

When Child's Play Is Too Simple; Experts Criticize Safety-Conscious Recreation as Boring

By JANNY SCOTT

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Just as a society's ideas about nature can be read in the character of its parks, and its beliefs about education are often written in the look of its schools, the attitudes of Americans toward children's play can be traced in the changing face of public playgrounds.

They were there in the jungle gyms and asphalt that once dominated playgrounds, and in the pyramids and mounds that revolutionized play areas in the 1960's. And they can be seen now in what some landscape architects and scholars of child development see as contemporary playgrounds' deadening sameness.

The style is ubiquitous: primary-colored, pipe-rail play units moored in a moat of rubber matting, the number of moving parts held to a minimum, sand and swings often banished, safety and low maintenance elevated to pre-eminent concerns.

Playgrounds are safer than ever, proponents say—a critical consideration when hundreds of thousands of children are reported injured on playgrounds each year. But detractors say many of the playgrounds are dumbed down, that the pursuit of safety and lawsuit-avoidance has eclipsed the goal of challenging play.

Many implicate what M. Paul Friedberg, a landscape architect and pioneering playground designer in the 1960's, calls "safety fundamentalism" and what others say is a tendency of affluent two-career parents to try to "childproof the world."

"The truth is there is something wrong about the way we value our children's development," said Roger Hart, the co-director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and a professor of environmental and developmental psychology. "We have a very narrow view of what children need. We don't understand that play is important enough to allow children to get dirty." Others, like Anthony Pellegrini, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Minnesota, make the case that American playgrounds are far better than they once were, even if they are not as interesting as they might be.

As Mr. Hart and others see it, play has many forms, all of them valuable for development in the first seven or eight years of life. In addition to physical activities like running, jumping, climbing and swinging, they include such things as fantasy play, social-dramatic play, sensory and exploratory play, and construction play, building with materials like sand, gravel, water and dirt.

Asked to describe a good playground, they describe something few Americans have probably encountered, a playground whose diversity supports a wide range of activities, with such things as holes to hide in, material and tools to build with, wagons for hauling, flowing water for damming, opportunities for gardening, a supervisor to consult for help.

They point to the adventure playgrounds that flourished in Scandinavia and Europe after World War II, in which children built play houses out of scrap materials, worked with tools and experimented with timber, earth, water, even fire under the supervision of an adult leader. “Better a broken bone than a broken spirit,” Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a leader of the movement in Britain, is often quoted as having said.

What children themselves prefer appears not to have been studied extensively. But Joe L. Frost, a professor of early childhood education at the University of Texas in Austin, says his research shows that children are engaged longer, suffer fewer injuries and have fewer behavior problems on playgrounds that are “broad, expansive and designed for all the developmental needs of kids.”

Toddlers gravitate naturally toward loose parts, stacking materials, tricycles, sand and water, Mr. Frost said. Preschool children need all that, along with apparatus to strengthen their motor development. They all need exposure to nature. “Children need playgrounds that help them develop a sense of beauty,” he said. “Some of them look like concentration camps.”

In the United States, public playgrounds emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, less out of an impulse to serve the developmental needs of small children than out of a desire to keep them off the streets and let them “blow off steam,” scholars say. In Manhattan, Central Park had no structured playgrounds until well into the 20th century. The first one, the Heckscher Playground, opened at the south end of the park in 1926. According to Michael O. Gotkin, a landscape architect in New York City who has written on the subject, playground building in Central Park took off in the mid-1930’s under the reform administration of the Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, amid rising public concern for indigent families.

By 1941, the Moses administration had built 20 fenced playgrounds on the margins of the park and several deeper inside, equipped with sandboxes, steel jungle gyms, swings, slides and seesaws. In an article titled “The Politics of Play,” Mr. Gotkin quotes Moses as having written that the playgrounds were “surfaced with a resilient asphalt preparation, which prevents digging and eliminates dust.” Moses also wrote, “Located near the major entrances, they intercept children on the way into the park and provide a place in which excess energy can be worked off without damage to the park surroundings.”

The Central Park playground designs remained barely changed well into the 1960’s, Mr. Gotkin notes. Then, in the late 1960’s, several architects and landscape architects, including Mr. Friedberg and Richard Dattner, applied the new ideas of child psychologists like Jean Piaget and Bruno Bettelheim to the reinvention of playgrounds in the United States. Working with materials like timber, concrete and granite, they created playgrounds out of sculptured land forms, linking them with such things as stepping columns and bridges, integrating the parts into a single system of continuous play.

The idea was to create equipment that could be used in many ways, and to encourage decision-making and group play. Mr. Dattner's Adventure Playground at West 67th Street in Central Park became "a must-see design for sociologists, educators, designers and parents," Mr. Gotkin writes. As the revolution spread, itinerant designers helped parents and children design their own playgrounds in communities across the country.

The revolution proved short-lived. Through emergency-room data, the newly formed Federal Consumer Product Safety Commission discovered during the 1970's that several hundred thousand young children a year were being injured at American playgrounds, many of them in falls onto surfaces like Moses's resilient asphalt preparation.

In 1981, the commission published its first set of playground-safety guidelines. Then, at the request of playground equipment manufacturers, the American Society for Testing and Materials drew up its own voluntary standard for public playground safety. Neither was mandatory, but they became the measure litigators used to judge a playground's safety in court.

Mr. Frost and many others are convinced that the number of lawsuits over playground safety has sharply increased, though no statistics seem to exist. Mr. Frost said he had worked with more than 100 law firms since the mid-1980's. Courts have awarded judgments of as high as \$11 million in recent playground-injury cases. He and others contend that the fear of litigation has made municipalities, manufacturers and some designers more cautious.

"Manufacturers now work hard to comply with standards and guidelines," Mr. Frost said. "And in doing so, they have to some degree dumbed down their playground equipment." Many manufacturers, he added, now avoid making certain types of apparatus, like overhead ladders for swinging and fire poles for sliding.

Custom-designed playgrounds have dwindled in favor of playgrounds with equipment selected from catalogs, designers say. Municipalities with limited maintenance budgets have cut back on sand and moving parts, which present a safety risk if not kept up. Amid growing public fears about kidnapping during the 1980's, parents began to prefer playgrounds with unobstructed views. Tunnels were closed off.

But while it may be difficult these days to build a challenging playground that meets the safety guidelines, it is not impossible. Take the eight-year-old playground at Nelson A. Rockefeller Park at Battery Park City, known for its meandering wooden structures, hiding spaces, child-powered merry-go-round, landscaped surroundings, expanses of sand and a giant net suspended high above the ground.

"We sweated blood on the whole job," said Donna Walcavage, whose Brooklyn firm designed the playground. The Consumer Product Safety Commission updated its guidelines after the working drawings were complete, necessitating changes; few play-equipment companies were willing to build the playground.

But in the end, she said, she was able to use sand, wood and movable parts because Battery Park City had the desire to create something extraordinary and the budget to maintain it.