Barbara E. Hendricks

Designing for Play
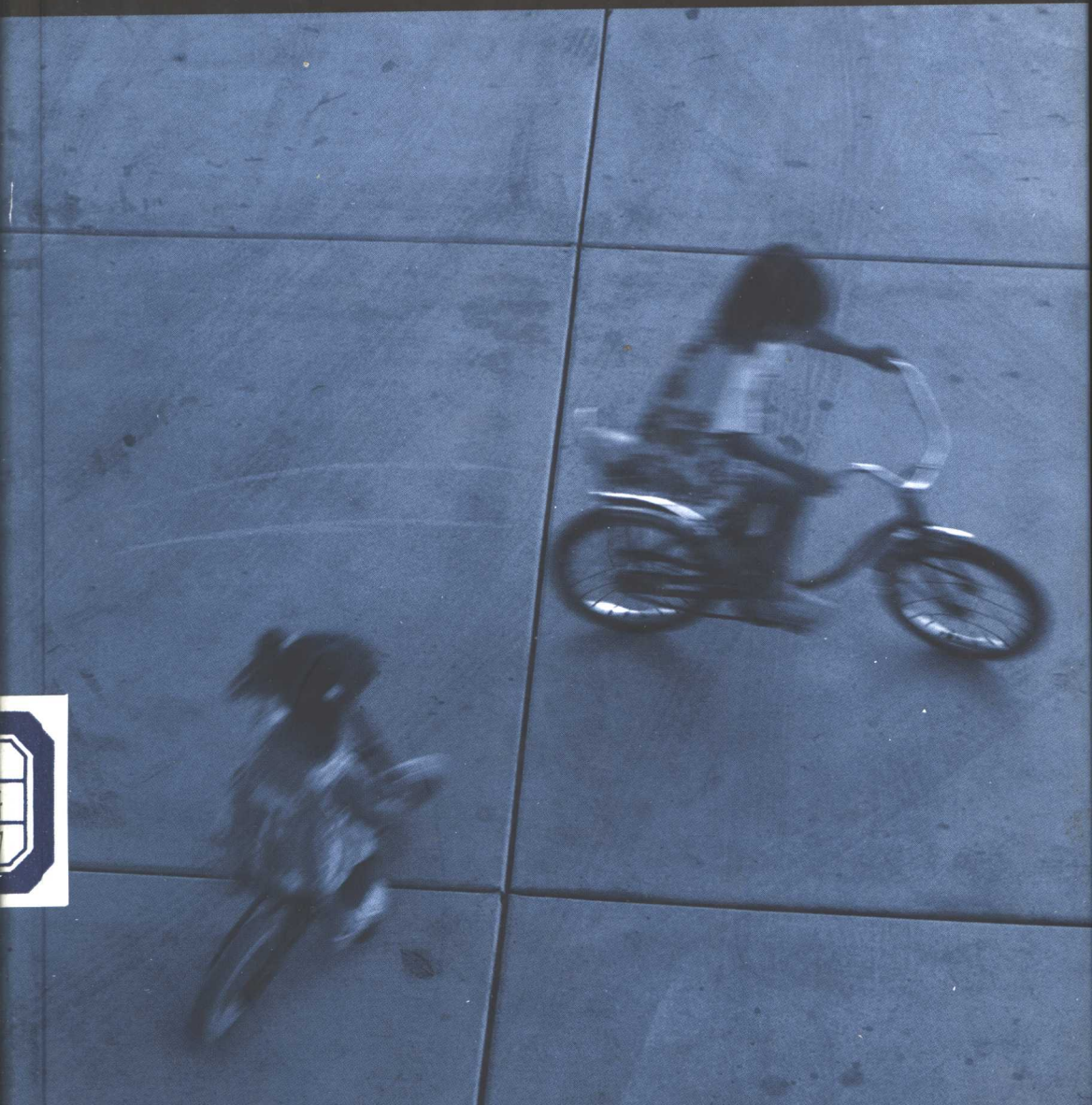
Designing for Play

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Foreword

This book is aimed at the designer who would like to design well for the children. It is intended as a reference to introduce current issues and ideas relating to children in public spaces. The large body of literature and expertise relating to child development and child psychology may seem inaccessible to a designer; in this book I hope to whet their appetite to come to know more about this important population.

This is a book, but I hope it is not a typical book. A book about play should also signal that it is to be played with, it is for people who play, who play seriously. It is not necessary to start at the beginning and read toward the back. You can also start in the middle and read toward the front. Boxes of information and highlighted ideas that catch your attention can be the starting point. Some statements that are important to me are repeated – this is not a mistake in the editing – it is deliberate. Repetition is part of he way we play and the way we learn and remember; the repetition is part of the rhythm of this book. The whole aim is to increase the quality of designing for play – and we can only do that when we feel freer as adult designers to use play as a tool for our own further development as well as enjoy it for the fun of it. Enjoy!

Acknowledgements

Contents

1 Designing for Play

Designing for play has been the rightful field of work for anyone who wishes to set themselves up as a playground designer. There is no clearly identified body of knowledge required nor any particular design skills. Architects, landscape architects, sculptors, engineers, technicians, builders, gardeners, sportsmen, educators and former children all have tried their hand at playground design. The multitude of angles from which we approach playground design could be seen to bring in a wonderful diversity to this field. Unfortunately that is not so. Public playgrounds have been part of western cities for a little over one hundred years now and yet as we enter into the twenty first century there is no other aspect of public provision that has changed so little over the past century and is so boringly the same around the world as public playgrounds.

Why is this so?

- Is this because there is so little professional competence in the design of play areas?
- Is it because designing for children has little or no prestige in society?
- Is it because societies do not prioritise good quality space design for children as a public service?
- Is it because children have no political power?
- Is it because the adults are too busy taking care of their own needs?

The list of questions could continue – there is no simple answer to the problems in public playgrounds design. The solution lies in the will of society to want to offer children a quality childhood, where children are recognised as citizens and not extensions of their parents. To date there are few role models to follow when trying to establish new levels of service for children. We need to look to the basic characters of play and of childhood. Yet if there is no agreed upon body of knowledge – where do we start?

How do we know something?

We recognise as right or accurate pieces of information that seem to make sense to us. When we are new to a subject and learning about it for the first

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time we tend to accept without question the first pieces of information we are told about that subject. After that all further incoming information is filtered through the first set of knowledge we have.

When we are learning about children's play out of doors, a subject where there are a multitude of meanings and theories, we need to consider carefully those first pieces of information we have accepted and identify our biases, otherwise we are in danger of discarding salient knowledge about children and children's play in favour of that information we first received.

Some excellent articles and books have been written on designing for children's play – and there have been many nostalgic and romanticising publications as well. The design profession have been busy contributors – mostly landscape architects or architects, however the majority of reference books have been written by pedagogues and early childhood experts.

Many of the playground design books now published are a type of do-it-yourself playground design guide. Playground design has been seen to be a distant cousin of garden design at the amateur, home-gardener level. Anyone can do it, if they just follow a few technical tips and guidelines. This book takes playground design seriously – like play itself. It is a book aimed at bringing the issue of designing for play up to a professional level – a subject for designers about design.

Looking through the literature on designing play areas I have renewed my acquaintance with Arvid Bengsston's *Environmental Planning for Children's Play*. I have enjoyed the text and photographs every time I read the book and I have found that at different stages in my professional development I would find more material for thought and inspiration. This last time with the book I was struck with the sections dealing with the problems facing children living in cities – it sounded so immediate, as if he was writing about the situation in 1999. Actually it was 1970 when he wrote it.

What has happened in these 29 years? Little has changed to alter conditions in public spaces in cities in favour of use by children. In fact, Bengsston starts the book by referring to a 1958 European seminar on the problem of playgrounds. Forty years later the list of problems is almost the same and just as long. Is there a real intent on the part of society to provide well for children's use of public spaces? There seems to still be a great gap between people like Arvid Bengsston and other advocates of children's welfare and right to play and those professionals who are responsible for the form and content of the everyday public spaces used by children. Often the technical literature intended to inform these professionals only seems to widen the distance because each new text increases the height of the mountain of opinion and ideas we are trying to get an overview of.

I hope this book will help give perspective over the mountain – and give designers an overview over the current ideas and knowledge about children's interaction with their environment and about play as a cultural activity.

The century of the child - children as VIC's

The twentieth century was early on called the century of the child and the United Nations has celebrated the International Year of the Child and made a declaration of the Rights of the Child. Yet have conditions for children improved over this century?

In the western world children today have better access to medical care, protection by law from physical punishment and many children have bedrooms filled with mountains of toys – paradise on earth for children, you might think. Children are celebrated in the market economies as Very Important Consumers – they have a great influence on how the family income is used. But do children really have it better? Why then are there so many children with symptoms of stress and related problems?

Children today in most western societies have rights as individuals established and protected by law, although they are not permitted to vote for their governments. In this book I will address one aspect of western society that seems to be going in the opposite direction relating to children's rights, the children's right and freedom to use outdoor public spaces and the opportunities children have to come to explore in their own terms about living on Planet Earth.

> **The Right to Explore Planet Earth**
> This planet has rhythms of day and night, the sun moving across the sky, the moon's phases, the stars, and the rise and fall of the tides, the seasons as well as local geography and living things. All these items are part of our human heritage. Yet modern urban children are kept apart from the planet and its forces - we need to make a Charter with our children and give them the freedom of this earth.

In many traditional societies and developing countries children have better conditions relative to access to outdoors and exploring the world around them than do children in many modern western cities. Not that children in developing countries have access to designed playground – they do not; but they have the freedom to explore the outdoor environment around them and come to know about it in their own terms and make it their own. Children in modern western cities are not so free- they are very

restricted by traffic and fear of violence to children. Their movement is often so restricted throughout their childhood that they become adults with little or no understanding of how their city is organised. They are taken to public playgrounds and supervised while at play and then escorted back into the adult private sphere of the home. They have no sense of the lay of the land around them and may even have a fear of animals, birds and nature. Many city children do not ever see the stars in the sky and have no idea of how to determine north from south – they are cut off from the planet and its rhythms.

Children really are not so dangerous. It is the perceived dangers in the outside world this gate is to protect them from.

One mother of a five year old boy tells the story how one night in the winter when she put him to bed the full moon was shining into his bedroom window. After kissing him good night and turning off the light she left the room. A short time later a little voice called to her "Mommy you forgot to shut off the moonlight".
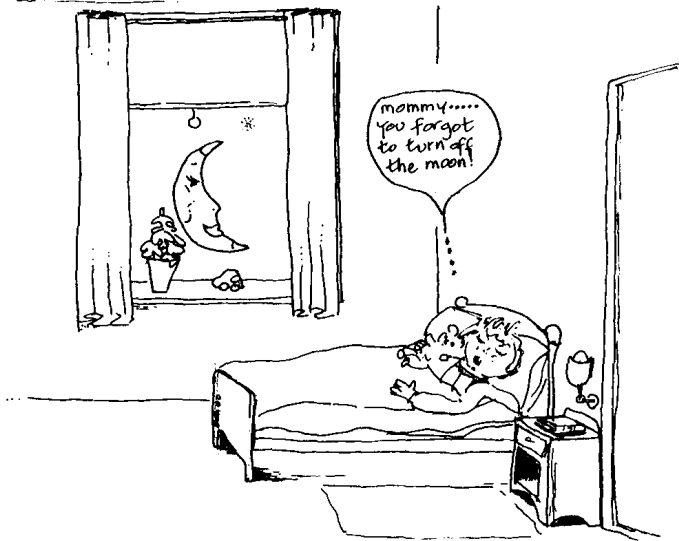
I am not suggesting that all is negative in western cities for children – cities are grand places to live. They are the epitome of our culture and civilisation. They are treasure houses of ideas, architecture, art, music and spiritual developments. The problem is that children are not permitted to use much of the city as children or to get the most out of city living. Children are not content to just be driven past and look at the city, they want to touch, to feel, to interact with things; and the way in which we now organise city living and childhood access to public spaces severely limits the child's possibility for exploring city on their own terms. They should not need to be bussed out to the forest to be able to play freely in the outdoor environment. In the twenty first century, if we adults act wisely on behalf of all our citizens, children in cities can enjoy the best of city living and those cities that take good care of the children will be seen to be the best cities for all to live in.

Play environment design requires reasonable competence in both the natural sciences of the environment and the social science of childhood as well as design. Theories of play area design all too often are based in adult mythology and clichés – not in knowledge. It seems the more we know about natural sciences and about childhood the more unnecessary it is to have a theory – what is important then is to design well.

> *I Ching:*
> "Those with little experience have little wisdom."

Playing means it is possible to take risks that would otherwise be too dangerous. Designing play areas requires a playful approach to designing, to taking risks, to testing the boundaries of trends in design, it means to risk being seen as not serious. Play area design should be executed with humility, recognising that we adults are but tourists in the land of children; we are not experts in their culture and their ways. Childhood experts are experts in an adult definition of childhood – not in life as experienced by children. While we have played as children we lack the experience of contemporary childhood.

> Cities are grand places to grow up in – they are the treasure houses of our civilisation.

Reference

Walker, Brian Browne. (1992), *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, New York: St Martin's Griffin.

2 People Play

About the role of play in our lives

> "Play is a constant happening, a constant act of creation in the mind or in practise" Arvid Bengsston, 1970.

The twentieth century has been the first century in this civilisation where children and childhood has been under the microscope. In the nineteenth century the state started to differentiate between children and adults with laws against child labour and requirements for school attendance. Children's and mother's medical care became specialities of experts. During the twentieth century we have seen an ever greater expansion of expert professions who specialise in children and childhood, in parenting and child care - psychologists, educators, educators of early childhood educators, childhood historians, sociologists and anthropologists. Children and childhood are now acceptable as an adult profession but not yet as prestigious as being in the business of automobiles, computers or aeronautics. It is an area of expertise that is often connected to "women's issues" and one where the value to society is not recognised in the pay packets those experts receive. And those professions that are experts on children are also seen to be experts on play and play spaces. This is an expertise arrived at by association – not by a competence in the subject itself. Play area design is often carried out by persons who know something about educating children but nothing about physical space design, or by physical space designers who know very little about children or play.

> Children and childhood are now acceptable as an adult profession but not yet as prestigious as being in the business of automobiles, computers or aeronautics.

Play is a phenomenon that is exceptionally complex and not so well understood – as witnessed by all the unsuccessful attempts to scientifically define play. Play is such an intrinsic part of being human that it is difficult for us to get the scientific distance to study it. Play has often in the past

been associated with childhood and free time – something people do when they aren't working or producing something useful. Play wasn't seen to produce anything useful.

The environment of play

Not so long ago we discovered that play could be made useful as a tool for learning and as a means for forming children into useful adults. As a result some kinds of play became more acceptable – and it was even acceptable to spent tax money on such things as playgrounds. The kind of play opportunities provided by public funds needed to be defended in terms of child development and building up physical skills and good health. Children's play is still, however, somewhat of a black sheep in the herd of useful sheep.

When early childhood psychologists or educators focus on play it is always with the explanation that play is so important to the development of the children- and what they, as specialists, are interested in is the process of acquiring knowledge and skills – i.e. moving the child from the realm of childhood into the realm of adulthood, not in the act of play. Research on child's play has often been carried out so the adult expert could discover more about the development of human intelligence and the process of education.

Views of childhood

The Science of Childhood	The Poetry of Childhood
Hierarchical development, children develop into people through education /a series of progressive developmental stages. (adapted from Chawla, L. (1994).)	Romance of children as closer to nature, ideas of Rousseau, children as pure, as inherently competent.

Playgrounds are promoted as places for outdoor learning, such as the "Landscapes for Learning" on school grounds. Play area design is seen to emphasise and promote those kind of play activities that are most understood by experts to be developmental – or in the jargon of the commercial play equipment manufacturers- they have "play value".

Today we are beginning to realise the importance of play and a playful attitude toward life, both as an intrinsic healthy human drive and as a means of developing and growing in a complex and stressful environment. Developing, not just in terms of developing muscles and physical skills but also in terms of spiritual, intellectual, creative, social and emotional growth. The twenty first century should be the century when it becomes acceptable to be a lifelong player – and when it is recognised that players often enjoy a long life.

Playing is living!

Children's play occupies all aspects of young children's lives and many modern homes are fitted with play rooms and play yards to accommodate the activities of the children. Many adults however have difficulty when the child doesn't stop playing when they are in other environments – at the table, in the car, shopping and so forth. While children are very quick at picking up the understanding that in different places and with different people one behaves differently - the urge to play still comes to the surface.

Children are well known to play everywhere and play with everything. The recognition that children play everywhere has lead one or two local politicians to ask out loud why it is necessary to spend money on playgrounds – after all the children are all over the streets and corners and not in the playgrounds. In 1982, I was asked by a city councillor in a Canadian city, "Those little buggers are everywhere but on the playground, so why are you recommending that we spend money on these playgrounds?" My best answer then – and still is today – that city governments have a duty to create special, outdoor play places for children. Today, I will add that they also have a duty to make them places where children like to be and where they find challenging play possibilities.

Playing at life

Asking "why people play?" is like asking why we breathe. Both are essential activities that satisfy needs. "Play is life for young children" writes Cosby Rodgers in *Play in the Life of Young Child*. There are some big questions that must be lived out – not answered. These are questions like "what is the meaning of life?" and similarly "what is the meaning of playing?". Our verbal language may not have words for this yet – but we are still developing as human beings - at all ages.

How people play reflects the multiplicity of human nature and is a forever fascinating study. People never stop playing – not really. Adults tend to have absorbed the play into their daily life and give it important and serious sounding labels – but if seen as play many of the activities of adults can be better understood.

Playing is an expression of the joy of life

• Playing alone or together?

• Playing alone, permits one to explore the environment and find out about being alive on this planet, it can be fantastically satisfactory when the playing takes place in a richly varied outdoor environment.

• Playing alone, when the play is about social interaction and finding out about what it is like to be human, can be most unsatisfactory.

• Children must be permitted time to play alone in a varied environment and also time to play with others – with children of all ages and with adults.

• Play is about the pleasure of functioning – the joy of being alive and able to do things.

• Creativity is born in children's exploration of and relationship to the natural world and it is to this place that creative people return again and again for inspiration. (Cobb, Edith 1977.)

Playing at "office"

I have found great insight into the adult working environment –particularly the office environment -when one views it as another form of group role playing. I have come to understand my feelings of frustration and anger with a dictatorial and non -communicative supervisor when I realised that as a play leader he was not able to keep the play going, as he was not able to integrate the ideas and demands of all the players into the play. Children who are accepted as play leaders are very good at this (Andersen and Kampman, 1996). Perhaps these children will also better managers when playing "office".

Also when I play/work at "office" I want to be able to negotiate what role I am to play in the game and I want to know what role others are playing. I don't want to spend a lot of time guessing what role I have been assigned for that day. Good working environments can be developed using