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promoting the value of play

The Politics of Play

There is a movement afoot to create recreational spaces that better serve our cities and our children.

By Linda Baker

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The playground is the McDonald's of landscape design. Travel to any city in many parts of the world and the presentation is identical: a flat surface topped by one or two standardized all-in-one activity structures. The Memorial Park playground, which opened this August in Wilsonville, Oregon, points in a different direction. Located in a 17-acre park, the site features a large grassy mound encircled by a series of discrete elements. There is a six-foot-tall red rubber dome, concentric circles of rocks, a small waterfall, and two curved climbing walls with holes in their centers.

"The idea was to find simple solutions that don't specify the type of play," explains project manager Tim Nash, at the time with Murase Associates. Before starting the Wilsonville design, Nash (who is now with Portland's Koch Landscape Architecture) researched Aldo van Eyck, the Dutch architect known for creating unpretentious arrangements of sandpits, benches, and tumbling bars in postwar Amsterdam. The Wilsonville project is part of a burgeoning "creative playground" movement—one that eschews the homogenous regulated space of contemporary recreational areas in favor of diverse open-ended "playscapes." Ranging from Modernist set pieces to bucolic panoramas, the new projects aim to move beyond gymnasium-style functions (crawling, swinging, climbing). Instead the goal is to stimulate kids' imaginations, encourage independent exploration, and—more ambitiously—incorporate the twenty-first-century playground into the fabric of community life.

For example, the organic forms of the Wilsonville site—leavened with a splash of red—blend seamlessly with the park's rolling hills. An amphitheater for parents, embedded in one side of the playscape's grassy mound, helps blur the boundary between spaces for children and those for adults. "We wanted to invert the typical layout, where caretakers are on the outside," Nash says.

Much of the design momentum originates in Denmark, Holland, and Germany, where children are increasingly viewed as an indicator group for successful urban planning. But even in the United Kingdom and the United States, where privatized backyard play is the ethos, a handful of architects, educators, and equipment manufacturers is beginning to rethink the relationship among children, playground design, and public space. Creating more inclusive spaces for children and families, so the logic goes, is

one step toward making the entire city a safer and more welcoming place for kids.

“The quality of the built environment in play provision has been pretty dire,” acknowledges Hattie Coppard, director of London’s Snug & Outdoor. “That’s beginning to change.” Coppard, who will debut an undulating topographically driven design in Southampton’s Houndwell Park next year—“The whole space becomes a play element”—says health concerns such as child obesity and diabetes have brought new scrutiny to young people and their physical environments. In March, for example, the United Kingdom’s Big Lottery Fund launched a \$30 million “Playful Ideas” program targeting the installation of neighborhood playscapes. “The focus on innovation and design is significant,” Coppard says. “They don’t want flat ground with a box.”

Over the past 15 years international play-safety guidelines have spawned a ubiquitous crop of red, yellow, and blue structures rooted in “impact-attenuating” surfaces. The design problem is especially acute in the United States, where a litigious culture first eviscerated the seesaw, then the merry-go-round, and increasingly threatens the swing set. Eliminating spontaneity and risk from children’s play not only discourages physical activity, critics claim, but deprives young people of the experiences they need to grow and develop as individuals. “Play becomes simplified, and then the child doesn’t have to pay attention to his or her movements,” Danish landscape architect Helle Nebelong says of standardized environments.

Nebelong’s own projects (she runs her own firm in addition to working for the city of Copenhagen) favor the irregularity and asymmetry found in the natural world. At the Nature Playground, which opened in Valbyparken—Copenhagen’s largest park—several years ago, steep hills and felled branches share space with a sand-and-gravel pit and a village of woven willow huts and fences. There are wildflower meadows, a large snail-shaped mound with a spiral path, and five whimsical towers crafted from wood, metal, and Plexiglas designed by students from the Denmark Design School. Lacking plastic gimmickry, the Nature Playground attracts visitors of all ages, Nebelong says: “It becomes a place for everyone to enjoy.”

Creative-playground designers, many of whom prefer to carefully edit their use of equipment for psychological and aesthetic reasons, cite another benefit of the practice: reduced costs. “When money is tight, it makes sense to take advantage of existing features—natural rain and water courses, hills, views good and bad, adjacent land uses and neighbors—and turn them into play and learning opportunities,” says Ron King, a New Hampshire-based landscape architect and certified playground-safety inspector who is introducing Danish-style plans to American schools and child-care centers. A signature effort, completed last summer at Bedford Memorial Elementary School, includes a ten-foot “mountain” fronted by a boulder climbing wall, a stream (or “leaping chasm”), and winding paths with fairy-tale-like arbors. “The play is not prescribed, so the kids have more opportunities to problem solve and use their imaginations,” says Leslie Fredette, a second-grade teacher. The project has also transformed the school playground into a space for the whole community to gather and exercise. “It’s really gratifying to see all the people here on the weekend,” she says.

Advocates of creative play weave a common narrative about contemporary youth. Car-dominated neighborhoods, media saturation, and overscheduled lifestyles have “limited the spatial conditions of childhood,” says Baldo Blinkert, a sociologist at the University of Freiburg, in Germany. In the 1990s Blinkert’s research on children’s diminishing use

of public space inspired city officials to implement a playscape policy; a larger municipal project continues today. “We need not only new types of playgrounds but also an urban environment that makes it possible for children to participate in urban life,” Blinkert says. Freiburg’s next step is to reclaim the street as a safe place for children’s play, where kids can kick a ball, meet new people, or simply watch the world go by.

Will rethinking the playground help break down barriers between children and the city—or for that matter, the suburbs? It’s hardly a modest proposal. But even Kompan, one the world’s largest manufacturers of playground equipment, appears willing to help bridge the gap. In May the company installed an innovative multiage playground in Seattle featuring a new Galaxy product line, inspired by Alexander Calder: it has movable parts and an airy, not boxy, layout. “We recognize that large, brightly colored pieces detract from the architecture of a building or an (adjacent) field,” says Tom Grover, Kompan’s vice president of sales and marketing. “Aesthetics,” he notes, “is one of many drivers that’s making playground design change.”

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