

**Location**

Cincinnati Nature Center (CNC),  
4949 Tealtown Rd, Milford,  
OH.

**Context**

Suburban/Rural.

**Site type**

Nature center.

**Opened**

2011.

**Size**

1.6 acres.

**Age range**

All ages.

**Access**

Visitors arrive by car (no public transportation or sidewalks). PlayScape entry is free with nature center admission fee (members free).

**Who initiated**

Cincinnati Nature Center (Bill Hopple, CEO), in collaboration with the University of Cincinnati (UC).

**Principal stakeholders**

Cincinnati Nature Center, members and visitors; Arlitt Child and Family Research and Development Center (Arlitt Center), UC.

**Estimated construction cost**

\$200,000 (2009).

**Actual construction cost**

\$500,000 .

**Funding sources**

Private donations, corporate donations, in-kind contributions.

**Contractors**

Sharon Floro, GroundWork Design Cincinnati LLC; Rachel Robinson, Design Landscape Architecture, LLC; Luke Schelly, LJS Design and Build; General Contractor, Andy Argo Construction; Bzak Landscaping; DeVore's Land and Water Gardens, Inc.; Eads Fence Company; Jonathan Young, Elk Run Construction.

**Design Consultant**

Natural Learning Initiative.

## CASE STUDY 6

### Marge & Charles Schott Nature PlayScape

Professionally designed, all-ages installation using natural materials, surrounded on two sides by patches of existing woodland, fully enclosed with a light deer-proof fence, easily accessible from parking. Recirculating stream. Intentionally avoids elements that are found at a typical playground. Part of the Cincinnati Nature PlayScape Initiative to ensure the children of Greater Cincinnati have access to nature and to educate adults about the importance of outdoor play for healthy child development.



6.1



6.2



6.3

6.1 Newly designed landscape already looking wild in the first growing season.

6.2 Layout shows curvy primary perimeter pathways with varied, secondary crosslinks interconnecting nature play settings.

6.3 Family-friendly entrance.



6.4



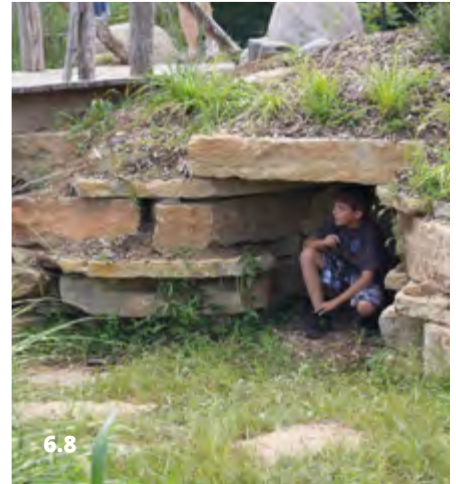
6.5



6.6



6.7



6.8

**How initiated** In 2007, the Natural Learning Initiative (NLI), NC State University, was retained through a partnership of Cincinnati Nature Center (CNC) and the Arlitt Center as Nature PlayScape design consultant at both institutions. The Niehoff Urban Studio, University of Cincinnati, collaborated with NLI to deliver a professional development program (PDP) on design for childhood and nature to a regional group of landscape architects. PDP participants observed development of the Nature PlayScape design program via facilitated design workshops, including children. A team of PDP “graduates,” responded to an RFP and was appointed project landscape architects by CNC. NLI remained involved as a consultant.

**Mission** To stimulate healthy child development, family enjoyment, creativity, learning, a passion for nature, and sense of stewardship through spontaneous outdoor nature play, regardless of income or physical abilities.

**Overall theme** Provide a dedicated place where children can wander off trail, dig, climb, pick flowers, build forts, play in mud, hop on rocks, and engage in all manner of natural adventures—in contrast to the strict rules in the remaining 1,000-acre nature preserve.

**Design goals** For children: Facilitate child initiated learning; encourage curiosity, exploration and discovery; motivate physical activity; stimulate creativity; facilitate social interaction and respectful behavior; prompt decision making to test limits and become confident. For adults: Demonstrate replicable nature play elements for families; encourage use as a research site and teaching tool; model play facilitation and build community among visitors, volunteers and members; inspire users to invest playful nature in residential yards, parks, and school grounds; train caregivers and teachers to overcome barriers to nature play.

**Planning and design process** Design workshops with NLI engaged CNC staff, stakeholders, CNC members, and children in creating a conceptual design—developed further with the design team, which produced construction documents.

**Primary settings** Recirculating stream; gathering terrace; pathways; wetland; hills; rocky places, tunnel and cave; fallen logs; forest and field habitats; willow tunnel; dirt, sand and pebble play; multipurpose lawn; diverse, seasonal plant textures and colors. Outside the entrance: pavillion, shady picnic tables, convenience station, and storage shed.

**6.4** Stacked, local sedimentary rock creates a stimulating three-dimensional landscape. Here, a “tunnel” and “hill”—archetypal landforms, together with “canyon,” “bridge,” and “cave” (also illustrated).

**6.5** “Canyon” and “bridge.”

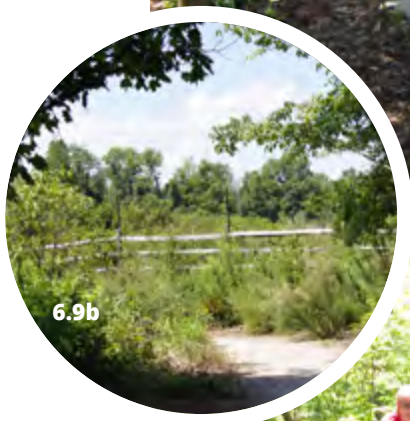
**6.6** A choice of “dirt play” settings are available, each with loose parts, here near the entrance for younger children.

**6.7** More distant dirt-play setting embedded in the landscape.

**6.8** “Cave.”



6.9a



6.9b



6.10

**6.9** Comfortable, shady, resting area for adults with a view across the central space. Feeling at ease is assured because the nature PlayScape is fully enclosed by a light, perimeter deer fence (inset).

**6.10** Large-scale loose parts play setting in the existing woods with permanent natural play structure to give focus and identity—one of several.

**How installed** General contractor, supervised by CNC staff and landscape architect. Local artisans hired for rockwork and rough timber construction.

**Activity programming** CNC staff and trained volunteers provide periodic play opportunities and materials. Usually, the Nature PlayScape is unstaffed.

**Site management** Duties not limited to the Nature PlayScape. Seasonal gardener 40 hours/week. Family program coordinator plans, delivers, and oversees the Nature PlayScape (15 hours/week). Part-time staff assist, including birthday parties. Mowing, replanting, importing materials such as logs, etc., executed by CNC grounds and facilities staff.

**Source of staff support** Operating budget and small endowment.

**Volunteer upkeep** Ad hoc volunteer groups perform maintenance and help with programming.

**Evaluation** Early science learning investigated by Arlitt Center with National Science Foundation grant. Site monitored to develop Nature PlayScape Management Plan (2013).



6.11

**Impact** Nature center family memberships increased almost 30% in the 12 months after opening.

**Future developments** Shade structures by stream while trees grow, so parents feel comfortable and stay longer. Modify stream to better handle sediment loads from mud play. UV treatment to recirculating water.

**Unique aspects** Designed by landscape architects trained in outdoor design for children and families. Hands-on, nature play area within a nature preserve. Part of a regional nature play strategy. Nature preschool established. Perimeter deer fence with a single entry/exit reassures parents that children cannot leave.

**Major challenges** To convey to visitors the notion of personal responsibility for assessing risks and help them not to assume that everything must be safe so that no thinking is required on their part.



6.12

**6.11** During much of the year, the stream flowing through the central open area is the main attraction. Also a photo-op for the mother.

**6.12** The stream is an active play setting. Newly planted trees will offer necessary summer shade in years to come. Photo: CNC.