



CLEAR CHANNEL

IMAGINATION PLAYGROUND  
AT BURLING SLIP, NEW YORK

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A CASE FOR

play

**Parks are increasingly giving kids play spaces that let them explore, take risks, problem-solve, and daydream.** By VANESSA GENEVA AHERN



**Remember the thrill** of racing your friends to the monkey bars at the neighborhood playground? Scanning the park for a squeaky swing, an imposing steel slide, or a spinning roundabout that you could only stop by dragging your foot through dirt? ¶ With the surge in screen time, play advocates and child psychologists are making the case for the importance of play for children. Writer and playground consultant Susan G. Solomon calls for more—and better—places to play in her books, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* and *The Science of Play*. “I look for public play solutions that encourage risk taking, succeeding and failing, planning ahead, gaining friends,” notes Solomon on her website. “Many of these built works are inexpensive, sustainable, and easy to accomplish.”

The design team observed how kids in SMALE RIVERFRONT PARK used the playground equipment according to the classic “Four Types of Play,” first identified in 1968 by the late Israeli professor Sara Smilansky.



#### FUNCTIONAL PLAY

Physical activity like running, jumping, and climbing.  
Engages the child in **RISK** and **CHALLENGE**.



#### CONSTRUCTIVE PLAY

Creation activity like building, shaping, and making.  
Engages the child in **EXPERIMENTATION** and **DISCOVERY**.

Landscape architects are designing play spaces that use natural elements to encourage free play. Urban planners are engaging with local community boards, parks and recreation departments, and school districts to create play spaces that give a new generation of kids the freedom to explore, safely take risks, climb, solve problems, and daydream.

All together, these efforts are creating some of the most innovative parks across the country.

### New ways to play

The sprawling 170-acre Craig Ranch Regional Park in North Las Vegas, Nevada—built in 2013 on the site of a former golf course—has several themed areas for interactive play, including a garden bed, a huge rabbit statue, a rattlesnake slide, a tree house, and a rock-climbing wall with hexagonal space nets for playground adventure. Nearby, the smaller Aliante Nature Discovery Park boasts a waterfall and a lake with local wildlife. But the big draw is the Dinosaur Park area and its irresistibly climbable, half-buried triceratops skull and fossil sandbox.

Planners and designers need to reinvent playgrounds and the way children play, and including these interactive elements is the way to do it, says Brie Hensold, principal planner of Sasaki. “We need to understand that play is how children learn, and a fundamental part of development. It’s not just an exercise,” she says. “We design new spaces that are designed to encourage risk and creativity that can open up new avenues for use that you couldn’t have predicted.”

### SMALE RIVERFRONT PARK CINCINNATI



Part of that understanding involves watching children play. Hensold’s team conducted a post-occupancy study of a play space in Cincinnati at Smale Riverfront Park, where they saw that kids used slides in unexpected ways, transforming them into climbing walls—which was a surprising use but still safe, thanks to the playground’s soft surface.

“The playground also incorporates nature play and design features that draw from the adjacent river, including a rock retaining wall,” Hensold adds. “It’s treated as part of the playground and used for parkour, an unexpected activity for a space that was

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—BRIE HENSOLD,  
PRINCIPAL PLANNER OF  
SASAKI



#### DRAMATIC PLAY

Imaginative activity like role playing and make-believe. Engages the child in **STORYTELLING** and **ACTING**.



#### GAMES

Activities like hopscotch, tag, or follow the leader. Engages the child in **COMPETITION** and **TEAMWORK**.

#### WHERE DESIGN MEETS PLAY

Kate Took, ASLA, a landscape architect at Sasaki, explains the wild appeal of Cincinnati’s Smale Riverfront Park.

**READ**  
[sasaki.com/blog/view/968](https://sasaki.com/blog/view/968)

**WOODLAND DISCOVERY PLAYGROUND  
SHELBY FARM PARK  
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE**

**SUSTAINABLE PLAY**

KIDS WERE INVITED TO SHARE their opinions on what makes a playground great at a public workshop before the Woodland Discovery Playground at Shelby Farm Park (right) in Memphis, Tennessee, was designed by James Corner Field Operations in 2011. The popular playground consists of several large nests where kids can slide, swing, climb, run, find, and discover. Plus, the playground was one of the first three in the world to earn a Sustainable SITES Certification from the Sustainable SITES Initiative ([tinyurl.com/y82dhw43](http://tinyurl.com/y82dhw43)). It features a one-quarter-mile-long arbor structure made from 99 percent recycled steel, play areas made from recycled athletic shoe material, and soft landings under nets and tree houses made from recycled boots.



**EXHIBIT & BOOK**

The Design Museum Boston's Kickstarter campaign hopes to bring to life its book about design and the importance of outdoor play.

**EXPLORE**

[tinyurl.com/yuc3cedr](http://tinyurl.com/yuc3cedr)



An exhibit, *Extraordinary Playscapes*, is at the Harold Washington Library Center in Chicago through December 16.

**VISIT**

[tinyurl.com/y8r-tuzdz](http://tinyurl.com/y8r-tuzdz)

not even designed as a play structure," she notes, referring to a sport that involves moving quickly and efficiently through environmental obstacles by running, climbing, or jumping.

Matt Urbanski, principal at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc., a landscape architecture firm in Brooklyn, looks at the play space from a planner's perspective: "What is it that the site has the capacity to do, and what is missing in peoples' lives," he says, "and how do we bring those two together in cool ways?"

In 2004, Tim Carey, then president of Battery Park City Authority in Lower Manhattan, knew the answer to that question: nature. With Teardrop Park, he wanted to recreate his childhood experiences in the Hudson River Valley.

To realize this vision, planners and designers at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc. had to manufacture nature, as they didn't have any natural features there to work with. Stone forms were used, sand was dredged up from the East River, and a road was built as a base. Now, "when you go into

Teardrop, you can't sense the edges unless you look straight up at the buildings," says Urbanski.

This melding of nature and play together became a motif for the firm after the development of Teardrop Park, which opened in 2004. Nature-themed projects followed, such as Brooklyn Bridge Park and Chicago's Maggie Daley Park, which features rolling topography and a quarter-mile-long ice ribbon inspired by a winter wonderland concept. The firm is currently working on a plan to revitalize the riverfront of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

**Backyard deficit**

Bringing nature to cities is vital, especially with the recent boom of millennials moving downtown—and having kids. It is something planner Scott Page, principal at Interface Studio LCC in Philadelphia, has noticed, and he says that cities will lose the benefit of that growth in places like Philadelphia if they don't work to attract and retain families.

"That means taking an eye to the design of the streets and parks, and realizing that [communities]

SMITH MEMORIAL PLAYGROUND AND PLAYHOUSE  
PHILADELPHIA



## A PARK FOR EVERYBODY

SCOTT PAGE, PRINCIPAL at Interface Studio LLC in Philadelphia, sees Philadelphia's Smith Memorial Playground and Playhouse (above) as a good example of design equity. The park's vision statement calls it "a welcoming, safe, and inclusive space where differences are valued. We facilitate education and interaction among children and families of different backgrounds

- in order to promote understanding and acceptance of diversity."
- Page says the park is "one of those unique assets that Philadelphia offers. It provides an opportunity for everybody. It engages kids of different ages in multiple ways," he says.
- Meg Wise, executive director of Smith Memorial Playground and Playhouse in Philadelphia, says their goal is to

- provide a space where children have the autonomy to direct their own unstructured free play. "The playground was completely rebuilt between 2005 and 2009, with a design from Betsy Caesar of Philadelphia. The goal was to leverage the natural green space and to provide open-ended play opportunities while conforming to traditional safety standards," says Wise.

## GAMIFYING THE PLAYGROUND By KRISTEN POPE

WITH MANY KIDS glued to their electronic devices, some park planners are “gamifying” the playground experience with high scores and flashing lights.

Evergreen Park, in Salt Lake County, Utah, features a spinning device called the “Swirl.” One child stands on the Swirl’s platform and uses a controller to choose interactive games for herself and her playmates. The Swirl has three arms with “surf-around spinners” and a tower with LED nodes for gaming.

“That aspect of gaming scores, competition, and activity is the reason we put it there,” says Morgan Selph, who oversaw the development of the playground and now works for a company that sells electronic playground equipment.

Electronic games can also appeal to kids who don’t thrive on traditional playgrounds. Ground-level equipment offers greater accessibility, and many games use color and sound patterns for kids with hearing or visual challenges.

The games also allow players to advance to more difficult levels as they improve. “Marble Drop” is a popular game played on a piece of equipment called a “Rocky,” where players stand and balance and

shift their weight to “drop” a digital marble down a “hole,” later moving on to more challenging scenarios.

Ken Dobyms, a representative of Kompan, the company behind the Rocky, says “[Traditional] playgrounds didn’t really level up well.”

Philadelphia’s Herron Park has a different twist. This urban “sprayground” features water jets that come on at intervals with sensor-controlled flows. It was built by park engineers and staff plumbers after a pool needed a pricey

rebuild. Instead of a new pool, they designed the sprayground.

“The neighborhood children love the synchronized jets,” says Alain Joinville, public relations manager for Philadelphia Parks and Recreation. “It is more entertaining than just one steady flow of water.”

Electronic playgrounds entertain kids, but they also create challenges. The equipment, kept outside 365 days a year, must be resistant to severe weather and vandalism. It also

needs a power source.

“Getting power to the structure was probably the most difficult part,” says Ryan Pickup, park superintendent for Layton, Utah, home to Legacy Park. The town dug trenches under concrete to power their equipment, which was installed in 2009.

In residential neighborhoods, parks must also be careful that lights and sounds don’t disturb neighbors. In Salt Lake County’s Evergreen Park, the electronic features shut down at 9 p.m., an hour before closing time.

Park planners also love the real-time data available, including which games are played, when, for how long, and with how many players. The equipment can even determine how many calories were burned, update software automatically, and dispatch repair technicians.

In Hoboken, New Jersey, park managers discovered that an electronic playground located two blocks from a busy nightlife district had a surge in activity after 11 p.m. on weekends. “An unexpected outcome of putting cool stuff in public parks is you never know who it will appeal to,” says Dobyms.

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Kids explore the interactive features of an Icon Space electronic playground at Manhattan Plaza, New York.