


## *Playgrounds ... A Plea for Utopia or the Re-Cycled Empty Lot*



The spirit of play is vital to all humanity, the basis of most of the happiness of mankind, the means by which humanity advances creatively, scientifically, intellectually, and socially. Not only is it vital to childhood but the spirit of play is vital to all mankind. In understanding children's play, we will have understood the key to the processes which educate the whole child. Because we live in a highly civilized world, all play activities need the kindly, sympathetic, understanding teacher who will provide materials, suggestions, kindness, freedom, and space, and who, by example, will set standards of behaviour and discipline with which children can experiment creatively to their own advantage.<sup>1</sup>

— Neville V. Scarfe, dean of education,  
University of British Columbia

The concept of play is illustrated by the cover sketch [see page 42]. Children love to be where the action is; they make no hard and fast distinction between work and play. Adults, however, often misunderstand the child's urge to play; we forget in our crowded urban life to provide

spaces for them to play by building, digging, or moving things around and manipulating these at their will. Play is not trivial; educators all over the world stress the significance of early learning and the role of playing in this process.

It has been demonstrated that much fundamental learning takes place before the age of five and therefore we must build community playgrounds that relate to this insight.

As we drive through towns and cities we admire well-treed and well-manicured grass areas in most public parks. Usually a small corner is reserved for rigid and mechanical equipment such as swings, slides, jungle gyms, and teeter totters or intimidating concrete monsters. These sorts of playgrounds have only occasional or intermittent customers, for short-term visits and therefore fail to meet the educator's goal. The essential ingredients for playgrounds are space and a good variety of items that can be manipulated in an infinite number of ways so as to elicit new responses from the child as he plays. Physical activity such as derived from climbing on a jungle gym is not enough if the child is to find self-fulfillment in play; psychological as well as kinetic stimulation are needed for self-development. So far this has been done most successfully through the design of Adventure Playgrounds.

## The Adventure Playground

Lady Allen of Hurtwood, an early advocate of the Adventure Playground in England writes in her most recent book, *Planning for Play*: "Adventure playgrounds are places where children of all ages can develop their own ideas of play. Most young people, at one time or another, have a deep urge to experiment with earth, fire, water and timber, to work with real tools without fear of undue criticism or censure. In these playgrounds their love of freedom to take calculated risks is recognized and can be enjoyed under tolerant and sympathetic guidance."<sup>2</sup>

The Adventure Playground was invented in Denmark during the German occupation when the "Emdrup Junk Playground" was opened in 1943. A well-known landscape architect, Professor C. Th. Sørensen,<sup>3</sup> had designed many formal playgrounds in Copenhagen, but was impressed by the fact that children seemed to prefer messing about in junk yards and building sites, and developing their own brand of play with waste objects which they found there.

With great perception and courage, he started the "Emdrup Junk Playground" in a housing estate outside Copenhagen. He and the children were fortunate in its first understanding leader, John Bertelsen, who was a trained nursery-school teacher and an ex-seaman; he was well-equipped to tackle an experiment in learning and teaching. Emdrup gave the world a new concept of play and is still influencing playground design 31 years later.

So far the idea of the Adventure Playground has found little acceptance in North America and we have only spotty and temporary examples in Canada. The Adventure Playground is really the old empty lot that many children of earlier generations took for granted in most Canadian communities. Let's find and re-create these occasional informal spaces and thereby recycle the empty lot as a conscious effort to achieve creative play spaces. This can best be done through the children themselves but guided by trained leadership and supported by the parent.

**The Site** The site may be one or two city lots. It should be in public ownership with well-drained loamy soil; it should have a few trees for shade and be close to the homes of the children it is designed to serve. It should be made into an area separated from the diverting and disturbing influences of our present-day, car-oriented world. It should give the child the possibility to play in his make-believe world and discover his own innate skills in the presence of a well-trained unobtrusive leader.

**The Leader** A competent leader is the key to the successful playground. He has to be a resourceful person with infinite patience and one who can develop human trust amongst the children and the neighbourhood. From then on, the Adventure Playground will build itself.

Think of yourself aged ten or maybe twelve, what did you like to do on the empty lot? When you ask today's children, you will hear pretty much the same; they are likely to say: "We want mounds to slide down from, we want sand to dig into, we want a tire with a rope hanging from a tree, we want buckets, we want shovels, we want water, we want to plant a garden, and we want to build a tree fort high in the trees." And so the list will grow and your enthusiastic clients will give you a list too long to fill and so you start involving the parents; hopefully they will help to realize some of the wishes and aspirations of the children and the community; thus making it an ongoing adventurous process.

The essential ingredients for an Adventure Playground are:

### Suggested Materials

- 1 left-over lumber ends from construction sites donated regularly by builders in the community
- 2 hammers | choose the best  
saws | and most suitable in size;  
nails | have sufficient in number
- 3 rope
- 4 old car tires
- 5 pulleys
- 6 wooden boxes
- 7 cardboard cartons
- 8 bricks or rocks for building a fireplace for cooking



- 9 pipe ends and wire mesh, plastic pipe
- 10 old telephone poles for seats and stepping uphill
- 11 gardening earth
- 12 appropriate gardening tools, seeds, watering cans
- 13 sandbox area 18" deep, filled with cement mixing sand; excess excavation will make a mound. The sandbox should have buckets and shovels, etc. A watering hose should be connected to a hose bib.
- 14 carpenter's bench
- 15 storage shelter and "Magic Box."

The illustrations [see pages 45 to 47, this volume] may give an idea how these materials are used.

Experience has shown that the best Adventure Playgrounds are simple and flexible with a lot of unfinished space and full of variety and surprises; the "Magic Box" which can be stored in the shelter should contain new items which keep the children fascinated, especially the younger ones aged three to eight who undoubtedly will come to visit. Their interests can be satisfied and diverted without getting in the way of the "older builders."

The overall programme can be supplemented with inexpensive equipment. Such material can be found in our city dumps, beaches, river edges, etc. Children like outings to the dump and would bring back very precious finds such as springs, pails, and other treasures. These could be used in the playground. Other

important ideas for the playground would be a garden using either small beds 3' x 3' square for each child or one large area for all, depending on the ages and interests of the children.

The total programme will be one that encourages children to play in larger and smaller groups, communicate with one another, cooperate, and share. The building of their structures will help them to develop motor skills, coordination, and self-confidence.

An Adventure Playground, if successfully run during a summer, ought to pave the way for more permanent institutions of its kind and encourage community programs of this nature all year-round. It should guide today's children into becoming self-motivated, confident, and creative adults.

Creative play in an informal setting will make the playground the adventure in learning that the empty lot provided unselfconsciously for earlier generations.

## Notes

- 1 Editor's note: N.V. Scarfe, "Understanding Children's Play," in World Organisation for Childhood Education, *Report of the 8th World Assembly* (Zagreb, Yugoslavia, July 31 to August 6, 1960), 34.
- 2 Editor's note: Lady Allen of Hurtwood (Marjorie Allen), *Planning for Play* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 55.
- 3 Editor's note: Carl Theodor Sørensen (1893–1979).