



## Environments for Play

*Childhood is a strange country. It's a place you come from or go to - at least in your mind. For me it has an endless, spellbound something in it that feels remote. It's like a little sealed-vault country of cake breath and grass stains where what you do instead of work is spin until you're dizzy.*

— Lyall Bush, Executive Director of Richard Hugo House, a center for writers and readers.



Play in childhood is mostly fun, so we can assume that it leads to happiness and is a good thing for children to do. But it's more than that. Play exercises the body and it exercises the mind in creativity and imagination. Play situations tend to be social and they require and promote cooperation. They teach children the skills of compromise, selection and decision making.

But this kind of play is not always available to our children. It is not fostered by the kinds of playgrounds that we build today – playgrounds that are only flat surfaces of resilient material

populated with multi-colored pieces of plastic play equipment. These playgrounds are typically too small, too simplistic and, at the same time, too chaotic for children.

If you're thinking about building a playground or perhaps renovating one, there are a few things to consider. But first, let's think about how play might be defined.

### What is Play?

Play is essentially what children do when their lives are not being organized by adults. Play isn't exactly the work of childhood, but it isn't idleness, and actually, it isn't always fun. It is a time when children control and manipulate their world, sometimes into imagined environments. They set their own agendas and make up their own roles and their own rules. So one thing that we can identify as good design is that a playground should foster independent activity.

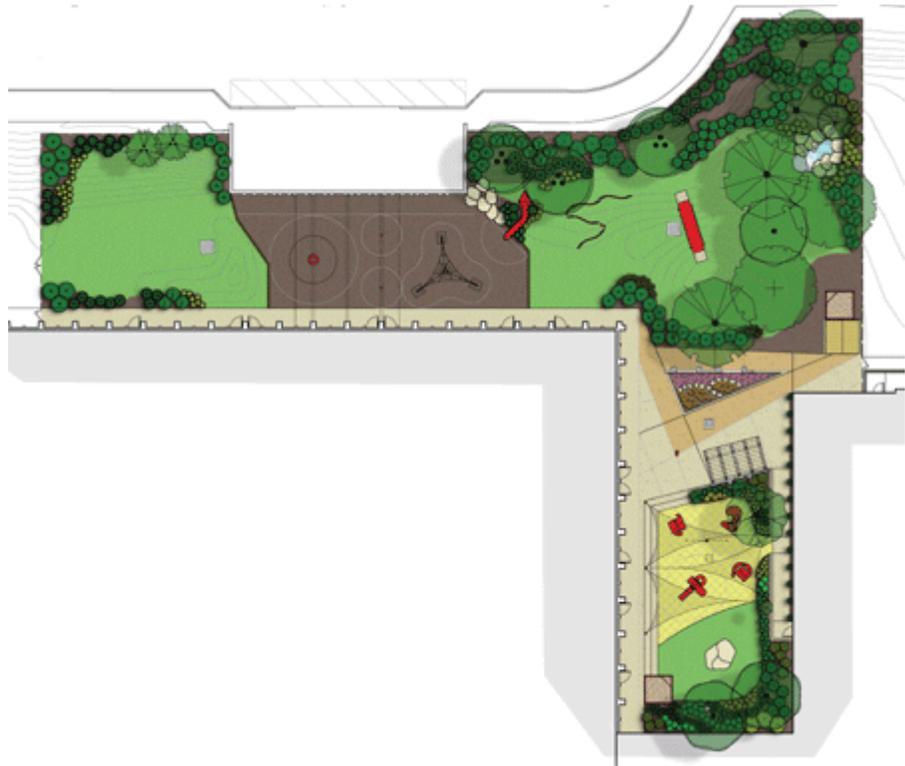
In many ways an overgrown vacant lot with its miscellaneous tree branches, rocks, trash and other found objects is a pretty good play environment. The obvious exception is that it has the potential to be quite unsafe. This newsletter discusses some of the ways of importing the better qualities of a vacant lot into a playground. We won't discuss the details of safety here except to say that the recent examples we're showing were designed within the very effective guidelines of the Consumer Product Safety Council's Guidelines for Playground Safety.

### Play in Preschool

Another important point is that what's said here is focused on preschool playgrounds. That means children from 2 to 5 years old in an environment where adults are present or at least available when the playground is in use. This is an age bracket when the individual sensory play of the infant and toddler is growing into imaginative and constructive play in small groups. After 5 there is a transition to group games with self-imposed rules. At perhaps 7 or 8 years another transition occurs toward more athletic games with accepted rules from outside the group.

The two playground designs shown in this article are for child care centers, although some of the principles can be applied to any playground. One, for the University City Children's Center (UCCC),

is for children 2 through 5. The other, for the Jewish Community Center (JCC) on the right, includes an area for infants and toddlers as well. UCCC's has been in operation for a year, and the JCC's will be built in the near future.



## Some Design Concepts:

So, if you want a good playground, here are a few things that promote play, real play.

### Nature



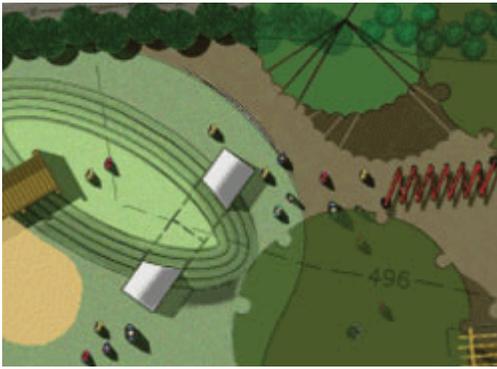
Nature is the basis for human habitation. If we want children to understand this, and to relate to the environmental challenges we face, we need to let them experience nature. That experience includes the way plant materials change across the seasons and how they are infinitely varied, how they feel and how they smell. A playground full of trees and shrubs will be calming, fascinating and beautiful. Let nature be the context for play.

### Abstraction

Spontaneous invention and change make for true play and for sound child development. They tend to be supported by two things: a reasonable level of abstraction and the availability of raw materials and loose parts. A child's creativity and invention are limited by the identity of an item such as an object in the form of a car or a train.



Play structures are best when they are abstract. Mounds and a bridge, a slide down an existing hill and a climbing pyramid allow imaginations to work. Their play functions and identities will change frequently.



## Lots of Open Space

You'll need a lot more space than any child care facility minimum standard recommends. Playgrounds should not be tight, packed with equipment and have a jumbled, over-active feeling. These playgrounds are over-stimulating for young children. Chaos diminishes the learning process, so a good design reduces it. Provide some unassigned space and let children figure out how to use it. Provide space for children to roam.



## Complexity



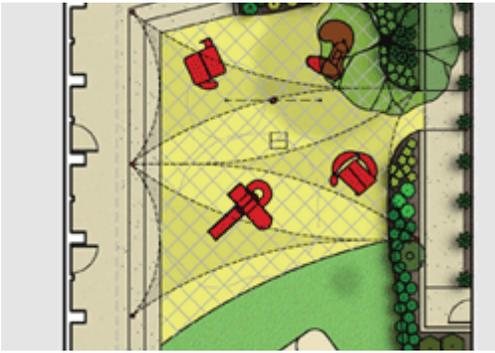
Playgrounds should enable children to grow holistically; physically, socially and emotionally. Complexity is different from chaos and it can be good. We should provide a depth of experience, not a jumble of toy-like items. Our playgrounds are designed to "sprawl" a bit using well thought out areas, equipment and materials. Children, like adults, need "resting spaces." They need a layering of spaces created by trellises, low walls, changes in level and plants.

## Shade

The heat of the St. Louis summer and the harmful effects of the sun make shade an important part of any playground. At UCCC, a trellis will be built along the west side of the building as a transition from classrooms to playground. The separation will insulate the classrooms a bit and will allow some thinking, selection or adjustment time for the children. Vines on the trellis will be the first natural element encountered.



At the JCC, several fabric sails will shade the infant/toddler area. A sukkah-like structure is provided for the older children which reinforces the religious goals of the center. Most important is the use of the largest trees that can reasonably be transplanted.



## Small Pieces and Loose Parts

A playground's design, using landscaping and natural materials to provide inherent physical challenges, enables children to experience success. Adding materials such as boards, blocks, wooden boxes, and small planks encourages children to organize their environment and to develop in their skills.

The open-ended nature of these pieces also allows a teacher and children to work together to incorporate the content of a curriculum into the playground's environment. The outdoor environment provides a place for children to develop physically in an inventive, creative, imaginative and safe way as they change and manipulate their environment. It provides a daily challenge for children to develop in the spirit of joy and fun!

## A Child's View of the World

Playgrounds should be divided into smaller areas so that several environments can exist together. As an example, low walls separate areas and can have niches in which to place objects. These dividing elements become parts of the imaginary worlds that children create for themselves. Their lack of a specific identity will be their strength, since one day a small opening in a wall will be a place to hide a treasure and another day a window onto what may be happening next door.



We hope that our playgrounds will all be stimulating, safe, and secure environments. We want them to enable children to play in a natural landscape - the best play environment we can conceive of.

This kind of play will require teachers to gently promote and support it. They will need to provide some help with storing, organizing and distributing the smaller elements of play, just as they do inside the classrooms. It will take staff time. This is necessary if we are committed to walking a line between a world ordered by adults and chaos, between a typical playground and a vacant lot. We want all the opportunities of the vacant lot but in a safe and secure environment.

*Play environments: they deserve our best design, lots of space and a real connection to the natural world. Places where children can roam freely, imagine different worlds and enjoy making this transition to being happy and healthy adults.*

