

Playgrounds can be significant contributors to a sense of wonder and creativity that becomes a part of a child's lifelong art education. Adventure Playgrounds and Imagination Playgrounds are explored as forms of art and experience.

“The form of the American playground, chiefly identified with individual neighborhoods and their small parks, was defined by a sand pit and the gymnasium, an early climbing apparatus.”

—Solomon (2005, p. 8)

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Playground Innovations and Art Teaching

An important part of the Progressive Education movement, the playground, influenced John Dewey's educational philosophy of learning. “The playground, particularly during the Progressive reform movement of the early 1900s benefited from the widespread belief that play was child's work. Dewey portrayed children as miniature adults who had to adapt to their environment by actively exploring it” (Solomon, 2005, p. 8). Educators believed that if a child had a place to play, they would not be seduced by the evils of the neighborhood, such as gangs, drugs, or looting. Playgrounds became a place for children and adults to come together and establish a sense of community.

Figure 1. Free play at the Imagination Playground in New York City.

The playground became part of the American landscape from the beginning of the 20th century; many well-known artists, architects, and landscape designers were involved in creating some of the most interesting model playgrounds. “The modernist preoccupation with children and childhood as a paradigm for progressive thinking influenced innovative playground designs” (Kinchin & O’Connor, 2012). While school playgrounds are generally not as innovative as some of the Modernist playgrounds, it is important for art teachers to be aware of developments in playground design intended to contribute to children’s art appreciation and creative experiences.

The rethinking of playgrounds not only as places that utilized adult artistic sensibilities, but also as locations where children performed as designers, occurred between the 1940s and the present in Europe and America. These ideas can be implemented to some degree in every school. The art room can be extended to the outdoors, and the indoor art room can be considered a creative playground. Art teachers can discover inventive ways to adapt existing spaces and structures available in their school to enrich the art program. Playgrounds can encourage children to play and exercise their imagination outdoors, which is exactly what most children have little time for. Learning about model playgrounds can help to envision plans for using creative adventures, constructions, and pretend plays as important aspects of school art.

Writings about the importance of the playground in developing a child’s language and physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and intellectual sides seldom address the role of the playground in shaping young creative minds. Playgrounds, however, can be significant contributors to a sense of

wonder and creativity that becomes a part of a child’s lifelong art education. A journey to a playground can be a meaningful exploration of ground and space, surface and form, light and shadows, developing visual thinking and focus on invention. Playgrounds can act as important large-scale canvases displaying children’s creative investigations.

Playgrounds as Art

Art became a subject of the American playground during the 1950s when playgrounds, considered as major community landmarks, were also criticized as eyesores. During this period artists, architects, and landscape designers were asked to design playgrounds. Artists began to transform lifeless steel structures, categorized as cages with bars, to sculptural fantasies. Children were invited to appreciate these playgrounds as art placed before them, and experience the art through the act of playing.

The Museum of Modern Art and play equipment manufacturer Creative Playthings were instrumental in promoting the union of playgrounds and cutting-edge sculpture. American post-war architects and sculptors such as Aldo van Eyck saw great potential in the playground to educate perception and public taste through the urban landscape. Influenced by Scandinavian designers, Van Eyck led the way in integrating playgrounds into the urban fabric (Solomon, 2005, p. 7). American landscape designers such as Garrett Eckbo and Daniel Kiley described playgrounds as creative canvases on which artists could most directly communicate with children. Sculptor Isamu Noguchi and architect Louis Kahn explored the playground as a place to showcase art and good design. Kahn sought to embrace variety in playgrounds for children. He reasoned that “play must be free and uninhibited in spaces with

interesting shapes not imitative of nature, yet unrestrained in their making” (as cited in Solomon, 2005, p. 52). It was clear that artists saw their creations as not only improving the appearance of playgrounds, but also inspiring the visual sensibilities of young players. Artists defined the connections that joined the concept of communal space, play, and the creation of artwork.

In 1953, Creative Playthings opened a new division called Play Sculptures and commissioned sculptors to conceive designs for playground equipment. Artists such as Egon Moller-Nielsen and Henry Moore were asked to work on play structures. A sculpture competition cosponsored by the Museum of Modern Art and *Parents* magazine supported the notion that playground sculpture could be an art that children need to experience, an art that could satisfy children’s exploration of beauty, imaginative play, and physical activity. The competition started to solidify the connection between art and playgrounds. The Museum of Modern Art competition and a subsequent exhibit in 1954 of playground pieces received vast media attention and provided legitimacy for playgrounds in the world of art. By 1955, artists were eager to join the ranks of playground designers.

The ’60s saw playgrounds as part of mass consumerism and big business; companies began to sell “cookie cutter” play structures in large quantities to restaurants such as McDonald’s. Once the mass production of playgrounds became “big business,” liability was a dominant concern. Since the later part of the 20th century, American playgrounds could be described as victims of escalating insurance costs and safety regulations. Safety concerns are an overriding consideration in today’s playgrounds with padded floors, “no running” rules, and with “no creative playing” rules implied. Today, some play structures are made of plastic with rubber chips to prevent accidents. The plastic structures are colorful with more components, yet safety outweighs any emphasis on promoting creative playing.

One of children’s first architectural experiences is on a playground. The playground is a mini city, or urban landscape, just the right size for a child. Yet, no one ever asks a child to take a step back and explore it as such, to contemplate it as an art form, and to navigate it as an architect. Children might have played their whole lives on the sculpture and landscape design of great architects, yet they are unaware of their surroundings.

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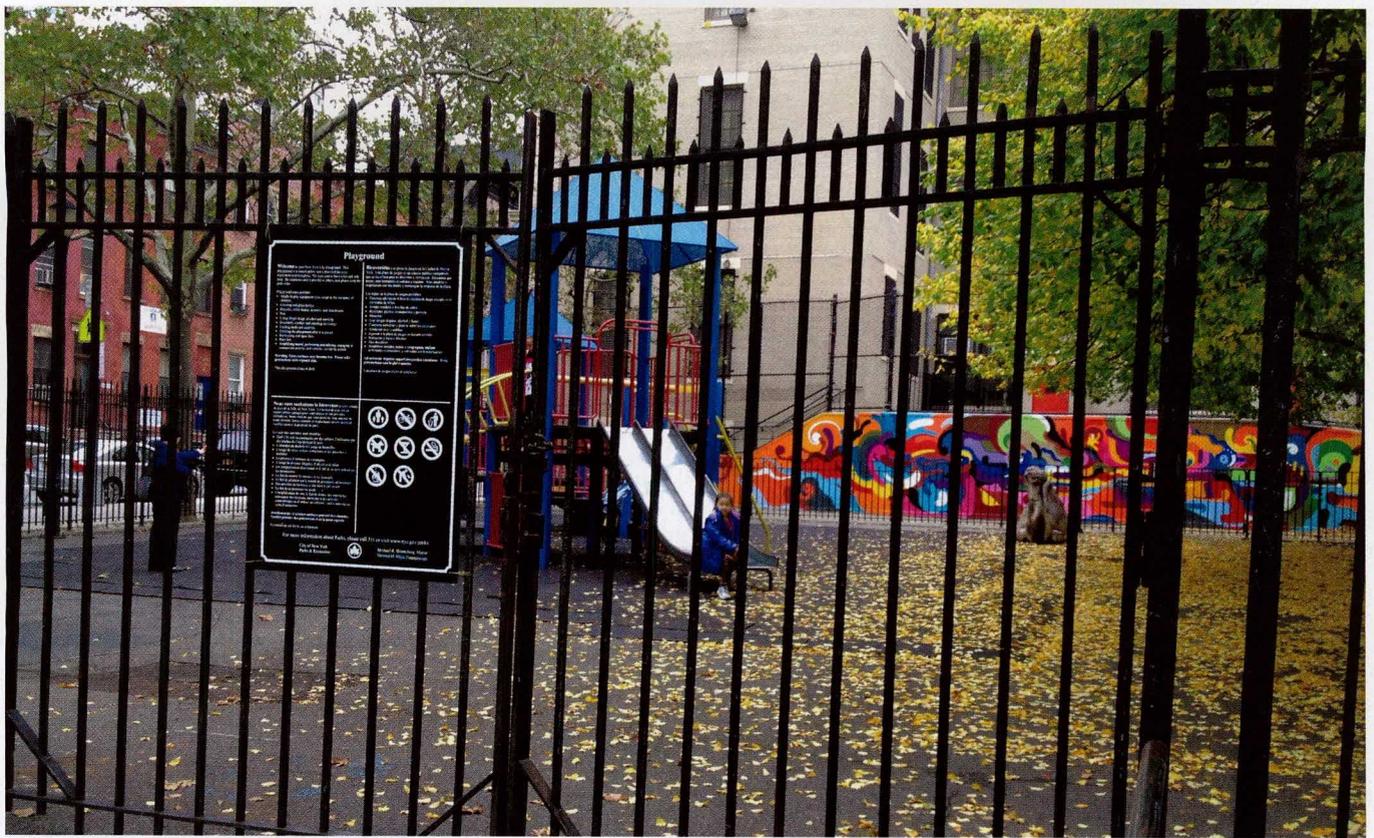


Figure 2. A structured New York City playground.

How does one see the beauty and experience the possibilities of the playground space? How can beauty, placed by designers before a child, be translated to create artistic play within the structures?

Artist-designed playgrounds placed beautiful forms and objects before children, but they did not promote the child to shape their own art. The child as creator and designer, and the playground as backdrop, was an innovative concept in European design. Moving from simply providing a physical place to play to providing an environment to pretend, to make things, and for children to creatively express themselves was the concept of Adventure Playgrounds.

Adventure Playgrounds

While the American contribution centered on building aesthetically inspiring playgrounds, during approximately the same period European models emphasized providing a public space for the child to exercise the right to creatively play.

In 1931, Danish architect C. Th. Sorensen saw that kids were not playing on the playgrounds that he designed, but were more interested in littered boxes or the dirt-covered ground. He came up with what was first called a Junk Playground, now known as the Adventure Playground. Sorensen's vision of the playground was a space that supported

children's natural creative and imaginative playing.

In a sense, you and I have always played in adventure playgrounds. We created a fort in the kitchen cabinets, jumped from couch to couch across oceans; we snuck out through a hole in the fence to a new world... We made a children's world in the city and in the country. Imagine, a place that provides all that, in the middle of a city. Here you go, hammers, saws, nails, wood, tires, rope, cloth, whatever you can find. Make it yours. You can change this playground right here, right now. (Sutton, n.d.)

During the 1940s, war and devastation in Europe, including Copenhagen and Amsterdam, became the sites for innovative playground ideas where children could depart from disturbing events and engage in fun and play. It was Sorensen who created examples of how concrete and chains could be lifted in order for kids to feel the freedom to imagine and to playfully venture into an improved world they invented.

In the Adventure Playground, children could arrange used tires, nail wood scraps, and build with telephone cable spools. According to Wardle, "Adventure playgrounds help to develop a range of cognitive skills and allow children to be repeatedly inspired and challenged" (1987,

para. 4). Popular in Europe were over 1,000 Adventure Playgrounds that, although now substantially decreased in number, continue to be a way for kids to be creative with found objects in an otherwise prefabricated world. In Adventure Playgrounds, children don't play on ready-made structures, but are able to build their own constructions. Allowing for design teams and interactive play, children form new social relationships. Building and making art together, children envision future landscapes, vehicles, and cities. Participants are provided the safety of an enclosed supervised environment where Play Workers supervise the space, mediate disputes, and serve as active audiences.

Unfortunately, many American youths have few opportunities to play in community settings. Creating a public play place did not catch on in America like it did in Europe, due to stricter playground codes. There are only two functioning Adventure Playgrounds in the United States (in Berkeley and Huntington Beach, California). New trends in school backyards are art gardens inspired by Monet, often designed by art teachers; and enormous architectural climbing structures developed by consulting firms and built by parent volunteers. Adult-conceived and adult-built spaces, however, are not necessarily promoters of children's imaginative playing.

Art teachers may want to look at their own schoolyards for alternatives, such as the potential for setting up what resembles an Adventure Playground. They can lead the way to planning schoolyards where children can construct with donated wood, brick, and stones from local lumber yards; used tires from bike or automotive stores; and other building materials saved from home renovations. These playgrounds can be constructed and deconstructed, making the elements recyclable and cost effective.

Imagination Playgrounds

Imagination Playgrounds are the newest in innovative American playground design. Similar to the Adventure Playground, the Imagination Playground provides children free space to manipulate the environment, and enlists them as artists and creators of the structures. The difference is that the giant blue foam blocks are employed to meet American safety standards. The multishaped forms essentially advance block playing, allowing it to be performed on a large scale outdoors. The child size and larger blocks allow young architects to build public structures and enjoy city type building experiences with large architectural spaces to move through.

Created by David Rockwell in Burlingame, New York (2011), the playground focuses on soft loose parts, so that kids are able to construct with the blocks through unstructured free play. Users create a flow of new spaces and environments, constantly altering the playground. Rockwell explains that, “Years ago, he [Rockwell] bought his children an art table with cubbyholes and drawers, only to have a eureka moment. I found them playing in the hall with the packing box and foam” (Graeber, 2011). Rockwell set out to produce multiuse, movable, and interchangeable simple blocks, and offer them without instructions to promote creative playing. Similar to Sorenson striving to engage children on the playground with building experiences, the uniform blocks of Imagination Playgrounds are a far more controlled and limited, yet safe American way to explore play in playgrounds.

In Imagination Playgrounds, Play Workers are hired to set up and dismantle blocks—but more importantly, perhaps, to interact with children. In observing an Imagination Playground in action, I witnessed a Play Worker speaking to parents when they overstepped bounds by not allowing their children the freedom to explore. Play Worker Katie commented,

It’s not a space where you can do anything you want. It is a controlled environment, and sometimes parents get intimidated because we don’t just let kids destroy things, we will say no... we will also tell parents if they are building for their kids, and not allowing them to have the full experience. (personal communication, 2012)

Katie was hired to take care of the playground, and although she has worked at other playgrounds in the city, she said that this was the only one in which families knew her, and she felt helpful. Katie’s demeanor was more like an early-childhood specialist without an education degree. Katie spoke of attending intense training sessions, and when asked about the differences between the participants in playgrounds, she said, “These kids are able to play together and build amazing things. They seem to be far more focused, interested, and creative than what they do on typical play structures.” Imagination Playgrounds and Adventure Playgrounds reaffirm the notion that free play is an important part of art learning.

Play blocks as a foundation for creative thinking goes all the way back to the forming of Kindergarten by Fredrick Froebel in

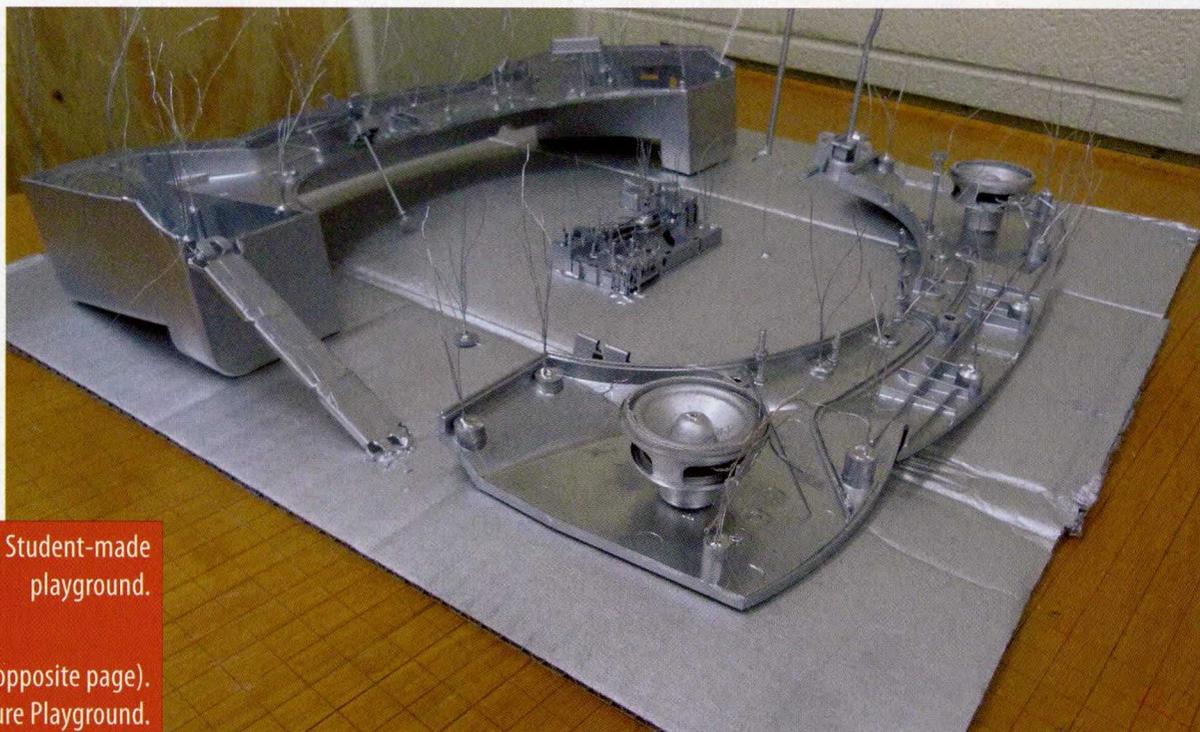


Figure 3. Student-made playground.

Figure 4 (opposite page). Glamis Adventure Playground. Courtesy of The Shadwell Community Project.

1840. Play blocks are still used by many art teachers to begin an art class and promote student discoveries. Blocks in an art class can also be used to illustrate design concepts and search for new forms in furnishings or architecture. Today, children have little time and few opportunities to play with wood blocks, or any play blocks, except on the computer. Even LEGOs are sold in highly scripted kits, making free play difficult. Therefore, playgrounds for block players become community events of importance.

Blue blocks of the Imagination Playground allow children to enter safe worlds of improvised block constructing. Art teachers can create Imagination Playgrounds in their schoolyard by gathering large sturdy boxes, plastic forms, giant pillows, or inflatable items to bring into public spaces to build with. This changes the notion of the playground or schoolyard becoming an outdoor space for art learning. When children are able to use large linear or blocklike forms to perform, build, and create imaginary places, the playground becomes a backdrop in which to present plays and display constructions.

Playgrounds and Art Experiences

A playground is not just an outdoor gymnasium. The exuberance and energy on display is physically as well as creatively challenging. The playground is a place to discover basic art processes and exercise problem-solving skills. Model playgrounds allow for manipulating ground materials and manmade forms. Art lessons about space, movement, or light taught theoretically in a classroom can be realistically explored outside. Art teaching can utilize schoolyards as stimulating playgrounds to build forts, explore hidden alcoves, and design places for fantasies.

For example, children can use a school playground to wrap up trees for rubbing or cover playground structures as large presents. Just as the artist Christo and his wife Jean Claude wrapped bridges, monuments, and buildings to reexamine familiar forms in the environment, school children can experience wrapping playground equipment in plastics and fabrics to provide exciting new forms and canvases. Playground equipment can be used as armatures, stretchers, and hangers redefined by its covering in bubble wrap, newspaper, or gift wrap. Draped outdoor

forms provide fresh opportunities for playful musings as sculptural landscapes, opened as new interiors, or vast canvases for drawings and paintings. The playground can be a place for environmental designing or animation; a setting to explore action scenes or still lives. It can be used to set up futuristic worlds in an environment that provides new challenges in scale.

School playgrounds can be used to explore lines by following amazing walkway cracks, or intricate lines sprinkled and poured over concrete from watering cans. Open spaces allow for drawings on grassy surfaces, where yarn stick like Velcro and milelong contrasting colors can be cast. Sharp lines can be freely inscribed on sandy floors, as playgrounds offer countless opportunities for fearless art.

Space can be felt outdoors. Various perspectives, or ways of depicting space in pictures, can be invented and examined firsthand. Also, what better place than a playground to study points of view, where climbing up tall structures or moving through tunnels and slides offers a variety of changing worldviews? One can drop pebbles, twigs, or wheeled toys down the slide to



Children playing with sand, dirt, and water outdoors are the original Earthwork artists.

study motion or visual changes experienced in testing inclines, heights, or depth. What better place to study one's own moving shadows, or set up figurative shadow-puppet shows? Light and shadow are memorably studied in playground experiences. Dramatic shadows, cast beneath play structures, can be traced on the ground or sketched on 'shadow-trapping' papers.

School art programs can benefit from ideas expounded in model playgrounds. Motivated by playful investigation of their surroundings, the trees and play structures even in ordinary schoolyards can provide children opportunities to learn about art. Children can be imaginative helpers in designing playgrounds where they initiate their own play experiences. Every art teacher can gather large sturdy boxes, foam shapes, and the loose parts that nature provides for students to create with. Every nook and cranny behind a school produces unique sounds, spaces, and opportunities for young architects or designers.

Playgrounds and Earthworks

Children naturally expand any playground area by finding uses for bushes, trees, and leaf piles. They design with found materials in outdoor spaces that bring play beyond the built structures. How often does one see a child digging in the dirt or creating pine needle rooms with pinecone furnishings, while ignoring the playground structures? Art teachers, as schoolyard playground designers, can take young children's playing into account. Art classes in the playground can design on grounds using water and

rocks, and build natural bridges. As art flourishes within model playgrounds in schools, it can spread to connect playground structures to become "tree houses" transformed into imaginative architecture and sculptural uses. Children playing with sand, dirt, and water outdoors are the original Earthwork artists.

During different times of year, the playground changes in color and art materials, and students can sculpt with dirt, snow, or leaves. Outdoor colors are always changing, and growth and decay are elements of a living playground; it is art that is not taken home or kept, but added to the environment, possibly going back to the original forms. Sculptures can be built and torn down, and then put back into the earth. When a child constructs on an Adventure Playground, they are also creating a piece of Earthwork.

Indoor Playgrounds

Dreams for what could be invented in playgrounds can be thought about in the art room. In the classroom, students can create the plans and models for playhouses and bridges that can be installed outside. Understanding that the playground is an architectural space with opportunities

to design and test a variety of ideas is a valuable art lesson. Studying the history of playgrounds is not just for teachers, but an opportunity for art class learning. After all, our students will be designing the model playgrounds of the future.

Conclusion

The traditional playground designs that so many of us have played on as young children were developed early in the 20th century and are still being installed today. According to Heseltine and Holborn (1987), "this type of playground is useful for physical development, which the design and the setting of play equipment are taken into account about every part of physical body of children" (p. 5). Model playgrounds, however, offer vast opportunities to explore the nature of children's creative behavior, and study modern architectural concepts and methods related to teaching art.

The history of model playgrounds and the creative ideas they suggest provide many opportunities for art teachers and their students. Even in the most restricted schoolyards, model playground ideas can flourish. Art classes can study playgrounds and examine art and its connections to the environment, including landscape architecture, Earthworks, and more. Model playgrounds, and their extensions created behind schools, have the potential to offer children important art experiences.

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