



Outdoor play is “under attack.” Or better said: play as it was once defined, self-generative games/stories/situations using the imagination and often with other children, conducted without adult involvement, is being replaced with other forms of entertainment. Instead of building a snow fort in the backyard, children build a house in Minecraft on their tablet. Instead of playing good guys/bad guys, tag, or capture the flag in the yard, they play shoot-'em-up games on X-box. Instead of chasing fireflies, they're flicking balls at Zubats in Pokemon Go.

# THE ENVIRONMENT OF PLAY

by Torie Ludwin





Ambulance Playground, Malawi, Africa (Super Local, 2015)

**With the extraordinary social, emotional and creative benefits of outdoor, imaginative play, how can we create compelling, public play spaces that encourage it?**

The decline of spontaneous outdoor play time has had deleterious effects on children, contributing indirectly to the rise in youth obesity, the loss of the pervasive benefits of imaginative play, and a lack of exposure to nature. In Minnesota, for example, 1 in 3 children are considered obese or overweight by the age of five. Overweight and obese children are likely to watch three or more hours of television than those children who are not. There has been widespread research on the positive cognitive and social effects for children of pretend play, including greater self-regulation, more complex language use, increased development of empathy and a propensity toward

creative thinking. And at Stanford, researchers have found quantifiable evidence that walking in nature as opposed to an urban environment could lead to a lower risk of depression and relieve anxiety.

With the extraordinary social, emotional and creative benefits of outdoor, imaginative play, how can we create compelling, public play spaces that encourage it?

Playground design has become quite high-tech—and safe—in the last few decades. Gone are the seesaws and carousels (danger!) as well as sandboxes (cats!) and dirt (germs!), to be replaced with bolted-in-place jungle gyms and rubberized flooring. It's rare to find a climbing tree (lawsuits!), bushes, a brook, a ditch, or wildlife on today's urban playgrounds. The elements of nature, and their potential risks, have been removed. The "well-behaved landscape," while satisfying to those who fear litigation, offers little by way of nature, spontaneity, or the outdoors.

But what if the play materials at a playground were mobile? What if, instead of being made of plastic, they came from nature? What if a playground allowed for improvisation, movement, and transformation? What would it be like to bring nature and play back together again?





Adventure Playground, Berkeley, California

The Land, an “adventure playground” in northern Wales and subject of a 2015 documentary of the same name, allows for all that plus even more. Lady Marjory Allen of Hurtwood, landscape architect and children’s advocate, became interested in children growing up in high-rises in England’s large cities after WWII, and wrote books on playgrounds and “adventure playgrounds” in particular, giving rise to their greater renown in England and Europe. Also called “junk playgrounds,” they are outdoor spaces staffed by a “playworker” where children are free to play and build with old tires, wood pallets, canvas, broken appliances, rocks, water, empty oil barrels, cardboard boxes, logs,

tubes, water, sticks, mud and yes, fire. Children are expected to take risks, negotiate for materials, work together and solve problems, all with essentially a junk heap and each other. The staff playworker is there to support play without disrupting it, and to intervene in case of real danger or violence; parents are not expected to stay. Improvisation is essential, as is a willingness to take small risks, for the children as well as, for some, the parents. There are about a thousand adventure playgrounds spread across England, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Japan. There are also a handful of them in the United States, including one right here in Houston.

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Playform 7

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The Parish School’s Adventure Playground champions child-directed play by providing the raw materials to build and explore, and then stepping back to let children do exactly that. Their playworkers are trained in recognizing and supporting approximately 16 different play types from rough-and-tumble play to mastery play to role play. With loose parts and playworker supervision, children are free to take pieces of “junk” that have little use on their own and bring them together to make something from them. It has been widely well-received.

The idea of moving toward “loose parts” playgrounds is gaining traction within architectural communities. This past summer, the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) held a series of panels in conjunction with its exhibition entitled, “Extraordinary Playscapes,” which examined the art, history and science of playground design. BSA also created “passports” to several playgrounds in the area including its own adventure playground in the exhibition, Imagination Playground (foam blocks and cylinders or chutes), to a set of Playcubes designed by architect/designer Richard Dattner, and to a Playform 7 sculpture.

While these aesthetically pleasing sculptural playthings do look like a lot of fun, another alternative is to bypass man-made materials and send children (with parents) into state and national forests and parks. Though it takes time, planning, and transportation, it can be a transformative experience to see a caterpillar

in its natural environment, hear birds calling to each other from the treetops, look over an expansive valley, or touch mossy stones in an icy-cold stream. The beach, more accessible in Houston than valleys, is its own adventure playground (and I do not mean The Pleasure Pier): highly mobile sand and water, ready to be combined in a variety of ways. It’s why children play there for hours on end, constantly stimulated, building, poking, digging, burying, sculpting, experimenting—technology-free.

As Houston builds out its bayous and expands parks into more neighborhoods, we should also think about creating spaces in those parks for the freedom of imaginations. 



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