

A Unique Urban Playground

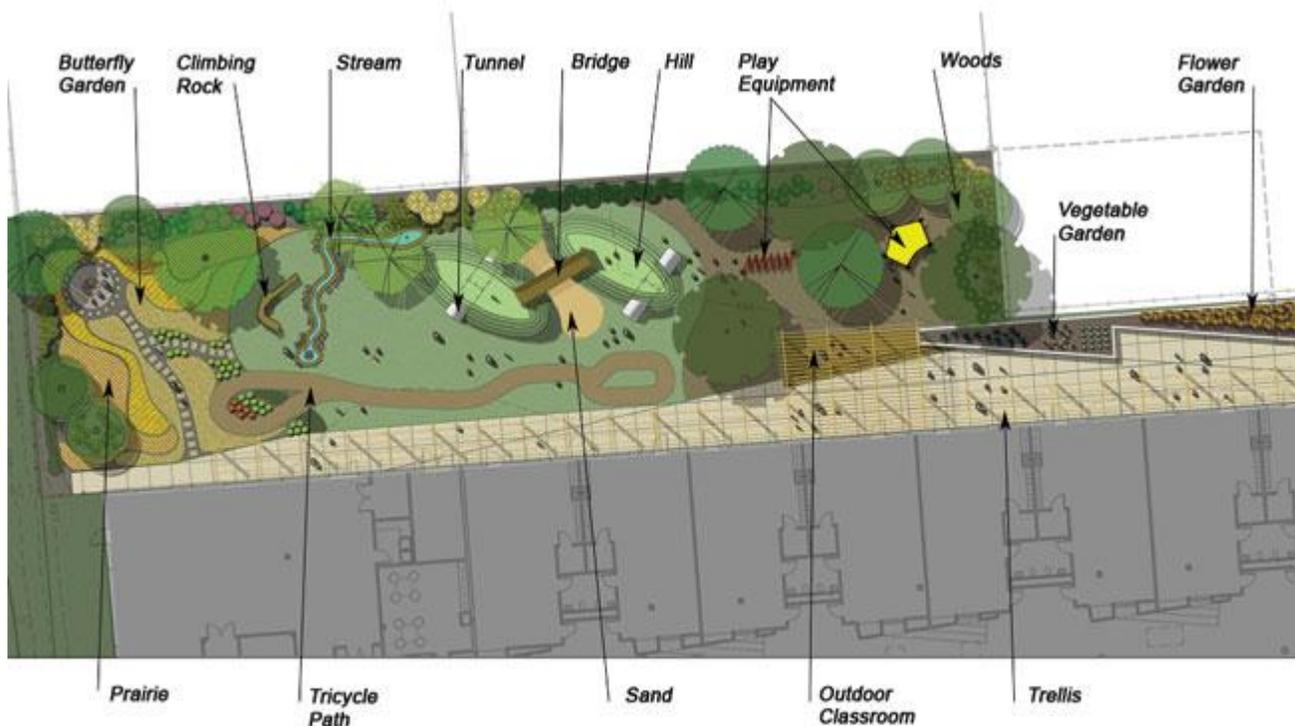
at the University City Children's Center

The Importance of Play

Play is what children do when adults stop organizing their world. It allows them to explore their feelings, imaginations, abilities and limitations. It is not optional; it is essential to their development.

The University City Children's Center wanted their playground to be based on the general needs of children and their developmental stages. They also wanted to cater to the specific needs of the Center's children, economically and socially mixed, and to the Center's program as a progressive and innovative pre-school associated with Washington University.

When the Center relocated to its new facility the play area remained a construction site until last year when funds to build it became available. A few parts are yet to be completed but the children began using it last summer.



The Design Process

Design processes are usually most effective with the direct participation of a client who knows the situation and has an interest in the outcome. In this case the Center's director, Steve Zwolak, known to the kids as Mr. Z, worked closely with us from conceptual design through construction.

The first thing Steve did was borrow a book from us on adventure playgrounds written in Britain in the late 1960s. These playgrounds were very adventuresome. Building materials and hand tools, fire, rope, ladders, junk heaps, animals (really) and complete freedom made these playgrounds a child's dream, but a very high risk environment. While we weren't going to do that, we did want to do more than install some play equipment on a soft surface. We liked the idea of a vacant lot and found materials, but we liked the Center's children too, and wanted to keep them safe.

The Building, the Playground and Mother Nature

To begin with, the design of the playground was linked directly to the design of the Center's building giving most classrooms direct access to it. It was our feeling that views from the classrooms should be of nature, rather than the urban environment. So each classroom has floor to ceiling windows onto the playground, not so much to see the play as to see plant materials. Of course, this natural environment will take some time to grow into maximum effectiveness, but some immediate benefits have resulted.



The Trellis

While not yet completed, a trellis will provide filtered sunlight and some weather protection so children can decide where to begin their play.

The trellis will provide shading to the sunny west side of the building's classroom windows. The roof of the trellis will run along the whole west side of the building. The trellis will separate the classrooms from the active play and will allow some thinking, selection or adjustment time for the children. Spatial complexity and layering of the architectural elements beckons and at the same time reduces the abruptness of this transition.

Vines on the trellis will be the first natural element encountered. Wire grids are provided for them to grow on. Because St. Louis summer heat can be so intense, a misting system from the trellis will provide a cool area. There is also a large mister in the center of the playground.



Not too much Equipment

Often playgrounds are over-built with equipment so that children are playing in areas that can feel over-crowded. At the Center there is play equipment, but it is only part of the play environment. It is also abstract so that it can be whatever each child imagines it to be. There is an exception, however: a big artificial rock for climbing, that looks like a rock.

Most playground designers assume that bright colors and numerous simple shapes are all that children like. We believe that kind of environment diminishes the play and learning experience. This playground is designed to eliminate some of the chaos but to be more subtle and to include some complexity.



Prairie, Hills and a Stream

There will be a miniature prairie with a pathway among tall grasses. It beckons with child-like hide-outs in a safe and secure area. The pathway leads to a butterfly garden for observing the interdependence of plants and animals.

The grassy mounds located next to the prairie provide a different environment with their textures and elevation changes. In a child's mind they will climb these five foot high hills. Tunnels lead through the hills and a bridge connects the hilltops over a large sand area. A small artificial stream channel separates the hills from the prairie making water play possible.



Woods and Gardens

Numerous trees will eventually provide the shade so important to outdoor play in St. Louis summers. The simple act of planting numerous trees will in itself create a better environment than many playgrounds.



In the vegetable garden children tend plants and actualize the entire process. The garden provides opportunities for the children and teachers to plant, nurture, grow, harvest and even eat the vegetables grown there.



The Small Stuff

Our playground is divided into smaller areas so that small environments exist comfortably together. All the playground elements such as columns, walls, trees and mounds are the raw materials of the imaginary worlds that children create for themselves. Their lack of a specific identity is their strength, and they, along with the small bits and pieces of natural materials like sticks and rocks become the elements of play.



Organized or Assisted?

This playground is a carefully designed landscape that provides a stimulating, safe, and secure environment for our children. It enables children to play in a natural, well maintained landscape - the best play environment we could conceive of.

This kind of play requires teachers to promote and assist it – but not to organize and manage it. They provide help with storing, organizing and distributing the smaller elements of play, just as they do in the classrooms.



The playground walks a line between a world ordered by adults and chaos, between a typical playground and a vacant lot. We want the opportunities of the vacant lot but we've also created a secure place for children.

University City Children's Center's Playground...it's a special urban playground; an inventive, safe, and child-centered world!



Next Issue?

What play means and how we can make it the best experience for children.

