

# 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



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account for a changing climate and for the changing experience of childhood itself. At a time when children are often overscheduled, 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

**Nathan Schleicher's son helped design a climbing wall at the Presidio of San Francisco's playground, which reflects nature rather than Tinkertoys.**

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, 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 reali-

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by they inhabit. "And that," Moore says, "is what informs our life."

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, there came the recognition that children deserved childhood, that they did not belong in factories, that maybe they should be offered a sandbox instead. In the early 1900s, some of the earliest playground designs were conceptualized by adults — grown-ups building things that they thought kids should have. Those things mostly had specific, limited uses: a seesaw, a slide, a swing.

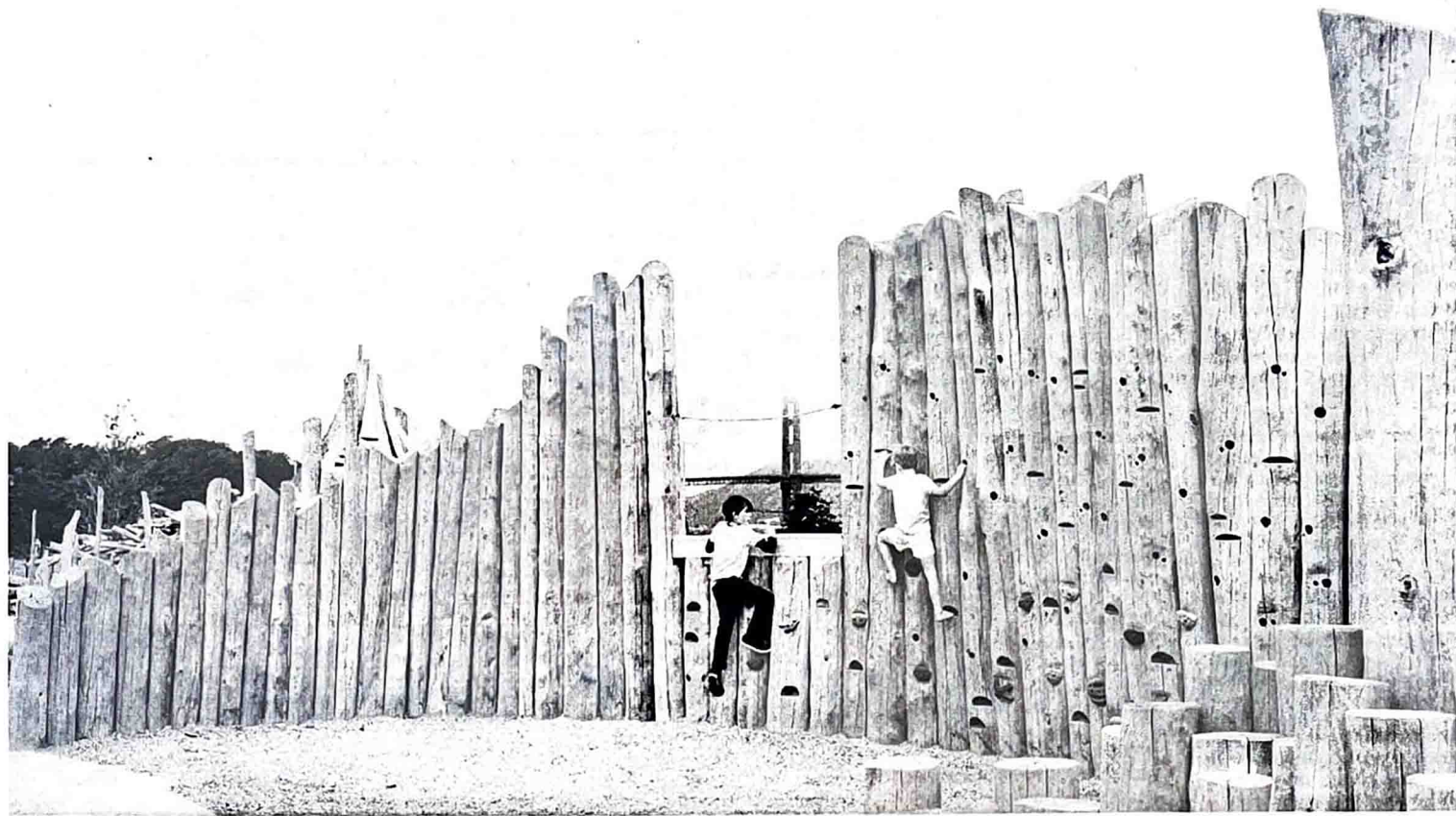
Those classic elements still abound. But as our understanding of child development deepened and children took on a more vital role in the creative process, the designs became far more imaginative.

A few years ago, Nathan Schleicher, creative director at the Canadian playground design firm Earthscape Play, was working on a 2-acre playground installation that would overlook the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. He was tasked with designing a climbing wall composed of upright logs — a structure that would allow children to move laterally, but not vertically, from one side of the wall to the opposite.

This left him with questions: How far should a kid have to reach between one handhold or foothold and the next? How should those notches in the wood be placed to prevent children from climbing up and over the wall, which would not be safe? And how exactly should the notches be shaped to accommodate a child's fingers and toes?

There were no preestablished guidelines for the depth and width of this kind of handhold or foothold, Schleicher says, "so I bought 20 pounds of Plasticine clay, and I brought it home and made log faces on my dining room table, and then I had my son Max — he was 7 or 8 at the time — try them out." Together, they figured out the sizes and shapes that felt right to Max. Schleicher took photographs and measurements, and carpenters created the same notches in wood.

This is a literal example of a child's fingerprints on a project, but collaboration with kids is common. "Sometimes our design team will present different options to children, who will vote on what they most want to see included," Schleicher says. "Sometimes they'll design things out of



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twigs or rocks or Legos. I love being able to empower children to be designers, because they're already artists, they're already designers, they just don't have the power to make the thing."

A boy once gave Schleicher a drawing of a small playground with a colorful butterfly in the center. He refined the idea, and now a rooftop in Brooklyn is home to a climbable creature with wings of orange slatted wood and curved steel antennae.

For a space-themed park that will open in Fresno, Calif., this year, a little girl's drawing inspired a climbable play house shaped like a flaming meteor. For an upcoming project at the Sharon Nature Preserve in Ohio, a child built a model of straws and leaves and proposed a structure with delicate-looking towers and a bridge between; when the playground opens next year, it will include what the design team calls "the

Elevated Nests."

Even the youngest playground visitors have something to contribute, says Moore, who served for 9 years as president of the International Association for the Child's Right to Playnow called the International Play Association. He has collaborated with children on design projects throughout his career: "We've done work with preschoolers — by around age 2, kids have something to say about their feelings about being outdoors," he says. "They can scribble down on paper, and they'll have to tell you what they're drawing, but they can express themselves." Moore has given workbooks to teachers who ask their students to create models and write stories that are then sent back to the designers.

"We ask them: What do you want to see in this space? Swings? Slides? What do you want this space to do for you?" says Lysa Ratliff, the chief executive of Kaboom, a nonprofit focused on ending playspace inequity that has built or renovated more than 17,000 playspaces across the United States. Ratliff says the organization regularly hosts design events for children to envision their future playground. "Kids are the first designers of a Kaboom playground — we see them as the experts, an essential part of the community that we engage," Ratliff says.

Even after a project is complete, children continue to shape a designer's understanding of their work. Schleicher frequently visits playgrounds, where he spends time drawing what he sees, taking notes and chatting with parents. He recently watched children play atop an abstract installation that had a traditional slide affixed to one side, and he noticed that the children ignored the slide entirely, choosing instead to slip down the slope of the sculpture itself. "You see that, and the next time you make a sculpture, you realize — 'Oh, if I tweak this angle, this is how the kids are going to want to play with this,'" he says. "A slide has rules. Parents are constantly saying, 'Hey, only one way down that slide, buddy!'" He laughs. "Instead you can create a slidable moment, and that's a similar experience, but it's one that gets to be discovered."

That sense of discovery adds an undeniable thrill, Heller agrees, which is why she favors elements that offer more affordances — meaning more potential uses, in the parlance of design. "We're trying to give children more freedom to explore," she says, "in a world where freedom is more often restricted."

A playground tells a story, sometimes a personal one: In a predominantly Black neighborhood in Louisville, Schleicher helped create a playspace that celebrates jazz music and honors beloved local civil rights leader Alberta Jones. In a park built for members of a First Nation tribe, his team emphasized intergenerational connection, with spaces where elders can share stories with children. At a playground for children who

have experienced homelessness, Heller helped design a multitude of cozy, quiet nooks, where a child could step away and calm themselves if they began to feel overwhelmed. Heller is now working on a playscape at a center for children with disabilities, all of whom are in wheelchairs, most of whom are nonverbal; their playspace includes a path through a garden filled with sensory experiences — plants with unusual textures, a railing inscribed with a poem in Braille, a wheelchair-accessible swing.

In the past, playgrounds more often reflected the societal aspiration or unease of a rapidly changing world, says Heller, who has written about the history of playground design. After World War II, children gathered to play amid the rubble of bombed-out buildings in Europe, and the concept of "adventure playgrounds" — places where children had free rein to explore, build and take risks together — took root, fueled by the hope that a new generation might avoid global calamity by embracing a democratic, collaborative spirit. Later, during the Cold War and the simmering tension of the space race, American playgrounds skewed toward novel, thematic designs, with cosmic imagery and rocket ship playhouses meant to inspire little would-be astronauts.

Then geopolitical fears gave way to individual ones. A slew of lawsuits over playground injuries in the 1970s changed the American public's perception of playground safety and led the Consumer Product Safety Commission to publish its "Handbook for Public Playground Safety" in 1981. The creation of safety standards was critical, Heller says, but what followed was considered by many to be something of an overcorrection.

"That introduced the idea of a standardized playground," Heller says. "Everything became lower to the ground — if the first model playground was a skyscraper, then these were a one-story residential house. And that really changed the face of play during the time period. It eliminated a lot of the progress that was made in understanding child development, because people were just so scared."

About 200,000 children are treated in emergency rooms because of playground injuries every year, a number that has held relatively steady in recent decades, says Heather Olsen, a professor at the University of Northern Iowa and project principal investigator for the National Program for Playground Safety. The stagnation of the level of injuries suggests that there are factors beyond what is addressed by playground safety voluntary standards, Olsen says: "More research is needed to answer the unknowns of why these injuries are happening."

Playgrounds — in their disrepair, in their inaccessibility, in their absence — are one more way to reveal a society's systemic failures. Public playgrounds in America were once segregated by race; they remain widely segregated by geography and wealth. Ratliff, the CEO of Kaboom, has



ROBIN MOORE

witnessed the neglect and disinvestment that plague public spaces in majority-Black and Brown neighborhoods, where parks are, on average, half the size and five times more crowded than those that serve a majority-White population. A playground tells a story, not always a happy one.

"Playspaces are fundamental to our sense of belonging and how we move in the world. And we are living in a country that was designed for the benefit of some people, and the oppression of others, and that is included in our playspaces," Ratliff says. "Our success as humanity should be measured on the happiness and health and sense of belonging that all of our kids have."

In the past few couple of years, Schleicher has found himself faced with a new type of project: To design playgrounds that will stand in flood zones, an increasingly prevalent reality of our warming world. He is working on five of them, he says.

"It's an interesting design challenge, to think about the resilience of a playground that can be used in the 49 weeks of the year when these flood plains aren't wet," he says. Designers have always considered the movement of sunlight, he says, placing metal slides and shade sails to account for the unique thermal dynamics of a playground; climate change has amplified the need for adaptive playspaces.

This means a shift away from the brightly colored plastic of the past and toward elements such as wood and stone, biodegradable materials that also offer children a tactile connection to the natural world. Designers often incorporate a surrounding landscape — trees, bedrock, streams — into the design of a playscape, acknowledging a mutual dependency: Children need contact with nature to thrive, and the natural world needs a new generation to help preserve and defend it.

Moore has been thinking about this dynamic for a long time. At 85, he is still designing playscapes in nature preserves across the country; he has no immediate plans to retire. He often reflects on the first playspace he ever created, at his children's elementary school in Berkeley, Calif., where his team transformed an acre and a half of hard asphalt into a nature play-and-learning landscape. They planted a stand of redwood saplings there, trees that now stand nearly 70 feet tall.

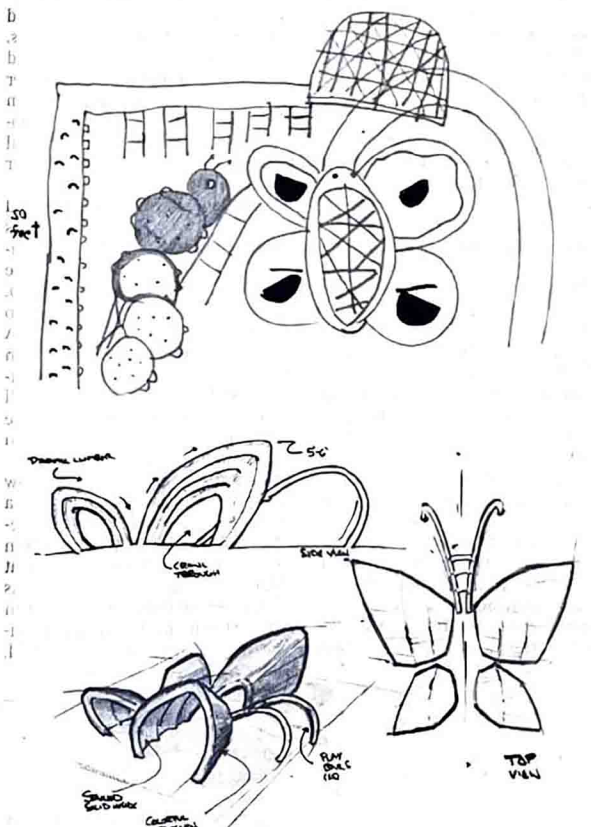
The climbing wall at the Presidio of San Francisco, at top, and the Nature PlayScape, above, in Ohio are two examples of play areas that take their cues from nature. "I love being able to empower children to be designers, because they're already artists, they're already designers, they just don't have the power to make the thing," says Nathan Schleicher, who designed the climbing wall.

"This is the long view of culture. We are about cultural change, cultural realignment, creating a culture of caring for people, and caring for the planet. That's the ultimate thing," he says. "That's what we do in our work: Let children have adventures, and grow up to be courageous, confident people."

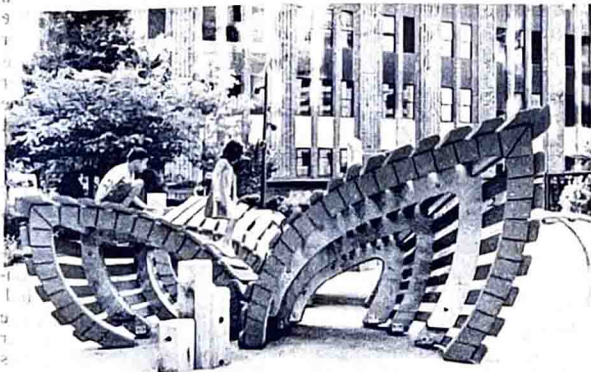
Last fall, Schleicher visited the playground in the Presidio of San Francisco and saw the climbing wall marked by the notches that were modeled using his son's hands and feet. He saw a boy — maybe 9 or 10 years old — trying to traverse the wall. "He's been doing this for 25 minutes," the boy's mother told Schleicher, and then, as her son approached a wide expanse of wood between notches: "Oh! This is the part that always gets him." It was the last, vast stretch of the climb before reaching the platform at the end of the wall, and suddenly, Schleicher recalls, it felt like all eyes on the playground were trained on the child.

"Everyone gets really quiet, all the parents get quiet, there's just this hush as we're watching him reach," Schleicher says, "and he stretches, and he gets it! He makes it to the platform and he pauses, and then you can see this huge smile on his face."

The child's mother turned to Schleicher: "She told me, 'He's been trying for weeks just to do that one thing.'" A minor triumph, maybe, but to Schleicher, it meant something more. A little boy had faced a problem and failed to solve it. He came back to the playground to try again. This time, he was able to reach far enough to cross a once-impossible distance, and he learned how it felt to do that. He had fun.



Schleicher used a boy's butterfly drawing, at top, as his inspiration for a small rooftop playground in Brooklyn.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF EARTHSCAPE PLAY

The finished structure is a climbable creature with wings of orange slatted wood and curved steel antennae.