



**2009 ASLA GENERAL DESIGN HONOR AWARD**  
**Teardrop Park, New York, NY**  
 Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc. New York, NY  
 Photo: Elizabeth Felicella

## CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS NEWSLETTER, SUMMER 2009

### Letter from the Chair

Greetings Members! The establishment of an ASLA Professional Practice Network devoted to Children's Outdoor Environments is extremely timely. We are fortunate to have a rich and growing foundation of research, literature, and design work to layer our understanding of what

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### Letter from the Chair

by Jena Ponti, ASLA

Greetings Members!

The establishment of an ASLA Professional Practice Network devoted to Children's Outdoor Environments is extremely timely. We are fortunate to have a rich and growing foundation of research, literature, and design work to layer our understanding of what a healthy, responsive, and high quality play and learning environment means. The widespread public awareness of the current state of childhood is revealing some new challenges that our profession is primed to help address. This effort is a collaborative one. How can we continue to forge partnerships with parents, educators, municipalities, legislators, and others who are also engaged in this work? Where are there opportunities for advocacy and education? How can we, as landscape architects, add momentum and strength to this movement? There are many questions to ask and hopefully our network can collaborate in an effort to form answers.

I am pleased to present our PPN's first newsletter, a wonderful way we can communicate and share as a group. Two members, Joy Kuebler, ASLA, and James Couillard, ASLA, have graciously offered to share accounts of their projects. I hope that their articles encourage you to share your projects, research, and experiences in subsequent newsletters and on our PPN's e-Network.

I look forward to hearing your ideas on how to make the best of our network.

My best to you all,

Jena Ponti, ASLA  
 Chair

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### Brick City Adventure Park: Simplifying Play

by James R. Couillard, ASLA

As public sector employees and design professionals, we are constantly challenged to meet the needs of our citizens and visitors, all while being transparent and fiscally responsible with the taxpayer's dollars. The joy of working on "budgetless" projects are fond memories of design competitions and the "what ifs" of private sector projects. The current economy has forced a lot of private sector jobs to be scaled back and in some cases this is how parks departments may be operating on a day-to-day basis—recession or not.

For park renovation projects, our budgets have to address several critical points. Are we proposing enough for the community? Is this project too expensive? Will the Board approve this use of their constituents' money? Designers have to abide by these considerations while we listen to the community. Their needs can sometimes bust any budget, and choosing what gets built first and what comes in later phases can be another challenge.

Brick City Adventure Park (BCAP) in Ocala, Florida is a thirty-five acre park owned by Marion County Board of County Commissioners and operated by the Marion County Parks and Recreation Department. The County originally purchased the park in 1991. It reassumed operational responsibilities in 2008 and brought new enthusiasm and visions for the park's true potential. From a financial standpoint, the timing to assume the operations of this park was difficult, but from a site design/planning perspective, the timing could not have been better. The ideas about free play and the need for children to re-engage with nature and the outdoors have a significant role in the newly created master plan for BCAP.

With the need to promote outdoor play on a very limited budget, doing more with less translated into: How can we get people excited about this existing wooded park and not break the budget? We took the simple approach of solving safety issues, opening views into wooded areas by clearing underbrush, and updating play equipment, and are excited about dusting off this jewel of a park.

At BCAP, a two acre portion of the park is becoming an energized play area for children. Even before the new play area was designed, we found that the wooded area was being used for general play. Previously, the area was heavily overgrown and presented visual barriers, which deterred children from entering the woods.



Recently removed play unit. Image courtesy Marion County Board of County Commissioners, Parks & Recreation Department.

Now, with minimal maintenance and removal of unsafe items, children are encouraged to explore and discover the flora and fauna of this protected open space.

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Play area with play unit removed. Image courtesy Marion County Board of County Commissioners, Parks & Recreation Department.

New play units that focus on the adventure theme with climbing apparatuses and agility stations are in the plans, and future elements include high ropes courses, wall climbing, and other activities that fit the existing site.

However, it is the wooded envelope that is capturing the imaginations of the children in a pleasantly unexpected way.



Cleared understory of wooded area. Image courtesy Marion County Board of County Commissioners, Parks & Recreation Department.

Brick City Adventure Park is a unique park for both residents and visitors in this region. With the absence of city noise it is hard to believe that you are visiting a park right in the middle of a city.

Preserving as much of this green space as possible for future generations is one goal of protecting places like BCAP. By implementing recreation improvements that have a low impact on the surrounding setting, simple play spaces are being created and open space is being protected for current and future outdoor enthusiasts.

*James R. Couillard, ASLA is a Parks Designer for the Marion County Parks & Recreation Department in Marion County, Florida, and can be reached at [James.couillard@marioncountyfl.org](mailto:James.couillard@marioncountyfl.org)*

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### Buffalo Public School 90, Dr Charles R. Drew Early Childhood Science Magnet: Learning Courtyard

by Joy Kuebler, ASLA

Buffalo Public School 90 is a shining example of how landscape architecture makes a true and lasting difference in people's lives. Prior to the redesign and construction by Joy Kuebler Landscape Architect, PC, the school's courtyard was an underwhelming space, with straggly trees and a flagpole. Numerous windows looked out into the space, and providing access to daylight was their only real function. After meeting the project's oversight team, the school's principal and staff, we were thrilled that the group wanted a naturalized space for kids to get dirty, run, jump, and roll in a fresh and enriching learning environment.

With ever increasing curriculum mandates, children are losing valuable time in the natural world. The objective for this courtyard was to meet established curriculum requirements for students in grades Pre-K through second grade in an outdoor environment, while encouraging kids to love nature. Water, varying topography, naturalized and constructed gardens, open areas, and gathering spaces are dispersed throughout the courtyard and divided between various curriculums including science, math, music, art, and geography/geology, with language arts and physical education included throughout. Every outdoor space is connected by the accessible "circuit walk" that weaves between class spaces and provides accessible opportunities for learning and physical activity.



Photo courtesy KC Kratt  
Photography, Buffalo, New York

Through schoolyard environments like BPS 90, we can beat childhood obesity, help reduce the incidents of ADD/ ADHD, and most importantly, encourage and empower the next generation of environmental stewards.

## CURRICULUM ELEMENTS FOR EACH OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

### Central Gathering Space:

- Is large enough to hold several classes
- Provides tricycle ring with compass and clock inscribed in pavers
- Provides chalkboard for class lessons and group postings
- One of two sandboxes has organic shapes and poured concrete curbing

### Water Channel:

- Sinuous water channel flows throughout courtyard
- The 6" deep and 8" wide channel intersects the circuit path at various points with wooden bridges
- Activities are encouraged such as timing the speed of a stick, damming the water, and racing ducks
- A skimmer and carbon filter ensure good water quality

### Physical Education:

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- The entire courtyard has elements for play, mobility, dexterity, and hand and eye coordination
- The overall circuit path can be fit with markers that allow the students to track the distance they have walked during gym class
- The logs provide interesting balance beams
- Mounds are wonderful for running up and rolling down
- Boulders are placed close enough for students to step from one to the other
- The concrete areas are great for jumping rope and riding tricycles

#### **Music Classroom:**

- Plants here make sound in the wind, attract "singing" insects and birds, and can be used to make instruments
- A small concrete area allows students to set up chairs and music stands to play outside
- Area provides a living tee-pee that holds up to 10 children

#### **Math Classroom:**

- Unit paving of various materials and sizes shows ratios and proportions
- Raised planters provide area for growing vegetables, counting seeds, measuring growth



Photo courtesy KC Kratt Photography, Buffalo, New York

- Various fruit trees are selected to bear fruit when school is in session

#### **Science Classroom:**

- Large earth mounds aid in teaching about gravity, velocity, and measurements
- Shade garden features native ferns, sedges, and rushes
- The water channel widens and students are encouraged to get into the water
- Logs provide seating as well as an element for experiments and observations



Photo courtesy KC Kratt Photography, Buffalo, New York

#### **Geography/Geology Classroom:**

- Boulder "council ring" are provided for small group gatherings, climbing, and jumping. Tree stumps provide for exploration
- Area provides a living tee-pee that hold up to 10 children
- Local plants with various survival elements and ethno-botanical uses
- Sunflowers are planted by kindergarteners and then harvested when students are in first grade

#### **Art Classroom:**

- Brightly colored perennials inspire young artists
- All plants in courtyard are non-toxic so leaves, petals and berries can be used to make paint and ink

- Small concrete area has interesting score patterns
- Nearby "Dr. Seuss garden" has oversized, interesting smelling or unusual looking plants

**Language Arts:**

- Opportunities are included for increased language awareness
- Boulder "council ring", tee-pees, central gathering space, and log seating provide locations for story telling and group discussions
- Chalk board allows students to "post their findings" for fellow classmates to read and provide responses
- Central gathering space becomes a "stage" for drama activities with seating on the surrounding lawn



Photo courtesy KC Kratt Photography, Buffalo, New York

- Each new fall class is encouraged to make and post signs for the courtyard, allowing every student to be active in the "naming" process

*Joy Kuebler is a principal of Joy Kuebler Landscape Architect, PC in North Tanawanta, New York, and can be reached at: [jkuebler@jklstudio.com](mailto:jkuebler@jklstudio.com).*

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