With kids’ help, playgrounds take an imaginative leap forward

BY CAITLIN GIBSON

As a child, he swung from tree branches and rock-hopped through streams, ran wild among meadows and wandered through woodlands. In the 1940s, the landscape of the south of England was Robin C. Moore's first playground. He's been thinking about playgrounds ever since.

"It probably explains quite a bit about who I am," he says of those earliest lessons in autonomy and discovery, which have long inspired his career as a preeminent urban landscape design researcher who specializes in environmental design, child development and playspaces. Ask Moore about the meaning of a playground, and he doesn't focus on the individual elements within — a slide, a swing, a boulder — so much as what they collectively represent in the narrative of childhood.

"The question is about freedom," he says, and repeats the word emphatically: "Freedom!"] This is the essence, he says, something all children require; it is also something that has become, in our anxiety-producing modern era, much harder for children to find.

The freedom of play is what the trendsetting architects and designers of today's playgrounds think about first. Then they think about how to create that feeling, and how that feeling fits into a bigger story about who we are and who we want our children to become.

"Because playground designers are working with children, they're working with the next generation, there is this intimate tie between the playground designer and trying to envision what the future should be like," says Naomi Heller, a playground designer and landscape architectural associate at StudioMLA Architects in Boston. "And then we design for it."

What that means, right now, is a movement toward more inventive and inclusive playgrounds, spaces that integrate natural elements and emphasize a sense of open-ended possibility. A playground should be welcoming but not predictable or easily mastered; it should be exciting, with some element of risk. A playground of the 21st century must account for a changing climate and for the changing experience of childhood itself. At a time when children are often over-scheduled, when there are fewer places for them to range beyond the reach of daily pressures and parental supervision, playground creators gravitate toward designs with more room for imagination and interpretation. A swing is a swing, but an abstract sculpture can be something to leap from, crawl through, build a fort beneath.

Children have increasingly taken center stage in the creative process — drawing pictures of structures they want to climb on, making models out of clay, building forms with Legos. Their inspiration is handed over to the adults, who consider both the logistical minutiae and the highest-altitude vision of what a playground is meant to be: a place where children should have serious fun, and where fun should be taken seriously.

What happens at a playground? Kids teach each other tricks. They flip off a platform, reach the top of a climbing wall, leap to the ground from an airborne swing. They learn how their body moves through space. They make a friend. In an ideal playspace, Moore says, children have intimate contact with nature — trees, rocks, dirt, water. All the while, he says, they are acquiring tacit knowledge, developing an understanding of their environment based on what they can see, do and feel for themselves. A playground is a place where children both escape and prepare for the complicated reality of adult life.

See Playgrounds on C5.

Nathan Schelcher's son helped design a climbing wall at the Presidio of San Francisco's playground, which reflects nature rather than Tinkertoys.
On playscapes with more-natural design, creativity grows

**PLAYSCAPES FROM C1**

"In the wake of the industrial revolution, many have noticed that children have lost some of the freedom and creativity of their ancestors. This may be due to the fact that children are no longer allowed to roam freely outdoors, but instead are confined to a small space.

Some designers have attempted to recreate this environment by creating more-natural playscapes. These playscapes are designed to resemble natural landscapes and encourage children to explore and learn through play.

A recent study conducted by the National Park Service found that children who play in natural environments have a higher rate of creativity and problem-solving skills. This is because natural environments encourage children to think outside the box and use their imagination.

In conclusion, playscapes with more-natural design can help children develop creativity and problem-solving skills. By providing children with more-natural environments, we can help them develop into the creative and innovative thinkers of the future."

**The finished article is a creative and engaging piece that highlights the benefits of more-natural playscapes. It provides a compelling argument for the importance of natural environments in children's play, and encourages the design of playscapes that more closely resemble natural landscapes.**

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*Schulderer used a butterfly drawing, at top, as his inspiration for a mini rooftop playground in Brooklyn.*

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*The climbing wall at the Presidio of San Francisco, above, in Ohio are two examples of playscapes that take their cues from nature. "I love being able to encourage children to be designers, because they're already artists," says Nathaniel Schulerer, who designed the climbing wall.*