

# Playful Landscapes

A playful landscape...

- enables children to appropriate the space.
- promotes playfulness in everyday encounters.
- requires flexible design that supports healthy interactions among its users.
- facilitates the expression of children's playful desires.
- considers that the space will be perceived and used by children.
- must create outdoor learning experiences that support the user's individual and collective development, especially for children.
- needs to integrate a flexible and open design approach to generate programmatic diversity and children's participation.
- creates experiences for every sense.
- integrates diverse textures and loose objects in the space.
- stimulates the imagination.
- evokes all kinds of use, including unexpected ones.
- offers children the means of discovering things for themselves.
- prioritizes contact with nature.

Creating new spaces for people in urban or natural environments requires a complex understanding of various and diverse aspects of a specific terrain. Landscape architecture practices negotiate with tangible and intangible resources to potentiate, equilibrate, control or preserve some existing economical, social, environmental and cultural connections. Despite the permanent condition of those spaces, where floral and faunal species can grow and thrive for years, ephemeral but transformative human experiences and perceptions can be developed in infinite ways and through everyday encounters. As J.B. Jackson mentioned in *Vernacular Landscape*, “[l]andscape is a space on the surface of the earth; intuitively we know that it is a space with a degree of permanence, with its own distinct character, either topographical or cultural and above all a space shared by a group of people.” (Jackson, p. 5). An outdoor shared space requires a flexible design that supports healthy interactions among its users. Spaces where people can learn from their experiences, decisions, movements and conversations. Landscape architects must create outdoor learning experiences that support the user’s individual and collective development, especially for children. In their early years, they have the capacity to obtain the tools needed for their healthy social, cognitive, physical and emotional development. It is during this time where they are shaping their perception and knowledge about everything they can see, taste, smell, hear and touch. Sometimes, their surroundings allow them to experience lively encounters where they can find their own ways to express themselves and interact with other human and inhuman entities. Two of the most recognizable play advocates of the 21st Century, Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell—in a publication created for the Play England non-profit organization— mentioned that “Human development is a lifelong process of

experiences that connect the brain, the body and the environment in a constant, mutually influencing shaping process”. (Lester and Russell, p.2). Landscape architects are responsible for creating environments that facilitate those transformational and ever-changing processes. Additionally, landscape architecture deals with dynamic forces and must integrate a flexible and open design approach to generate programmatic diversity and participation for the youth. The essay will explore the potential of landscape architecture in the creation of healthy and participatory environments for children living in cities and establish its crucial role in the psychological development of citizens.

## Importance of playful learning experiences in outdoor rooms

At the beginning of the 19th Century, Frederick Law Olmsted began a conversation about the importance of creating accessible outdoor spaces for people. For the design of Central Park, Olmsted designated a specific piece of land for free and open uses, which eventually became the Hecksher Playground (Figure 1)—an adventure play area created by Richard Dattner in 1969<sup>1</sup>. As Jackson wrote, Olmsted “was aware of retained sizeable areas of land where the common people, and particularly adolescents, could exercise and play and enjoy themselves, and at the same time participate in community life” (Jackson, p.128). A few years later, when Olmsted began working at broader scales, promoting public access to national resources such as the Yosemite National Park in California, he believed in the benefits

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<sup>1</sup> The Cultural Landscape Foundation, 63rd Street - Heckscher Playground. <https://tclf.org/landscapes/63rd-street-heckscher-playground>

that people could obtain through the contact in nature. In 2004, Ron Williams's *Landscape Architecture in Canada* explains that Olmsted was keenly aware of the certain impact of nature in people's lives: "He observed that natural scenes exert a positive influence on the psychological well-being of those who are exposed to them over a continuous period of time" (Williams, 238). Providing access to playful experiences in natural environments is fundamental to promote community involvement and to instigate more interaction between its members.

There is now a plethora of research that establishes the importance of contact with nature and play as two necessary elements for the healthy development of children. In 2013, the Canadian non-profit organization Evergreen published design guidelines that aim to facilitate the creation of playful environments for children. Evergreen's guidelines claim that "[p]lay allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), proposes several other benefits of play, stating that "[children who regularly play outdoors tend to be fitter and leaner, develop stronger immune systems, play more creatively, have more active imaginations, report lower stress levels, and demonstrate greater respect for themselves, and others." (Spencer and Wright, 2014). Playful landscapes can therefore function as catalysts for healthy interaction between people and their surroundings.

<sup>2</sup> Landscape and Child Development: A Design Guide for Early Years-Kindergarten Play-Learning Environments, 2013

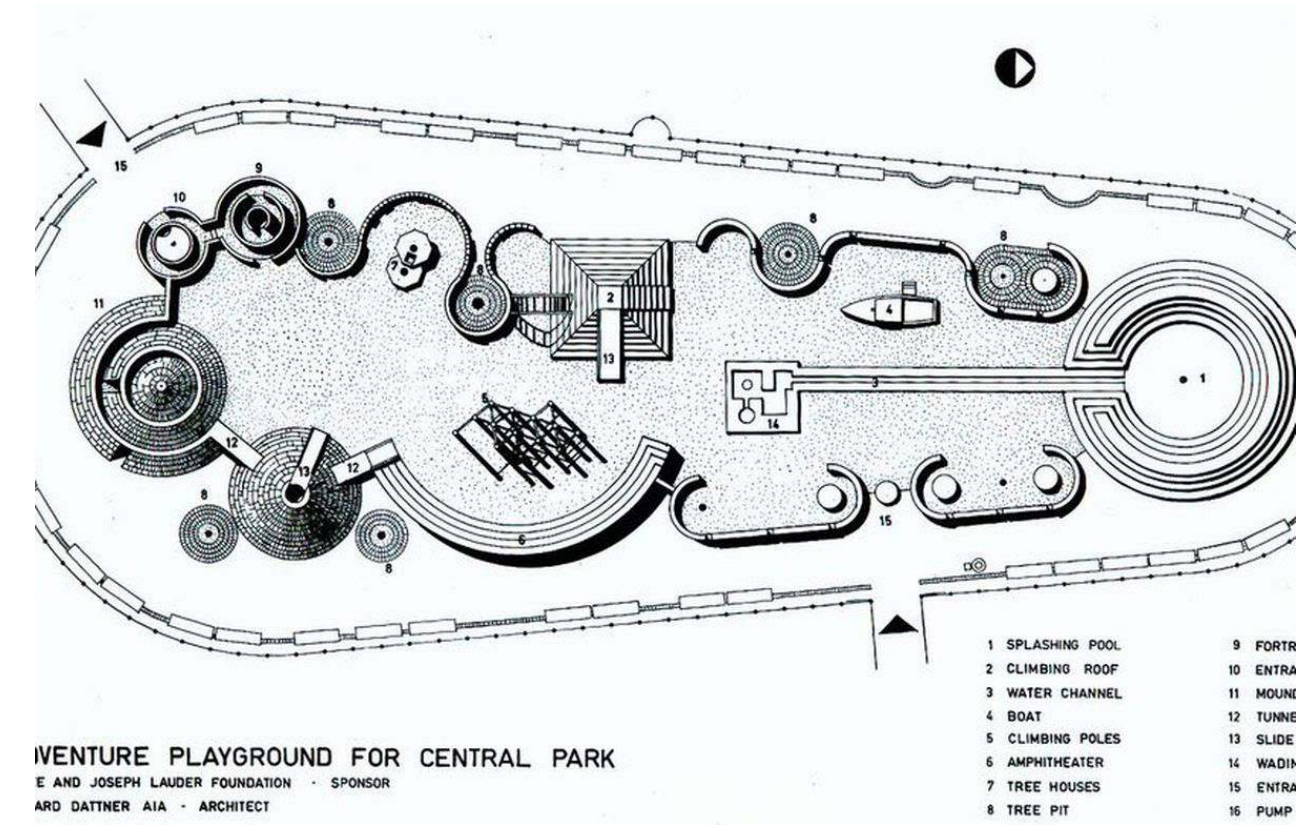


Figure 1. Architect Richard Dattner's plan for the Adventure Playground in New York's Central Park, circa 196.



## Design for Play: A participatory tool in landscape architecture

Landscape compositions must have a thoughtful consideration for the creative process of children living in cities. Every object, material, form and color in an outdoor space should either contribute or reflect the creativity of its young occupants in some way. In 1969, Dattner's manifesto establishes two main requirements for the design of play environments. The first is that "the environment must provide the individual with an adequate range of experience". The second is that "the environment must allow for some measure of control by the individual". (Dattner, p.42) Therefore, children need spaces with "experiences for every sense" (Dattner, p. 44) as well as flexible spaces where their decision can be reflected. In the following three case studies, we can observe how these principles of experiential diversity and individual agency can be implemented in a practical setting.

In 1967, the Canadian landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander designed the Children's Creative Centre Playground for Montreal's Expo '67 (Figure 2), a temporary progressive playscape with diverse programming. Multiple areas, with different textures and materials were made available to young visitors, including playful topography, sandboxes, tunnels, bridges, play tables, musical screens, and others. While circulation through the site is not clear from an adult's point of view, the use of the space and the significance of its elements depends completely on the child's interpretation. For example, stepping logs and other structures allow children to move throughout the park in a dynamic and playful way. At the same, other planting

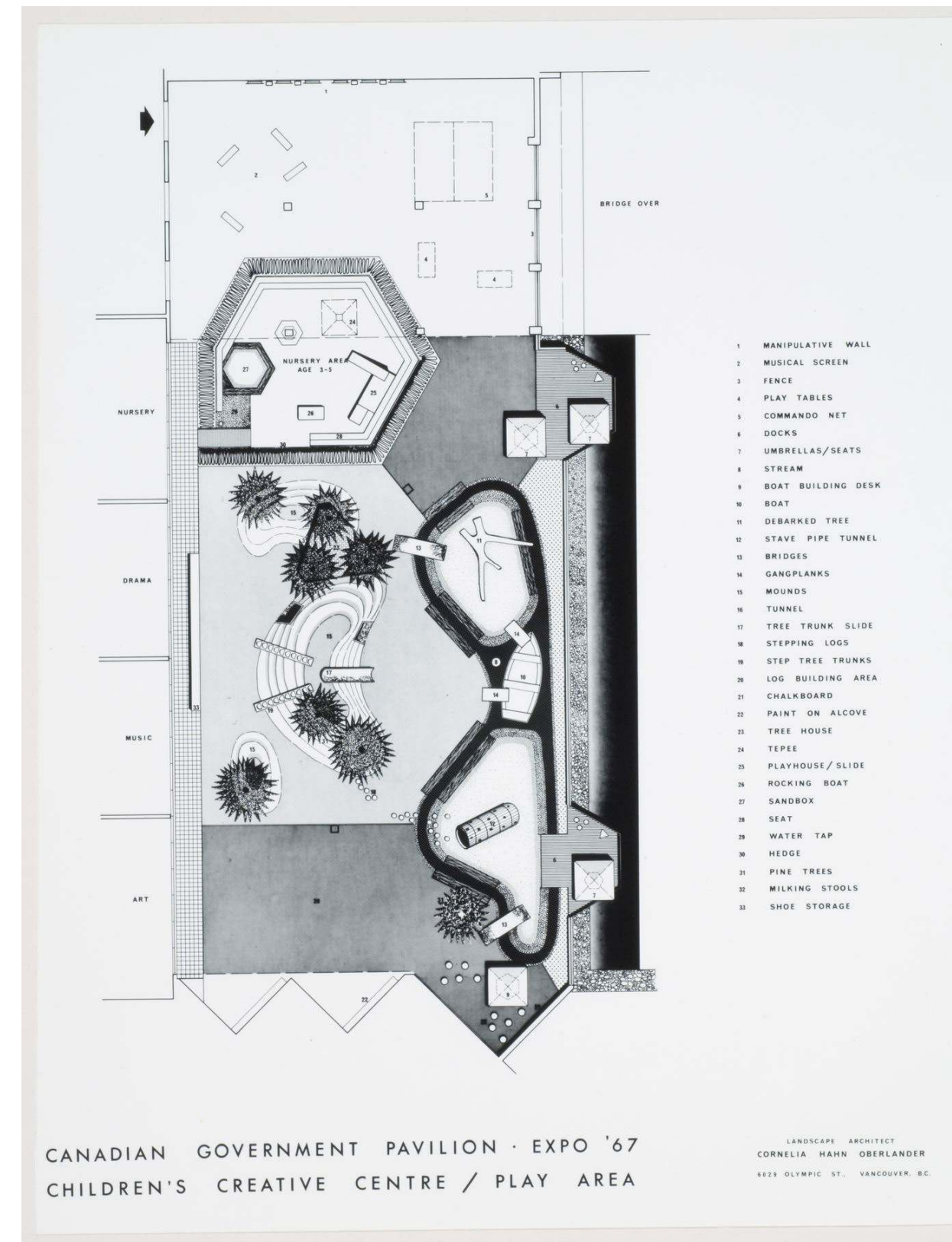


Figure 2. Presentation drawing for Children's Creative Centre Playground, Canadian Federal Pavilion, Expo '67, Montréal, Québec

material is found close to the mounds and the three house. (Figure 3 and 4). At the end of the playground, there is an open area for children between 6-11 years old. There are some mobile parts as pieces made by wood in different sizes and forms that can be used by them to build whatever is in their imagination. An open function is clearly settled with those mobile parts (Figure 5). Landscape design must integrate diverse textures and loose objects in the space in order to create flexible environments.

Another important figure working in play areas for children but in a decade earlier, the Dutch architect Aldo Van Eyck explored similar play spaces for the city. During his time working at the Public Works Department more than 700 playground were built in Amsterdam<sup>3</sup>. Van Eyck created playful terrains in underused areas of the city. (Figure 6). His playgrounds had similar elements as sandboxes, steel 3D polygons and solid concrete elements “used as seats, to gather round or as stepping and jumping stones”. However every playground had site specific forms and design compositions. The 3D geometric figures are now a symbol of Van Eyck’s playgrounds, as the Stedelijk Museum described in *The playgrounds and the city*, “The primal, elementary forms have an urban character and stimulates the imagination. They are not tied down to a particular function but evoke all kinds of use, including unexpected ones. They offer children the means of discovering things for themselves.” (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, p. 70). Transforming those lost spaces into playgrounds, an increasing use of space and social interaction was achieved.

In 2017, Wendy Russell made a presentation at the International Play Association (IPA) conference in Calgary, where she discussed that play designers need



Figure 3. View of children playing at Children’s Creative Centre Playground, Canadian Federal Pavilion, Expo ‘67, Montréal, Québec



Figure 4. View of children playing at Children’s Creative Centre Playground, Canadian Federal Pavilion, Expo ‘67, Montréal, Québec





Figure 5. View of children playing at Children's Creative Centre Playground, Canadian Federal Pavilion, Expo '67, Montréal, Québec



Figure 6. Dijkstraat, Amsterdam-Centrum, 1954

to be focused on “facilitate the expression of children’s playful desires”. As she mention, “playing is ordinary or co-created from everyday stuff to become out-of-the ordinary, times when children can temporarily co-create time-space for life to flourish.” Play designers need to consider how to promote playfulness in everyday encounters. Additionally, she considered that “number of small and experimental steps can be tried to render space more equitable and more open for playing”. It is important that landscape architects develop new creative approaches to understand how play can really arise in children’s ordinary experiences. In 2018, the experimental planning office of Mexico’s Government, Laboratorio para la Ciudad (LabCDMX) developed an urban experiment called “Urban Toys” a design competition that sourced designs for three temporary architectural installations for the reactivation of underused public spaces in Mexico City’s historic centre. The project demonstrated the potential of playful experiences and introduced mechanisms that enabled children to appropriate the spaces in question. The installations also led to the formation of more cohesive communities in that local residents became actively engaged in the maintenance of the structures and tended to participate more in social activities on the site.

These examples demonstrate the various possibilities for landscape architecture to shape the physical, psychological and creative development of citizens. Landscape architecture should use creative and participatory mechanisms employed in these past projects to establish new interactive relationships between the children and the built environment. Doing so would allow individuals to grow their sense of agency and control in the spaces they inhabit everyday.

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