with the water. The modern art movements of massive stone, metal and cement surfaces in rectilinear shapes can repel even the strongest urge to play. Most important is the transition from the ground to the water – if this is soft and easily accessible the children will find a way to get in contact with the water. Features like the water play area at the World's Fair in Vancouver in 1986 show how a very attractive and well designed and playful sculpture can draw the whole family into playing.



A small maze of rustic material is a popular idea amongst adults but little used by children. Mazes for children to enjoy need some sense of magic, mystery and challenge.

Mazes

Another trend in play area design has been to commission artists to create mazes within the play area. While mazes have had a history which includes amusement for the wealthy and later became features in public parks, offering them as play features on playgrounds for children is a new idea. On playgrounds these mazes are often formed in wood palisades or poles standing upright creating narrow passageways. To my mind they always look like very complex livestock loading pens used when animals are on their way to the slaughterhouse and therefore I am uncomfortable with this visual image on a playground. For urban children however it is unlikely they will make such associations although after several tours through them, labyrinths and mazes cease to be of interest. In my opinion such play features can be appropriate as part of a larger play garden or amusement park which children visit once or twice a year but have no place on a playground that children use everyday – they lose all mystery or sense of being special.

Pavement mazes and ones in low rounded stones, when integrated into walking areas and plazas add a playful touch to what otherwise might appear to be a serious space, however such features should not take up any of the precious little space allocated to children's play. The most playful hedge to my knowledge is the one at Sofiero in Sweden where the designer has created low, rolling earth walls where long grass grows. These serve as both walls and pathways in themselves. Children

love rolling around on the grassy banks. Usage and erosion however are concerns in such a design and cannot be part of a heavily used everyday playground.

Children live in the here and now.

Designers of mazes are too often artists or architects who are fascinated with plan view complexities and patterns and have little or no understanding of growing things or how growing things change over time and with the movement of the sun. They treat the design of a labyrinth as a paper exercise that is then inflicted on a piece of land – and afterwards the children can use it. Garden designers who have little understanding of children’s play have also imposed long corridors and seemingly meaningless barriers to children gaining access to the play feature set in the centre. Pre-school age children do not appreciate the intellectual challenge of a maze and unless the process of moving through the maze is a series of playful activities that is not uni-directional, a maze simply becomes a hurdle to the children’s access to play spaces. In general mazes have been more of an adult imposition on children’s play than an interesting play opportunity for the children. Let the children build their own mazes in the sand box or digging patch for their small animals and cars, for the most fun in mazes is in the making of them.

Adults can continue to write treatises about the mysteries of mazes and the journey of life; children however look for wonder of life and mystery in more physically active and less controlled settings. Children live in the here and now. They have no concept of life ending or even of going on for a long time, and persons over 30 are “the oldest beings on earth”. Items and spaces in children’s play areas should be there because they signal play or have some value to childhood, not placed there for the sake of some adult fascination with a historical relic. Let us hope that there will soon be found another trendy designer object and leave mazes and labyrinth to find their place in garden history.

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.

Accessibility and play for children with special needs

All children play. When a child doesn’t play it is a sign that there is something wrong. Play is such an important feature in children’s lives that it is now being used by adults both as part of therapy to heal children and as part of education to train children. These forms of “play-training” are not however what we are addressing at a public playground – here the play must be child initiated and child directed. It must be play for childhood’s sake not play as a tool of the adults. These must be play places where all children can and do come to play.

The basic consideration in terms of creating public play spaces for all children is access from the home to the park play area. This trip must not be so very difficult that it is almost never embarked upon. There must be no physical access barriers such as long staircases, narrow entry gates or very steep slopes. Children who use mobility devices or are ill often also take medication and may need to have access to clean and useable toilet facilities and drinking water. If these are not present at the playground then it is not likely they will come very often. Items like shade protection from hot summer sun and protection from strong winds must also be considered. A comfortable and attractive outdoor space is the primary drawing feature to motivate a tour to the playground even though it involves some organisation and some difficulty. The design of a play area with an attractive landscaped setting is essential to the families which include children with special needs as they often rely on other children at the playground as play mates.

It is of utmost importance that there are other children at the playground with whom they can play. A child in a wheelchair taken to a park to wheel up a ramp or sit on a wheelchair carousel and then be wheeled home has really not played. Children need other children to play with – this is the primary ingredient to playing, the swinging, going up and coming down are secondary. When the child's abilities mean that there is little possibility to experience the joy in playful movement of one's body, it shouldn't be so that play at the playground consists of artificial replacement of movement possibilities such as being wheeled up onto a platform and so forth. This only serves to highlight the child's disabilities while limiting the play possibilities of those children who can enjoy challenging physical movements. Being wheeled about in a mobility device happens to children who use wheelchairs everywhere – play at the playground should be something different. The joys of playing are many and children who have disabilities can and do still find much to explore, discover and wonder about.

When I watch children at play I often see that the play has become a pile of young children lying on the ground, giggling and laughing. A child using a wheelchair can very likely also be part of such a group without any difficulty. They should not be isolated from the other children, for example by leaving them sitting up on a raised platform in their wheelchair. Much of children's play takes place in the spaces defined by the play equipment – and this is where the children should be able to move freely.

Not all children who are specially challenged use mobility devices, yet most effort in public parks has been focussed on making them useable by this group. There is consensus amongst many experts that the demands for equal access to play opportunities for children using wheelchairs has and will continue to result in a reduction in challenging physical play possibilities for the children who do not use such devices, both able bodied children and children with other needs – visually impaired, learning and social difficulties and so forth. This is true only so long as playgrounds are outfitted as places for solely physical play possibilities. In such cases, and particularly in the case where the combination

structure is *the* playground, then there is little physical challenge left after these structures are made wheelchair accessible. However as already stated, such an approach to designing for play doesn't really serve any children's real play needs. Combinations structures – smaller ones as part of a larger play facility have their place and are enjoyed by children, but must never be all there is for playing.

Good play designs offer a wider variety of play possibilities

Where there are sand and water play, good fantasy and social play possibilities, open grass, sunny spaces for talking and socialising, then the possibility of a tour on a swing or a climb to the top of the roof is but one of the play possibilities that the children will engage in after ability and choice. However, to serve all children is not the same as to meet a specified level of ability. Able bodied children will seek out physical challenges and they need these at the play area – otherwise they will not be there when the children with special needs come to play. Integration of playing children is much more an important goal than making access to all things for the least able to move about freely. Only through contact with a whole variety of children will a child come to understand the competences of all the children and the many nuances in their play world. All children love to play, and the most important playthings we can offer them are other children to play with. All children need the social and emotion interaction with others. Children of all abilities can play together if they share time and space. Play is about fun, enjoying each other's company, about exploring the world around them, not about going up a ramp and turning around and coming back down again. That is just downright boring.

Community participation in playground design

More than any other force it is the process of involving the local adult community in playground design that has perpetuated the sameness and lack of innovation in public playgrounds. As adult advocates for children and children's play, the adult community has failed completely. This is not really their fault. The fault lies back with the city government that has side-tracked both local democracy and quality provision for children's play needs through this process. The politicians have cynically allowed the adults in the community to make decisions about some things that they the politicians don't think are very important. They would never let the local community decide over roads, over economic support to businesses, or over the location of a shopping centre. The result has been the appearance of local involvement in government but what is really a distancing of the local community from making decisions about things that really matter. These local groups can't decide anything other than what brand of swing, slide or teeter-totter – and often they have to work hard to raise some or all of the funds – and they even spend time on weekends to install it. All this is done with the best intentions of

doing something for the children. The planners who have designated the amount of space, its location and relationship to other elements in the community, and allocated funds for development have already made the big decisions that have pre-determined a low quality outcome for the children. There is never enough space, funding or expertise to permit the idea of a playground to be expanded to a beautifully landscaped play garden. It is an exercise in repeating the old mistakes and pulling the citizens into the problem so the results can't be criticised. "It is what the community wanted" is what is said when one questions such boring and minimal provision. It is not the community's fault, but a weakness in local government; it is formulaic urban planning magnified by low political priorities for children and play.

"Sophisticates never understand children" Bruno Bettelheim

Manufacturers of play products as designers of playgrounds

Much the same as the process of community involvement, the custom of asking playground equipment suppliers to provide a free design service as a prerequisite to obtaining a contract to supply is one of the main reasons for the poor quality and sameness of public playgrounds today. This is like asking the producer of sofas and armchairs to design your house for you.

No city would ever ask the supplier of asphalt to design their traffic system yet somehow responsible authorities in many cities in the western world have taken to the idea that it is okay to do so when the issue is children's play. This is another signal from adult authorities of how very little importance they place on providing well for children's play. A playground equipment manufacturer is only interested in one thing – making the most profit on the order. This is not negatively meant; it simply is a necessity of business life. The staff set to prepare the proposal have no expertise in space design and probably not even in layout, most often they are computer technicians. They can arrange space so their product fits into the flat 2 dimension space allocated – and that is all they can do. They can try to impress then with a flashy computer-generated impression of what their product will look like in the space. These companies are specialists in the manufacturing of a set array of products for profit, they have engineering and technical expertise but have no knowledge of designing play spaces, no play advocacy, no ability to highlight the unique character of the site, and they have no outdoor spatial design skills. There is no concern for making well balanced spaces for play. There is no design. This is a process that has resulted in sameness and boredom and an emphasis on low cost.

When one combines the demand for low cost to the buyer and the maximising of profit for the producer with a user who has no power to influence the product it always results in poorer quality. Public playgrounds stand as a clear testimonial

to the failure of this trend in play provision. Manufacturers of play items have a role to play in society, as do the producers of asphalt and sofas but it is *not* as designers of public spaces.

In playground design, like with any other commodity on the market – you get what you pay for. Like with the process of community participation the problem is not the producers' need for profits; the problem is the unwillingness of society – of all of us – to invest in our children and in quality public spaces. As we begin the twenty first century we seem to have no vision for a quality community life. It should be a matter of course that there is sufficient funding for a well trained and competent designer to prepare designs for children's play spaces. There is a market economy rule that says "you get what you pay for." When you pay nothing, as in the case of designs for children's outdoor play spaces, the children get nothing.

Playgrounds as charity cases

Children's public play provision has always been coloured with aspects of charity in a way that public roadways and policing has not. The twentieth century was predicted to be the century of the child. While life in cities today for western children is a good one it is good for them because it is good for adults, the children benefit from the spin-offs of the good life of the adults. They also suffer from the negative back side of this same good life. We cannot take credit for any special efforts to improve the quality of a child's life in cities or outdoor spaces for children during the twentieth century. There has been a tremendous increase in the number of adults who earn a living off of childhood however. In the twenty first century we should perhaps try to be known as the century of play. If the adults play well and demand access to good play then the children too will benefit.

Can we do better?

This chapter has been very critical of much of the status quo of public park playgrounds. It is not the first time these places have been criticised – they have been under the gun since the 1970s. Yet every decade brings new versions of cutbacks in government spending and somehow it always goes over children and play. It seems that all the arguments for children's development through play, all the statements of what children do need will never move the adults in power to provide well for children's play. What is necessary is not to *make* them provide well but to get them to *want* to do it.



Public play spaces in older cities are often very small spaces squeezed in between building and street, with little regard for the playfulness of the space in contrast with the character of the building. Play spaces are charity cases – in this taking up a small garden attached to a church.

We can if we want to!

A long time ago, when I was a little child I loved to help my parents with taking care of the farm animals. At that time we had a team of work horses to do some of the heavy work on the land. One thing I liked to do was to take this team of wonderful gentle animals out of the stalls and down to the little stream so they could get a drink of fresh water. I was far too little and too weak to make them follow me – but always the temptation and appeal of fresh water made them willingly follow down to the water. It is the same with politicians and provision for children's play. The advocates for children's play are far too few and have too little power to make the politicians and the powerful do their duty to the children – based in arguments of what children need. The dismal results of the twentieth century have demonstrated that. In the twenty first century we need to find ways where there is pleasure, prestige and appeal to be a political leader who is known to provide well for children's play. Places where children and children's play are prioritised would become the preferred places to live, the best addresses. Community leaders in such places would be highly respected as wise leaders. The communities would be exciting examples of new democratic processes and ideas.

Creating childhood habitats

It is easy to find consensus that public playgrounds are not in good shape. It is much more difficult to find examples of well designed public playgrounds. To improve play provision we are inspired by good examples, not by criticism of bad ones. We need to create and celebrate good playgrounds. There is good political value in creating high quality public parks. Communities are held together, generation after generation by sharing public spaces that all enjoy and value. There is good citizenship in places with high affection value. One need only refer to some of London's central parks, Central Park in New York and to Vancouver's Stanley Park. Not only are these places aspects of civic pride they also unite the residents in common experiences of space and affection for the space.

“A civilised society is one which struggles to make the world better for its children”
(Kline, 1993)

There should be a Nobel Prize awarded each year to the city that has made the best contribution to children's play and an Academy awards programme for such play areas. But more than the publicity and the media attention, the real rewards would be the warm regard of local respect, and the joy and satisfaction that comes from having struggled to make things just a little better for the next generation and for future developments of our culture.

Again and again, as I write this chapter I have been faced with the realisation that good design will not solve all the problems of public playgrounds nor do away with all the criticism. Good designs of landscaped spaces with high quality furnishings and items specially to support children's play are essential physical features of a good public park playground. To make public playgrounds successful in the hearts and minds of both the design oriented adults and the citizens of all ages and abilities means we also need to change the perception of what a public playground is. Buckminster Fuller has said that playgrounds should be renamed research laboratories. I love that idea – every time I remember his words I think of playgrounds as a different place – a research laboratory conjures up images of a space or spaces filled with interesting tools and equipment for measuring and weighing, materials to make magic potions and special machines to see into the heart of an object in a way we can't see with our bare eye. Playgrounds should include these kinds of possibilities.

I would also like to add a new way of talking about playgrounds. To paraphrase Fuller I would say that playgrounds should be renamed *open air refreshment bars*. Playgrounds should be places where all who live in the area can come to celebrate the joy of living, to find pleasure in the company of their fellow citizen while enjoying the harmony of nature and living things. A playground should be a strong life reinforcing element, where one can drink in the wonders of this planet and the mysteries of life.

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