

Kids Don't Need Equipment, They Need Opportunity

by Ellen Ruppel Shell. From Smithsonian Magazine, July 1994. Reprinted by permission of the Smithsonian and Ellen Ruppel Shell.

Forget about swings and teeter-totters and concrete turtles - to be a real success, a playground needs a few good mudholes.

Flood Park playground in Menlo Park, California lacks the glitz of an arcade and has none of the pizzazz of a theme park. There are no interactive video games, no ear-popping sound systems, no death-defying vertigo machines. These are only simple things: a rock the shape of an oversize beanbag chair, a cluster of stunted trees, a single wind chime. Not the stuff, one would think, to catch and hold the interest of technosavvy youth.

One would be wrong.

Today, a sharply clear Saturday in early fall, the place is crawling with kids. Kids as acrobats, flinging themselves from the rock into sand piled four feet deep. Kids with pebbles and sticks and soda cans to form pools and eddies. Kids as set designers, turning a tangle of twisted Australian tea trees into a spaceship, then a pirate ship, then a playhouse. Flood Park was designed to fulfill not some adult fantasy of what kids want, but the desires and needs of the kids themselves. There is nothing here that cannot be touched and changed, nothing that kids can't control. Flood park is a work in progress, and that, it seems, is its magic.

"Ideally a child's play space should never be finished, it should be in a constant state of change," says Susan Goltsman, a principal in the Berkeley, California, based firm Moore Iacofano Goltsman, who planned and designed the play space. "Children, you know, have a way of creating their own worlds."

You can probably recall creating such a world yourself as a child. There was a vacant lot or open field, a building site or back alley where you fled from time to time to escape adult judgement and scrutiny. There, far from a guardian's watchful eye, you and your friends made your own laws, appointed your own leaders, settled your own disputes. But the landscape of childhood has changed dramatically. Those vacant lots and open fields have given way to the push of progress- have been paved into parking lots or built into shopping malls and subdivisions. Those back alleys and secret cul de sacs have become truly frightening, places not of mystery but of danger. The freedom many of us associate with childhood is at worst an anachronism, at best a luxury out of reach from millions of today's kids.

Goltsman is one of a growing number of designers, architects, city planners and educators who are working hard to reverse this trend. In a sense, their goal is to

reinvent the vacant lot. Rather than flattening the landscape into submission and smothering it with asphalt, this new wave of playground designers relies heavily on context, incorporating as many features of the native topology and local culture as possible. The places designed are subtle but complex, as intriguing as a child's imagination can make them.

In a tiny, exquisite playground in Central Park in Manhattan, for instance, children scramble up a jumble of rocks and logs to the top of a granite outcrop carved into a smooth spiral slide. They climb and slide and climb again, the slip of mud and rock against their sneakers, climbers challenging a peak. In Sunnyvale, California, kids excavate for fish fossils at a playground where the nearby wetlands make a soothing backdrop.

Swings Adrift In An Asphalt Sea

"The idea is to use the landscape as a playground and nature as the play element," says Mark Francis, a landscape architect on the faculty of the University of California at Davis. "Most playgrounds are so tame; what we're trying to do is recapture a bit of the wild side."

Many architects and designers think of playgrounds as a necessary evil, something to tack on reluctantly, budget permitting, after the real work of creating buildings is done. This helps to explain why so many inner-city housing developments offer so little for children- typically a trio of wings set in four globs of cement adrift in an asphalt sea. Usually the swings have no seats. Often the asphalt is strewn with broken glass.

The thinking, or lack of it, that led to this tragedy is changing, but slowly and sporadically. And while theorists argue and government agencies equivocate about what to do, a handful of activists are slipping bits and pieces of childhood back into the inner city. Sam Kornhauser is one of them.

Kornhauser's work is building playgrounds in Harlem, a community where the distinction between "playground" and "parking lot" appears to be mostly semantic. Indeed, a recent tour of Harlem's elementary school yards yielded little evidence of people of any kind, save during recess when teachers patrolled the perimeters of chain link fence as students let off steam in skittish games of tag.

An architect by training and a child advocate by avocation, Kornhauser considers play an educational opportunity, and the playgrounds he designs are an embodiment of that belief. His play space at Public School 197, for example, is a Harlem in miniature, everything built to resemble something the kids have seen before. There's a "tenement house" climbing structure, seedy but rakish in a splash of primary colors. There's a stage like the one at the Apollo Theater. There's a

store, a fire engine, an ambulance, and a giant crawl-through tube marked with a white cross to represent Harlem Hospital- the school's neighbor and benefactor of the playground. Though fronted by a busy thoroughfare, the play yard is quiet, the street noise barely audible. Sitting here, you can almost forget that the playground is locked up each night to keep drug dealers from using it as a place of business.

"When I first began work on this project, there was nothing here but broken monkey bars, a fulcrum where a seesaw used to be, and stanchions sticking out of concrete where there were supposed to be benches," Kornhauser says. "It was a little daunting. But I spent a couple of days walking around the neighborhood, and I got inspired. I mean, Yankee Stadium is just 20 blocks across the river, and to east is a railway bridge, and the trains lead to just about everywhere else in the world. I thought, this place is a real intersection of ideas."

A quartet of murals hangs on the playground's inevitable rectangle of chain link fence. They were painted by P.S. 197 students with a program called Unity Through Murals. Each painting depicts a view of the city and beyond: Yankee Stadium and north to the Arctic; the Harlem Bridge and east to Egypt and the pyramids; a neighborhood YMCA and west to Hawaii and Japan; and the Manhattan skyline giving way to a tropical rain forest in the lush, overripe style of painter Henri Rousseau. "The idea," Kornhauser says, "was to encourage pride in the neighborhood, but also to help children see beyond to the rest of the world, to convey a sense of geography and history."

Children of the inner city, Kornhauser explains, have enough freneticism in their lives, so there are no monkeybars here, or swings. But there is a garden, a magnificent tumble of color and fragrance that not only catches the eye but soothes. There are roses and vegetables and what looks like every kind of flowering plant. The flowers attract insects and a wide assortment of birds.

When the children finally clamber out of P.S. 197 for recess, most head straight for "downtown," the toy Harlem with its fire engine and ambulance and playhouse. But one, a little boy of about 8, breaks away from the rest to take a stroll through the garden. Bending low, he inspects a flower that is drooping on its stem. Rather than yank at it, as one would expect, he takes a twig, sticks it in the dirt and props the stem against it, like a crutch. Satisfied, he scrambles to his feet and rushes back to score his turn at the ambulance.

The idea that creative play fulfills a vital need in children has been batted around by theorists for more than a century, but has only recently become part of mainstream thinking in the United States. Americans tend to underestimate the importance of play, to consider it as discretionary rather than essential to child development. Roger Hart, an environmental psychologist who edits the quarterly journal *Children's Environments*, says that this misguided concept of play has

trickled down into the spaces we create for children, resulting in a proliferation of lackluster environments of little value.

Needed: Water, Sand and Loose Parts

"Most people who care about child development know nothing about design, and most people who design know nothing about child development," Hart says. "We all know that children need water, sand and loose parts to build with, as tools of communication and interaction. Yet most playgrounds have little beyond pieces of manufactured exercise equipment selected from catalogs. Kids don't need equipment, they need opportunity."

Hart, who is director of the Children's Environments Research group at the City University of New York Graduate Center, drives me to the Playground for All Children, or PAC, a 3.5-acre playground in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens, New York. PAC has been in operation for about a decade; it was the first playground in the country to integrate children with special needs and children without them. The basketball nets are low, to give those in wheelchairs a chance to rack up points; the slides, swings and seesaws are designed so that youngsters without working legs can manage them. But the real beauty of the place is the staff. PAC is one of the few play areas in the country with a team of trained play leaders.

"In Europe, play leaders have been common for years," Hart says. "In the Scandinavian countries, being a play leader is a profession. Americans should consider investing in people rather than in equipment. It really does work."

The investment at PAC certainly appears to have paid off. Diane Piselli, the playground's director, runs a pet-facilitated therapy program, and her German shepherd, Spencer, and two other dogs pull wheelchairs down to the basketball court. PAC's recreation leader, Eric Friedman, has the sort of enthusiasm and energy that inspire kids to push through their fears. He and the rest of the staff plan games and art projects, and help the children tend a garden with peppers, tomatoes and eggplants. There are sunflowers, too. "Kids were so surprised that you could eat sunflower seeds straight from a flower," Friedman says. "They thought they had to come from a store."

That afternoon Hart takes me to the Union Settlement Association in East Harlem. One of the largest and oldest social service agencies in Manhattan- it will be celebrating its 100th anniversary next summer- the Settlement is shadowed by a burned-out tenement that resembles nothing so much as a vast slab of charred beef. Across the street there's a school with one of those abandoned asphalt play yards. On the corner, cars double-park in an angry tangle in front of an impromptu street market that, I'm told, specializes in the sale of illegal drugs.

"This place used to be a garbage filled lot- I'd look out on it every day and hardly notice," says Sally Yarmolinsky, director of development at the Settlement, unlocking the gate and leading us inside. 'You can get used to ugliness. But this, this is a dream come true."

The playground is, indeed, a wonder. There's a vinecovered gazebo as big as a living room, and fruit trees, and 50 vegetable beds planted with everything from collard greens to bamboo. Old men play dominoes here in the summer, while parents work in the garden and keep an eye on the children cavorting in the water fountain. There's plenty of stuff to climb and sit on, all of it brightly colored, clean and safe. There's also an "amphitheater," built in the shape of a Shaker hat box, where kids put on performances they create themselves.

"This playground has become a focus point for the community, a bright point in so many families' lives," says Yarmolinsky. "It's safe, it's beautiful, it's a place you can come just to sit and think. There aren't many places to be contemplative in the city. This is a sanctuary."

It is a sanctuary that took root when two groups somewhat at odds- one, Operation Green Thumb, a city agency devoted to gardening, and the other, the Council on the Environment, a private agency that turned vacant lots into playgrounds- came together to create this unique setting. It's raining the afternoon I visit and the children have wisely stayed inside. But Yarmolinsky is prepared- she pulls out color photographs of community events that have taken place here, and of kids. In one, a grinning boy of about 10 hangs from a climbing net backed by a lush mesh of foliage. It's summer, and sunny, and the boy is dressed in shorts, a colorful shirt and sneakers. He looks for all the world like a kid on vacation in Miami Beach.

The history of playgrounds is a history of bad ideas. In 1907, the Playground Association of America called public attention to the need for organized play, and manufacturers rushed in to fill the void. Much of the equipment they produced was hazardous, made more so by its installation in concrete or hard ground. Virtually all of it- the swings, jungle gyms and seesaws, the slides and the merry-go-rounds - encouraged "gross motor activities," exercises of the large muscles of the body. But as Roger Hart argues, a playground fitted out with only this kind of equipment wouldn't even satisfy a chimpanzee.

In the 1950s and 60s, climbing apparatus took on new and startling shapes: this was the period of, for example, the concrete turtle. Concrete is nothing if not durable, and many of these turtles continue to grace our parks today. Most parents have noticed, however, that children don't get much of a kick out of interacting with these creatures. That's because nothing that children can do to or with a stone turtle will change it in any way. These mass produced concrete objects were not springboards to the imagination, they were just bad art.

This period was also the heyday of the novelty playground, the type built around grand themes. There was the "Dennis the Menace" playground in Monterey, California (you can guess what that one looked like), and the East Orange, New Jersey, "nautical" playground with its cinder block lighthouse and jetty, and two full-size cabin cruisers (landlocked, of course). Soon to follow were the so-called "fantasy" playgrounds- "undersea," with octopus rockers and shark swings; "Sputnik-inspired," with rocket-ship towers; the "fairy-tale," with enchanted castles and pumpkin coaches. The problem with all these attempts to catch children's attention was that the play value of most of the equipment was pretty much gone by the time it left the factory. This led to problems. Children can be quite inventive, as they tend to seek, rather than to avoid, risks. So the "horsie" swing became a battering ram, and the rocket-ship tower became a launching pad.

By the early 1970s playground safety was a grousing concern. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission drew up guidelines. Here and there, schools and cities took action. Some installed rubber or other forgiving surfaces beneath swings and climbers, some removed the wings and climbers entirely. But most did nothing- most injuries on playgrounds today are still preventable, involving falls from a height onto a hard surface. And while in the '80s wood gradually replaced metal for play apparatus, it was usually fashioned into the same old towers and slides and teeter-totters that have been around for half a century. Even the so-called "participatory" playgrounds, in which children are encouraged to "design" their own play spaces, and parents to construct them, are built around pieces of equipment rather than around a solid concept of child development. That's why these "community-designed" structures of wood and old tires look so much alike, whether the community that designed them is in Texas or Maryland or Massachusetts.

"The nicest thing about these community-built playgrounds is their barn-raising aspect," says Susan Goltsman. "Building them is certainly a terrific experience for the parents and the community. But, again, people are focusing on structures, not the needs of kids."

Jay Beckwith, a designer and seller of playground equipment in Forestville, California, agrees. Beckwith popularized the notion of "continuous play loops," in which play features, such as slides and climbing structures, are linked together rather than set apart in lonely isolation. Continuous play structures, which encourage socialization, are widely promoted these days, and Beckwith thinks that's a step in the right direction- but just a first step. "Equipment for active play is all most people are interested in," he says, rather sadly. "They don't seem to have an understanding of kids' other needs. When they are creating, making a mess, well, that's a problem. But being creative is messy."

Most of us have had the experience (or heard it related) of watching a child reject a toy in favor of the box it was packed in. Of course, such a response makes perfect sense: there's not much kids can do with a stuffed animal, but a box full of loose packing material is a box full of possibilities. The same can be said of play spaces. When Roger Hart talks with young children about playgrounds, their number-one choice, he reports, is not a fancy piece of equipment but something more like a mudhole. A choice, Hart suspects, most parents and other adults haven't even considered.

"Adults really aren't very good at figuring out what kids want or need," says Joe Frost, a professor of education at the University of Texas. "Kids love bright colors, but communities have threatened suit when brightly colored equipment goes up in the park."

One of Frost's own creation, a playground at the Beauvoir School in Washington, D.C., is a case in point. The school operated for more than 60 years without an outdoor play space, not for lack of resources but, as headmistress Paula Carreiro explains it, because the parents of the children who attended seemed to have overlooked the value of play in favor of academics.

"This is an elementary school with PhDs teaching science classes; with a swimming pool, a tennis court," Carreiro says. "And there was no playground."

An attempt to correct the oversight was made shortly before Carreiro arrived two years ago: an architect-designed labyrinth of elegant brick walls was erected. The idea was that the children would pedal their Bikes carefully between the walls, like well-mannered robots.

"I took one look at those walls, and I knew we were in trouble," Carreiro says. "The walls were stately and elegant, but they weren't for children, I called in Joe."

Tear Down The Walls, Put Up A Playground

Joe Frost spent several days at the school, speaking with parents and teachers, observing children, pacing off the space. He noticed that children dug for insect in the rotten stump of a giant oak and made a note to keep it. He saw that kids played impromptu ball games on a particular patch of dirt, so he declared that spot an equipment-free zone. Then he convinced the parent to take down the walls and put his design into action.

The day I visit Beauvoir is chilly, but the kids don't seem to notice. They flood out of the classrooms, heading straight for their favorite spots. A pair of tube slides, painted in garish primary colors, wait like elevators to whisk older children down from the playground's upper level, which is equipped for younger children, to the

lower, more challenging one. Three boys entertain their friends with an Irish jig on the rubberized stage of an amphitheater, then chase each other in a game they call Power Rangers. Three first-grade girls, their long hair streaming, egg each other on at three increasingly tricky sets of climbing bars and rings, falling again and again onto the soft mulch. Two tiny girls make chocolate sand cakes in the playhouse, while a friend stands statue-still at the bow of an adjoining pirate ship, like a widow dreaming of her husband lost at sea. What's missing is the heat of argument, the steady stream of threats and recrimination that one associates with playground politics. Carrerio says that aggression levels went way down after the playground went up- the children are too involved to bicker. "What Joe Frost helped us build here was more than a playground. It's a testament to a belief in childhood."

Frost has studied children at play for nearly two decades. He says that what they need is simple: open space, challenge and the tools with which to materialize their own ideas. Child experts are in wide agreement on this and have been for decades. In the 1960s and '70s a small but significant movement of educators and landscape architects pushed to implement this concept in the nation's playgrounds, with some success. A scattering of neighborhood play spaces from Baltimore to Berkeley showed signs of the influence, but only a handful of these survive. Loose materials- the string and wood and nails that Frost recommends- require storage; freedom and challenge require skilled supervision. And those are two things that most public play areas lack. Park and school administrators, Frost complains, are constantly searching for the magic bullet, the one piece of play equipment that requires no maintenance or supervision and will keep children happily engaged. What they fail to acknowledge, he says, is that good play is rarely predictable- no piece of equipment designed by an adult can substitute for the child's own creation.

"American just can't seem to accept that, and it's a pity," Frost says. "Because so many children in this country have two working parents or only one parent, it's more important than ever to provide them with a rich and creative play environment." It's Frost's hunch that many learning disabilities have their roots in play deprivation.

In Texas, a coalition of concerned educators and parents has made impressive progress toward remedying this problem. The Houston Adventure Play Association has sponsored the installation of two school playgrounds built around a model first described by Danish landscape architect D.T. Sorensen 51 years ago. Sorensen knew that children preferred construction sites to most organized spaces, and this observation inspired the creation of his "junk playground," the precursor of the Adventure Playground. These are basically empty lots stocked with building materials: wood, nails, rope, water, sand and other found objects, as well as the wheelbarrows, hammers, saws and other tools necessary to transform the junk into any number of useful things- under the watchful eye of trained play leaders.

Photographs of European and Japanese Adventure Playgrounds show children building playhouses from scratch, broiling sausages over campfires, planting gardens and tending animals. These are scruffy, wild-looking places; while children love them, most adults in this country seem not to. The American Adventure Play movement took only tentative hold in the mid-'70s, and the Houston branch, along with three others in California, is a lonely vestige. Still, the spirit of the Houston group is strong, and their dream is to inspire a rekindling of the movement nationwide.

"There is no question, we have a visual-pollution problem," says Frances Heyck, secretary of the Houston Adventure Play Association. "But there is also no question that Adventure Playgrounds satisfy many of the needs of the urban child. Everyone worries about kids watching too much TV. Here is something we can all do to counteract these influences- it's cheap, it's available to everyone, and believe me, it works!"

A quick glance at one of Houston's two Adventure Playgrounds, with its grubby tables and chairs, ramshackle storage huts and piles of junk, make instantly clear what Heyck means by visual pollution. Play here is messy, unpredictable, spontaneous, freewheeling, and sometimes a little scary. It looks a lot like life.

Indeed, Robin Moore, a professor of landscape architecture at North Carolina State University and president of the International Association for the Child's Right to Play, says that our children would be best served if we thought of playgrounds not as kiddie ghettos but as a new focus of community life.

"Exercise is important, of course, but children have so many other needs that are not being addressed" Moore says. "They need a diverse, secure and supportive place, a safe haven. Once they have that, the play will come. And that play, you know, will be wonderful."