

# Our Proud Heritage—Playground: A Historical Context

---

Resources / Publications / Young Children / September 2015 / Our Proud Heritage—Playground: A Historical Context

TIMOTHY A. KINARD

I am on the playground of a public elementary school, one where I have spent the past several summers running a multilingual early childhood program. Since I am writing a historical reflection on playgrounds, I wanted to visit a familiar one for inspiration. Seated on a raised metal platform, I consider the rest of the playscape. There is a low footbridge with bulky, rounded metal posts connecting my perch to a slide. The railing is sunny yellow; the posts, royal blue. Brackets and bolts holding the equipment together are fire-engine red. There is a tunnel beneath me and swings beside me. Wall-to-wall mulch carpets the area enclosed by a sturdy iron fence. Each summer, the teachers and children in the program use many outside areas at this school. We build forts and houses, take microscopes on expeditions, tend the garden, splash, hammer, saw, dig, run, sit, and wonder. I sit and wonder now.

Due to our rental agreement with the city, our summer students do not have access to the playscape where I sit. Though we have access to many inviting outdoor spaces hosting a diversity of plants and animals, the playground—this space I sit in now—is not covered in our agreement. When I first heard we wouldn't be able to use this space, I was disappointed. But now as I sit on the hard metal, I reflect on

the possibilities for creativity and inquiry in the open spaces outside the fence and I wonder about “playgrounds.” I am interested in investigating all kinds of taken-for-granted notions about early education (Taguchi 2010), and I realize that I have taken for granted that a playground looks like the place where I sit.

---

## Pre-playgrounds

The first schools for the very young in the United States did not include playgrounds (Vinovskis 1996) because they were established prior to the concept of a playground. These city “infant schools” were created in response to and need for care of the young when urban development dictated a move from work at the home to working outside of it (Vinovskis 1996, 103). These schools, originally intended for the most impoverished, were vocation-focused—designed to prepare students for the workforce. Outdoor play in these early American schools was not a consideration.

However, shifting ideas about the early part of a person’s life began to shift the landscape. (And central to this essay is the idea that shifting thoughts do, indeed, shift landscapes.) By the mid-1800s the writings of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had profoundly influenced adult thought in the Western world regarding the topic of younger human beings and the potential for the lives they lead. Childhood began to be viewed as a separate, increasingly cherished time, imbued with innocence (Cunningham 1996). These ideas shifted the infant school movement away from its industrial focus. Rousseau’s (1762) writings introduced the Romantic notion that childhood was a developmental blooming, worthy of a suitable natural environment (Kinard 2012). These new ideas cast unfavorable light on the infant schools’ lack of special places for outdoor activities. This scrutiny contributed to the demise of infant schools, and presented a new challenge for educators interested in the quality of urban children’s lives.

## The garden

The playground was part of the answer. The earliest playgrounds emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth century and spread to the United States as a “distinctly urban character” (Solomon 2005, 7). These new spaces were intended to address social concerns about the development and health of urban children and the need for protection from the “mean streets” (Curtis 1917), but also contributed to the *subtractive acculturation* of

immigrant families (Solomon 2005). In other words, though the playgrounds provided by city governments did provide relatively safe places to play, they also created spaces where the dominant cultures in urban centers worked to whittle away at the cultural beliefs, practices, and knowledge held by immigrant families.

These American goals for introducing playgrounds became intertwined with European ideas about the “garden for children,” inspired by Rousseau and Friedrich Froebel. These writers’ bucolic tales inspired a desire to create outside spaces for exploration and play with inviting materials and an emphasis on the natural world (Brosterman 1997). But this did not necessarily imply that playgrounds as we have come to know them were a foregone conclusion. The equipment on a contemporary playground does not have this garden origin.

In contrast to the garden-oriented playground, the “outdoor gymnasias,” arose in the early 1880s in response to German interest in “physical fitness, health, and nationalistic motives” (Frost 2012). These gymnastics devices, constructed of weatherproof materials, were set in paved yards (Frost 2012). Today’s playscapes are clearly influenced by those early metal contraptions, which were erected in public spaces and included some familiar sights: swing sets, seesaws, monkey bars, and slides (Norman 2010). But these paved playgrounds were also characterized by hard surfaces, and a softening was due.

## Sandboxes

In the late nineteenth century a German civic leader, Von schenckendorff, piled sand in public areas to create play spaces, and an American visitor brought the idea home (Frost 2012). Municipal leaders in Boston mimicked the sand piles, and a playground staple was born. Early childhood educators still sing the virtues of playing, constructing, and exploring with sand (Ashbrook 2010).

A mid-century essay describing the use of sand by influential post-World War II Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck was aptly subtitled “More Durable Than Snow” (Lefaiivre, de Roode, & Fuchs 2002). Like snow, sand can be sculpted. Unlike snow, sand can be molded year-round anywhere on the globe. The innovation of adding sand to the playground again shifted the landscape and reflected a shift in thought. Playground designers began to think about the benefits of constructive play, which “involves building and making things no one has ever seen before” (Drew et al. 2008), in children’s development. Van Eyck’s addition of sand follows a new line of thinking about constructive creation that actually had its inspiration in devastation.

After World War II, London's urban landscape was pocked and strewn with rubble, yet children flocked to the shattered bomb craters to play (Norman 2010). Children's advocates van Eyck (from the Netherlands), Marjory Allen (from England), and Carl Sørensen (from Denmark) saw potential in the mayhem (Norman 2010; Frost 2012). From the destruction of war emerged a new take on the playground.

Van Eyck was moved by the children's improvisational play in the burned-out lot of a war-ravaged townhome.

He noticed that the lowered, central space left by the destruction was inviting, drawing people in. Inspired, he designed new playgrounds with low walls and sunken sand pits. His spaces were more like common areas than the outdoor gymnasias had been. Van Eyck described his work more in social terms rather than ones related to physical education.

With the aid of a little concrete, wood, and aluminum, there have come into existence social centers: places where children and parents meet, true extensions of the doorstep—for it is on the doorstep that the outside and inside worlds, the spheres of collective life and of individual life, intersect. (Solomon 2005, 21)

Sørensen and Allen also realized that children's social life was central to the way bombsites were being used, and that children's autonomy and creativity were important factors. They noted that a key attraction of the bomb craters was the strewn ruins of building materials left by the explosions, which the children jointly repurposed for their play. From this observation, the "adventure playground" movement was born (Solomon 2005).

## Adventure playgrounds

Adventure playgrounds often include a "shanty village," constructed by children from recycled wood, rope, pipe, or tires. Currently across Europe, and in Asia and a few isolated American playgrounds, adult play leaders aid in the construction, facilitating the building and the ensuing sociodramatic play (Norman 2010). The play leaders do not plan the projects for the children; rather, they assist from the sidelines, highlighting the autonomy and ownership of the young designers and builders. Adventure playground pioneer Marjory Allen championed these amorphous, rickety cauldrons of creativity as places where children come to build and play but also "to come to terms with the responsibilities of freedom" (Solomon 2005, 14).

*Play leaders do not plan the projects for the children; rather, they assist from the sidelines, highlighting the autonomy and ownership of the young designers and builders.*

There were once several adventure playgrounds in the United States. But the pressures of a society growing intent on regulated, safety-oriented play areas with immutable structures and fall zones has led to the near eradication of US adventure playgrounds (Frost 2012). In his book, *Children and Injuries* (Frost 2001), renowned playground advocate and a US leader in playground safety Joe Frost asserts that adventure playgrounds have fewer instances of injury than fixed playgrounds. Norman (2010) and Frost (2012) both cite the North American distaste for the “ramshackle” look of these playgrounds as contributing to their disappearance.

The fixed-apparatus playground can be defended for its pea-gravel cushions and foundationally sound structures. But the reign of the fixed playground was not inevitable, and American taste continues to play a factor in the evolution of outdoor playscapes.

## Unfixed playgrounds

Throughout the tenure of the fixed-apparatus playground there has been an ongoing tension between advocates of aesthetics and free-form exploration versus those who prize safety and familiarity. The following example is just one thread in a loosely woven tapestry of what could have come to be in playground landscapes.

Isamu Noguchi, the designer and artist, submitted several playground designs to the New York Parks Commission throughout the twentieth century (Solomon 2005). Noguchi’s play areas imagined unregimented frolicking across large, sloping surfaces with organic rises and dips. Some of Noguchi’s concepts have ended up in the Museum of Modern Art (Rychlak, Matsumoto, & Posch 2007). But the parks commission did not share Noguchi’s vision, repeatedly rejecting his designs (Noguchi 1967). The editor of *Art News* defended Noguchi’s work in 1952, mourning the unrealized “playground [that] instead of telling the child what to do (swing here, climb there) becomes a place for endless exploration” (Solomon 2005, 25).

Noguchi eventually found success in Japan. His Moerenuma Park in Sapporo is reminiscent of his New York plans, and the park, with grassy mounds and slopes inviting alternative visions of outdoor play, is considered a civic treasure.

## Natural playscapes

Although playgrounds in the United States historically consist of pavement and metal, there have been guides toward the organic and green. Starting with Rousseau and echoed in children's literature like *Heidi* (1880), by Johanna Spyri, and *The Secret Garden* (1911), by Frances Hodgson Burnett, there have been streams of green thought about play (Dannenmaier 1998). These attitudes are in revival today. Contemporary advocates, like architect and urban planner Robin Moore, claim that outdoor education can help close the achievement gap through the foundational and interdisciplinary learning available in the exploration of natural materials and natural settings (Moore 2003). Others, like David Orr (ecologist), Peter Kahn (psychologist), and Stephen Kellert (educational researcher), call for the use of outdoor play in response to concern about the loss of green space to urban sprawl (Kahn & Kellert 2002). A movement is growing to get children out of their seats, out of the classroom, and out of doors (Danks 2010; Louv 2005). Advocates for outdoor learning believe that the natural landscape can serve as a space for valuable sociodramatic and constructive play as well as curricular material, facilitating the learning of mathematical concepts, scientific processes, fine arts, and language arts through exploration of the natural world (Danks 2010).

However, “in our modern world, it's not as easy as simply sending children outside to play” (Diamond 2009). For many, safe, green outdoor spaces are simply hard to find. But the desire to bring the green and growing world into urban spaces through design like Noguchi's is gaining traction. A new group of designers, including Rusty Keller and Sharon Gamson Danks, has been inspired to enfold the play and exploration of children into environmental understandings, transforming the playground into a natural playscape (Keeler 2008). Given these movements, the taken-for-granted nature of the playground could again be shifting.

*A new group of designers, including Rusty Keeler and Sharon Gamson Danks, has been inspired to enfold the play and exploration of children into environmental understandings, transforming the playground into a natural playscape.*

Recently, a growing number of businesses are responding to the distaste for the look of adventure playgrounds by producing smartly packaged, openended, outdoor materials with aesthetic appeal. Companies like Imagination Playground and nonprofits like Children's Scrapstore provide large containers of a variety of durable but mutable materials to stimulate constructive play.

Despite these movements, municipal playground contracts still bind many neighborhoods to the fixed-apparatus playscape. I was recently contacted by a committee charged with redesigning an area playground. After showing them the work of Noguchi, Keeler, Danks, and other designers, a board member told me that although the board was interested and excited by these different concepts, the city was bound to contract with a limited number

of playscape design companies. The three companies on the approved vendors list all made fixed, hard playscapes. Sometimes it takes more than shifting ideas to shift landscapes.

## Sandbox 2.0

Some mutable playgrounds are inspired less by the writings of Romantic literature and more by science fiction. I would be remiss in an examination of the notion of playground, if I didn't mention virtual playscapes. Along with the disappearance of green spaces, Orr blames the amount of television watched by the youngest Americans (an average of four hours per day) for contributing to a play crisis (Kahn & Kellert 2002). This passive watching is troubling to many, yet the desire to bask in front of a glowing screen is strong. One answer to this passivity problem might be virtual sandbox games.

Like sand in a sandbox, features of these games are moldable, allowing for creative manipulation within a virtual world. One popular virtual sandbox is *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* enables players to build structures and minisocieties away from adult constrictions, using raw materials as building blocks. Players craft tools and structures by mining blocks of elements and combining them to create usable items. For instance, unearthed icons for a flint, a stick, and a feather can be crafted into arrows. Blocks of wool harvested from sheep and felled trees can be crafted into a bed. Like a sandbox, there is no goal to the game beyond resourceful exploration and creativity. Players can wander aimlessly or focus their imagination on constructing usable or fanciful structures (Duncan 2011). The online capability of the game means that joint efforts and alliances, even friendships, are possible. Players are able to team up online to create and defend buildings, villages, fortresses, and cities together, from blueprints drawn entirely from their own imaginations. Whimsical castles and flying contraptions can result from social skills and creativity.

Similar to the adventure playground movement's use of child-owned spaces, the online sandbox thrives on the assumption that the young are driven to build "special places . . . forts, dens, and bush houses" (Sobel 1993). While online games lack the physical exercise that real, open areas afford, virtual building does offer cognitive, emotional, and social engagement (Steinkuehler & Duncan 2008).

## Possibilities

Sitting here on my summer school's familiar, fixed playground and reflecting on the playground's heritage, I see potential in the unclaimed, unregulated, wild growth beyond the fence. I contemplate the notion of "playgroundlessness." I envision schools embracing elements of the mutable landscapes of adventure playgrounds, the malleable material of sandbox games, and the explorable elements of the outdoors, and I sense another shift in the landscape.

---

## References

Ashbrook, P. 2010. "Building With Sand." *Science and Children* (47) 7: 17–18.

Brosterman, N. 1997. *Inventing Kindergarten*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Cunningham, H. 1996. "The History of Childhood." In *Images of Childhood*, eds. C.P. Hwang, M.E. Lamb & I.E. Sigel, 27–35. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Curtis, H.S. 1917. *The Play Movement and Its Significance*. New York: MacMillan.

Dannenmaier, A. 1998. *A Child's Garden: Enchanting Outdoor Spaces for Children and Parents*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Danks, S.G. 2010. *Asphalt to Ecosystems: Design Ideas for Schoolyard Transformation*. Oakland, CA: New Village Press.

Diamond, J. 2009. *When Learning Comes Naturally: Exploring Nature's Classroom*. DVD. 28 min. New York: Sarah Lawrence College & J. Diamond Associates.

Drew, W.F., J. Christie, J.E. Johnson, A.M. Meckley, & M.L. Nell. 2008. "Constructive Play: A Value-Added Strategy for Meeting Early Learning Standards." *Young Children* 63 (4): 38–44.

Duncan, S.C. 2011. "Minecraft: Beyond Construction and Survival." *Well Played: A Journal on Video Games, Value, and Meaning* 1 (1): 1–22.

Frost, J. 2012. "Evolution of American Playgrounds." *Scholarpedia* 7 (12): 30423.

Frost, J.L. 2001. *Children and Injuries*. Tucson, AZ: Lawyers & Judges Publishing.



Kahn, P.H., & S.R. Kellert., eds. 2002. *Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Evolutionary Investigations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Keeler, R. 2008. *Natural Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.

Kinard, T.A. 2012. “Deconstructing Delphinium: Violence and Flowers in Rousseau’s *Émile* and Henke’s *Chrysanthemum*.” *Children’s Literature in Education* 43 (4): 303–22.

Lefaiivre, L., I. de Roode, & R. Fuchs. 2002. *Aldo Van Eyck: The Playgrounds and the City*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum; Rotterdam: NAI.

Louv, R. 2005. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

Moore, R.C. 2003. *How Cities Use Parks to Help Children Learn*. Briefing paper. Chicago: American Planning Association.

Noguchi, I. 1967. *A Sculptor’s World*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Norman, N. 2010. “From Bomb Site to Boutique: The Playground and Its Journey From Anarchy to Economic Development Tool.” Paper presented at My City’s Still Breathing: A Symposium Exploring the Arts, Artists, and the City, in Winnipeg, Canada.

Orr, D.W. 2002. “Political Economy and the Ecology of Childhood.” In Kahn & Kellert 2002, 279–304.

Rychlak, B., T. Matsumoto, & K. Posch. 2007. *Design: Isamu Noguchi and Isamu Kenmochi*. Brooklyn, NY: Five Ties Publishing.

Sobel, D. 1993. *Children’s Special Places: Exploring the Role of Forts, Dens, and Bush Houses in Middle Childhood*. Landscapes of Childhood series. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Solomon, S.G. 2005. *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.

Steinkuehler, C., & S. Duncan. 2008. “Scientific Habits of Mind in Virtual Worlds.” *Journal of Science Education and Technology* 17 (6): 530–43.

Taguchi, H.L. 2010. *Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-Active Pedagogy*. Contesting Early Childhood series. New York: Routledge.

Vinovskis, M.A. 1996. "Changing Perceptions and Treatment of Young Children in the United States," in *Images of Childhood*, eds. C.P. Hwang, M.E. Lamb, & I.E. Sigel, 99–112. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

---

Photograph: Getty Images

**Audience:** *Faculty, Teacher*

**Age:** *Early Primary, Kindergarten, Preschool*

**Topics:** *Other Topics, Play, Outdoor, YC, Our Proud Heritage*

---

### **TIMOTHY A. KINARD**

Timothy A. Kinard, PhD, is an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at Texas State University in San Marcos. A former preschool and kindergarten teacher, Tim currently researches taken-for-granted notions in early childhood education and co-runs a program where preservice teachers and 3- to 7-year-olds make discoveries together through constructive play, sociodramatic play, and storytelling. [tk17@txstate.edu](mailto:tk17@txstate.edu)

© National Association for the Education of Young Children  
1313 L St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 20005 | (202)232-8777 | (800)424-2460 |  
[help@naeyc.org](mailto:help@naeyc.org)