

No More Cookie Cutter Parks

By Jay Beckwith

California has a long history of playground innovation. The 1960s and '70s were a particularly creative period in playground design. During this time, literally hundreds of totally unique award-winning parks and playgrounds were created. These often included experimental equipment designs which essentially laid the groundwork for the commercial products of today.

Artistic creativity, conceptual advances, innovative use of materials, and attention to detail, characterized the playgrounds of this "golden age". The landscape architects who devoted themselves to these projects found them very time consuming but also enormously gratifying. Much of the play equipment in these playgrounds approached the quality of sculpture. Characteristically, hundreds of hours were spent in community meetings developing plans which were sensitive to the neighborhoods in which the playgrounds were placed.

The play areas from this era became the focus of community recreation patterns and the source of considerable neighborhood pride. When visiting a new town one could find the location of these playgrounds by asking almost anyone on the street —they were community landmarks.

Losing a Legacy

Now these original creative playgrounds have aged, most of them with considerable grace, and with the passage of time hard decisions have to be made. Can they be maintained? Do they meet current safety requirements? Are they accessible for people with a wide variety of disabilities? Usually, the answers are no.

In just the past couple of years, an unexpected pattern has emerged. Across California (and in many other parts of the country), park departments are tearing down these old playgrounds. With few exceptions, these heritage playgrounds are replaced with the ubiquitous new modular pipe and plastic systems.

Granted, the modern integrated play structure has many advantages over the older wood and concrete play sculptures. These new products provide greater durability and are easier to maintain. They also assure compliance with safety and risk management guidelines. Many new play activities have become available such as track rides, curly climbers, and all manner of plastic components.

While real improvements have been made, something has also been lost. We are now entering a new era: the age of the "cookie cutter" playground where one play area looks just like all the others. This pattern is largely due to the fact that the diversity in available commercial play equipment is basically limited to a choice of colors and the scale of the structure.

What is Really Going On Here?

Is it true that these older playgrounds are dangerous? The history of accidents do not support this contention. There have been relatively few claims filed against these designs and they have excellent safety records. Is it true that they have been unreasonably difficult to maintain? To the contrary, they have endured for decades with little but routine servicing.

During the "golden age," landscape architects were required to be creative, work with the neighborhood, and design environments that would be a source of community pride and identity. Today they are frequently being told not to experiment, and are told exactly what play equipment to specify. Sometimes they are limited to a particular vendor or product model.

Play area design and renovation is under the control of maintenance directors and risk managers rather than of landscape architects working with the community. Is it any wonder that the results are stale and cliched? Ask any landscape architect. They will tell you that playground design just isn't fun any more. After you've visited any one of the new playgrounds, going to any other is not as much fun either. Considered on a site by site basis, we may be providing good playgrounds, but overall, we are failing the public.

If all that was lost was a matter of aesthetics it would not be a big concern. But the issue is far larger. The playgrounds of the '60s and '70s provided for many different types of play. The new playgrounds provide only for active play. As a primary designer of the modern modular play system, it was never

my intention that it should be considered the total answer to all children's needs in a play environment.

"PlayBoosters" and "Kid Builders" were designed after five years of observation of over 250 experimental play structures to determine the correct size and play activity requirements of children from 5 to 11 years of age. Manufactures have taken this modular system and reduced its scale to sell it for use in tot areas. However, the smaller versions of these systems provide only a fraction of the play needs for younger children because they do not provide good support for social, dramatic, or constructive play. To limit equipment selection to such active play systems makes the playgrounds poorly suited to the play needs of younger children. Providing only active play equipment also makes accessibility to play by many children with disabilities impossible.

Society is Changing

In the last two decades there have been startling changes in our society. A recent book, "Childhood's Future" by Richard Louv, details and discusses many of these changes. To effectively plan for the recreational needs of our society we must be aware of the changing demographics. Here is a summary of just a few of Louv's findings:

Increased Poverty. Young families are under considerable economic stress and this will have an impact on their need for and use of leisure services. One out of three American children now live in poverty. In the past twenty years the percentage of income spent on housing has doubled. One-third of the new jobs created pay less than \$12,000 per year. These entry level jobs are being filled, in many cases, by people just starting families. Most children will experience a divorce in the family. When couples separate, their earnings are cut by a third. The financial condition of young families impacts park departments in a variety of ways. For example, if people do not have money to take a trip, they will tend to drive to the nearest quality playground. These visitors are sometimes seen as "outsiders" invading the local park by the neighbors and a variety of conflicts can arise.

Time for Leisure. Economics has also had an impact on the use of recreational services. The typical workweek is now closer to 50 hours per week than it is to 40. This added time at work is taken away from leisure

time. The amount of time parents spend with their children is down 40% since 1973. It is no accident that McDonald's Restaurant play areas are so popular; they are convenient, clean, and safe. A parent can stop at "Playland" and get a low cost meal and play for their children in less than ten minutes. Can, or should, park departments be concerned with such competition from the private sector?

Health and Fitness. Societal changes have also had an impact on community health. By far the most leisure time is spent in front of the TV. As a nation, we are not as active as we once were. This shows up in the children's fitness levels, which are drastically lower than just ten years ago. Studies show that the activity levels of children are very strong predictors of life-long patterns. We are currently raising a generation of future couch potatoes. The problem is especially acute in California, where schools have eliminated most physical education specialists. Quality parks and play environments can draw people out of their homes and into positive physical, social, and affective interactions.

Perceptions of Safety. Marshall McLuhan's concept of the Global Village, as put forward in his book, "The Medium is the Message," has come true and it has implication for recreation. The constant barrage of news about violence in our communities has parents completely paranoid. Children are no longer allowed to play in the street or even the front yard. The experiences we had growing up are no longer part of the everyday lives of children. Few children now build treehouses or "dig holes to China." Parents need a safe place for their children to engage in these important developmental experiences. The typical park, with its manicured lawns and island of sand filled with metal equipment is too formal to allow for discovery learning, which is the primary way children learn about the world. At least some of our parks need to have places where it is OK for kids to pick flowers, to dig in the dirt, and generally engage in natural play.

Study after study show that far too many young families and children are in desperate situations. As professionals in parks and recreation we have daily personal experience with these trends. But as professionals, we are also among the more fortunate in our society. Our personal comfort makes it all too easy to overlook the real needs of our clients. When, for example, was the last time you had a staff retreat to discuss emerging societal trends and how to design facilities and develop programs to meet these changing patterns?

Just the single issue of learning about the financial condition of young families can have important implications for the management of your programs. For example, many park professionals feel threatened by what they see is a "lawsuit-happy" society in which the get-rich-quick mentality has become pervasive. While this may be true in a few cases, it is far more often the case that most people don't have sufficient medical insurance or savings to cover the cost of hospitalization. They have to sue just to survive the economic impact of an accident to a family member. We should be dealing with the root cause of lawsuits with risk management policies which quickly compensate for medical expenses incurred in playground accidents. Instead, we have become defensive and started to design parks for the lowest possible liability as the prime criteria instead of designing for the needs children and families first.

We should consider the lives of so many of our young families, living in poverty or close to the line. Working long hours for little pay, frightened for their safety, largely physically unfit and with few recreation skills. What kind of park, what sort of playground, do these families need?

A New Paradigm: Playscapes

It is time we reconsider the wholesale removal of the significant playgrounds from the "golden age" and their replacement with "cookie cutter equipment. We must resist the liability hysteria. We need the courage to advocate for creativity and innovation in the creation of new playgrounds. We can and should return to the idea of the park as the focal point of the community. We must develop a better understanding of the recreational needs of all of our citizens regardless of physical abilities. To create playgrounds that meet these needs, we must develop a new paradigm for playgrounds a new model with clear ideas and workable solutions around which people can rally.

Over the years different types of playgrounds have been given unique names to help people identify their special design characteristics. We have seen adventure playgrounds, creative playgrounds, tot lots, mini parks, and theme parks. Playscape is a term which has been used in the past but is poorly defined. The term was coined by merging the terms "play" and "landscape" in an effort to emphasize that the total environment can contribute to play value.

The term Playscape is precisely the name we need for this new model for playgrounds. Its historical meaning links it to our past traditions and yet there is no impediment to adding to the definition so that it could include the best of new technology which has become recently available. We need to fully define the term playscape and develop design standards to make it a powerful tool for creating more functional playgrounds.

This new definition of playscape should balance the benefits of our contemporary understandings of liability and low maintenance with the developmental needs of children. The successful adoption of this new model will depend on how well it meets the needs of three groups. Park departments must have environments which are durable and safe. The realities of funding require that a playscape include design features which make it appealing to philanthropic organizations so that parts of each project can be supported by grants and funding sources other than general funds.

The playscape concept must include a comprehensive process for community participation. When the neighborhood is actively involved in the planning process, Playscapes will become a source of community pride and identification.

This playhouse is one of the few products available which provide for social-dramatic play in a form which meets the standards of durability and supervision required today.

Finally, the needs of children must be the foremost playscape design criteria. It is necessary that the definition of a Playscape start with an acceptance of the standards imposed by parks for safety, maintenance, and budget but the definition can not stop there, the developmental needs of the children must also be included. If a playscape is to meet the needs of park departments, neighborhoods and children, the following elements must be included:

- 1) Active Play. The new modular play structures are very successful at providing for the active play needs of children. This is a proven concept that rightfully belongs in any park. The way these systems are configured, however, could be improved. We need to do a better job of including upper body building events, interesting climbers, and dynamic balance events.

2) Constructive and Manipulative Play. The essence of play is the freedom it provides children. A good playscape would empower children to create and change it. In the "old" days we believed in the value of the "adventure playground" which children could build themselves. Concerns for liability, maintenance and aesthetics destroyed the few experiments that were tried in the U.S. In many other countries the idea is alive and well, and has evolved into a practical program easily included in many park settings.

Perhaps we can't go as far as the adventure playground, but we can and should include, at a minimum, sand and water play. Note that the criteria is sand and water. Dry sand under an active play structure may provide a good fall surface, but it does not provide for constructive play. Sand must be moist if it is to be used in the building of sand castles. Just because it is difficult to design a low maintenance water feature doesn't mean that the function should be abandoned. According to Kazuo Abby, of Royston, Hanamoto, Alley and Abby, "Water features within the total play environment are extremely important. The wet sand provides unlimited creativity and it's safe, simple, and fun."

The first "manipulative" piece of equipment was the steering wheel. Recently we have seen the development of a variety of game boards, like tic-tac-toe panels. Some companies have been adding a variety of controls, levers, binoculars, etc., to their theme play equipment. This greatly expands the play value of what is essentially static equipment.

3) Social Play. To create social play areas only two basic criteria need to be met. First, there should be a "transaction interface." This is simply a window, counter, or storefront that creates an "inside" and "outside" Such an arrangement literally sets the stage for all sorts of dramatic play.

Second, a sense of enclosure is necessary. It is possible to provide small semi-enclosed spaces which offers a sense of intimacy but also allows for supervision. When properly scaled, such spaces are too small to provide cover for vagrants.

4) Uniqueness. Communities need and value unique features in their parks. Playgrounds with trains, ships, sculpture, and other special features create a sense of identity. The photo on the next page illustrates a successful recent installation of such a feature at Peacock Gap Playground. While it was thought that theme equipment would inhibit children's play, it is now known

that such equipment can stimulate rich imaginative play. Children are not particularly troubled by playing "Star Wars" on an old fashioned looking ship.

Currently the major obstacle to fulfilling the uniqueness criteria is the requirement that projects be bid and that three vendors must submit proposals. Certainly there are other methods of insuring competitive pricing in the creation of playgrounds. These methods will have to be clearly defined and made available to our communities.

5) Accessibility and Integration.

As many advocates have brought to our attention, integrating all citizens is not only ethically correct, it is also the law. There is every indication that the federal government is going to actively enforce the new Americans With Disabilities Act: this means playgrounds will have to be made accessible. While it is not easy, we can design play areas for those who have restricted mobility in order for them to be integrated with the general population. The problem is that there are few really satisfying design solutions to this problem. The manufacturers of equipment have generally offered only ramps. A few provide low horizontal ladders or ground level steering wheels.

Only a few manufactures have addressed the problem of creating transfer stations so that children may play out their wheelchairs.

Most advocates for accessibility say that ramps have a very small role in providing for the needs of people with various disabilities. Despite what most equipment manufacturers have concluded, wheelchair access is not the only issue to be addressed in creating an integrated environment. Putting a ramp to an active play structure on which there is nothing appropriate for the child who is physically disabled to do is insulting and can even be dangerous when used by skateboarders. On the other hand, providing access to wonderful places for social, constructive, and imaginative play, like the ship at Peacock Gap, is right, and realistic.

"When children arrive at Peacock Gap Park, they head straight for the ship. It's a fairyland, a pirate ship, a playhouse and a lookout. It promotes hours of

creative play. Oodles of children are on it all the time."— Sharon McNamee, Recreation Director, City of San Rafael

In the '60s there were few solutions for providing creative structures so we designed and built them ourselves. We cannot wait for manufacturers to develop solutions for integration — their agendas are completely different from ours. It is not just an equipment problem but an issue which involves the total design of the playscape.

6) Involvement.

Neighborhoods have the right and responsibility to be involved with the design of their parks and many park departments already work hard at getting user participation. These departments know that just letting neighbors choose equipment from a few catalogs does not qualify as real community involvement. Park design budgets must allow sufficient resources for educating the community. Citizens should be provided with information about the developmental play needs of children as well as current safety requirements. Community participation needs to be facilitated and nurtured. However structured, community input is essential in creating a play area that reflects the unique character of the site. This public relations work also builds a sense of identification with the park that will significantly increase utilization, reduce liability, and lower vandalism by removing the park as a symbol of external bureaucratic control.

For many years volunteers have been used in the installation of play equipment. With the supervision of a trained and licensed installer, this form of community involvement produces substantial savings and a sense of ownership in the neighborhood. The playscape concept should include guidelines for such volunteers.

7) Programmability. An example of a programmable feature would be an informal stage area where small groups can make presentations. Day care, latch key, populations with special needs, sports, and other programs use parks on an increasingly frequent basis. Future park designs should consider programmed use of the facility in a systematic way. Defining design opportunities for the programmed use of the park would be one of the most important aspects of the playscape model. For far too long, recreation programming considerations have been ignored in the design of parks. Current times demand that they now be included. Designing for the

programmed use of the playscape is one of the most powerful tools available for meeting the play needs of all children.

8) External Funding Opportunities. Californian's have been very generous in providing general obligation bonds for parks. Unfortunately, most of this money has been for acquisitions rather than operations. We must recognize that there will not be a sudden increase of funding through governmental sources. A playscape should take this financial situation into consideration from the very start. Playscapes will cost more, if only because there will be considerably more of the budget allotted to the planning process, to say nothing of the programming aspects or special features. Therefore, planners need to be constantly alert to identifying elements of their plans which can be broken out as separate components which may be attractive to a variety of funding sources or sponsors. Creating an adopt-a-park program can increase funding and lower maintenance costs.

9) Low Liability. The obvious first step in lowering liability is complying with Consumer Product Safety Guidelines. But just putting a compliance requirement in a bid specification for equipment is a very small step indeed. The playscape concept should be based on an fully-developed and integrated approach to risk management. For example, providing other kinds of play opportunities (like social and constructive, rather than just physically-challenging active play equipment) will reduce exposure to losses because children will not be solely engaged in high risk play. Providing playground safety fitness programs to schools, using the park as a focus, is another element in a comprehensive risk management program which can pay handsome dividends and justifies the design criteria of programmability.

10) Low Maintenance. A chief benefit of the new modular play equipment systems is their ease of upkeep while providing bright colors and bold shapes. Currently there are few products available for social and constructive play that provide this same level of durability. As the playscape concept becomes widely understood and accepted, market demand will force more products to become available. But until that happens there is much that can be done in the same way we have done it since the '60s do it ourselves. Since the features we are interested in, like good sand play experiences, do not present a liability exposure, they can be designed by landscape architects and built by contractors. But insuring correct design is only half the solution. Correct installation must also be assured. This may be difficult without the

traditional support of equipment manufacturers. The playscape guideline will have to provide standards for quality installation.

11) Kid Friendly Plants. The selection of plant materials in and around the Playscape should be carefully chosen for benefits to children. Plants can provide a sense of enclosure, loose parts for constructive play, flowers for decoration, herbs for smells, and changes in the patterns of light and shadow.

Community Gardens have been around for years and their management and operations systems are now well developed. As the photo on this page illustrates, these gardens can be integrated into a playscape and provide a positive visual contribution to the park. Community gardens will help fulfill the criteria of programmability, accessibility and integration. They offer a place where children can, with proper supervision, dig in the earth and cut flowers.

"Community Gardens can coexist within the playground environment and become a very important element of the urban playground experience. The San Francisco Community Garden Program has been an extremely positive experience for the whole community, including people of all ages and abilities." - Ron DeLeon, Assistant Superintendent, Neighborhood Parks, City and County of San Francisco. Photo by Perry Nenning

12) Multi-cultural. California has been a multi-cultural community since its founding. The golden age playgrounds reflected this diversity. The new playgrounds have a post-modern industrial appearance devoid of any cultural connotations. Resistance to celebrating the cultural heritage of particular neighborhoods in park design stems from the political content which has been included in some of these efforts in the past. While a radical La Raza mural may have reflected the cultural identity of the barrio, it also made a political statement which some members of other communities found offensive. A dragon play structure in the Chinese Community; a ship in the harbor park, or a Spanish-influenced site are all appropriate expressions in public facilities. The playscape concept needs to define what are the proper limitations for ethnic expression and the proper venue for particular political points of view.

13) Age Appropriate. While the modern multi-functional modular play systems are great for kids from six to nine years, they are less appropriate for other children who need more social and constructive play opportunities.

Adolescents have been a particularly forgotten age group. While they do, of course, use the ball fields, they are also interested in free play. One need only watch them on their skateboards to confirm this. They are also interested in just "hanging out" in small groups where boys and girls can "check each other out. 'Adults have concerns about such groups of teens; are they going to do something dangerous to themselves or others? The playscape concept can help reduce these concerns. A playscape, because of its rich array of unique attractions, will be used by more concerned citizens over a longer part of the day. This high-use brings with it increased adult supervision which, in turn, will help reduce inappropriate behaviors. Welcoming in adolescents makes the playscape a place where they feel they belong and removes it as a target for vandalism.

14) Comfort. It seems obvious that a playground should be a comfortable place for people to visit. But it is surprising how many parks are built without even a bench close to the play area. The issue of a clean, safe, and open bathroom is also central to the comfortable use of the playscape. Park benches can be selected which offer real comfort, but do not encourage people to sleep on them if this is a concern. Shade and shelter from wind should also be considered.

Balanced Design

These fourteen criteria should be the foundation of the planning process when designing a playscape. Expanding these preliminary design concepts into specific guidelines will provide powerful design and planning tools. As an example of how this will work, the figures below illustrate how the application of the age appropriate criteria would produce a budget for play equipment that would be different for children ages 2 to 5 and for those 6 to 9.

Playscape Equipment Budget

(Ages 2 to 5 Years)

25% Active Play

30% Constructive Sand Play

30% Social Play

15% Accessibility

Younger children are predominantly interested in constructive and social play. Active play focuses on swings, slides, and climbers. The cost of accessibility features is modest for play areas for younger children because there is less emphasis on active play and the structures tend to be lower.

When designing for this age group, a space guideline of 75 square foot per child and a budget guideline of \$500 per child served is an appropriate standard (75 square feet per child is used by the California State Department of Education). Site preparation and provision of fall surface will add approximately \$250 per child. Combining these together results in a target budget of \$750 per child or \$10 per square foot. If we are designing a space for 25 children, the planning goal for the project would be 1875 square feet and an equipment and sand budget of \$18,750. Of this budget, only \$4,687 should be devoted to active play.

Playscape Equipment Budget

(Ages 6 to 9 Years)

40% Active Play

15% Constructive Sand Play

20% Social Play

25% Accessibility

The school age child is primarily interested in active play equipment. While swings, slides, and climbers continue to be used, a greater variety is required to sustain their involvement. Upper body building events like horizontal ladders, ring treks, and track rides are extremely popular with this age group. A large, complex linked structure provides graduated challenge and insures use by all children.

The budget guidelines for this group are different than those for younger children. The space requirement increases to 125 square feet per child and the budget increases to \$750 for equipment. Add \$500 for surfacing a larger area, and the same \$10 per square foot guideline is obtained. If we are designing for the same size population of 25, then the area required would increase to 3,125 square feet and an equipment and surfacing budget of \$31,250. Of this budget, \$12,500 would be used for active play equipment.

The Elementary School as the New Community Center

The trends and solutions proposed here suggest a very surprising future trend. Given the need for programming and the general lack of funding available both to schools and park departments, out of necessity we will see increasing cooperation between schools and park departments. There are many communities which currently employ joint-use agreements to mutual benefit. These programs will expand. There have even been cases where parks have sold small, poorly used, sites they could not afford to maintain and used the money to develop improvements to the neighborhood elementary school play area. The playscape concept would be an ideal model for such a cooperative venture. It may be that the most interesting new parks will actually be connected with schools.

A Call for Action

The playscape concept is an idea which is right for the times. This approach can solve the seemingly mutually exclusive issues of liability, accessibility, play value, and cost effective operations, in an integrated fashion. Expanding this concept into a fully-developed standard would create a new design tool useful for designers throughout California. We need to preserve the successes of the past. We should bring together the designers from the golden age with other concerned designers and those park departments who have lived with their play environments for two decades to discuss the successes and failures.

We need to review the Consumer Product Safety Commission Guidelines due out in October and the forthcoming American Society for Testing and Materials Standards so that our future play areas will conform. The hard work of developing design solutions for integration beyond ramps for children with mobility disabilities needs to be done by experienced designers and park professionals working closely with accessibility consultants. Practical solutions for providing social and constructive play need to be explored.

A sensible strategy would be for the California Park and Recreation Society to join with the California Society of Landscape Architects to co-sponsor a task force to detail the playscape concepts proposed here. With the passage last year of Senate Bill 2733, which mandates that all playgrounds in the State be brought into compliance with the Consumer Product Safety Commission Guidelines by the year 2000, we desperately need this new

vision. Without the creation of Playscape Design Guideline all the playgrounds in California will be as uniform as peas in a pod. Its not too late to preserve the idealism of the '60's while making a bold step to provide the recreation diversity which can truly meet the needs of the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jay Beckwith has done just about everything one man can do to improve play environments for children. He created School Yard BigToys, PlayBoosters, and Kid Builders and is currently retained by Kompan, of Denmark. He has authored three books and dozens of articles and is currently writing "Vanishing Play," a pictorial essay on the disappearance of traditional play. He is known for his advocacy for safer play equipment and most recently developed a comprehensive risk management program with the School's Insurance Authority of Sacramento. Information on Senate Bill 2733 and a bibliography of readings is available from the author by calling (707) 887-7954.