Children’s power over play:
A cultural geography of playspaces in America

A thesis submitted to the
Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in the School of Architecture
of the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning
by

Eleanor Luken

B.A. University of Louisville
June 2007

Committee Chair: David Saile
Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to research the material culture of children’s play spaces in America and connect this architecture to society’s conceptions of children, childhood, and play. The chapter “The Study of Play” describes how parents and educators have changed in the way they value play. This chapter describes some of the tensions that exist between how children play and how adults think they ought to play. It discusses the dialectic relationship created as culture determines the form of play spaces and consequently as playspaces influence how children play, learn, and grow.

The chapter “Lessons from History” describes the shape of playgrounds throughout recent American history. It begins with the reforms parks created by social reformers to socialize immigrant and poor children. It concludes that playgrounds today are part of the “recreation movement” in which playgrounds are the jurisdiction of parks departments and are largely determined by economic factors. The chapter describes two alternative movements, play sculpture and adventure playgrounds, that have left their mark on the form of playgrounds today.

The chapter “Dens” suggests that playgrounds do not have to be designed by adults. It describes how social geographers research the “vernacular architecture” that children build for themselves in the form of “dens” (secret places). Children should have access to spaces so they can gain the many benefits from building their own playspaces. The chapter “Alternative Playground Model: Playscapes” describes an upcoming trend that combines the social mission of reform parks with the space and freedom for children to do their own building.

In conclusion, playground design innovation should not be thought of as equipment design existing within the status quo system of park planning today. Instead, child and play advocates should continue research about the relationships between children and the spaces they inhabit. Researchers and planners should continue to explore ways that populations with differing interests, in this case adults and children, can share the city and hopefully mutually benefit.
# Table of Contents

I. **INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................. 6

II. **THE STUDY OF PLAY** ........................................................................................................ 9
    Attitudes about Childhood ........................................................................................................ 10
    Playing in the Everyday Environment ....................................................................................... 16

III. **LESSONS FROM HISTORY** .......................................................................................... 22
    The Dominant Trend ................................................................................................................ 25
    Reform Movement .................................................................................................................... 25
    Recreation movement .............................................................................................................. 34
    Today: Safety-conscious commercial play .............................................................................. 38
    Alternative Playground Movements ......................................................................................... 42
    Play Sculpture .......................................................................................................................... 43
    Adventure Playgrounds .......................................................................................................... 50

IV. **DENS** ............................................................................................................................. 54
    Studying Dens .......................................................................................................................... 54
    Review of Studies .................................................................................................................... 57
    Summary .................................................................................................................................. 58
    Consequences of Building Play .............................................................................................. 60
    Social ....................................................................................................................................... 60
    Spatial Awareness ................................................................................................................... 62
    Identity ..................................................................................................................................... 63
    Mental Health .......................................................................................................................... 64
    Work Ethic ............................................................................................................................... 65
    Conditions and Barriers .......................................................................................................... 67
    Spatial Autonomy .................................................................................................................... 67
    Low Adult Intervention ............................................................................................................ 69
    Time for Free Play ................................................................................................................... 71
    Loose Parts ............................................................................................................................... 72
    Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 74

V. **ALTERNATIVE PLAYGROUND MODEL: PLAYSCAPES** .................................................. 76
    Public Health Benefits ............................................................................................................ 78
    Romanticism ............................................................................................................................. 80
    Discussion ................................................................................................................................. 83

VI. **CONCLUSION** ................................................................................................................... 87

VII. **REFERENCES** .................................................................................................................... 90
I. INTRODUCTION

This research began with the goal of creating design guidelines for developmentally appropriate playground design. This evolved out of two related fields of study. I expanded upon an interest from my undergraduate studies in art history about the potential for ludic behavior—playful, whimsical, irrationality—to counteract the hyper-rationality of late capitalism. The Situationists were my primary source for both artistic and political inspiration. Their activities, such as derives, and the writings of Guy Debord attempt to subvert the dominant mode of production and consumption. Derives challenge the way city dwellers conceptualize their cities. Situationists might use a map of London to navigate Paris, making decisions about where to walk and when based not on the errands they need to accomplish that day but upon the transcendental experience of traversing the city. This *psychogeography* is an alternative way to view the niches and nodes of space and reject parceling and property values as the current logic of city space. Constant, a Dutch artist inspired by the Situationists (and a friend of the great playground designer Aldo van Eyck), designed a utopian masterplan of New Babylon, a home to urban nomads. Here inhabitants could change the environs based on mood and adapt the space for any given program. To the New Babylonians inhabiting space is an artistic act, one that is rooted in playful experimentation.

At the same time I was interested in adults’ ability to play in the city I was also intrigued by the possibility that children hold for the future. I was not so different than the “child savers” of the early twentieth century reform era who sought to mold children into better adults than their parents, thus eradicating the social ills that so troubled the
reformers. I became convinced of the potential space has as a third educator (after the learner and the teacher) particularly after I took a course in constructivist education theory. In practice, constructivist and Reggio Emilia (an education tradition from a city in Italy of the same name) classrooms would be environments ripe for exploration. A designer would first free the space from traditional restrictions, such as gridded lines of desks and a focus on the front chalkboard, and then fill the space with affordance-rich, or highly interactive, objects and areas such as activity settings and tools for science experiments and construction projects close at hand. In this classroom, children ask questions of, and tinker with, their surroundings. The teacher is available not to lecture but to question the child’s ideas, asking them to stretch their creative minds and discover alternate solutions and explanations for the mysteries the children find. During my research, I came to believe that the classroom, the home, the neighborhood, and the city should all be sites for such exploratory, creative play/learning. The playground is one of the only spaces that is truly for children in the city. Not a place where they must follow adults rules of space, follow an adult schedule, or require adult money, but a place where children can do what they have been doing since the first animal or human child was born: discover the world by playing with it.

This thesis begins with a discussion of the theory behind providing children with places to play. This includes the struggle between children and adults as children assert their autonomy and claim spaces within the home and the city for play. This thesis explains how playgrounds were introduced to America as part of the larger social reform movement following the Industrial Revolution. The history of playgrounds in America reveals that today’s playgrounds are a continuation of the recreation movement that began post-WWII.
Chapter 3 of this thesis presents a completely distinct way of regarding playspaces for children. It does not regard playgrounds as solely the purview of municipal parks departments or as a mere commodity demanded by citizens. Emerging from the field of social geography, the chapter on dens studies play spaces as children’s territory within the city and the power struggles that occur when outsiders claim space for their own use. Studying dens means observing the vernacular architecture or childhood. It is akin to the way anthropologists study the material culture of past societies. Researchers seek to uncover children’s building strategies and, most importantly, the cultural and person meaning that children ascribe to their dens.

Chapter 4 presents playscapes as an emerging model of playspace design. It was inspired by much of the research conducted on children’s dens, which found that nature is a key setting for dens. Playscape largely deviate from the recreation movement of park production. At this time they are mostly built by private non-profits with a mission of preserving nature. Because of their strong social mission, playscapes bear more resemblance to the reform parks of the early twentieth century that today’s typical playgrounds.

In conclusion, this thesis found that allowing children to have a space in the city involves more than setting up modular equipment. Child advocates should continue research on the way children negotiate space and connect with their special places. When it comes time to make urban planning decisions with children in mind, the empirical research should be used to determine what conditions are necessary for children to be able to interact meaningfully with the environment and what barriers stand in the way of their participation.
II. THE STUDY OF PLAY

“Man is never so serious as when he plays”
Play is a way to “tame the savageness of life.”
(Friedrich Schiller Aesthetic Letters in Lefaiivre 2007, 40)
Frederich Schiller was one of the first Western writers to acknowledge play as an essential human characteristic that ought to be cherished rather than suppressed. This opposes the Kantian “cult of reason” (from Critique of Judgment) that was the dominant logic of eighteenth century culture. Later writers expanded on these ideas to revolutionize the study of play, including Rousseau, Karl Groos in The Play of Animals (1896), Sigmund Freud in several works, Jean Piaget in Play, Dreams, and Imitations in Childhood (1936), John Huizinga in Homo Ludens (1938) and Erik Erikson's Childhood and Society 1950. But before these influential writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, childhood was not necessarily given the privileged status it is today. In fact, different cultures at different times viewed children as anything between precious beings and mere small adults.

This chapter surveys the attitudes with which adults regard children’s play. First it discusses the evolution of childhood as a social, rather than biological demarcation. Then it describes how built spaces respond to society’s conceptions of children and contribute to the way that childhood is defined. This section shows how adults’ attitudes towards children reflect play provisions in the city and the home. More specific examples are described in Chapter 3 on playground architecture throughout history. The second section describes how children negotiate an adults’ world as they attempt to find places for play. These themes are referenced in Chapter 4, which explores how children claim spaces for play and their own “vernacular” architecture.
ATTITUDES ABOUT CHILDHOOD

Play as physical exercise has been valued since antiquity in the form of games and sport. At some point scholars become interested in the human value of frivolous play or play that is unique to the child’s world? Some experts studying the social geography of children believe that “childhood” as more than a biological stage was not an important concept until the Enlightenment, specifically Rousseau’s writings (Holloway 2000, 3). Philippe Aries (1962) writes in *Centuries of Childhood* (one of the most comprehensive descriptions of children’s conditions throughout history) that in the Middle Ages young people were thought of as small adults who were unskilled and badly behaved. This is what Carl Jencks refers to as the Dionysian conception of children as little devils (Jencks 1996 cited in Holloway 2000). This is apparent from paintings at the time in which children were portrayed as proportionally the same as adults without the larger head, eyes, and body fat that are physical markers of a child.

The experience of growing up, of which play is an influential part, is one of enculturation. Social geographers believe that it is dangerous to rely on an essentialist definition of childhood, the idea that categories of human are determined by “essential” or intrinsic characteristics. To do so normalizes the experience of one class of children, placing all others on the margin. Holloway even describes this as ethnocentric (2000, 18) because traditionally claims of what it means to be human or civil are based on characteristics of humans in the dominant ethnicity and cast other ways of life as deviating from a self-proclaimed norm. In parts of the majority world, children as young as three or four may be expected to contribute to the household by doing chores or caring for others. Such a lifestyle disrupts the common ideas in America of what a young child is, what they
are capable of and how we should treat them. We are more likely to view childhood as something that must be protected, as a special yet vulnerable time in a person’s life.

Foucault’s complex understanding of power relations put forth in part 4, chapter 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, affirms the need to allow for multiple definitions of children. Childhood, like sexuality, is not a “thing” that can be repressed or discovered in full truthfulness. It is a concept that adults and children (the often forgotten authors) are continuously rewriting.

The notion of education is based on assumptions that scientifically (and thus virtually without criticism) explain the child’s normal behavior. The scientific notion continues to dominate the field as educators study children and curricula to determine the most beneficial program. Gaile Cannella cites this reliance on scientific method as producing experts in the field who make prescriptions with unquestioned assumptions (Cannella 1999, 39). Cannella interprets disciplinary technologies, curriculum development and teaching methods in terms of Foucault’s discussion of power, to which I would add the practice of sanctifying certain play activities and modifying behavior on the playground (Cannella 1999, 41). Of the experts’ unquestioned assumptions is the idea of a universal childhood, which is needed to scientifically observe causal relationships. The major critique of the body of knowledge surrounding the playground movement is that power was (is) uni-directional. Experts, affirmed by those who took their advice, believed that it is possible to know what children need as a universal concept apart from specific cultural and individual contexts.

In Rousseau’s mind, and others’, there is something uniquely special about childhood that is overlooked when they are not differentiated from adults. However, this
sets up a paradox: Differentiation plays a role in the societal notion of children as “other.” As Holloway points out, it is an other that we have all experienced being (unlike, for some, the “second sex”, a minority ethnicity, etc.) and so is generally not vilified (2000, 3). This positioned children as a deviation from the norm and in academics and policy they were treated as a fringe group and not given due scholarly attention. This is not so true anymore as one can find a plethora of literature and journals in most disciplines devoted specifically to children as well as the agendas of national organizations such as Head Start (advocating early childhood education) and Kaboom (advocating neighborhood playgrounds).

The conception of children as distinctly different from adults is not ubiquitous; it was created when educators began to adopt the scientific method as an epistemology. This parallels the way Foucault describes power and knowledge relating to sexuality: child behavior became an object of medical and psychological knowledge and reformers felt the need to suppress potentially dangerous behavior through the education system and pedagogical playgrounds. The growing field of child psychology allowed educators, reformers, pediatricians and a host of other experts to make statements about what children “need” (Cannella 1999, 48). Behind even simple statements (children need a place to run around) is an unstated assumption (because play is a consequence of excess energy or because physical fitness is desirable). This reliance on our ability to know what is good for another influences playground design through to the 21st century, evidenced by the plethora of parenting advice, toys marketed for self-improvement, and the robust fields of pediatric medicine and psychology.

An example from early America’s puritan ethics contended that children need to be taught the moral arts (Chudacoff 2007, 41). Missing from this statement is the implied
why, which is likely so that they will be welcomed into heaven. Most statements that express some sort of need for children, even in today's literature, rarely name, let alone justify, the implied end goal. Rather, this is an assumed idea of what is good and right between the author and reader (or child psychologist and parent, pedagogical expert and teacher, etc.). Woodhead (1990) categorizes need statements and analyzes the source of power in each. Some needs are within a child's nature, within human's nature in fact, and include the need for sustenance evidenced by an infant's search for her mother's milk or her hunger cry. The desired outcome in this case is "to live"; thus this categorization is usually the most universally agreed upon and least problematic. Psychological needs are more complex; for example children need a continuous warm relation with a mother figure (Woodhead 1990, 68). Often these statements are based on empirical studies over time, which attempt to isolate direct causes of some early childhood experiences. Such research presumes definitions of mental health, which are not always stated in conclusions. Good examples are studies of the effect of divorce on young children. Results in a 1946 study gave a bleak outlook for children from divorced families. Today's studies, due changing societal factors and differing ideas of what psychological adjustment looks like, show that divorce does not lead to children's corruption. These examples are only to illustrate that empirical research and expert opinion are not the full extent of universally valid prescriptions for child rearing. Further complications include cultural attitudes (for example the differences between Western and Asian thinking on independence and obedience) and individual ideas of the value of childhood. The conclusion Woodhead draws from her analysis is not to refute statements about children's needs but to put them in
context and recognize the “plurality of pathways to maturity within that perspective” (Woodhead 1990, 73).

A society’s conception of childhood has implications for the design of public and private spaces as well as evaluating the experience of children interacting with the built environment. Our thinking of children usually regards them as “little angels” who must be protected and nurtured, or “little devils”, whose behavior interrupts adult life,

In many regions of the majority world children as young as three or four have important roles in the household’s productivity. They may be assigned chores or act as caregivers, all roles that would engage an adult if the child were not there. Children are seen as having responsibilities and capable of an array of activities. In other societies, children are protected and nurtured; they are given learning opportunities rather than responsibilities. In the latter example, a space for children might be a developmentally appropriate playground or playroom. In the former example children inhabit the fields, the town, and the home alongside adults. These spaces must accommodate the behaviors of both children and adults thus children’s play occurs in everyday, rather than dedicated, environments. As geographers and anthropologists have noted (see Holloway 2000) this play often occurs freely, without any interventions from adults or specially designed environments. Design interventions in countries where children have an important role in household production could acknowledge that playgrounds are not an appropriate solution, as children do not have time to devote to themselves and their play. Along these lines the “play pump” was built throughout Africa by the non-profit Play Pump International. They redesigned the water pump to provide an opportunity for interesting movements and social cooperation for the children responsible for collecting water.
A second example illustrates emerging architectural typologies due to changing attitudes towards children. As Holloway and Valentine (2000) describe, in traditional British culture the proper place for pre-school age children was the home. This is where children are nurtured and cared for and the house is arranged to meet the needs of its young inhabitants. Thus working parents seek out in-home nannies, if possible, or place their children in home care environments. However, in recent decades emerging research in the popularized field of child psychology suggests that young children need practice in social situations if they are to be properly socialized. Furthermore, a more formal and directed childcare setting provides a plethora of educational toys and activities to prepare them for kindergarten. Thus the educational preschool emerged as a specialization of school architecture. Various issues are now considered such as the architecture to which young children may respond best (many still say home-like and non-institutional), to the logistics of pint-sized toilets, to the development of programming directed at preschool fieldtrips to various cultural attractions (zoos, museums, nature centers, theatre, etc.). The Head Start organizations, aimed at the formal care of pre-school children, is one of the largest funding sources in education policy, with special grants for play yard and classroom design innovation. In fact, my involvement in the Cincinnati Playscape Project, described in depth in later chapters, is a direct result of a preschool care center and research lab at the University of Cincinnati that commissioned a natural playground designed for the sole use of 3-5 year olds. Such a concept may have baffled designers in previous decades and even today’s childcare providers in different societies.
PLAYING IN THE EVERDAY ENVIRONMENT

“To a young child the idea of a playground is ridiculous in the first place. The whole idea of being taken to a place to play is almost an oxymoron. Children want to play everywhere.”
-Roger Hart (2007)

The previous section discussed adults’ conceptions of childhood and how that affects play provisions for children. As the quote from Roger Hart, above, suggests, dedicated spaces for play may be superfluous. After all, children have always played even before there were formal playgrounds. The following chapter, which describes how playgrounds developed over the last century in America, illustrates that the presence of playgrounds in the city at times had more to do with adults’ needs than with children’s play.

This study of children’s places for play in the everyday environment follows a thread of social science known as children’s geography, namely their access to, use of, and attachment to space (Holloway 2000, 11). This field had a strong beginning in the 1970s with much of today’s scholarly activity occurring in Europe and Scandinavia. Some scholars focus on qualitative research with children, paying attention to their ability to participate and the ethics of researching with children. Others use empirical research to study the psychology of space, how children perceive, organize, and interpret the world around them (for example Lynch’s (1970) studies of children’s cognitive mapping). Still others take a theoretical approach, for example challenging the essentialist conceptions of childhood (that childhood is universal and not dependant on time and location).

A common research theme is studying the mechanisms of power between children and adults. This theme is referred to throughout the preceding description of the history of
playgrounds. By observing children in different settings (from a home care setting in Britain, to a family farm in Bolivia, to a McDonald’s play place in America) researchers raise questions about the nature of children’s autonomy, the fine line between education and control, and the difficulty of making prescriptive statements about what is best for children. Because children do not behave according to societal norms they are treated as “other.” This affects the spaces children inhabit, whether built specifically for them or not.

Although adults themselves have to be constrained into social order, much as Durkheim argued, children offer living exemplars of the very margins of that order, its potential disruption and, in fact, its fragility. Children, on a momentary basis, exercise anarchistic tendencies. ... They are dedicatedly unstable, systematically subversive and uncontained and all of these manifestations re managed, barely, under the rubric of creativity, self-expression, primitiveness, simplicity or even ignorance. (I. Frones cited in Jones 2000, 30).

The constrained social order that Frones and Durkheim refer to means that “space is ordered materially and symbolically on adults terms and scale” (Jones 2000, 31). The layers of imaginary geographies such as public/private and property ownership constitute a striated “social order” that most adults adhere to. But like Frones's quote describes, children do not abide by the cues that adults have been socialized to conform to. Robin Moore (1986) suggests that children exist in their own smooth space, moving through space governed by environmental affordances rather than cultural demarcations. Jones refers to Delueze and Guattari (1988) to explain that the definition of a space changes over time according to different users—it is a constant ebb and flow. Thus children create a differently striated space, perhaps based on interesting or boring atmospheres, maximum freedom or adult surveillance, scary places and sensory rich places, etc. (Jones 2000, 37).
In the everyday environment children and adults are constantly interacting with and rewriting the meaning of space. How does the child as other, and behaving according to their own patterns of movement, fit within the adult world? They are either little angels who are vulnerable to the violence and depravity of the (particularly urban) world or little devils who disrupt business and social processes with noise, erratic movements, and nonsense (Jencks 1996). Jones (2000) draws attention to the “monomorphic,” single use, spaces that characterize most of the city including busy streets, offices, tended gardens, most businesses, etc. In contrast, “polymorphic” spaces can house children’s activities without compromising the primary, adult intended use (Jones 2000, 38). For example, barns or garages and edge landscaping intended to be a visual barrier could accommodate children’s games without disrupting their primary function. These spaces do not segregate children (like the kid-zone drop-off at a mall). Rather, adult and child activities integrate harmoniously. Smaller, residential or city side streets can serve as polymorphic spaces. Matthews, Limb, and Taylor (2000) write about how older children in the UK use streets as a thirddspace (see Soja 1996). Because they are not under the watchful eye of adults, they have the freedom to develop their own culture, which often runs parallel to but goes unnoticed by adults. Young people rely on social groups to develop personal identity and evoke a feeling of belonging, which can be difficult for some, in their status as “other,” to do in the adult world. (Matthew, Limb, and Taylor 2000, 68-76).

Jones writes that children form their own geography materially and conceptually “in the warp and weft of the striations of adult space” (2000, 43). Children are both members of this broader society and agents of change in the world they can contribute to, constituting a lived geography (see James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). Very often this
geography is suppressed to the detriment of children (because they lose a chance to practice autonomy and shape their world, the environmental competence that Roger Hart cited as so important). Adults as well miss the opportunity to see how creative, energetic, mobile, and unbiased people move through our own space, a phenomenon that has inspired many artists (COBRA for example) but few urban planners. Jones suggests that we fashion the shared environment with permeable boundaries (increasing children’s territorial range), to be heterogeneous (add variability both in the built environment and program), and tolerate the behavior of children, which does not often conform to adult social rules (2000, 43-33)

More often than not, although children are confined both spatially and temporally (the mechanisms varying by culture), they find ways to assert their autonomy. Adults can attribute this universal phenomenon as their insatiable creativity and ability to experience the world through play, or they can refer to it as dangerous idleness, as was the response in America during the Protestant Reformation and is still common today in households that require children to work in order to survive. The sources in this thesis suggest that it is less useful to study children’s strategies of asserting autonomy as prescriptive, suggesting how the built environment could accommodate these activities. As Foucault informs us, power is not about the colonizer and the oppressed, but is a dynamic relationship that evolves and is always at tension. Thus, there will always be constraints on children as they continue to be brought up in an adult dominated world; and despite extreme circumstances, in both rich and depleted environments they will find ways to exercise their creativity. Punch (2000) describes the strategies of children in Bolivia. It is important to
study these as phenomenon that inform a broader study social geography, power, and territory.

While a common concern of children in America is their restricted territorial range, many children, particularly in the majority world, are temporally confined with household chores and school. Living primarily in rural areas, these children are asked to, in addition to attending school, complete domestic chores, care for livestock, and do agricultural work. This leaves little time for oneself, to create a space of play or a social world. Punch (2000) studied rural children in Bolivia. She found that they used their large spatial freedom to slip away from responsibilities to find time to play. Children and parents or teachers were constantly negotiating this; many children are punished for this behavior but continue anyway. For example, they may meet up with friends before or after school and start a game or conversation that makes them late for school or chores.

Chudacoff (2007) writes about the school as an important setting for American children’s play in the early 1800s. Their lifestyle may be similar to children in the contemporary majority world whose time is restricted and are isolated from others their own age. The school building and school day are important meeting points for children and exceptions from their day of work. Some children may take the opportunity to play while they are minding livestock. Others would use an errand to the center of town as an opportunity to visit friends, elongating the errand as long as possible. Punch makes the point that play in the everyday environment, for most children of the world, has less to do with how spaces are made to accommodate them and more to do with the children’s strategies of combining work and play in meaningful ways.
Home, school, and the nearby neighborhood acts as “nodal points of a contiguous expanse of space within which children play” (McKendrick, Bradford, and Fielder 2000, 100). One of the greatest innovations by the famed playground designer Aldo van Eyck was the idea of placing small play spaces in the leftover spaces of the city within close proximity to each other. This forms what Lefaivre (2007) calls a “polycentric net.” These safe spaces within the city connect children with each other and points of interest, and allowing them to considerably extend their territorial range.

The preceding discussion aimed to highlight the importance of the everyday environment for children’s play. Children are certainly capable of playing just about anywhere so the questions becomes not one of designing a perfect play space for them but negotiating relationships in the places children already play (and perhaps augmenting the environment in some way). This study adds to the struggle between adults and children as they continue to define spaces for children to play. The triumphs of children in claiming play spaces is described in Chapter 4, which uncovers the fascinating phenomenon of children building their own, “spontaneous architectures” away from the playground and without adults.
III. Lessons from History

Until the latter part of this century, leisure, including children’s play, was categorized by function such as self-improvement, socialization, identification with a social group, or catharsis. Each generation has held that certain functions are superior to others. Many parents today would much rather see their child playing with a toy piano than rough-housing with their sister or watching television. It wasn’t until recently that play theorists began to acknowledge that leisure could be purposeless. A seminal proponent of this idea was anthropologist John Huizinga in his landmark work *Homo Ludens* where he championed play as an irrational activity, one that cannot be studied objectively but serves only it’s own ends (Huizinga 1960, 4). This description of play baffles social scientific thinking, it treats play as a hazy, unknowable entity. Conversely, the way most people think of play, today and in the past, is recreation, or rationalized leisure. Goodale and Godbey observe: “rationalized leisure is functional. It fulfills purposes defined in advance. It has been brought under control and made more predictable” (Goodale and Godbey 1988, 239). To think of play as anything else sends one down a rabbit hole of questioning “purpose” itself.

To explicate these questions I discovered a range of response through American history. The texts I relied upon use what Foucault describes as a genealogy. This is a method a historical philosopher uses to analyze a phenomenon and provide critique. It is useless to search for the “origin” of the playground, no such thing exists. Foucault cites Nietzsche when he claims “The lofty origin is no more than a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that tings are most precious and essential at the moment of birth”
Cultural geographers use a method that Foucault describes as: “To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion...it is to identify...the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value to us” (Foucault 1977b, 146).

The history of playgrounds in America is a story of relationships of power between educator and student, parent and child, designer and user, government and citizen. Even the most progressive, sensitive, and participatory designs incorporate power and struggle. Foucault acknowledges in The History of Sexuality, that power and struggle are inherent in all relationships. This is especially clear as geographers compile more research about children establishing space for themselves in the adult world, as explained in Chapter 4.

This introduction to playground design history is unfortunately, but necessarily brief, as it is only one chapter in a more broad study of children’s playspaces. Most of the information is drawn from three books: The politics of park design (Cranz 1982), which establishes the categories of park “movements” used here (reform, recreation, etc.); The evolution of leisure (Goodale and Godbey 1988), which offered fascinating insights on America’s disposition towards children and play in recent centuries; and Centuries of Childhood (Aries1962), perhaps the most complete discussion of the material and social culture of children over many time periods and locales.

The first section introduces the advent of playgrounds in America in the late nineteenth century by philanthropists interested in children’s well-being. This development was closely linked to the Industrial Revolution and the social reform movement in America. As the popularity of playgrounds grew citizens began to demand
parks and playgrounds from their government as part of basic, municipal services. Thus, nearly every city has since developed a parks department responsible for building and maintaining playground facilities for the city’s inhabitants. A key feature of this era, which continues today, is the need to economize; in order to provide park services to everyone the quality of each park decreased. Parks in America today are the purview of parks and recreation departments. A main difference since the beginning of this era in the 1940s is the accumulation of standards and qualifications that dictate playground form. Mostly due to safety concerns, the shape of play equipment is now rigidly monitored. In mid-century parks were experimenting with repeated designs in order to maximize efficiency; today a unique playground design is very uncommon.

The final two sections describe two concurrent splinters from the dominant landscape of playground production in the twentieth century. The first is the idea that playgrounds can be sculptural works of art. Artists and architects began to explore the possibilities for enhancing children’s creative play. Many of these ideas were incorporated into commercial playthings and equipment in mid-century America. The second deviation from traditional playgrounds, the adventure playground, came from the U.K. and the Netherlands and had little representation in the United States. However, these alternative play spaces were available to American designers, educators, and writers, many of whom were greatly inspired by the adventure movement in Europe (including Jane Jacobs and Christopher Alexander who discussed the placement and nature of playgrounds as part of healthy neighborhoods). Though adventure playgrounds were organized by philanthropists with a reform mission aimed at children from war-torn cities, what
developed has inspired, or added credence to, anti-playgrounds sentiments, such as those expressed in the chapter on children’s vernacular architecture, Chapter 4.

**THE DOMINANT TREND**

The dominant trend in playground design begins with philanthropists who built and supervised reform parks in order to ensure that the city’s children has access to a proper upbringing (and thus would not be future deviants). After playgrounds gained immense popularity, municipal governments took over park planning as one of the basic services the city provides. This is still the logic of playground design and implementation today. In the last several decades increasingly fearful parents have demanded safety standards for playgrounds. That trend has had a large impact on the form of the playground equipment cities built. Also in response to parents’ fear, commercial, “pay-for-play” centers now sponsor many of the cities playspaces, though these are private and often linked with commercial interests.

*Reform Movement*

This history begins with the Industrial Revolution because that single period worked to urbanize rural America, a change that greatly affected the character of children’s play. Professions of the past were often tied to land, but factory work required a mass of bodies to tend to assembly lines. Parents and children went to work in unhealthy conditions for long hours. Industrial zones dominated nature. The park movement in America developed from a desire to reconnect with the outdoors and have alternatives to the filth surrounding factory life. Unstructured outdoor activities provided respite from long hours of tedious work under artificial light and poor air quality (Cranz 1982, 7-8). Due
to lack of child labor laws this need applied to children as well and many parks offered
stations with fresh milk and clean water. The editor of *Garden and Forest* describes the
transcendental aims of the eighteenth century park: “No mere playground can serve the
purpose of recreation in this true, broader sense—the purpose of refreshment, of renewal
of life and strength for body and soul alike” (Cranz 1982, 15).

Central Park epitomized the practice of simulating nature within the city. Olmstead
tamed nature to yield the most pleasant experience for the user. This style interprets
English formal gardens and Beaux-Arts plazas into the “picturesque” American “pleasure
ground.” The Ramble is a patch of wilderness, organized with paths, benches, and orienting
markers. Native plants were arranged at first in informal designs, but to justify large park
budgets designers resorted to a more structured layout. They commonly included mown
grass meadows and artificial lakes.

Only specified leisure activities were permitted on the grounds. Popular
entertainment such as gambling, vaudeville, and horseshoes were banned in favor of lawn
tennis and horseback riding (creating an unintended class bias). Bans on spitting,
swearing, drinking, and fighting enforced civic order. Pleasure grounds were intended to
inspire idyllic experiences with nature, to enlighten the masses. The reform agenda sought
to transform the unruly lower classes, many immigrants, into a civil society (Gagen 2000,
216-17). Ideally public parks would cut all ties with banal urban life; parks departments
had to be convinced to include restrooms and food facilities which they believed would
disrupt the pristine grounds.

As Aries (1962) describes in *Centuries of Childhood* children’s play was not on the
whole seen as a separate class of leisure. Before the Industrial Revolution children were
able to find recreational opportunities in the rural outdoors. But city children did not have a true space for play until social reformers advocated on their behalf (Aries 1962, 210).

Playgrounds first became a concept in American open space planning during the Industrial Revolution and subsequent reform movement, thus termed “reform playgrounds.” The population of the reform movement in America was diverse, ranging from early feminists to Puritans warning against idleness. The movement was incited by changing American values and lifestyle after the Industrial Revolution, which was characteristically more urban and mechanized than ever before. Play took on a very different form than the previous generation’s memories of pastoral childhood.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries children had less adult supervision than ever before and more access to other children and activities. Reformers were appalled at how adults spent their time (in saloons, drinking, and other boorish, illicit activities) and felt the need to begin child-saving efforts to prevent corruption of youth (Gagen 2000, 216; Chudacoff 2007, 105). A census of children’s behavior from Cleveland streets on a summer day in 1913 reported that 5,961 young people were observed “doing nothing” and of the 7,358 kids “playing,” 3,171 were “fooling around” (activities including breaking things, making graffiti with chalk, stealing, gambling, drinking, watching girls, and throwing mud) (Chudacoff 2007, 109-10). Let us not forget the nuisance this behavior caused adults and shopkeepers. City streets were often contested territories of competing uses with adults shooing children away and children trying to claim an area of their own in the middle of the city (Cranz 1982, 80-81; Chudacoff 2007, 108).

Reformers observed what they perceived as the ills of society and their effects on young people. According to Maria Kraus-Boelte, the first teacher of German kindergartens
in America, “American children must be taught how to play” (cited in Chudacoff 2007, 68). Reformers, educators, and parents devoted themselves to providing the best opportunities for children to flourish. The beginning of the twentieth century is considered a golden age for play: child labor laws ensure then more time for free play, dense cities increased access to other children, and more families and cities had disposable income to devote to play provisions. (Chudacoff 2007, 69). The Playground Association of America (which later became the National Recreation and Park Association) formed in 1906 to bolster community efforts with government funding (Moore 2006, 87; Chudacoff 2007, 112, 114). This was a significant event because the development of a city organization to manage parks suggests that playgrounds are part of the basic services a city should provide. This puts playgrounds on par with the other services that citizens demand.

In response to worries about hygiene and safety, cities devoted land especially for children’s play. Often it was equipped with slides and jungle gyms to capture children’s attention (Chudacoff 2007, 113). Pleasure grounds of the past carefully constructed views and transitions between spaces to create a tranquil experience. Parks of this era, however, were rigidly organized and prioritized functionality over beauty. They were often symmetrical and segregated by utility. For the first time parks used fences to separate spaces. They included paved grounds, spaces for organized games, and plots for garden instruction (Chudacoff 2007, 113). Playgrounds were often sites of pedagogy combined with play; they contained nature and other materials for scientific exploration. This accompanied the advent of recess, when the classroom extended into the outdoors to improve children’s physical and mental health (Moore 2006, 88). Cranz notes an inherent irony in playgrounds of this era: at the same time they presented an alternative to the
drudgery of factory work and city life, they responded with an equally rigid and ordered system to supposedly offer respite (Cranz 1982, 63).

The pedagogical applications of parks stemmed from a burgeoning science of children's studies. At the same time adults were coming to appreciate play as an essential part of childhood that offers respite from the structure of school and work, they were also fearful of the dangers of illicit and totally free play. As one historian observed of educational theory from this period: “The child was impulsive, self-centered, without a perception of the boundaries between reality and imagination or good and evil. At the same time he was worshipped with Wordsworthian enthusiasm” (Mergen 1975, 405). This tension spurred much writing from this decade on how children ought to behave (Chudacoff 2007, 68). Advances in science showed biological differences between young and mature humans. They were now considered a special class of humans with particular needs (as opposed to little adults). Educators began to study children’s play as a legitimate field. They observed what children actually did and commented how well formal play provisions adapted to their behavior. Ethnography emerged as a viable way to study those we don’t understand; researchers sought the opinions of children by asking them what they prefer (Mergen 1975, 410). Some texts from this time are contradictory because at the same time they advocated the joy of free play (for example, Joseph Lee or T.R. Crosswell) educators devised implements and programs to encourage children to achieve particular educational goals through play (Chudacoff 2007, 92, 100). Because play was considered a reflection of culture, adults recognized the potential to mold little ones into ideal citizens. Children’s studies were closely linked to social change and ideals of the
American “good life.” This condition is clear in the physical and programmatic structuring of playgrounds from the era.

Playgrounds had not yet become the charge of local governments; they began out of philanthropic efforts such as those who later formed the Playground Association of America. For example, in the late nineteenth century the Mother’s Club started several playgrounds in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They focused on neighborhoods with high immigrant populations and tenement housing because they expected the playgrounds to socialize children who were not accustomed to civil, American behavior (Gagen 2000, 217). Like the pleasure grounds of mid-century, certain conduct was expected in the playgrounds. For example, children might be required to have clean faces and hands before they could participate; girls’ clothing might be regulated (Gagen 2000, 225).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries adults were genuinely interested in children’s play. At the same time the reformers exhibited societal control they did so with benevolence implied by the term “child saving” efforts. Child psychology was by this time an established field. The Playground Association sponsored a journal and research projects, encouraging a host of experts in the field of children and play. In 1930 President Herbert Hoover called a White House Conference on Child Health and Protection in which they created a Children’s Charter with principles concerning safety and welfare, growth and development, and education. The conference concluded: “With the young child, his work is his play and his play is his work” (cited in Chudacoff 2007, 98). As Chudacoff explains, this statement merely made official what academics, educators, and parents had long been thinking—that play is essential for proper growth. Because play is so important, it was often not left to children to decide for themselves, rather adults took charge of
determining what types of games, toys, and environments could inspire the most productive use of play time. “The state and its institutions set apart children by age and status, and family ideology as well as public concern channeled young people toward a protected physical and emotional development” (Chudacoff 2007, 99). With this newfound emphasis on children’s needs and desires came a conception of childhood that is still prevalent today: the sheltered child. This responds to the study of children’s needs, as discussed in Chapter 2. As the sciences of child psychology and education developed, adults believed that there is such thing as proper development. Without it, left to their own inclinations, children will develop into deviants. Children, therefore must be protected and encouraged into proper development. Today’s sheltered children are encouraged to develop cognitively so they will be able to perform in a knowledge-driven economy. They are still sheltered from potentially corrupting influences from the city.

The mechanism that controlled protected children in early American playgrounds was not as much a design issue as a programmatic one—almost all playgrounds of this era were staffed. The most distinguishing aspect of the reform era was the presence of play leaders. This respected profession made sure that children who came to playgrounds were properly supervised and kept away from the dangers and mischief of the city. There is a curious role disjunction between a child’s instinctive nature and their caregiver’s goals for their well-being. In the nineteenth century, child psychologists, parents, and educators, began to include observations of children’s natural wonder in widespread literature. One advocate of children’s play, Joseph Lee the founder of the American Playground Association, said “[Play is] the active projection of the force [the child], the becoming of
what he is to be” (Cranz 1982, 66). On this basis Lee developed the play leader profession to guide children to play in ways that would contribute to their full development.

Play leaders supervised activities and encouraged games over free play in order to teach skills and goal setting (Cranz 1982, 65-68). Playgrounds were places for socializing children, especially poor and immigrant children. Play leaders were a crucial piece of the reform agenda because they instilled approved values in the playground users (Chudacoff 2007, 112). The Chicago parks department represents the spirit of the times when they boasted that parks of the previous era offered a “place for recreation but the new playgrounds offer a scheme of recreation” (Cranz 1982, 65).

Gagen (2000) describes how the play leaders and the playgrounds they ran reinforced social norms of citizenship and gender. For example, after the age of 12 boys’ and girls’ playgrounds were separate, each run by a play leader of the same gender who was supposed to model appropriate behavior (Gagen 2000, 220). The boys generally played organized sports, sometimes setting up a tournament with other nearby playgrounds. Gagen interprets this as preparing young men for a life of civic involvement (2000, 218, 222-23). Organized games teach teamwork and healthy competition. They developed loyalty to their neighborhood playground, the locus of their team, and thus cared for and protected it.

While boys learned to participate in civic life, girls learned to be patriotic in the background. They learned songs and dances to perpetuate celebratory customs. In some playgrounds, Gagen describes, once girls aged 12 they became “little mothers” and watched over the younger children’s playground (Gagen 2000, 223-24). Play leaders coordinated activities such as crafts and sewing, all of which prepared girls for a life of domestic success.
(Gagen 2000, 218). This sharply contrasts with today’s notion of playgrounds as settings for outdoor, unstructured, physical play.

One may criticize play leaders for imposing adult values on children’s play. However, their actions were well-intentioned and accompanied an intense interest to give children the best life possible. This leads me to question what benevolent intentions we have towards children, play, and playgrounds today that will later seem misguided. There is still a play leader movement, popular in adventure playgrounds in Scandinavian countries and the U.K. Today leaders use different tactics; they aid child-initiated activities and allow risky, but supervised, behavior. Play leaders have all but disappeared from American playgrounds. As characteristic of the following epoch, the popularity of and demand for playgrounds soared, requiring municipalities to reduce maintenance costs to buy more land and equipment.

The examples above of the rules and customs of early American playgrounds show that the settings adults create for children reflect society’s notion of children at that time. Chudacoff connected the widespread emergence of community-sponsored playgrounds with a concurrent shift in public opinion about the nature of children’s behavior (Chudacoff 2007, 69). No longer devilish and corrupt, adults saw children as playful and good. Not only could this behavior be nurtured, reformers believed that doing so could raise a new generation cured of society’s ills and immorality (Gagen 2000, 217; Chudacoff 2007, 65). Right at the time that America at large was beginning to accept children’s play enough to make it a priority in policy-making, the Great Depression made playgrounds, with their high maintenance costs due to staffing, impossible to keep funding.
Recreation movement

By the roaring 1920s there were many ways for Americans to spend their increasing free time. The public dialogue surrounding leisure assumed that American’s were successful and now pursuing individual happiness. Cranz interprets this public momentum as a social phenomenon that suppressed dissent from the emerging bureaucratic lifestyle: “Essentially, it involved the characterization of the urban mass population as a leisure class, one whose members had achieved their goals...Social control of the masses proceeded not via improvement but rather via flattery” (Cranz 1982, 106). Consequently, citizens happily enjoyed parks and playgrounds and requested more facilities to service the expanding neighborhoods. This reception of leisure grounds changed the role of parks departments nation-wide, replacing their reform agenda with one of meeting demand for a successful product. This relationship to economic practices at the time continues to be relevant even today when playgrounds and pay-for-play facilities constitute a big business. The idealism of reforming society was lost as the American public was conceived of as consumers who knew what they wanted. Ironically, despite high usage rates, the satisfaction with the current mission of parks meant that it no longer assumed a prominent place on the political agenda and consequently lost funding priority (Cranz 1982, 107-09).

The onset of the Depression and World War II transformed municipal economics, in many sectors building and progress stalled. Still committed to the idea of the good life realized through leisure, communities used what facilities they had to host social events and neighborhood-driven programming (Cranz 1982, 110-17). As the country regained affluence, cities had the funds to change the physical environment to meet social aims. Americans gravitated towards single-family homes with accompanying plots of land and
car garages. They built new towns outside of the big cities where soldiers could come home to and begin their families as part of the “American Dream.” Each new neighborhood envisioned a site for leisure activities near their home, especially playgrounds for the children. Demand for parks soared. Residents came to expect a park with each new residential community. Developers were happy to provide a token, cheap playset, but in the majority of cases municipalities were hardly able to keep up with requests. Cities purchased more land, but consequently used smaller plots. The need to provide all neighborhoods with a playground required parks departments to develop efficiency with respect to park planning. This is the era when staffing became almost nonexistent from public parks (Cranz 1982, 119-21). Children were, once again as in the nineteenth century, left to guide their own play only now they had a demarcated space to play away from the activity of the adult world. The notion of giving children a space to play is complicated. At the same time it condones play it does so within very specified boundaries—play within reason. Play takes place only in sanctified zones, keeping it out of the arena of adult’s business and making it into an activity that can be supervised and controlled.

A new image of the American playground emerged in the 1940s and 50s from the economic models of park services. Cities boasted of the number of playgrounds they had built. They repeated successful designs and equipment only with fewer pieces and lower

* Later in the twentieth century this responsibility to direct play would shift to parents who feared for children’s safety.
quality materials. The image of the playground in this era is a seesaw, swings, slides, park benches, and chain link fences (Cranz 1982, 122). In an effort to provide more parks, maintenance costs had to be cut resulting in very little vegetation (an irony for parks). Signs and lighting were meant to compensate for lack of adult presence and bright coats of paint tried to disguise dilapidated equipment. Advances in park design took the form of reducing maintenance costs and increasing safety rather than inspiring children’s play. These conditions changed the shape of parks to such an extent that by 1962 landscape architect Garrett Eckbo commented that “American park design is more limited, conventional, stereotyped, repetitive, and resistant to innovation than any other area of design” (Cranz 1982, 122).

Recreation committees emphasized quantity of parks, safety, extending hours and accessibility, and encouraged play as physical activity. This reflected American values during the McCarthy era of trying to raise good and patriotic little citizens; parks played a role in the popular discussion the best way to raise children and spend leisure time (Solomon 2005). The recreation movement exemplifies a consumerist approach to free time. Leisure is no longer a state of mind but a variety of activities. Recreation centers offered lists of classes, clubs, sports, hobbies, and activities for all ages (Goodale and Godbey 1988, 209-10). Goodale and Godbey connected this attitude to the burgeoning notion of “time deepening.” Post-war Americans thrived on progress. Science and technology confirmed our suspicions that progress was unlimited. Faced with such possibility Americans scoffed at opportunity costs with their recreational choices. It was possible to have everything; in fact, that was a pretty good goal. “Time deepening” refers to the practice of taking on more activity than can be accommodated with limited resources.
Research has shown that many Americans say the amenity they most lack is time. We compensate by hurrying through activities, multitasking, or micromanaging a daily schedule (Goodale and Godbey 1988, 214). In this sense, the focus of free time is participation rather than a subjective mental state. This mirrors parks departments’ preoccupation with quantity of services at the expense of maintenance. Americans’ preoccupation with (superficial) choice has only grown in recent decades in the face of global capitalism. This trend in American playgrounds has remained constant through today resulting in frugal play provisions and an understanding of ideal play as recreational opportunities.

A shift took place in the 1950s regarding society’s conception of childhood. Chudacoff traces it to the popularity of Barbie dolls beginning in the 1940s and the advent of children’s television programming, beginning with the Mickey Mouse Club in 1955 (Chudacoff 2007, 154-57). Rather than molding little ones into proper and civil adults, marketing schemes gave children the power to demand playthings from their parents. This time period marks the “two major themes of adult domestication of children’s play since the mid-twentieth century: commercialization and the co-optation of time and activity” (Chudacoff 2007, 157).

Mechanisms of power were deeply embedded in economic conditions of the time. There is the unquestioning idea that progress and consumption is desirable. This was reinforced as businesses began to profit and perpetuate consumer culture. Foucault’s discussion of power (1978) reminds scholars that the essence of power relations within a structure does not lie in a dominating or masterminding party but within many forces that work with and against each other. In mid-century America there was a boom in expert
opinions about what is the best education or plaything for children. A growing consumer culture made businesses attuned to consumer values and allowed them to tailor products to fit American’s ideas of what a safe and fun playground looks like. Affluence, mass production, and inexpensive materials made it possible for families to purchase their own playgrounds, forever changing the community aspect of parks by creating a large private sector. Power is at play as all these forces react.

Today: Safety-conscious commercial play

In 1972 when Columbus, IN employed Cesar Pelli to design a playground for their indoor mall, America’s play spaces took on a different form than ever before. Pelli’s playground was wildly popular, and still is for children who can play freely, for parents who can rest without worrying about their child’s safety, and for the retailer who keeps the family inside a little longer (Solomon 2003, 70-72). This example of indoor play is one that is sensitive to design. However, as malls and retailers saw the success of indoor playgrounds their inclusion, rather than a creative design, is what mattered. A ubiquitous image of the American playground is one attached to a McDonald’s fast food chain. It has marketing appeal for both parents and children and alters the program of playgrounds to entertain for short bursts of play rather than providing sustained interest for a community of children. Extending the commercial application of playgrounds a bit further is the pay-for-play model of indoor gymnasiums, game rooms, and arcades. The growth of commercial play may be a response to the barren playgrounds and, in a common illogic, a belief that children need some exciting new spectacle to entice them to play. This is a model that is loved by many children and appreciated by parents seeking a rest, but it
makes the child into a consumer at a very young age (and not the idealized consumer of modern art of the 1950s), that the Mickey Mouse Club television program foreshadowed.

We could similarly analyze the range of products and advertising schemes marketed to children. A subtle and dangerous theme is that “good” parents provide their children with all the opportunities for success (a magical childhood at Disneyland, a Leap Frog alphabet game for toddlers, the popular collectible toy, etc.).

The two most influential factors in the changing look of America’s playgrounds were the rise of large-scale manufacturers to provide products and an increasing concern for children’s physical safety during play. Play equipment manufacturers captured a new market of institutions, parks, and families who wanted to take advantage of pre-designed, easily assembled equipment. Manufacturers took over the market by buying out boutique design companies. Architectural consulting and monumental designs, not surprisingly, did not find their way into most communities due to limited means. But now these communities could declare their intentions for children by providing them with features that scream “Child-only play.” As with most markets, designs followed money and were therefore determined by what products generated the most profit. Even Creative Playthings, a company who once displayed a symbiotic relationship of design and production, eschewed previously held faith in abstracted forms in favor of more symbolic play structures, a popular product among many consumers still today.

Largely determining the shape of manufactured play equipment are safety standards. The consumer movement of the 1970s made caregivers aware of potential hazards of children’s toys and spaces (not unlike the stories shared to scare youngsters off the street and onto playgrounds in the nineteenth century). Such organizations provided
the impetus for a codified set of safety standards to prevent high falls onto hard surfaces, accidental tripping, falling, or slipping, splinters, and every other accident imaginable. Each time a playground tragedy occurred, a new standard attempted to prevent future such accidents (Chudacoff 2007, 165). Fear created an unfortunate cycle: families kept away from playgrounds (often favoring “safer” indoor options), parks budgets could not justify putting money towards unused playgrounds, and the equipment dilapidated and presented true hazards. The body of rules made manufacturers and parks responsible for children’s safety while using their playgrounds. When accidents occurred families took legal actions; in a startling trend, courts found municipalities at fault and awarded large settlements to the plaintiffs (Solomon 2005). Fear of liability caused insurance companies to raise coverage rates, making even simple playgrounds unfeasible for many communities and institutions or allowing them only the barest of equipment. These conditions are present today; even the most creative and careful of playground designers are bound by an immobilizing set of rules. Daycares, municipal parks, children’s museums and other potential playground owners all know the fear of playground accidents and the repercussions that follow; it is no wonder they immediately look to standard designs and manufacturers they think they can trust. The effects can be seen in a comparison of American playgrounds and those in a country, such as the U.K., with more relaxed regulations. The latter have the option of experimenting, the former has very few options other than the dearth of designs deemed “safe” (Solomon 2005, 78-79).

A new commercial market takes advantage of parents’ reservations about children’s free play. Often called “pay-for-play” these are sites where parents can brings their children and feel safe to let them run around unattended. Some are destination play
spaces, other are located in other businesses such as malls or restaurants. The equipment usually consists of soft or plastic climbing equipment, tunnels, and mazes and perhaps some games or arcades. McKendrick, Bradford, and Fielder (2000) studied the changing geography of children's play environments, particularly the trend of hosting birthday parties in commercial playgrounds. They conclude that the choice to celebrate a birthday in a pay-for-play center is made in the adults' interest in convenience; they have to prepare, clean up, and monitor the party very little. In one sense the commercial play place indicates a place for children and celebration (i.e. birthday parties) outside of the privatized home and the broader concern of children’s play (albeit driven by financial, rather than altruistic motives). In places normally frequented by adults, a play area can send a message that children are welcome in public, daily lives. In another sense it represents children’s continually decreasing independent mobility. The authors contend that there must be more research on pay-for-play venues as sites of exclusion by ability, age, and socio-economic status. Blackford (2004) used observed children playing more freely in a commercial play place than in a traditional park. She determined this was because parents were more relaxed and less inclined to intervene in children’s play, which theorists tend to conclude is a positive aspect of a play situation. Future research could study the affordances of commercial play zones to see if children find meaningful play there. These pay-for-play sites are quite the opposite of playing in the everyday (see next chapter). They are destinations that children must be escorted to, they are not intended for regular play (often the costs make this impossible), and, consequently, the play events are of a hyper-stimulating nature. The bright colors, gimmicks, and the sort of equipment that
provides interest for children for a couple hours do not afford the many benefits of sustained, personal, and meaningful play.

**Alternative Playground Movements**

The previous section described the dominant movements in America’s playground history. Reformers inspired interest in children’s play because of a social agenda and cities eventually assumed responsibility for building and maintaining playgrounds. This is how playgrounds are managed today with the emerging exception of private play facilities. The following section describes two alternative movements in the mid twentieth century that contrasted and added variety to the dominant mode of playground design. The first is artists’ and architects’ new interest in playground design as sculptural works. This is the first time that playgrounds were a topic of conversation amongst designers. The second alternative movement was adventure playgrounds, which were actually a bona fide movement only in the Netherlands and the U.K. American designers, planners, and educators, however, were all aware of the success of adventure playgrounds in cities suffering from destruction caused by WWII. In this description of playground history, adventure playgrounds stand out as the most community- and child-driven response to playspace provisions. Community-minded planners and architects, such as Jane Jacobs and Christopher Alexander, advocated the adventure playground as an innovative model for playgrounds, one that opposed the heavy-handed, top-down approach of Modernism, and similarly the Modern art take on play sculpture.
The recreation movement is only one fork (albeit the larger one) of mid-century America’s bifurcated interest in leisure. In the 1930s landscape architects, architects, and artists expanded their fields to include playground design. It wasn’t until the 1940s that design schools such as Harvard included parks and playgrounds in designs and urban schemes. The design innovation that ensued, in America at least, remained at the level of design theory and education and rarely made its way to the playgrounds of most children.

Designer playground ideas from the 1950s and 60s were inspired by the plethora of available research on child psychology and education. Jean Piaget had published on the merits of child exploration and imagination. Architects tried to combat the standardization of playgrounds common in most cities. The most vivid application of new ideas in children’s play and the role of parks in the urban community came from architect Aldo van Eyck in the Netherlands. His designs took advantage of leftover spaces of the city and he conceived of them as vibrant sites of community life. Using primarily simple materials and textures found in the urban background these designs became part of the urban fabric. He oversaw over 700 such playgrounds which created a network of children’s spaces through the city (a composition rarely found in the United States). He illustrated the potential of high art to merge with everyday life. No similar popular movement took place in America but designers were aware of and influenced by van Eyck (Solomon 2005).

The upper class and art world had a different idea of what playgrounds could be. Abstract Expressionism legitimized creative processes and found inspiration in the uninhibited creativity and imagination of children. Van Eyck, Garrett Eckbo, Dan Kiley and James Rose illustrate through their designs how the ideals of Modern art influenced ideas
of what playgrounds could be. The most well known American artist who took up the task of playground design was sculptor Isamu Noguchi. Never before had parks officials conceived of a playground as a sculpture. Sculpture, too, was expanding its definition to include installations and a relationship with everyday life. The Museum of Modern Art excitedly displayed some of Noguchi’s designs. One critic praised the connection between art and child’s play: childhood is an “occasion for developing the imagination and an awareness of and sensitivity to beauty.” The museum stated the purpose of the exhibit was to promote the idea of sculptural play forms, to show that playgrounds can “stimulate a child's sense of space and form” (Solomon 24-25). Artists proclaimed that abstract forms allow children to use their imagination during play. These ideas recall the writings of nineteenth century educator Friedrich Froebel who designed simply shaped toys and learning materials to stimulate learning and creativity. The play-sculpture movement acknowledged that children’s wonder is a blessing and sought to nurture it. Their designs were provocative and monumental, with few opportunities for children to manipulate them. One physical educator contended in 1953 that creative play is better than other types of play. Creative participation in an activity involves both novelty and appropriateness but could take many forms. The next best types of play include active participation, emotional participation, then killing time, in decreasing order of desirability (Goodale and Godbey 1988, 236). This description of play reflects the philosophy of play-sculpture designers and their hopes for children using the playground. This indicates an underlying idealization of the creative child and an opportunity to improve America’s youth. It also illustrates “expert” opinions of childrearing practices.
The play-sculpture movement’s closest chance at gathering popular appeal was through the toy maker and retailer Creative Playthings, owned by Frank Caplan. Because of Caplan’s interest in child development, play theory, and modern art he solicited a team of designers to help him choose, and eventually design and manufacture, products that reflected these values. As one critic said of Caplan’s use of Modern art in toy design: “he did not denigrate the art, he elevated the child” (Solomon 2005, 23). The company was quite successful. According to art historian Amy Ogata they pitched creativity as a commodity to upper-middle class American families and institutions who were eager to eschew the conformity of the Cold War era and display America’s uniqueness (Solomon 2005, 26).

In 1954 Creative Playthings, MoMA, and Parents magazine hosted a competition to showcase new ideas in playground design. Guidelines required that designs could be mass produced and accessible to the private consumer; at the same time designs should acknowledge their place in modern town planning. A jury selected winners from over 350 entries. The panel did not include children but full-size prototypes at the exhibition did provide corroboration of the judge’s choices (Solomon 2005, 29-32). Critics, artists, and visitors all considered the competition a great success.

The play sculpture movement wasn’t entirely altruistic. The driving force behind MoMA’s participation in sponsoring creative play environments was an attempt to mold future art patrons. Rearing children in beautiful, composed environments, they believed, would instill in those children an eye for the aesthetic (Solomon 2005). This hasn’t been corroborated, however Randy Hester, who researches how memories of environments affect designers’ works later in life, believes that the landscapes of childhood solidify one’s aesthetic values (Sebba 1991, 397).
One editorial commented about the 1954 MoMA exhibit that this playground philosophy would educate children about design and beauty and help them grow as enlightened patrons of modern art (Solomon 2005, 33). This indicates an underlying idealization of the creative child and an opportunity to improve America’s youth. Does providing children with highly composed spaces teach them about beauty? Will this visual astuteness improve their daily lives? If play theorists established almost a century ago that children have a culture of play that it is difficult for adults to discover, does it similarly follow that children have their own aesthetic, one that Modern art may not reinforce? These questions are not to debase the creativity and good intentions of the playground movement. It is only to point out how over time adults have imposed their ideas of “the good” onto children’s play spaces in order to shape childhood.

While artists, designers and architects expanded interest in playgrounds as a form of high art, competing social and economic conditions kept designer playgrounds in the minority. The previous decades’ affinity for abstract forms continued, though mostly in plans. No better project could illustrate this than New York City’s Riverside Park; its avant-garde design and the political tensions that followed fed the American presses for five years. Residents surrounding 8 acres of Riverside Park (at 103rd Street) dedicated themselves to small improvements to the park, culminating with a request to philanthropist and playground advocate, Audrey Hess, for a complete renovation. She was immediately interested in the chance to put play theories from Europe and the American art world into practice in an innovative playground and chose Isamu Noguchi, well known in the sculpture circles for his U.N. playground design. Personal connections through Hess,
Frank Caplan (of Creative Playthings), and MoMA brought Louis Khan to the project as it expanded to include architectural elements (Solomon 2005, 44-46).

The initial design took advantage of the site’s intense slope: slanted edges provided a natural fence and privacy and school building were tucked into the earth. Ramps connected different levels at the same time providing convenience for parents, children, and the elderly. Some of the themes from Noguchi’s previous designs re-surfaced here in the geometric spheres and contoured topography (Solomon 2005, 48).

When the plan was unveiled Parks Commissioner Robert Morris immediately rejected it as too expensive and too dramatic and called it an “unjustifiable architectural monument” (Solomon 2005, 49). A community group formed in opposition to the plan believing it would pour concrete over precious green space. Perhaps because they felt they had no say in the design, the majority of the neighborhood was enraged and threatened legal action against the designers and philanthropists. Despite disapproval from several fronts, Noguchi and Khan continued revising the design, which the New York Times lauded as a breakthrough in playground design. They enhanced the previous design’s contours with features such as stairs, ramps, pyramids, and circular holes in walls, all positioned in ways that they had multiple uses. Angles and levels were interconnected in a unified space. It combined the designers’ differing interests in monumentality and sensory experience. Though the project gained media support, a court eventually sided with the neighborhood groups to halt the project (Solomon 2005, 51-52).

This defeated project illustrates the tensions between the duality of playgrounds as recreation centers and playgrounds as sculpture. One culture within the city widely supported innovative ideas, wanted to infuse high art of highly composed spaces into
everyday life, and believed that children could benefit from abstract forms. Another group imagined children playing creatively although in an unobtrusive setting with communities providing much of the programming in the form of organized events.

Projects such as Riverside Park could not gain popular support but that did not mean that their agendas were completely lost. Architect Richard Dattner and landscape architect M. Paul Friedburg continued theorizing about more effective play spaces. Both utilized integrated pieces and spaces, observed children excitedly exploring sand and water. They believed that the playground had an important role as a community safety mechanism and were inspired by the European adventure playground movement. Dattner utilized concepts from child psychologist Jean Piaget and believed that play grows from imagination, spontaneity, and socialization and could have an educational component of “learn by doing” in a space where one was allowed to make mistakes (Solomon 2005, 54-55). He hoped to make creative play spaces more fiscally accessible and Friedburg worked on making them intergenerational loci of the community. Taking more after van Eyck than Khan, both Friedburg and Dattner employed textures that alluded to the surrounding city such as concrete and wood. A prime example of architectural thinking at this time is Friedburg’s “total play environment” in the Lower East Side. Its interconnected pieces are significantly more dense than the Riverside Park plan and it offers the opportunity to continue play across many different forms, spaces, and apparatuses. Dattner found success when the Estee Lauder family sponsored a new play area in Central Park. It put sand play at the center with nearby ledges to accommodate play, parents, and general urban life. Responses from the community, over several generations, reveal that it is a success and finds its way into the fond memories of nearby residents (Solomon 2005, 57-59).
Friedburg and Dattner’s efforts were inaugurated into the mainstream as both designers teamed with play equipment producers. Dattner developed Play Cubes, which could be arranged in infinite patterns for climbing, sliding, and crawling. These gained commercial success in Europe but never became popular in the U.S. Friedburg worked on re-arrangeable, modular, wooden systems of what are now called post-and-platform designs. He sold the designs to a successful manufacturer and the form has become the standard for play equipment today, only now in metal and plastic (Solomon 2005, 60-61). Friedburg and Dattner illustrate how alternative playgrounds are prized in one sector but need the support of a major manufacturer to gain wide appeal. In this decade artists focused on modular designs that could be easily mass-produced.

What changes in America spawned the ever-popular post-and-platform playground convention while losing the interest in child psychology and integrated design that inspired it? As with many societal changes there are not clear causes and effects. One response, mostly from Europe, to the Modernist principles for play spaces was that they were based on an adult aesthetic and were not, nor need they be, appreciated by children for their abstract sculptural content (Solomon 2005, 59).

Changes in the shape of America’s cities and neighborhoods transformed the traditional role of playground as a community component. New suburbs often contained a token playground to attract families, many of whom were affluent enough to have their own play structures in the backyard. Exodus from the inner city meant that it was harder to justify city budgets to fund playgrounds in neighborhoods that needed them most (Cranz 1982, 135). Mayor Lindsay of New York City reconceptualized the role of parks as open space and the site for community events and programming. One might now see political
protests, “happenings” of the 1960s, and public art in the city’s parks (Cranz 1982, 138). This effort to breathe life back into parks paralleled (and tried to combat) the popularity of private play provisions. Often city parks were thought of as sites of intergenerational activity and true public spaces (and made possible alternative playground design), but changes in American lifestyle made parks an infrequent stop for many families.

Adventure Playgrounds

This section digresses from the American playground chronology to introduce the post-WWII trend of “adventure playgrounds” in Europe. This movement was concurrent with the recreation movement though it is a very different approach to play environments. American planners, architects, and educators were aware of Europe’s adventure playgrounds; the movement was part of the renewed city planning interest in children’s play and, eventually, what made some (such as Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford) critique the trend towards Modern play sculpture. First conceived in 1930 by Carl Theodore Sorensen, the adventure playground is essentially a “junk playground,” He writes:

“I am thinking in terms of an area, not too small in size, well closed off from its surroundings by thick greenery, where we should gather, for the amusement of bigger children, all sorts of old scrap that the children from the apartment blocks could be allowed to work with, as the children in the countryside and in the suburbs already have. There could be branches and waste from tree polling and bushes, old cardboard boxes, planks and boards, ‘dead’ cars, old tyres and lots of other things. Of course it would look terrible.”

The first adventure playground was built in Emdrup Denmark during WWII. It used available materials, often scraps from the war-torn city, to create a play structure for the
children who would otherwise be forgotten amongst all the other things the city needed to care for. Ideologically, these playgrounds have many benefits including making play possible with completely found materials in places that might not have access to traditional play equipment. They also promote sustainability with large scale “urban recycling” initiatives. Often businesses would bring appropriate scrap materials to the adventure playground that they would otherwise throw away. Finally, these free playgrounds are spontaneous and can emerge even in places where land is contested such as the demarcation between a historically poor neighborhood and its gentrified neighbor. (Lefaivre 2007). Children often don’t recognize these structural conflicts and play nonetheless.

Unlike a traditional playground, loose parts are essential to the adventure playground. These include building materials, scraps, tools, vehicles, water, and dirt/sand. An adventure playground is always open for play but loose parts are only brought out when a play leader is supervising. Like reform era play leaders, adventure play leaders have a specific role: to prevent dangerous building designs, administer first aid when necessary, arbitrate disputes, and advise with building problems. Other than that they rarely intervene in the children’s play. This is what makes adventure playgrounds sites for true unstructured, play. Unlike unsupervised, playgrounds the children who use adventure playgrounds have access to a variety of materials (notice, not toys and equipment) to add complexity, spontaneity, and possibility to their play. Risky activities that children are naturally drawn to are not banned because an adult is present to prevent true dangers. Rules are limited to those mandating safety, the idea being that children will follow a couple of “principles” that are built into play rather than a long list of adult identified rules.
The adventure playground is a space that is designed by children according to their own logic and rules. While there are over 1000 adventure playgrounds in use today, only two are in the United States: Berkeley Marina and Huntington Beach, both in California. Speculation as to why these playgrounds are less popular in America suggests a cultural difference in how adults handle children’s risk. Further study as to why there are fewer adventure playgrounds here would be interesting and important for this discussion. The nature of American culture, values, and preferences will surely shape what types of playgrounds children and parents will respond to best.

Like the reform park, play leaders were an essential component of the way an adventure playground functioned. However, rather than encouraging adult-defined, proper activities these play leaders had an observational role and engaged in child-initiated activities. This indicates a highly participatory environment. Roger Hart created a scale of participation beginning with manipulation and tokenism (Hart 1992). Adventure playgrounds exemplify the highest rung of child-initiated activities and shared decisions with adults. He would refer to play leaders as “animators” as people who “give life to the potential in young people” (Hart 1992, 14). Roy Kozlovsky (2008) delves deeper to interpret the social goals of adventure playgrounds. He notes the restorative mission of adventure playgrounds to illuminate control mechanisms. Educators believed (and still do) that play leaders and play had therapeutic benefits for children who had grown up with the horrors of war. Psychologists saw the opportunity for play to reveal one’s internal struggles, a kind of psychotherapy. The play leader observed and encouraged even destructive play so that difficult emotions could be dealt with in a safe space rather than manifesting in delinquency. This is what Foucault calls a confessional strategy whereby
emotional excess is contained. Play leaders must believe that a subject’s interiority can be known and manipulated in order to produce children with healthy emotional ranges (Kozlovsky 2008, 2, 31).

American adventure playgrounds had a different role in social life, particularly due to the absence of war on home territory. Educators observed the success of European junk playgrounds and used that as a model. However, they never caught on as a common model, perhaps due to communities’ reliance on parks departments to provide play facilities and the waning interest in community initiatives (a hallmark of the adventure playground design/build process). The Natural Learning Initiative at North Carolina State University (one of the organizations focusing on all natural play environments, see the chapter on playscapes) has sponsored play-leaders from the UK to share some of their strategies. Their efforts suggest that places for messy, free play, and the trained leaders providing a special sort of supervision may be (slowly) coming to the American playground scene.
IV. Dens

One of the key features that drew children to adventure playgrounds was the availability of materials and an uncontested space where children could build their own playgrounds. The Adventure playground was the only model described in the playground precedents that gave children the responsibility of design. Chapter 2 described how children’s geographers have taken up the task of researching children’s tactics for negotiating space for their own play. Adventure playgrounds illustrate an interesting relationship in which adults give children the space for free, self-initiated play. The following chapter describes in depth studies of children’s own architecture. Some of the studies refer to issues mentioned in Chapter 2 of children negotiating their play in an adult’s world. However, most of the observations about children building their own play places apply to the activities of the adventure playground. It is unfortunate that the adventure playground model has not been more popular in the U.S. As the following research shows, children could benefit from access to more sites where they are free to design their own playspaces.

Studying dens

The term “spontaneous architecture” comes from an article written by Roger Hart thatdocuments an innovative exhibit at the Junior Arts Center (Moore 1983). The museum held four two-week installations where they had different building materials available (cardboard boxes, spaces and objects that look like home, and peg and blocks that can be assembled) and invited the children to play. As expected, most children built settings for play or clubhouses they could inhabit
Bernard Rudofsky (1977) alluded to “spontaneous architecture” as an architectural term when he documented the building practices of non-architects across centuries and continents. This paper discusses the vernacular architecture of children. The working definition in this thesis is: the placemaking and building activities of children as they create, navigate, and deconstruct spaces for play.

There are two aspects of building play that get conflated and distinguished in this section. They are exemplified by the stages a child goes through conceptually when inhabiting their own space. The first is a mental restructuring of a found space to give it significance out of its conventional meaning. This occurs in the very earliest forms of spontaneous architecture; children as young as three make caves out of the kitchen table or a sheet thrown over two chairs. Hart calls this transformed space and it is a defining quality of play. John Huizinga (1971), one of the most well-known play theorists wrote: “one of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain.”

Transformed space is also used to describe the social spaces inhabited by much older children, such as an unused corner or niche. Their ownership makes the space a territory governed by social rules outside the logic of the broader setting.

The second stage, and type of spontaneous architecture most research focuses on, is dens (forts in American English although nearly all the empirical research comes from the Netherlands and U.K.). Den refers literally to a small, informal, often secret place. Practiced primarily in middle childhood, ages 6-11, this play requires both the transformance of a found space as well as construction activities that modify the den.
These construction activities also occur in other types of building play such as creating micro-worlds with blocks, Legos, sand, or dirt.

Kylin (2003) divides the studies on children’s special places into two focuses: one aims to learn the meaning that dens have for children, why they build, what makes a place special; the other observes the den as a physical object that can be characterized by spatial analysis. Hart’s stages of fort building correlate with the two research approaches—each illuminate the benefits that different types of construction play have on young builders. The first stage, transormance, tells the most about children’s connection to their special place. Whether it is an attic crawl space, a bush, or the kitchen table, children have the ability to turn a space into something from their imagination, to name it and thus transform it into something else. Some of benefits I list in this chapter refer to the nature of making a space of one’s own: learning social roles, affirming personal identity, and having a safe place.

The second way of studying children’s dens is by observing the material culture of their construction. When researchers follow Kylin’s second type they document the materials, methods, and “furnishings” of the spaces that children build; they describe the built work as a physical object. There are benefits to construction play of this sort: the physical rewards of active play, cognitive problem-solving, practicing meaningful work, and mental health benefits.

This chapter is especially important and apropos to an architectural thesis because it describes building as a playful activity. The nature of building play is often for the joy and challenge rather than achieving a built space; thus it follows a trend in architecture of
studying the process by which a space comes into being (participatory design for example) with less focus on the nature of the resulting object.

Review of Studies

These following studies by Maria Kylin, David Sobel, and Mark Powell focused on what children do as they engage in this type of play and the meaning it holds for them. This qualitative, empirical data supports further observations on the meaning and benefits of den building and construction play.

Kylin studied dens in Eslov, Sweden in 2002. She surveyed children using in-depth, open-ended interviews and “place expeditions” (Roger Hart’s term), interviews conducted during a walk around the selected area. This technique has proven especially useful for children to aid their recollection and inspire details or narratives to share with the interviewer. She identified three primary characteristics that influenced den architecture: character of the environment, distance from home, and available materials.

Sobel conducted fieldwork on children’s special places for over three years in the late 1980s in Devon, England and Carricou Island in the West Indies. He observed children at play building their dens and psychoanalyzed the relation of dens to personal identity. In addition to formal interviews, he had children draw conceptual maps of their neighborhood on which they labeled their home, their dens, and other special places or landmarks. This exercise is widely used because it helps children articulate what places make up their world and what places are most important or special to them. He amended this procedure into a picture drawing exercise for children in Carricou who were less accustomed to using paper maps. He developed friendship and trust with groups of
children in both cities and after several weeks they were wiling to show him their secret places to play.

Powell writes about his observations of an incredible “fort culture” at the Montessori school where he teaches. He observes the children’s activities both as a researcher and an administrator, who was at times called to intervene as well as a guest of the children’s built territory. This deviates from the other two researchers, who document the private world of dens. Fort building was an iconic social activity at the Montessori school. Children formed alliances based around the territory of their forts. Leadership patterns emerged, some more democratic than others. They defended their forts from “outsiders” and willed their spaces to children of the next generation at the end of each year. Societal rules and norms emerged; play styles (such as war play) came in and out of vogue over the years that Powell observed.

Summary

For all children, the dens went through a common cycle: first a site was chosen, then the children built the den. They spent time playing in the den, modifying and improving it, but then the den was destroyed or abandoned. As one boy said in an interview:

Interviewer: When do you stop building dens? Boy: Do you mean how old you are? I: Yes. B: Maybe when you reach 60. You never stop building dens (Kylin 2003).

Another group of children explained how they spent a long time building a very elaborate den and then set it on fire on the local bonfire night. This indicates that their play was in creating the space itself, with less emphasis on actually playing games inside the den or regarding it as a permanent creation.
Sobel (1987) found that in both of his study sites den building was very common: 75-80% of children found, built, or played in dens, 20% indicated that was their favorite place to play. Building play was most popular in children aged 9-11. He concluded that this indicates “a biologically programmed interest in constructed play spaces that unfold on a determined schedule” (Sobel 1987, 63)

While Powell doesn't comment on the universality of building play, his descriptions illustrate how quickly children engaged in building on their own. He writes, “this was in no way a programmed activity but rather a spontaneous one that simply wasn't stopped” (Powell 2007, 89). The Montessori school had the conditions ripe for building, namely a large woods and long recess period. The children surprised their teachers by abandoning the field and organized games to play in the woods. At one point, almost 60% of the elementary students spent their recess time in 11 forts (Powell 2007, 90).

Roger Hart has a theory that children's behavior is relatively universal, so axioms can be derived from analyses conducted in many different countries. However, Sobel observed differences in the play styles in England versus the West Indies with the latter having more gendered play and more social play in large groups.

Most of the studies noted, and concurred on, different building styles according to gender. Sobel found that typically girls created a space to play their games of house or family or to have a social place for a group of girls. Thus they started inside, delineated a boundary and shelter, and carefully attended to interior detail such as filling the den with objects and decoration. Powell observed that the girls’ shelters were more likely to be uncovered and used for social gatherings and pretend play. For boys in both Sobel and Powell's studies, the construction itself was often the primary activity. There was no
conclusion whether these differences were the products of social programming or had a hypothesized biological foundation. (Sobel 1987; Hart 1987; Powell 2007).

The kind of exploratory play found in building play is directly related to stages in child development, suggesting that it is an important feature of childhood. Gibson writes: “The need to obtain food from the environment is as strong as to get food from it and obviously useful for survival” (cited in Sebba 1991). From an evolutionary perspective it behooves children to explore the world, manipulate it, and experiment with it; on a basic level this is how children become acquainted with their habitat.

**Consequences of Building Play**

Children are naturally drawn to build their own architecture and inhabit secret places. In the studies described above, the researchers note many positive benefits that accompany den building. In their freedom children are able to practice social relations. They also improve their confidence and ability to affect change on their surroundings. Dens are special places where children are able to explore their range of emotions and develop their sense of self. Finally, engaging in such an intense project gave many children the chance to experience the pleasures of meaningful work.

*Social*

Kylin thought that the most important developmental aspect was the ability to have a child-controlled space, whether it is a social or private place. Children enjoyed dens because they could define their social group or be left entirely alone. Powell found that having retreats helped children begin to manage the intense group play they encountered
elsewhere because they had a safe place that could slowly be opened to others (Powell 2007, 101).

Being able to manage their group of playmates is very important to some children as they grow into their social self. Many of the Montessori school’s forts thrived on exclusivity. Teachers and parents attempted to say that everyone must be allowed to play. Doing this, however, undermined the potential of bonding social capital within the social groups. A group of young girls were left out of the other forts so they started one of their own. Now they had the opportunity to practice leadership and experience ownership of a place they could call their own (Powell 2007, 93). Requiring the forts to be open to everyone also interfered with the children’s regulatory system as they could no longer expel those who would not respect the group’s rules.

Powell (2007) observed a culture of fort play among the elementary students at the Montessori school. Their dealings highlight the many learning experiences from negotiating the social dynamics of group play. Construction play is distinguished from many other types of play because it allows children to “own” a piece of the world, to practice their autonomy, set the rules, and learn from the consequences. The learning experiences at this school were not all happy. For years teachers and parents heard complaints about some children not playing fairly, stealing materials, excluding others. They were tempted to intervene, at times they wanted to ban fort play altogether. At its worst, one year a megalomaniac six-year old commanded his group of friends to “declare open war” on the other forts who he believed were conspiring to overthrow him. Eventually, groups of students even those not directly targeted by the terrorist group, tried
to negotiate with the offending child and convinced him to play peacefully. Finally, he called a truce (Powell 2007, 98-100).

The children’s willingness to come forward and negotiate a situation they felt was wrong, shows the moral principles practiced in fort play such as benevolence, justice, loyalty, and righteous leadership. The children learned things from conflicts they wouldn’t have had the teachers solved every problem. Learning to solve interpersonal problems is one of the great benefits of building play as a social activity. And as one girl said: “Well, it was kind of interesting stealing sticks!” (Powell 2007, 96).

Spatial Awareness

The drive to locate found spaces and transform them for play is especially common in younger children, ages 3-7. As one cognition scientist explained, “Nature intended this to be the time when the brain is most receptive to sensations and most able to organize them.” There is an evolutionary drive to explore and learn about one’s environment. Children become aware of the relationship of their body in space, the common patterns of environmental changes, hidden opportunities, and threatening stimuli.

At the Junior Arts Center exhibit (Moore 1983) researchers watched as children created building challenges for themselves and succeeded at problem solving. Physical challenges might include pitching a roof over a fort or cutting out pieces of furniture for a miniature fort. In these situations children envision an end result and then use tools at hand to try and create a physical version of the object in their mind. This describes what Seagart and Hart (1987) refer to as “environmental competence.” It is “the knowledge and skill and confidences to use the environment to carry out one’s own goals and to enrich
one’s experience” (Hart 1987, 324). Knowledge refers to children’s problem-solving abilities such as the nature of the materials they are working with and basic physics principles. Skill refers to the ability of children to stack, balance, tie, inset and other gross- and fine-motor skills. Confidence is what Hart says makes environmental competence important to children as they grow. If they believe that it is possible to change a situation (or at least its physical manifestation) as children grow they are more likely to be engaged with the world and make improvements to their surroundings.

**Identity**

Sobel has a more psychoanalytic approach and believes that the most important aspect of den building is developing self-identity. Because of his studies of middle childhood development and close readings of Carl Jung's writings, he concludes that, quote “Because children need to interact with concrete materials to ground the thinking process in middle childhood, they need to use wood stone and earth to engage in the process of letting the self be born” (Sobel 2002, 71). He connects this to Clare Cooper Marcus's famous book *House as a Mirror of Self* in which she describes how ordering our space can be a reflection and development of our personal identity. When children have a place for themselves, especially one they built themselves, it can be a symbolic place for them. In this special place they can reflect on the world and feel safe. Children at this age do not have many things that they can say are “theirs” and such accomplishments fuel one’s pride and ambitions (think of how excited children are to show a scribbled drawing they made). An entire space is quite an accomplishment, especially if they spent time on the building or furnishing processes. Children’s houses can be contested places, most of the rooms are not
theirs despite how comfortable they feel in them, even the bedroom is invaded by the rules of the household. But a den is truly a place that is their own, that they are responsible.

Dens do not need elaborate materials or sets for them to represent a very special place in the child’s mind.

*Mental Health*

There is evidence to support a tentative conclusion that building activity is useful in coping with stress and preventing depression. Kelly Lambert is one of the first neuroscientists to research depression at the neuro-circuit, rather than chemical, level. In an oversimplified summary, scientists have found that neurotransmitters connect different nuclei in the brain, each of which are responsible for a different type of brain activity.

Strengthening the connectors means that when one is activated it can activate others in the loop. Lambert identified the “effort driven rewards” circuit. She applied this logic to Montesori’s teaching methods and Csikszentmihalyi’s philosophies on “flow” in work.

When a child is faced with a task that requires tacit problem solving, the effort driven rewards circuit is stimulated. The first stop is the striatum, which is responsible for movement, especially the hands. Neurotransmitters make connections with the prefrontal cortex to think through a problem, plan actions, compare items, categorize them. Both of these nuclei are connected to the accumbens, a pleasure zone that produces emotions such as interest in an activity, tranquility while working, and pride when a task is accomplished.

Her book is for adults who want to maintain emotional well-being. She recommends interspersing craft and other physical-mental hobbies into everyday life to support healthy brain function.
Lambert’s ideas are especially apt for children who spend most of their day engaged and physically interacting with the world and reflecting on their experiences. There are several types of play and learning activities that might activate this circuit in children—construction play is certainly among them. Children have sustained fun while building because the activity is challenging, it requires solving problems, thinking up new solutions, trying them out physically, and learning from the results. Building is all about making decisions, the prefrontal cortex must be engaged. It is a bodily activity that emphasizes fine motor activities, specifically those with the hands.

Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow exemplifies work as a creative, joyful activity. In *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975) he introduces the concept of flow, or being “in the zone.” It is the trance that comes when a person is completely involved in a task. In order to keep sustained interest the task must not be too easy or too difficult. Many teachers have strived to find this balance for their students, particularly those using constructivist teaching methods. The benefits are self-motivation and mental stimulation.

*Work Ethic*

Roger Hart (1987) wrote about children’s architectural practices in an article about children’s participation in planning and design projects. He contends that it allows them to experience democratic responsibility. One is unlikely to participate in improving their world if they think their efforts are useless. Helping children see the projects they initiate come to fruition builds their confidence to continue participation as they age.

In Powell’s description of forts at the Montessori school, the children dedicated themselves to fort building, likely more than they put into their school-work. Their
sustained interest, in a day’s work as well as continued interest over the school year, shows how something that is considered work can be engaging and meaningful. One girl described the maintenance that their fort required: “we have to rake up all the twigs and put them in the fire, long twigs are for the doorway.” Some students had begun cultivating their own gardens (Powell 2007, 91-92). What made the children engage these tasks so willingly and with so much concentration? Powell attributes this in part to the children freely choosing fort building on their own terms; they concentrated so hard on their construction projects because it was an activity they chose to do because they enjoyed it. Their engagement recalls Csikszentmihalyi’s state of flow, which occurs when one falls into harmony with one’s work. Montessori, in fact, espoused play as a child’s work (though she has been criticized for using this to normalize young people according to societal values). She believed that “work touches their whole being by satisfying a subconscious urge in their nature to grow and develop into a harmonious personality.” Her classroom lessons harnessed the children’s concentration, which she said and Lambert echoed as well, is like a meditation (Powell 2007, 103). Whatever the activities in the classroom, Montessori seems to be correct in her observations that children freely dedicate themselves to work activities for the joy it brings as long as the child freely chose the task on their own.

The work of building and maintaining forts was more than enjoyable for the students—it was important. And rightly so, as the issues they dealt with in terms of social structure, governance, and construction constitute important, real-world issues. One boy describes what fort building has taught him: “If poor people came, we’d just build a fort for them and give them the materials. Life isn’t just one huge thing, you know, it’s about friendship. Life is hard work. Doing stuff for forts is really hard work!” (Powell 2007, 99).
Not all children agreed with this boy’s socialist work ethic (as was the case with the war-mongering fort leader described above). But many of them treated their recess as their one time of the day to complete their work. As they did so, they expressed much joy, learning, and mental engagement.

**CONDITIONS AND BARRIERS**

Many children lack the opportunity to engage in den building due to parental and spatial restrictions. The following section describes some of the conditions that are necessary if children are to be able to engage in this beneficial play activity. First they need a space where they are allowed to build, even if they are messy (adventure playgrounds reserved space in the city specifically for children’s messy play). Second, they need to be able to initiate their own play and explore options and ideas. Third, they need to have time away from work or scheduled activities so they can invest in building play. Fourth, they need materials with which to build. Each of these four aspects is severely lacking in contemporary play provisions and programming. This leads to the conclusion that ideal playgrounds will not be a feat of industrial design ingenuity but will address children’s access to space, autonomy, time, and tools.

**Spatial Autonomy**

Roger Hart (1979) suggested neighborhood planning decisions that give children “the ability to carve out opportunities for play irrespective of formal play provision.” This begins to suggest that “playground” design is part from an industrial design project, there are implications for neighborhood and city planning. Children play in the spaces of
everyday life. The preceding research shows that den play is fun and has many benefits, yet many children are restricted due to spatial conflicts between adults and children.

One of the four ways Jones (2000) identifies that children negotiate space with adults is “disorder,” when children appropriate discarded space (37-38). Most of the qualitative studies described in this chapter observe that children have the freedom to tinker with their environment when they are given control over a space; the location and loose parts within it do not have to appeal to adults’ taste. In one of the earlier comprehensive studies of children’s games, the Opies observe that “the peaks of a child’s experience are ... occasions when he escapes into places that are disused and overgrown and silent” (Opie and Opie cited in Jones 2000, 37). They refer to the great disordering of London (WWII) and how it produced sites that were ideal for play (adventure playgrounds). Chudacoff (2007) writes that as America urbanized in the 19th century there were increasing number of spaces for children to appropriate for play. These could be leftover spaces in the architecture of new homes such as attics, cellars, and stairways; or these could be public spaces such as docks, warehouses, and stables (2007, 49, 53). Hart determined that children living in suburbs or planned communities were the least likely to find unstructured play opportunities. Many of the designs in these neighborhoods are intentional and children’s additions are not always welcome. Furthermore, without many waste areas there are not always enough found materials to play with.

Sobel found that children tended to play in discarded areas, even if they were littered and uncomfortable. They used natural materials, primarily found natural items. Their dens were kept secret, sometimes from friends as well as adults. He found a similar rule for distance from home as Kylin observed, that older children ventured further but
almost all remained close to safe places. They named their special places and created unique rituals and rules of order for their play there.

The most desirable areas for children in Eslov to build dens were in forest-like areas with thick layers or vegetation, good for finding plenty of hiding spots. Kylin found that children who could not find a hidden spot often did not build a den at all. And some children abandoned their den to create another when it was no longer secret (Kylin 2003). The child rightly kept away from areas that were controlled by an adult aesthetic such as front yards so they can remain autonomous over the activities within their special place. One boy said, “we had a den in another place in the garden but Mamma thought it was too messy, so we have to stay here near the compost. ... There was much more scrap around but I’ve cleaned it up” (Kylin 2003). It seems that children can do quite well in the spaces passed over by adults. In the case of junk playgrounds, the scrap it contains may be useful loose parts for play or building.

Low Adult Intervention

Distance from home affects building choices because children often create dens to have their own space apart from the adult world. However, as one might expect, they need to be assured that a safe space (like home, a playground, or a neighbor's house is nearby. Consequently dens are often built in places where the children can observe the world around them but still remain relatively hidden from that world (Kylin 2003).

Children are rarely in completely autonomous situations. Especially for younger children, they may have a difficult time being adventuresome and taking risks if they do not feel that there is a caring adult to turn to. However, Powell found that the teachers’
intervention in the dynamics of their students’ fort play at times undermined the social
benefit of the children working out their problems for themselves. To deal with the
increasing complaints of misbehavior in the forts, the school principal set up voluntary
weekly community meetings where the children could discuss their concerns and reach
consensus on solutions. As a result they delivered a list of rules to the school at large
governing boundary rights, materials trade, and leadership. The children who were
particularly problematic never attended the discussions and ignored the rules. Many of the
children saw the contract as the administration’s attempt to control their play and resented
the interference. In the end, most of the children agreed that the contact was of little help
(Powell 2007, 95-96). This recalls the experience of governmental intervention in a
problem neighborhood without consulting the local population. The school’s rules did not
acknowledge the “code of the street,” and were unable to address the problem at its core.
In the end, children found the most success if they could convince offending playmates that
it would behoove them to cooperate with the group at large. The world of forts is an
interesting study in self-governance, but only if they are allowed meaningful opportunities
to negotiate this social world.

In other situations adults have found less intrusive ways to aid children’s
construction play. An integral aspect of the functioning of adventure playgrounds are the
play leaders. Their role is to support the children’s initiatives. This involves helping them
gather the necessary materials and perhaps challenge to expand their problem-solving
efforts.
Time for Free Play

Building is an activity that children engage in with little encouragement from adults. In fact, adult intervention can preemptively thwart valuable learning experiences. Powell found that the Montessori teaching tradition transferred well to a recess environment that allowed building play to flourish. Primarily, freedom of choice is a motivating factor and a reason why children can sustain an activity for long periods—because they are truly interested in it rather than being made to do it as part of a school task. As well, an error system allows children to evaluate problem areas without evaluation from the teacher. This occurs as they share building ideas with other children, set goals and adjust them as necessary, and negotiate interpersonal conflicts as they arise (Powell 2007, 101).

Many children do not have the luxury of free time; this may inhibit their ability to engage in building play. A recent guidebook for schools suggested “recess should be a productive learning time where everyone has a purpose and works to fulfill that purpose” (cited in Powell 2007, 87). The Junior Arts Center (Moore 1983) study observed that children gravitated towards building play without any adult encouragement, but only after a period of more energetic bodily play such as chasing and play fighting. One can observe in traditional playgrounds that children generally head straight for the swings and slides and often request these when asked what they would like in their playground. After a while, though, they lose interest in these single-use objects and begin to engage the playground and each other in more exploratory play. If children don’t have extended periods of free play, they may not be inclined towards these more subtle types of play that are so beneficial.
Powell suggests that by far the most important feature making fort play possible at the Montessori school was the children’s access to a wooded area. He calls it a “multi-sensory wonderland of microhabitats” (Powell 2007, 90). The woods provided niches for privacy, physical challenges for all abilities, and a space to be messy. Most of all, natural play areas contain a wealth of materials that can be used as building materials or props for play. From sticks as play swords to vegetation as foodstuffs, children are able to mentally transform objects for play just as they are able to transform found spaces.

Several studies including Kylin’s have observed that children are more likely to build when they are in an environment that has space defining qualities. Natural areas often have enclosed areas and niches. Several researchers have noted that contemporary suburbs offer few places for children to inhabit because they use space so efficiently. Older houses and streets, by contrast, often have leftover spaces; children find these and use them as settings for spontaneous architecture.

*Loose Parts*

Kylin observed that found materials largely determine the shape of children’s dens. Children chose sites where plenty of natural materials are available for construction. Discarded materials from home are common as well such as cardboard, pop bottles, or boxes. One of the requisites for construction play are the materials from which to build. These are characteristically absent from today’s American playground, which consists primarily of fixed equipment. “Loose parts” is a term frequently used in writings about the architecture of built spaces for young people. Designers often recommend that children’s environments be full (without being overwhelming) of items for the children to explore,
utilize, and combine. What adults call the “real world” is, to a child, a rich, sensory environment. However, it is one that they are not always allowed to touch and there is not always a trained adult to guide the child’s questions and exploration. Spaces specifically built for children (schools, playgrounds, child care centers) have the opportunity to create an environment that does allow children to indulges this exploration. Teachers know that much learning comes from observing, exploring, and trying—all ways of interacting with the environment. (It should be noted that Maria Montessori often took her students into the city to allow for accompanied exploration of the “real world.”)

"Affordance" refers to all of the possible ways that an individual could interact with an object regardless of the intelligence or symbolic meaning that the object imparts. Harry Heft (1988) refers to a form’s functional significance and uses this approach to analyze children’s ecology of outdoor environments. The theory of affordances is particularly suited to children because of their unique ability to mentally transform objects and use them for unintended purposes. Adults are often stuck thinking that a bucket is used for carrying something and less quick to use it as a small table or seat. This is a useful tool for observing children’s play because it allows the observer a way to notate an unexpected use of a prop. When evaluating a playground, researchers can take note of the affordances in the yard to determine how rich of an environment it is. Objects with a variety of affordances are useful to construction play because they lend themselves to supporting a variety of play narratives.
CONCLUSION

Playground design can move away from object design and create fertile grounds for children to direct their own play, building their own architecture, and be inspired by the environment. Hart (1987) has long been an advocate for children’s participation in design and planning projects. As currently practiced, participation takes on little meaning past tokenism or consulting. He advocates that playground designers employ a user-centered, highly participatory design approach. This has many of the same benefits of building including social interaction and connection to place.

Kozlovsky (2007, 2) is generous when he compares traditional playgrounds with adventure playgrounds (and other spaces that allow for child-centered building play). The former “operates by inciting kinetic pleasure” the latter “induces the pleasure of experimenting, making, and destroying.” Many studies from child researchers such as Roger Hart (1977) and Robin Moore (1986) have shown how standard playsets or traditional playgrounds fall into disuse because they offer limited complexity. While slides and monkey bars offer immediate interest, they usually do not engage children through multiple developmental stages. Furthermore, while social skills and imagination are exercised on the playground, the primary focus is on gross motor skills like climbing, running and jumping. Famous playground designer Carl Theodore Sorensen critiques the traditional playground for its “inflexible ironmongery” of unattended immovable modular metal climbing frames and swings. The unsupervised fixed play playgrounds are considered to be more dangerous and offer far less choice and complexity of play than adventure playgrounds, but they are much cheaper and far easier to maintain, which makes
them a more realistic but unimaginative option for councils and architects when making planning decisions that involve children’s recreation.

Deprived of space and time to play, the value of a child’s play may decrease. They cannot explore a world they do not have access to, negotiate the social world if they are isolated, or engage in a project if they are constantly being interrupted. Children today are, in a sense, kept from creative free play by the lure of entertainment play and the ubiquity of organized sports. In some cases, intervention involves addressing environmental deprivation; reform playgrounds tried to do this, it is also part of the goal of nature playscapes. In other cases adults have to do very little for children to have wonderful spaces to play: give them the time, privacy, and a place where they can make their own rules. Despite being far less expensive, this is difficult for adults to do because of the way Americans structure neighborhoods and children’s lives.
V. ALTERNATIVE PLAYGROUND MODEL: PLAYSCAPES

One of the main themes of the previous chapter was that natural spaces are conducive for children’s building activities. This chapter will explore an emerging playspace model: playscapes. Playscapes combine the free, nature play or dens with the intentional design of formal playgrounds. There is a plethora of research describing why nature play, and hence playscapes, are beneficial to children. This chapter divides that research into two sections: first, why outdoor play is good for children’s bodies and minds and second, why outdoor play is good for children’s souls. The playscape movement is filled with aspirations: that children will develop relationships with nature, be fulfilled by it, and preserve it later in life. This chapter concludes with the observation that, in spirit at least, playscapes bear closer resemblance to reform parks than today’s playgrounds of the recreation movement.

In nature children found plenty of loose parts, spots with space defining characteristics, and were allowed to interact with and change the environment to suit their play. For older generations and children in other countries the outdoors is the primary place for children’s play. Adults claim the house and the street but children can reign in nature. However, many children in America today do not have access to natural spaces. Many play advocates are concerned about this lack. Den building is only one activity that is lost when children can’t play outdoors. Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, has spurred a popular movement to reunite children with nature. He encourages adults to recall their own fond memories of playing outdoors, illustrates the benefits of freedom that
children have in nature, and describes all the things one can learn about the self and the world by observing and exploring nature.

Due to several factors including rising rates of child obesity, the sustainability movement, and concern over the ubiquity of digital media in children’s lives, a growing body of parents, scientists, and lobbyists are interested in increasing children’s contact with nature. One response to the epidemic is the No Child Left Inside Act passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in September 2008, which increases funding and support for schools to implement nature-based curricula. As the discussion above indicates, the broader, public world can be inhospitable for children. In America there is a trend of children retreating to the private world of the home, or their room even, and lose the opportunity to participate in cultural meaning-making with their peers and their city. McKendrick, Bradford, and Fielder (2000) describe this retreat as a push/pull effect. Children are “pushed” inside by threats to their playspaces including parents’ fear of strangers and other children, barriers created by intense traffic, and funding cuts that let the quality of outside play areas deteriorate. At the same time, increased affluence has allowed for a multitude of child leisure objects (toys and games, media, etc.) most of which are suited for the indoors. This simultaneous “pull” or attraction encourages children to choose to stay in their private worlds (2000, 100-101).

The nature movement is relevant to playground design. Though most playgrounds are outdoors they rarely take advantage of the treasures of nature. This is in part an effect of the recreation movement that sought to lower maintenance costs by reducing plantings. Instead parks departments opted for manufactured play equipment that required no upkeep. However, an alternative playground model is possible and is gaining appeal in
“Playscapes” are part of a landscape design and education movement to increase children’s contact with the outdoors. They function similarly to adventure playgrounds but are comprised of natural, rather than junk, loose parts. Robin Moore has made a career out of observing children at play and designing spaces to improve play opportunities. He was an advocate of adventure playgrounds but lamented that they are primarily filled with junk rather than natural materials. He is the preeminent playscape designer today and designs play areas for zoos, botanical gardens, nature centers and arboretums. Playscapes are not yet popular with parks departments or neighborhood planning agencies; instead, they are primarily built by private organizations with a mission of preserving natural resources. As researchers conduct further studies on the benefits or nature play and designers accumulate a variety of nature-based play installations, the playscape movement will hopefully become more widespread.

The research on the benefits of playscapes generally falls into two categories: first, public health research including physical, cognitive, and emotional health; second, the environmental impact, mixed with a dose of romanticism for nature and nostalgia for childhoods of the past. The following section will briefly describe the empirical studies related to children’s health and access to nature. Researching playscapes could produce an interesting study in evidence-based design.

**Public Health Benefits**

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, childhood obesity has tripled in the last four decades. Outdoor play including organized sports, exploring nature, and
sustained construction play offer children a chance to exercise gross and fine motor skills that the indoor play facility is ill-equipped to allow (Fjurtoft and Sageie 2000). Emerging research links decreased outdoor play with the rise of preschooler’s weight-related health problems (Moore 2003; Sturm 2005; Klesges et. al. 1990). Barbour (1999) determined that multi-purpose play spaces offer physical and social benefits to a wider range of children than those who are already physically competent and confident. Such spaces include sand and water play, loose parts, wheeled vehicles, and varied climbing and play structures. Wilderness offers such elements with no human intervention required such as navigating a river's edge or climbing a fallen tree. These rich play environments encourage psychomotor physical challenges, which stimulate the mind and body simultaneously (Bixler et. al. 2002).

A report by the American Association of Pediatricians (Ginsburg 2006) proclaims that children need unstructured, free play time for healthy emotional and cognitive development. Both qualitative and quantitative studies indicate that natural settings with ample vegetation encourage more and longer play sessions (Moore & Cosco 2006; Rivkin 1997; Wilson 1995; Hart 1979; Taylor, Wiley, Kuo, & Sullivan 1998). Herrington found that landscape-based designs stimulate more aspects of human development than standard play equipment (Herrington and Studtmann 1998). For example, dramatic play props and construction play promote cooperative play and give children the chance to engage their interpersonal skills (Barbour 1999).

One reason that outdoor play is decreasing is that caregivers emphasize academic preparedness over play and unstructured activities, even at the preschool level (Ginsburg et. al. 2006). In addition to health and development benefits significant learning inevitably
occurs in the outdoors especially when it is accompanied by environmental education such as the No Child Left Outside Act support. Natural environments create a rich context for preschoolers’ cognitive development through play (Kellert 2002). One of the earliest stages of development requires children to begin to categorize and distinguish objects, characteristics, and uses. Observing conditions of the world, such as the life cycle of plants and animals or changing weather patterns, gives children practice in interpreting empirical observations (Kellert 2002). Nature surpasses man-made structures in variety and complexity needed to stimulate these learning experiences. Other outdoor education includes practice adapting to a dynamic world and assessing risk. Moore conducted qualitative studies and found that “imaginative play and creative social integration can be supported by a highly manipulative environment having plants as its primary play material” (Moore 1989, 3). For those still concerned with formal education indoors, recent research has identified access to nature as an important mental relief, allowing the brain more capacity to focus and store information (Louv 2005; Taylor and Kuo 2008; Taylor et. al 2001).

**ROMANTICISM**

Richard Louv is one of the premier authors touting the benefits of children playing in nature. In a short article for Orion Magazine (Louv 2009) he declared that scientific evidence certainly helps support the cause but is the secondary reason why parents and policy makers should be concerned. Children have a right to access nature.

In some ways, the case for playscapes transcends the physical and cognitive benefits of nature when we reflect on the spiritual aspects of being in nature. Frost and Talbot
(2007) assert that a desire for mystical places and experiences is a universal feature of humans; this desire is reflected in the art, built, spaces, and spectacles we create for daily life and amusement. While many adults have memories of enchanting places “when we were one with the world, in love with life, suspended in an eternal present,” for many children these experiences are increasingly uncommon (Frost and Talbot 2007). Designing for children’s magical spaces requires that we “be willing to transcend the traditional and the scholarly and engage once again in the mystical, the enchanting and the elusive” (Frost and Talbot 2007).

In great literature and spiritual writing we see the importance that nature has had on the human imagination and our place in the universe. Yi Fu Tuan (1993, 232) writes:

The education of a child is a constant reminder that the child is nature, that its body is nature… Culture shapes and represses the body, but...the body can only be superficially modified, not radically transformed. Throughout an individual’s life it remains animal and passionate. Pure and simple happiness, intense pleasure, and the regeneration of life all depend on the natural functions of a healthy body.

The notion of children’s right to play in nature rests on assumption of nature as an idyllic space. This is apparent when parents describe their reasoning for moving to the countryside: safer place for their children, room for them to run around, plenty of things to play with in nature, a pleasant community to nurture them, safer from traffic, air pollution, dangerous adults, and the like (Jones 2000, 33). Jones notes that these parents, along with many others, are constructing the countryside as a pure space. Pure space is often posed as a dichotomy to urban space and the many challenges and frights associated with it (see Macek 2006 for a response to common public mind set) This is apparent in the American
phenomenon of the popularity of suburb housing communities. As Jones says, this pure space (in adults’ minds) has many benefits for children such as increased freedom and territorial mobility.

Rachel Sebba studied how adults interpret memories of favorite childhood places. She found that 96.5% of 198 participants identified a place outdoors as their most significant place memory (Sebba 1991, 400). Similar results are documented in published environmental biography studies by Kevin Lynch, Clare Cooper Marcus, K.I. Helphand, and R. Hester. Chudacoff used diaries, memoirs, and other historical artifacts to conclude that nature was an important site for children’s play (2007, 51). While not quantitatively accurate like Sebba’s study, Chudacoff (2007) achieves breadth in his work, commenting on children’s play behavior in America children from 1600 to the present and including the voices of slave and native American children (voices rarely heard from in the literature on history of children’s play). Sebba’s participants were asked to write about ways they play outdoors. Their responses recall the rich sensory details of the outdoors and the activities they name were directly stimulated by these features (Sebba 1991, 405).

Sebba concludes from her study that the natural environment “awakens and arouses the original reactions of the child and stimulates imagination” (Sebba 1991, 407). She knows this because so many adults named the outdoors as their favorite childhood place even if that wasn’t the answer they would have given as a child. When asked about memories, adults recall events that are original to childhood and not replaced by later memories, their original reactions to events. The events that are unique to childhood very often occur outdoors.
Sebba’s conclusions of the unique features of natural environments: a site for the original behavior of children (activities that are not replaced by more mature incarnations); a source of sensory stimulation; and a “starting point for daring hypotheses on the meaning of the world” (Sebba 1991, 415-16). “This gives rise to the hypothesis that there are fundamental characteristics in [the natural] environment which are not to be found in man-made environments and that these characteristics fulfill a role in the development of the child and in the unique experience of childhood” (Sebba 1991, 416).

For example, stimuli simultaneously assault the senses at an uncontrolled strength, whereas human-made environments are built for comfort, require little no adaptation, and do not engage awareness. Outdoors children can observe continual change of stimuli that are spread over a long range, which exercises perception and allows children to practice patience. The natural world is characterized by instability; this requires alertness and attention. Life springs from nature and it exerts force and movement. According to Piaget and others this awakens a feeling that one is in contact with living elements which have force and meaning and which one cannot be indifferent to. Children can find patterns and images in the soft, rounded shapes of the natural world, mostly ambiguous, and infinitely varied.

**Discussion**

Playscapes are not a model that is yet popular in America. Like adventure playgrounds, many of the best examples and sources of inspiration are in Europe. To incorporate playscapes into cities requires reversing some of the trends set by history. For example, as became the norm in the recreation movement they are financially unfeasible at
the city level. However, the real barriers between children and playscapes are not architectural.

The first barrier is the culture of childhood in America in the twenty first century. As described briefly in earlier chapters, adult attention has transitioned from not differentiating children, to protecting them, to catering to them. The “helicopter parent” is an image in contemporary America. Parents are afraid for their children’s safety and eager to provide the most enriching activities for them. Thus children’s time and privacy is restricted enough to heavily reduce the amount of free play time children have, even compared to one generation ago (who like to say that their parents sent them outside to play until dinner or dark). American children’s time and territorial range are more restricted than children in other parts of the world (Punch 2000). Children’s culture very often does not include nature. Their culture is too often defined by adults for the purposes of creating a new economic market (Chudacoff 2007). Children are lost in the world of television characters, video games, and theme parks—all are designed to capture and hold attention but not necessarily designed to respond to children’s developmental needs. Children often look up to older siblings. This generation of teenagers is caught up in their parents’ consumerist lifestyle and concerned about clothes and phones. In the saddest cases older siblings may be caught up in damaging social groups, violence, or drugs. These “vices” begin earlier each decade and create a separation between children and what is described as wholesome, energizing, creative, free play.

The second barrier between kids and nature is the spatial politics of natural areas, primarily in the city. Despite children’s affinity to nature, natural areas are not always kid-friendly due to the social rules of space. Much landscaping in the city is purely ornamental,
a child picking the flowers or stomping amongst the plants would be considered vandals of public property. Nature is messy, children are messy, thus playscapes are particularly messy. This does not accord with adults’ visions of public parks as “beautifying” projects. A site of dirt, strewn about tools, and piled logs looks like blight to an adult but an exciting place to explore for children. Our parks still hold some of the motives of pleasure grounds of Olmstead’s day (and his parks are still hailed as some of the city’s best). Today’s iteration of pleasure grounds includes recreational programming such as space for community events and game courts (Cranz 1982). Parks are intended to be intergenerational. Many planners have realized that their parks are not and sought to meet the needs of children and the elderly in these public spaces. Perhaps the problem with playscapes is that they are monomorphic (Jones 2000). Polymorphic spaces allow a variety of alternative activities without disrupting the primary activity, in this case exploratory play. Playscapes, especially those in the city, are often fenced for children’s protection. This is meant to keep adults out as much as to keep children inside. Making the playscape more public increases the dangers. A fence and the accoutrements of a playscape symbolically segregate the area as a place for children (though natural materials to not identify as child-only as much as play equipment). Ironically, one way to improve the presence of playscapes in the city is to research how they can be more intergenerational.

In many ways the playscape movement resembles the reform movement. They are not under the jurisdiction of parks departments; rather they are built by those who have an interest in children’s growth. Reformers were concerned about children being lured to a life of vice by alcohol and gambling. Today we are still worried about children’s access to drugs, sex, and violence. However, playscapes are not created to keep kids away from
society, they are to keep kids away from the *indoors*. Play leaders are present in both playgrounds; in the reform era adults believed that children would be getting into mischief if they were allowed on their own. The mission of today's play leaders is closer to those of adventure playgrounds. They want to encourage young people's natural inclinations and help them make their ideas possible. In a school setting, the teachers as play leaders might engage their students in conversation and challenge their thinking to provoke learning.

The reformers of the early twentieth century had no idea that one hundred years later child advocates would be proclaiming the crisis of rising weight and stress levels in children. The reform park responded to reformers ideas about the future. They believed that children were the key to making the future world a better place. The playscape movement grows along a more popular sustainability movement. How can children be expected to protect nature, the environment, and earth if they have no personal connection with it? (Louv 2005; Chawala 2007). Like the reformers playscape advocates today are motivated by evidence that suggests what is best for children. Their efforts are altruistic and hopeful about the long-range effects of children who grow up with proper play.

Reform playgrounds received funding because they had a strong social mission
VI. Conclusion

This thesis has presented an overview of the history of playground forms and programming in America as well as alternative ways of considering playgrounds. Throughout, the thesis has attempted to make connection between society’s notions of childhood and play and the concurrent playground forms of that era. Observing playgrounds around the world and throughout history reveals the way adults think about children through this specific material culture. The historical research shows that today’s playgrounds are part of a dominant trend of playgrounds as recreation centers. Playgrounds are considered a basic public service that the city parks department is responsible for implementing and maintaining. Before playgrounds had such widespread appeal and citizen demand they had the freedom to be more innovative. Before the recreation movement, the first playgrounds were an inventive response to social ills. America’s social reformers were idealistic and benevolent; they were philanthropists who created spaces in the city for children where they would be safe and could learn proper behavior. This mission is far from what playgrounds today hope to accomplish. With the exception of playscapes, playgrounds today are seen as a neighborhood feature, unquestioned and destined to remain mediocre because they are not intended to fulfill some broader purpose. Playscapes are an emerging movement that bear resemblance to the reform parks of the past because of their strong social mission.

The review of studies on dens in this thesis illustrates a new way of regarding children’s places for play. Instead of relying on scientific literature to create developmentally appropriate play places or relying on an artist’s creativity to design
imaginative playgrounds, research on dens shows how children create their own playspaces.

Children’s dens are infrequently discussed in the literature on playground design. This is likely because there is nothing for adults to design. Simon Nicholson wrote a famous article, “How not to cheat children: The theory of loose parts,” in which he exclaims that adults try to take the fun of designing and building away from children. Any study of vernacular architecture shows that humans have an innate desire to create habitats. The research presented here on children specifically shows that the desire accomplishes more than mere shelter. Building provides variety and challenge. Having a place of one’s own affirms personal identity.

Playscapes support den building because they provide children with nature (as mentioned in the research, nature is not a requisite but it is a strong facilitator of den building) and the time and space for unstructured play (a requisite for den building). The research indicates that dens flourish in safe spaces that are hidden from adults’ view, even better if the builders can spy out onto the world.

This conclusion must be prefaced with the information that den building is most common in middle childhood. All humans enjoy homemaking: very young children find hiding spots that they mentally transform, adults sustain their earlier interests in building and furnishing space. However, space for dens in particular, as an alternative to traditional playgrounds, may be limited in their scope. The spaces allowing for dens might also be spaces for adolescents and even teenagers; both age groups find spaces for private social interaction.
In middle childhood and especially in adolescence young people are fascinated by the adult, real world. There must be a balance between providing spaces for children and segregating them from city life. Providing adequate spaces for children requires thinking about children when making urban planning decisions. Increasing the number of children who can walk to school increases their territorial range and lets them explore their neighborhood. Calming streets reduces parents’ fear of traffic dangers; including pedestrian paths is another option. When the city makes an effort to increase perceived and actual safety parents can feel less nervous about children playing outdoors. New suburbs are not always designed with children in mind because they are too pristine and efficient. Young people find leftover spaces and their presence can clutter a setting if it was not designed to be adaptable.

Providing adequate playspaces for children is not about purchasing equipment and dropping it in a grassy lawn. This trend started in the 1950s and has become ubiquitous by today. Though this is an easy solution, cities need to research how children really play and provide opportunities for children to participate in daily life rather than segregating their token places for play.
VII. References


Macek, Steve. 2006. *Urban nightmares: The media, the right, and the moral panic over the city*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.


