

## **How to Grow a Playspace: Development and Design**

Katherine Masiulonis and Elizabeth Cummins, Editors (2017)  
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*How to Grow a Playspace: Development and Design* is edited by two landscape architects and brings together chapter contributions from authors with many years of experience from a diversity of fields including the history of childhood, child development, psychology, play, education, children's advocacy, children's rights, primary schools, forest schools, playwork, various expressions of art, urban planning and landscape architecture. The richness of these experiences and knowledge are brought together in a well-ordered and structured book with six sections each with a title related to growing of plants: Ground, Sowing, Seedlings, Sprouts, Saplings and The Potting Shed.

The first section is a brief introduction that reaffirms the child's right to play under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and posits the questions: What makes a great playspace? How do you go about designing a great playspace? The following sections and the 43 brief chapters address these questions, but they also provide challenges to the concept of what a playspace is and whether they are needed at all in some contexts.

Section 2 starts with a brief history of playspaces before moving on to discuss perceptions of play, and the importance of play for cognitive development touching on exploration, challenge and social interaction. The design of spaces for the affordances they support in children's play are then explored in a specific pre-school setting, which leads to suggested elements within settings that support specific activities. Some differences between how adults and children perceive and use spaces leads to sections about play being facilitated, or not, in contrasting cities in contexts of a rooftop, a gated community and streets. This section concludes with two chapters about designing inclusive playspaces, the first providing insights into some of the impairments children might experience and the second suggesting how playspaces can support the play of disabled children.

The next three sections each begin with a short introduction to child development from birth to age 5, ages 5-9, and ages 9-14, with the caveat that development is not only a factor of age but can be influenced by other factors, setting the stage for the ways in which play environments can also influence children's development. Section three moves on to a discussion about the natural environment and the benefits this can have for children, and the ways in which natural elements can be a focus for play spaces. Planting, water and rocks are discussed for the affordances they support, and the importance of sensory experiences is also touched upon. Examples are given of these natural elements in specific settings for early years, forest schools, children's gardens and a large public play space.

Section four's introduction to the development of 5-9-year-olds leads to four chapters explicitly focused on creativity, including colors, materials, art represented in different forms, and child-led creativity, which are discussed by drawing upon inspirational examples at different scales from entire parks to ground-level details. The second part of this section is entitled "schools," although this does not accurately reflect the content of all four chapters. The first provides a little discussion about some of the play and activities that can often be seen in school playgrounds, and the third chapter focuses on one school where history, ambition and ethos supported the development of a ground-breaking approach to a school playground. However, the second chapter, which provides a theoretical and stimulating discussion about the use of slides, is not related to the specific space of school playgrounds. The fourth and last chapter of this section is set in the context of a refugee camp where protected space can be important for children's safety but also provides an environment for learning and dealing with some of the differences and difficult experiences the children may have been through.

Section five opens with a discourse about the physical, emotional and social development of 9-14-year-olds together with a chapter about those older than 14, and immediately acknowledges that youth in this age group are often ignored in the external environment. A very brief chapter about technology is followed by a more detailed explanation of the development of a raised platform that never became a train route but did become an exciting, colorful and contextually relevant linear play route. Next comes a chapter that explores good and bad risks, injury and serious injury in play, and touches on the sometimes-inappropriate context of standards—which is somewhat strangely placed in the order of the book. The final two chapters of this section focus on playstreets and an adventure playground and discuss not only the fun these provide for children but also the ways in which adults can allow, or not allow, these activities to take place.

The last section, "The Potting Shed," consists of 11 chapters, some of which are so short that they add very little in content to the book. In fact, this section is something of an anti-climax to the rest of the book because it does not need so many brief chapters: I question the need for them or whether they should have been condensed into two or three chapters.

Overall, the 43 chapters of this book provide many useful insights and experiences with many informative color illustrations, though the number of chapters has resulted in a lack of depth in the text of some. The book can both be read in its entirety and dipped into for reference. If the reader wants to learn a little about child development at different ages then the first part of the three relevant sections should be read together. However, a variety of other threads are also woven through the many chapters and these provide rich stimulation for the reader and include the way that adults can help or hinder good play environments; some of the issues relating to providing outdoor play environments for disabled children; specific settings such as schools, cities and challenging urban and refugee contexts; the use of natural materials and art; and a wide range of settings from large urban spaces to school playgrounds and small interventions. There are examples of working with communities and the difficulties and delights this can bring, together

with how inspired adults can influence and train others and involve many other family and community members to change their attitudes and become involved in providing playspaces whether as long-term spaces or as time-limited interventions. Another richness is the international flavor of the variety in the book, which includes examples in Australia and New Zealand, Europe, and the U.S., as well as locations in India and on the African continent, which are possibly less-known by many who will read this book.

Reading this has reminded me of a short article I wrote for park managers, probably more than ten years ago, in which I stated that children grow and so should play spaces. I thus welcome the way that this book elaborates on this philosophy. It is to be recommended to many adults from different walks of life including parents, teachers, landscape architects, play equipment companies, play workers, developers and funding bodies.

Review by Helen Woolley

**Helen Woolley** received her degrees in Agricultural and Environmental Science and postgraduate degree in Landscape Design from the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK. She is a Chartered Landscape Architect and Reader in Landscape Architecture and Society and has researched and taught about green and open spaces together with children's outdoor environments for more than 20 years. She frequently works with non-academic partners in order to put her research and thinking in to practice. Her recent research interests include outdoor spaces for children in post-crisis contexts and high-density cities in China. She is currently an investigator on an EPSRC-funded research project entitled *Playing the Archive* bringing together aspects of history of play, AR and VR, contemporary play experiences and mixed-reality play opportunities in the outdoor environment.