

NEWS BRIEF



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CHILD'S PLAY A Study of Playgrounds

"Play is the child's work. The world is his laboratory and he is its scientist. Play is the research by which he explores himself and his relation to the world."¹

M. Paul Friedberg

Child's play is a serious business, and it is essential for the many adults whose decisions affect that play to be aware of its importance. It is the purpose of this News Brief to underline this fact and to highlight some issues concerning playground development which we feel deserve more widespread attention. We are limiting our discussion to playgrounds, not because we feel that they constitute the entire play environment (the whole world is the child's play environment), but because the public sector, through schools, housing projects, and public parks, can and does exert a great deal of influence on the quality of that environment.

Play activity should not be regarded as non-essential, left-over activity in left-over space. We must recognize play as activity that contributes to the intellectual, physical and emotional development--or stunting--of the child.

"Research shows clearly that the first four or five years of a child's life is the period of most rapid growth in physical and mental characteristics and of greatest susceptibility to environmental influence. Consequently, it is in the early years that deprivations are most disastrous in their effects."²

Since it is obvious that a child spends almost all his time during the pre-school years and much of his time during the pre-adult years at play, the quality of his play environment has a great effect on how he will develop. Our playgrounds are almost as important as our schools.

¹ M. Paul Friedberg, Play and Interplay. The Macmillan Company, Collier-Macmillan Limited, London, 1970, p. 35.

² National Education Association, Washington, 1966 in Planning for Play Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Thames and Hudson, London, 1968, p. 11.

Principles of Playground Planning

As Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a landscape architect world-renowned for her articulate and creative support of "adventure playgrounds", has succinctly stated, "The task is to create a sympathetic environment in which they (children) can flourish." How do we create such an environment? There is no definitive answer to this question at this still formative stage of the theory of playground planning. We can, however, present some principles which apply to playground planning and a number of methods of using these principles which have been tried, with success, in various parts of the world.

The first principle is that there must be participation in the creation and the use of the playground. The importance of participation has been demonstrated by the success of numerous playgrounds created by and constantly changed by children, with the aid of a sympathetic leader. (Lady Allen cites many such examples.) Such participation means that the child becomes more involved with, and more committed to, the end-product and also that the end-product is more suitable to his needs. Participation has, therefore, frequently led to more intensive use of the site, a higher quality of "play", and less vandalism. A good example of this is a playground in Boston which had been an under-used, highly vandalized asphalt-and-swing desert. It became a highly-used, well-maintained "adventure playground" when the local children of all ages were involved by a dedicated planner, Mayer Spivack, in its design, building and constant re-creation.⁴

Participation can be sparked by consulting the children on what to include in the playground. Thereafter it can be sustained by the provision of movable objects (blocks, building materials); malleable materials (sand, dirt, clay, water); social activities (games, joint building projects) and creative supervision or leadership.

The second principle is that there must be variety in the playground. By variety we mean not false novelty, but a real variety of sensory experiences (cool water, warm stone, rough bark), social contacts (with young people and old people) and play activities. Such variety is important for education.

"Experience indicates that exposure to a wide variety of activities and of social and mental interactions with children and adults greatly enhances a child's ability to learn."⁵

³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴ M. Spivack, "The Political Collapse of a Playground", Landscape Architect, July, 1969, pp. 288-291.

⁵ National Education Association, Washington, 1966.

And further, such variety is essential to his mental health.

"The individual...is strongly motivated to seek out stimulation of ideal complexity; when forced by circumstances to attend to stimuli that do not provide enough complexity, he becomes bored, restless, and miserable."⁶

Clearly, the dull, flat playgrounds that appear so often on urban landscapes can, at the very least, retard learning.

For Toronto as elsewhere, the following are some important ways of creating the necessary variety: providing moving equipment (swings, springboards) and static equipment (climbers, piles of logs and rocks); changes of level (artificial hills and sunken sandboxes or theatres); variety of colours (bright bars and natural stones); variety of textures (gritty stone, rough bark, smooth pebbles); man-made objects (tires, swings) and natural objects (logs, trees, flowers, rocks, bushes, grass); open areas and enclosed areas; active, social areas and contemplative, private areas; sunny areas and shady areas; dry areas (sand, dirt, concrete) and wet areas (pools, sprays); places for separate age groups and places for many age groups together.

The third principle is that there must be provision for physical comfort. The following are also important: water (wading pools and drinking fountains); shade; wind barriers; rain shelters; washrooms; sitting areas for adults, particularly mothers, as well as children; and easy access.

The fourth principle is that there must be provision for safety. The following are important for ensuring adequate safety: separating the play area from traffic; providing good initial design; good construction; good maintenance; good repair; and good supervision.

Obviously, physical comfort and safety can be accommodated within the context of variety and participation by careful design and supervision. Adventure playgrounds, for example, -- contrary to the initial fears of various officials -- have proved to be very safe while still providing ample opportunity for participation and the creation of exciting variety. The above principles are interrelated. For instance, the introduction of movable building blocks would create both variety (providing many possible activities) and participation (providing for manipulation by the children of elements of their environment). Provision of creative supervision would make participation possible (soliciting opinion; encouraging and directing, for example, a building project); encourage variety (directing many activities); and would help ensure safety (by discouraging unsafe activities and patching up any injuries which do occur).

In conclusion, it is obvious that careful, creative design and good supervision are the keys to creating a successful play environment that provides for participation by children and variety for them while accommodating their physical comfort and safety.

Playgrounds in Toronto

A group of eight year old girls play hide-and-seek in a parking lot adjacent to a large, flat, empty public-housing play area

A group of eight year old boys clamber over the porch of a boarded-up house across the street from a traditional asphalt school playground.

Another group of fourteen year old boys smash bottles against a paved school yard.

A little three year old girl falls four feet to the ground from a brightly-coloured, iron-bar "Parks Stage Coach".

These examples may seem extreme, but unfortunately they are not isolated occurrences. They illustrate: (1) that many traditional playgrounds do not provide the excitement and opportunities that other places, such as a car parking lot or a vacant house, do; (2) that a hostile or dull environment creates a hostile response, such as smashing bottles on the school pavement; and (3) that kids are "accident prone" and the traditional play areas are no safer than properly supervised and potentially far more exciting adventure playgrounds.

The sterile and hostile types of playgrounds that produced the behaviour described above were the result of many factors, including:

(1) Lack of creative design. Until recently, none of the relevant departments -- the Ontario Housing Corporation, the City Board of Education, or the City Recreation Division -- used trained landscape architects for playground design. Even now, the City Board of Education does not have a professionally-trained landscape architect on its staff and the City Parks and Recreation Department does not have a landscape architect in a position of authority in playground design.

(2) Lack of money. The Metropolitan Toronto Board of Education allocates a mere \$2.00 per pupil place to provide for "games facilities", while the City and Borough Boards of Education are responsible for financing maintenance. Since paving is easier to maintain than sod, hence cheaper, and since Metro does provide some funds for paving school grounds, paving is used.

Lack of the "right kind" of money is also a contributing factor. The Ontario Housing Corporation, for example, requires its developers to spend \$20.00 per family unit (or a minimum of \$1,500 per project) "for the provision of static playground equipment", but it has no money requirements at present for providing other types of equipment and has no "quality control" (such as plan review), over the expenditure of that money.

(3) Lack of adequate supervision. While there is excellent supervision by the City Parks and Recreation Department in many parks and school playgrounds during the summer, there is no outside supervision in many schools in non-school hours during the school year. There is no supervision at all at some OHC projects.

(4) Departmentalization of effort. The prevalence of asphalt, which in the heat of summer is a far from ideal play surface, has resulted from the attitude "We build playgrounds for children while they are in school and since it's wet during the winter, we have to pave the surface." By lack of co-operation with other agencies (such as the various Parks Departments) the Boards of Education have failed in many cases to provide play areas suitable for year-round use.

Fortunately, however, This situation seems to be changing -- witness the Regent Park recreation and landscaping plan and the Deer Park School playground project, two very exciting new efforts.

The Regent Park plan evolved out of a recognition by OHC, about a year ago, that the physical environment of Regent Park (the first public housing effort in Toronto) was totally inadequate and was in fact detrimental to the people living there. The new project was made financially possible when the Federal Government announced last spring that funds could be used for recreation purposes in public housing projects.

The Deer Park School project was stimulated by the acquisition of abutting ravine land by the school (as a result of a land-swap with a private developer) and by the fact that the school is about to start reconstruction to provide permanent facilities for those presently housed in temporary buildings.

Neither of these projects is completed at present, but both are particularly important in that they signal a new approach not only toward playground planning -- our primary concern here -- but also toward environmental planning in general. This new approach includes:

Citizen Participation

Both projects have placed a high priority on participation. At Regent Park several meetings have been held with tenants. These meetings are expected to continue as the plan evolves. At Deer Park School meetings have been held with parents, teachers and children. In addition, several special events have been held, such as a "Make the scene clean the ravine" day when over a hundred children and parents cleaned up ravine garbage, and a tree-planting day when 150 children spent the day planting trees donated by the Department of Lands and Forest. These meetings and events have been held to stimulate interest and to demonstrate previously untapped participation potential. The experience so far has shown that positive, enthusiastic participation is possible, if sought for, and that such participation can make valuable contributions to the design of an environment sympathetic to its users. The participation is expected to continue both in future consultation for design purposes and in the actual construction of the design.

Money

The Regent Park project has been made feasible because Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation is now able to provide funds for recreation and landscaping if they contribute to "community development". This marks a new approach. If, as expected, CMHC contributes 75%, OHC 17% and Metro 8%, the project can be implemented. The Deer Park project, approved in principle last April by the Shared-Use Joint Committee of the City Board of Education and the City Parks and Recreation Committee, expects to receive adequate funds. This, too, would indicate a new recognition by the Board of Education of the importance of the physical environment outside the school in the learning process. We hope that both projects will receive adequate funding.

Design

Dedicated and creative landscape architects have played a key role in the development of both plans. OHC hired a landscape architectural consultant to prepare the Regent Park plan, and landscape architects worked initially through local groups to develop the Deer Park School plan. The public sector has not often implemented the creative ideas of such landscape architects. We hope that this new emphasis on design will continue.

Inter-Departmental Co-operation

Both of these projects have shown that co-operation is possible and that co-operation makes hitherto impossible things possible. The OHC, CMHC, and City Parks and Recreation Department have all been involved in the Regent Park plan. Their continued co-operation is essential. The City Board of Education and the City Parks and Recreation Department (through the Shared-Use Joint Committee) and the Department of Lands and Forests have all been involved in the Deer Park Plan. It, too, will require their continued co-operation.

Exchange of Information

Much work remains to be done to ensure that good playgrounds are not the exception, but the rule. We suggest that one of the greatest needs now is discussion of the issues and exchange of information. Some of these issues that need discussion are:

(1) Participation: How can positive participation be integrated into the planning process? Clearly the first step is for housing, park and school officials to recognize that such participation is necessary. It seems clear also that the Boards of Education, the Parks Departments, OHC, etc., should not wait for such participation to appear spontaneously, but should seek it out. One possible way to do that is to hire designers dedicated to the principle of participation. Other methods could be discussed.

(2) Money: Who should provide what kind of funds? We pointed out some of the financial problems earlier. We would suggest that education officials at all levels recognize the educational value of playgrounds and provide funds accordingly. We should note that good playgrounds are not necessarily expensive. Relatively speaking, playgrounds do not require much money and the results of a small increase in funding could be

immense. OHC should investigate the possibility of requiring private developers to spend the playground money on non-static equipment as well as static and should be able to review the playground designs submitted.

(3) Inter-Departmental Co-operation: How can the various public and private bodies work together to promote better, more economical use of the financial, land, design and supervision resources available for new playgrounds? Progress is being made, but more co-operation is essential. One possibility might be for OHC to send representatives to the Shared-Use Joint Committee which presently includes representatives from the City Parks and Recreation Committee and the Toronto Board of Education.

(4) Design: What are the newest technical and research developments in playground planning and construction? How can better design be integrated into the planning process? One way is for all the relevant agencies to have professionally trained landscape architects (who, at present, seem to be the most up-to-date "play professionals") either on staff in a position of authority or hired as consultants on every project. A "shared-consultant" scheme might also be worked out by various departments.

(5) Supervision: How can better supervision be provided? Supervision is essential for creative and safe playgrounds. The summer Parks and Recreation Department supervision of parks and school playgrounds is excellent. But what can be done at other times of the year and in other locations? Teachers, older children, mothers, the elderly are all almost untapped supervision resources.

(6) Aesthetics: How can any conflicts between adult aesthetics and child needs be resolved? Adults generally like neat, clean areas with decorative equipment, while children generally love dirt and apparent chaos and enjoy working with "unaesthetic" materials, such as broken lumber. One possible solution would be to provide visual barriers of shrubs that would conceal the untidiness of the playground.

(7) Vandalism: What do various types of vandalism say about the environment and how can we deal with them? Vandalism is an expression of a lack and we must learn to diagnose and treat these lacks.

Play is important. It is at present not receiving enough attention and the attention it does receive is still generally by individuals working almost in isolation. It is therefore essential for all those presently, or potentially, involved in providing playgrounds to meet together to exchange information and work out new, more effective approaches.