

# Playground Design

Michelle Galindo

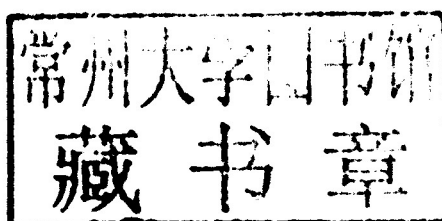


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# **Playground** Design



# Playground Design

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# Where did the conception of playgrounds begin?

by Michelle Galindo

The first playgrounds began with promoting health and recreation, issuing playground standards, continuing with interactive products going on to the market and with the need of putting children away from the streets rising. After analyzing the free, uninhibited play and exploration of children, unusual play structures based upon new pedagogical ideas on children's development were developed. Moreover, the safety regulations and the use of safer materials increased. The stimulation of creativity and imagination and increasing physical activity is the driving force of playground design today.

Images of swings are present in art as early as the 5th century B.C.; Greek vase painters captured life's more playful moments, including women and children playing on a swing. And while such evidence suggests that swings are an ancient notion, the modern concept of playground equipment, as we know it today began in the United States at the turn of the 20th century, amidst cultural and economic reforms.

In the late 19th century, when child labor laws successfully increased the minimum working age, newly idle children had no safe place to play in urban areas. A movement backed by women and educators in many private associations set aside space and created playground equipment. In 1920, the first playground standards were issued and The National Recreation Association began publishing recommendations for school

playground equipment. Soon after that Sebastian Hinton patented the "Jungle Gym", three-dimensional playground equipment on which children could climb as a form of exercise and play. Playgrounds grew rapidly across the United States in 1930, during the Great Depression and were funded by the Federal Government. In 1940 World War II put a damper on the manufacture of new playground equipment and many fell into disrepair.

In 1943, the first "adventure playground" was designed by C. Th. Sørensen, a Danish landscape architect. Here, children could create and shape, dream and imagine a reality. The movement of adventure playgrounds spread throughout Europe. In Switzerland, the first two playgrounds opened in 1955, and in Germany in 1967. These recreational facilities featured rope ladders, pyramids, and many other types of climbing apparatus, predominantly made from steel. They were often designed by architects and were beautiful urban spaces.

New safety regulations in the 1980s included recommendations for removing hard equipment (metal bars) by substituting soft materials such as wood and plastic. The change to wooden swing sets accelerated through the 1990s, and injuries from the playground equipment lessened. In the 1990s, further guidelines brought finely tuned sensitivity to safety issues in playgrounds' design. At the beginning of the

21st century, wooden playground equipment continued to accelerate. Today the concern with children's health has given rise to an increased interest in outdoor play, shifting design into more provocative and bold structures.

Despite significant changes over more than a century in the equipment and appearance of playgrounds, as their designs have evolved, one thing has remained constant – the essential role that the playgrounds play in the vitality of urban neighborhoods, and in particular the physical development and socialization of children. Not only is a playground a place where a child may fly down a slide, soar on a swing, scale heights on a play structure, or be cooled by a spray shower, but it is also a critical part of a child's emotional education, where he or she discovers perhaps for the first time the challenges of the world outside the home.

A lack of resources, limited budgets and our society's obsession over minimizing risk are the main cause for the standardized design of most playgrounds. While these playgrounds may be fun initially, they rarely sustain a child's interest on repeated visits. Today, technological advancements have allowed an ever-increasing body of talented architects, landscape architects and artists, in collaboration with manufacturers, that combine play, adventure, fantasy and safety into their designs, ultimately creating a spatial arena for children to support their boundless imagina-



tions at a manageable scale. The many practitioners showcased within these pages are striving to make playground design the next revolution, placing children at the center of their design process as a simple extension of their vision to create play environments that are rich in creativity, arts and inspiration to reach ecological health.

Their designs act “outside the box”, using imagination as the main design element, exploring material properties and keeping in mind that play is an important role in the development of children; their ideas are born from a visual story that creates a space where fantasy thrives, open up possibilities for free, uninhibited play and exploration, and meet the needs of today’s youth. They apply a wide-ranging selection of imaginative solutions in playground design, programs which combine the needs of creating an entertaining, exciting and stimulating environment on the one hand and, on the other, providing an aesthetically pleasing public space, while also ensuring that the necessary safety requirements are met. Included are the design components (surface materials, different types of swings and slides, climbing equipment) as well as the functional considerations (different types of activities for different age groups).

*Playground Design* exemplifies the best of high quality playgrounds, showcasing from fantasy, nature-based and sports playgrounds with different designed themes such as, dragons, ships, animals, towers, pirates, trees and an organically shaped structure, simulating a plastic “cloud”, among many others.

In the fantasy playgrounds there is a story plot where children become the actors and adopt roles which they are able to fulfill with their imagination. The designers provide the set, in which the children should act upon. The colorful playgrounds of Monstrum are based on storytelling, they create a visual story to teach and entertain the children. For instance, *The Tower Playground* in Copenhagen’s Fælledparken in Denmark invites children into a fantasyland where they will feel like giants. The playground is comprised of five towers modeled after real Copenhagen towers. The towers in the playground are connected by slides and bridges, allowing the children to climb and play among the rooftops of a miniature city. The replica towers give them a close up look at some of the city’s most important architecture.

No matter how poor, colorless and toyless their environment is, children always find a way to play. They play with stones, twigs, grass and water. They think up ways of turning mundane items into creations. The designers’ inspiration for the nature-based playgrounds featured in this book, was born from this basic way of playing. Their projects respond to their surrounding context, develop awareness for natural systems and provide a rich diversity of play and learning experiences. While the designers include elements suitable for specific age groups, the malleable elements of sand and water that link all these elements act as a social catalyst. Children are invited to embark in an adventure high above the trees and across bridges or to soak themselves in water basins. The *Water Playground* in Tychy, Poland by RS+ matches its surrounding landscape and contour of the basin, while at the same time colorful aquatic toys allow functional, constructive and dramatic play,

giving the children a chance to improve their motor skills and develop their social skills. These play environments were designed to allow children to experience risks and test their boundaries without exposure to hazard. The result is a design that provides open-ended play experiences that encourage imagination and creative play while meeting the emotional, cognitive and physical needs of children.

To attract the youth, a sturdier and bigger arena with bold design welcomes an older generation into an open and safe field, stimulating physical skills and abilities beyond the excessively abundant media entertainment available. Selgascano’s curvaceous skate park, *Mérida Factory Youth Movement* in Mérida, Spain provides the youth with a place to skateboard, dance hip-hop, climb rocks and create graffiti. This playground melts arts, sports and inspiration in a colorful, open and inviting plastic “cloud” structure. Sports playgrounds teach children about the importance of key values and to deal with competition. These learning aspects highlight the impact of physical education and sport on a child’s social and moral development. This pedagogic theory is the basic layer of the programmatic design idea.

Focusing on the immersion of a world of play and exploration, this volume presents 58 outstanding, recent interpretations of “meaning” in playground design worldwide, each meeting the requirements that contribute to ideal spaces for children, combined with innovative design practices. As society and technology changes, playground design will continue to develop and weak up the curiosity and creativity in children, as well as the inner child in its creators.









# FANTASY







↑ | The castle

# Dragon Playground

Berlin

The thematic playground Dragon Playground was conceived for children aged six years and younger. It is situated in a building gap with the castle hill rising at the rear wall of the plot. The dragon lurking in the sand is conquered from the castle. The dragon is a sequence of different climbing and balancing equipment. Its wings consist of a bird's nest swing and a hammock. A dragon nest seesaw featuring dragon's eggs complements the equipment. A paved path surrounding the sand area can be used for moving around the playground and for toys on wheels. The playground can be observed from a promenade along the street planted with cherry plums. An unpaved path leads through a jungle of hazelnut bushes, complementing the paths.

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