

Playing by the Rules: Making Artful and Innovative Playgrounds that Meet Standards

Summary

Designing innovative playgrounds may seem hopeless with all the federal regulations, industry standards, and concerns about liability in the United States. However, it is possible to create spaces that are artful, fun, and even have "loose parts." A panel of playground designers will talk about their efforts to create great places for kids within an American context.

Learning Objectives

- Introduce some of the safety standards that American playground designers must be aware of
- Show how designers can work within the existing safety standards to create artful playgrounds that provide some level of challenge for children.
- Demonstrate how accessible routes can be integrated into playgrounds in artful ways
- Show how playgrounds with "loose parts" that encourage creative play can be integrated into play environments in the United States, where playgrounds are typically static structures.

Speaker Biographies:

Barry Richards Barry Richards is a Principal and Studio Leader at Rockwell Group, where his work has included overseeing the creative direction of the breakthrough Imagination Playground initiative; the Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco; and exhibition design for Play Work Build at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC and the future National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. Barry is well known for his set design for film, television, and theater, including the 2009 and 2010 Academy Awards; the film Team America: World Police; and the Broadway shows Hairspray, Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, All Shook Up, Legally Blonde, Elf, Catch Me If You Can, The Normal Heart, A Free Man of Color, and Kinky Boots. A multi-talented individual, Barry has also designed special event spaces for DIFFA, Absolut Vodka, Swarovski Crystals, GE, and St. Pauli Girl, as well as products for such respected companies as The Rug Company, Jim Thompson, Dennis Miller, Maya Romanoff, Desiron, Leucos, Alessi, Disney, and Saloni Ceramica. Barry is a graduate of the University of Washington and Princeton University.

Christopher Nolan is the Central Park Conservancy's (CPC) chief landscape architect. He oversees a team of planning and design professionals responsible for all restoration and construction projects in New York's Central Park. Since joining the Conservancy in 1989, he has overseen a program of projects that is internationally recognized as the most significant and extensive renewal of the Park since its creation more than 150 years ago. He has worked extensively in the Park's 21 playgrounds, including leading the reconstruction of the Park's adventure-style playgrounds to comply with modern standards. In 2013, he led the

development of “Plan for Play: A Framework for Rebuilding and Managing Central Park Playgrounds.”

Matthew Urbanski Matthew is a principal of MVVA where, with Michael Van Valkenburgh and Laura Solano, he has been part of the project leadership for almost every major project the firm has completed. Collaborating with Michael Van Valkenburgh, he was a lead designer of Brooklyn Bridge Park in Brooklyn, Segment 5 of Hudson River Park in New York, Alumnae Valley at Wellesley College, and Allegheny Riverfront Park in Pittsburgh. Matthew is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design and is co-owner of Red Hill Nursery in New Jersey. He received an MLA from the Harvard GSD.

Daniel Jost is a freelance writer and contributing editor to Landscape Architecture Magazine. He studied landscape architecture at Cornell University and spent a few years working at a firm in Las Vegas, before turning to writing full time. Jost has written extensively on playground design, and the challenges involved in creating play areas that are artful, facilitate creative play, and provide a significant level of challenge while also meeting requirements for safety and accessibility.

Outline:

Playing by the Rules: Making Innovative Playgrounds that Meet American Standards

I. Introduction (Dan)

- A. No, we can't do everything the Europeans can when it comes to playgrounds... they have very different standards, universal healthcare, a different way of looking at damages in lawsuits. (Quick examples of European playground features that would be difficult to adopt in America's public parks thanks to America's standards.)
- B. Quick Introduction of the main regulations and standards that affect playground design in the U.S.
 - 1. 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design
 - 2. ASTM Standards (F1487, F1292, etc.)
 - 3. U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission guidelines (which many view as industry standards)
- C. It would be great if we could change the culture around lawsuits in the U.S., but that is probably not realistic in the short term...
- D. There might be arguments for changing some of those national standards.
- E. But even now, designers can still do a lot!
- F. Quick introductions of the designers on the panel who are doing innovative work.

II. Playground Tours that highlight the issues at hand.

- A. The Central Park Conservancy: What reconstructing the Park's playgrounds has taught us about standards: what is possible and what is not. (Chris)
 - 1. General Intro to Central Park Conservancy's work
 - a. A brief history of play in the park
 - b. Robert Moses era
 - c. Adventure-style playgrounds
 - d. A comprehensive plan for the entire Park
 - 2. ASTM F1487 & ADA: How they inform design
 - a. ASTM F1487: Playground vs. play equipment
 - i. It's a matter of definition
 - ii. Key concepts: use zones, composite structure, play functionally linked
 - b. ADA: integrated play, not just compliance

- i. Travelways, ramps, elevated play events
 - ii. It's not just for children- access for caregivers
 - 3. The Ground Plane: An Overlooked Opportunity
 - a. Contour, grading, and landform for play value
 - b. Safety surfacing
 - i. Materials, color, texture, sand
 - 4. Water play
 - a. Unique play value
 - b. Integrated into play environment
 - 5. Survey of Specific Examples
 - a. Hecksher Playground
 - b. Ancient Playground
 - c. Tarr Family Playground
 - d. East 110th Street Playground
 - e. West 68th Street Tots Playground

B. MVVA's Playground Work (Matt)

- 1. General Intro to MVVA's work with play areas /It's goals (Philosophy related to natural materials)
 - a. Brooklyn Bridge Park Pier 6
 - b. Union Square
 - c. Brooklyn Bridge Pier 1
 - d. Teardrop Park
- 2. Using Natural Materials in play areas
- 3. Big slides incorporated into mounds
- 4. Little Hills/Domes
- 5. Safety Surfaces and Aesthetics- Brooklyn Bridge Park
- 6. Water features

C. Rockwell Group and the Imagination Playground (Barry)

- 1. Value of "Loose Parts" for creative play
- 2. Difficulties Adopting Loose Parts in U.S. in the past
 - a. Adventure Playgrounds not always pretty
 - b. Concerns about liability
 - c. No play workers

3. Developing the loose parts for Imagination Playground
 - a. Making them fun (testing with kids)
 - b. Making them safe
 - c. Making them artful.
 - d. Not just for building stuff (noodles)
 - e. Encouraging collaboration between people with varying abilities
 - f. Encouraging interaction between sand water and blocks
 - g. What other loose parts does your typical imagination playground provide in addition to the foam blocks?

4. Creating the play areas for the loose parts
 - a. Standards that were applicable
 - b. Water features
 - c. The way sand and water are integrated at South Street Seaport Site
 - d. Parent areas
 - e. Artful accessibility at imagination playgrounds (water features, etc.)
 - f. Imagination Playground in a box...loose parts on a low budget

5. The importance of play workers
 - a. What do playworkers do.
 - b. Finding Funding
 - c. Places with built in play workers
 - d. Where are the imagination in a boxes going? What feedback are you getting from people about this?

6. Lessons learned and the new playground underway in Brooklyn

III. Question and Answer Period
