HISTORY AUSTRALIA

JOURNAL OF THE AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 8 | NUMBER 3 | DECEMBER 2011

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PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT
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History Australia

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History Australia is the official journal of the Australian Historical Association (AHA).

History Australia aims to reflect the concerns, publish the research and increase the professional self-awareness of historians making, teaching and applying history. It publishes refereed articles that draw on new historical research or address ways of teaching, exhibiting or applying historical knowledge.

History Australia is published on behalf of the AHA by Monash University Publishing: www.publishing.monash.edu. The journal is also available online, at <http://journals.publishing.monash.edu/ojs/index.php/ha>

Indexing and Abstracting

History Australia is indexed by CSA Sociological Abstracts and ABC-CLIO Historical Abstracts Online.

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ISSN: 1449-0854 (print)

ISSN: 1833-4881 (online)

Pages: 236

Design: Les Thomas

Cover Image: Funful, The Playground Equipment Line, Charles J. Jager Co., 1920 Trade Catalog. Smithsonian Institution Libraries Trade Literature Collections, Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Washington, D.C.

Printed in Australia by Griffin Press an Accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001:2004 Environmental Management System printer.

Print post approved: 351126/00070

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The safe and rational children's playground

Strategies and technologies since the nineteenth century

Carroll Pursell

Between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries the evolution of playgrounds in the United States was shaped by both ideology and technology. Advocates agreed that playgrounds should control and instruct children, but disagreed on the way to accomplish those goals: the extreme positions marked by a commitment to the principles of 'Efficiency' or the ideal of recreation. The technology of playgrounds, both the sites and the equipment, changed only slowly, but both steel and wooden devices of traditional design and newer forms of sculptural modernism became central to a developing discourse over dangers to users. Ironically, playgrounds had initially been touted as safe alternatives to play on city streets. After World War II they too were overtaken by the larger risk-aversion that came to mark American culture.

This article has been peer-reviewed

All play is a voluntary activity.

Play to order is no longer play.

J Huizinga (1944)¹

Around the turn of the twentieth century, according to Allen Guttman, 'the wholesale intervention of adults utterly transformed the informal world of traditional children's play'.² The campaign for playgrounds in

1 Johan Huizinga *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1949, 7.

2 Allen Guttman 'The progressive era appropriation of children's play', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 3, Spring 2010, 147.

the United States, which began as part of the Progressive Movement in the late nineteenth century, though supported by a range of groups and individuals, early fell into the hands of efficiency-minded people who tried to apply the principles of Scientific Management to children's play and its dedicated venues. After World War I efficiency faded, and in the 1930s playgrounds that encouraged children's creativity and sense of design took hold. Throughout the twentieth century concerns about safety, especially as it pertained to the technology of playground equipment, remained a persistent theme, leading to what one critic referred to as an undermining of childhood itself.

The playground movement that arose at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States was fuelled in large part by a perception that new purpose-built playgrounds would be safer than the urban streets where so many children, especially of emigrant groups and the working class, found their pleasures.³ Though many games, such as hide-and-seek and tag, needed no equipment, a range of devices from swings and slides to seesaws and sandboxes quickly became established as expected features of the new playgrounds. Despite the subsequent rise of professional playground supervisors and an attempt to make playgrounds schools of scientific play and nurseries of efficiency, by the end of the century they had themselves become seen as dangerous, full of technological traps and mechanical hazards.

Urban streets were the first playgrounds of the thousands of children who lived in the teeming industrial cities of the nation.⁴ Playmates abounded there. The comedian George Burns recalled that in the building where he lived there were sixteen families and each family had eight to ten children. Apartments in the tenements were cramped and crowded, siblings shared not only rooms but beds, and there was simply nowhere to play indoors. Adding to the problem, there was a chance that adult females in the family might well be using the space to do piece work while another family member, or possibly a paying boarder, might work a night shift and need to sleep during the day. Spending the time between school and dinner playing outside was the logical, necessary and enjoyable solution.

With little money to spend on commercially available play equipment, even bats and balls, urban children became adept at making do with found resources. The greatest of these, of course, was the cityscape

3 See Cary Goodman *Choosing Sides: Playground and Street Life on the Lower East Side*, New York: Schocken Books 1979.

4 Ibid.

itself, and like the adult followers of the extreme sport *parcours* later in the century, they adapted the built environment to their own needs. Fire escapes, doorways, stoops, alleys, sidewalks, curbs, fire hydrants, storm drains, utility poles, manhole covers and even the pushcarts, parked delivery wagons and adult pedestrians were transformed by the bricolage of play. Following the homosocial mores of the adults, girls claimed the stoops as their own territory, where they could sew, talk and keep an eye on younger siblings. Older boys controlled the middle of the streets for their games and activities, while younger boys took the spaces between the two.

Again, George Burns remembered that 'our playground was the middle of Rivington Street' in New York City.

We only played games that needed very little equipment, games like kick-the-can, hopscotch, hide-and-go-seek, follow-the-leader. When we played baseball we used a broom handle and a rubber ball. A manhole cover was home plate, a fire-hydrant was first base, second base was a lamp post, and Mr Gitlez, who used to bring a kitchen chair down to sit and watch us play, was third base. One time I slid into Mr Gitlez; he caught the ball and tagged me out.⁵

The same need to create baseball diamonds out of found objects extended to other forms of play. Historian David Nasaw has described how

children had to scrounge their equipment and then some. Garbage pail lids were made into sleds, bicycle wheels into hoops, discarded cans and used bags into footballs; baby carriages were transformed into pushcarts and wagons, and scraps of wood too insignificant to be used for kindling at home were burned in bonfires in discarded lunch pails.⁶

Johan Huizinga has written that 'All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course ... All [playgrounds] are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart'.⁷ In marking off streets for play, children posed a direct challenge to the adults who claimed them as their own world of commerce, transport and social intercourse. Peter and Iona Opie, the chroniclers of children's play, noted that the young and adults had been contesting public spaces at least since the Middle Ages, and that

5 Quoted in David Nasaw *Children of the City: At Work & At Play*, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday 1985, 30.

6 Ibid, 30.

7 Ibid, 20–21.

children marked their claimed space by 'screaming, scribbling on the pavements, smashing milk bottles, banging on doors, and getting in people's way'.⁸ Playing by their own rules implied breaking those of adults.

Adult activities were not only often irksome to children trying to play, they could be dangerous. The role of the streets as transportation corridors concentrated a tangle of wagons, horses, streetcars, buggies, bicycles and, eventually, cars and trucks. Darting out in front of any one of these might prove fatal. The potential danger was compounded when children, either to save money or for the thrill of it, jumped on and off passing vehicles such as street cars while they were moving, or just rode on the outside, clinging to some part or other. More than one child was killed trying to steal bits of ice off the iceman's delivery wagon. The danger posed by passing vehicles was part of the reason that, at the turn of the twentieth century, reformers began to demand that children be cleared from the streets and given purpose-made playgrounds.

Figure 1. Hudson Bank Gymnasium, 1898

Source: Museum of the City of New York, Byron Co. Collection.

8 Peter and Iona Opie *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970, 20.

In 1910 the *New York Times* carried an article headlined 'Ask Mayor to Clear Streets of Children'. Col. E S Cornell, identified as Secretary of the National Highways Protective Association, charged that 'last month there were thirteen children killed in the streets here [in New York City] – stricken down, simply because they had no place to go except the street, where they could get a breath of fresh air'. Cornell and his association advocated that the city allow children to play in the many vacant lots and unused schoolyards which dotted the city.⁹ In fact, many New York schools had no yards at all, but at least a few had experimented with putting playgrounds on their roofs. One, operating as early as 1898, was said to have 'sand piles, parallel bars, horizontal bars, hitch and kick standards, seesaws, swinging ladders, overhead ladders, and basketball'.¹⁰ This may have been Seward Park, which had begun as an area of rubble from slums demolished in 1898. At the behest of the Outdoor Recreation League the site was eventually cleaned up and dedicated as a playground in 1903.¹¹

Cities across the United States were already beginning to make some provisions for playgrounds, especially in dense working-class neighbourhoods. Settlement houses were established by philanthropists especially to aid immigrant working families, beginning in the 1880s, and by the turn of the century there were hundreds. Often they operated such social services as day-care centres, well-baby clinics and also playgrounds. These last were often merely empty dirt lots, lent by philanthropists. Municipal governments had since the mid-nineteenth century established large urban parks, such as Central Park in New York City and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. The latter, established in 1870, opened a dedicated playground in 1887. Refurbished in 2007, it retained its famous and popular long, dual cement slide built into a hillside. Smaller parks, usually under four acres in area, were also established, either for the peaceful contemplation of nature or as active playgrounds.

Boston was an acknowledged leader in the movement, with the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygienic Association operating playgrounds in schoolyards during the summer months. These typically contained 'sand gardens' and swings, as well as having picture books, small blackboards, small toys and games available for small children. What was called 'the good example of Boston' was followed by Providence, Rhode Island and Baltimore, where the United Women of Maryland

9 *New York Times*, 6 May 1910.

10 Sadie American 'The movement for small playgrounds', *The American Journal of Sociology* 4, 1898, 165.

11 Rebecca Mead 'State of play', *New Yorker* 86, 5 July 2010, 32.

maintained several playgrounds in schoolyards. In Philadelphia, the City Parks Association opened a playground in 1894 and by 1898 the city board of education itself was operating 27 playgrounds in the afternoon, under the supervision of the school janitors.¹²

In 1893 the West End District of the Associated Charities of Chicago co-operated with Jane Addams' Hull House, the famous model for the settlement movement of the late nineteenth century, to operate 'a large playground in an empty lot, equipped with swings, see-saws, giant stride, and sand bins'. In 1896

under the auspices of the university settlement of the Northwestern University, a large and splendidly equipped playground was opened, which will accommodate 3000 or 4000 children ... Numerous swings, large and small, giant stride, see-saws, sand piles, etc., afford ample amusement for the children, who fairly swarm there.

A police lieutenant from the local precinct claimed that 'not less than fifteen lives have been saved from the electric car since the establishment of the playground, and juvenile arrests have decreased fully 33 1/3 per cent'.¹³

Chicago's Municipal Science Club began studying the need for additional, often smaller parks in 1898 and the following year a Special Park Commission was set up by the mayor. In 1904 Chicago began to create hybrid spaces with landscaping for adults, playgrounds for children and often playing fields for organised or 'pick-up' sports. The celebrated landscape firm of Olmsted Brothers and the architectural firm of D H Burnham & Co were hired to design facilities which often had running tracks, wading pools, sand courts and field houses, in addition to playground equipment. In 1905 the Davis Square Park, near the Union Stock Yard, opened a field house, a gymnasium for women, another for men, as well as meeting rooms, a library and a cafeteria. It attracted five million visitors in one year.¹⁴ Such elaborate facilities, of course, defined the upper end of playground design.

Playgrounds in Chicago's schoolyards were each supplied with a sand pit, swings, seesaws, parallel bars and wooden paving blocks for building. Additional equipment could include ladders, climbing ropes, ring-toss and other games and apparatus. A special effort was made to 'interest the children and educate them in rational play'. Charles Zueblin, an influential Chicago sociologist, noted that many children seemed 'ignorant' of play

12 American 'The movement for small playgrounds', 59-161.

13 Ibid, 162-163.

14 'Playgrounds and Small Parks' and 'Playground Movement,' *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. Accessed 25 November 2008. Available from: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org>.

and showed 'a lack of initiative' when confronted with this bounty of equipment. 'The swings', he noticed, 'were the most popular form of amusement, doubtless because the most individualistic, and at first there was little consideration of others.' He concluded with a somewhat self-serving extension of the American work ethic: 'Work is a cardinal principle of American life. To this must be added play.'¹⁵ This linkage of work with play made it obvious that pieces of playground equipment were a part of the American child's tool box.

In 1904 the city of Los Angeles appointed a commission to oversee its recently acquired playgrounds. The object was to keep new facilities out of the hands of the people who ran the city's parks. 'The purpose of the playground', the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out, 'is different from a park in that it is intended to be more than a mere park'.¹⁶ The first playground in the city was opened in June of the following year. It contained a house on the grounds for the manager, the man who was 'to superintend the games and play of the whole playground'. Half the playground was 'portioned off for the girls', and contained sandboxes, six 'box' swings and five rope swings, a Maypole, seesaws, basketball courts and 'a pretty summer house with tables just the right size and that is actually to be devoted to dolls and their accessories'. The boys' portion of the grounds contained an open-air gymnasium with a trapeze, a horizontal bar, parallel bars, a leather horse, a 'leather buck', a rope ladder, two punching bags, six travelling rings, peg poles ('to develop grip'), slanting ladders, vertical ladders and horizontal ladders. There were also handball courts, seesaws and swings.¹⁷

The forcing of children into 'rational play', of course, ran against the grain of play on the streets, where kids made a virtue of subverting adult rules and were adept at making up their own. One historian has noted that 'while neighborhood kids enjoyed using the equipment provided, they did not relish the adult "supervision" that came along with it'.¹⁸ In part this was because the children did not share the philanthropists' understanding of the city as a space dangerous to life, limb and morals, finding instead that the streets, dumps, railroad yards and harbour fronts were places full of potential for adventure and even a bit of profit. But it was also because those same philanthropists had a vision of shaping savage immigrant, working-class children into

15 Charles Zueblin 'Municipal playgrounds in Chicago', *The American Journal of Sociology* 4, 1898, 151, 154, 158.

16 *Los Angeles Times*, 14 September 1904.

17 *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 1905.

18 Nasaw *Children of the City*, 36.

docile workers, trained to curb their initiative and follow often mind-numbing rules and regulations in worksites increasingly organised around the principles of Frederick Winslow Taylor's principles of Scientific Management.

An attempt by the city of New York to get its charter revised by the legislature so that it could organise playground administration and hire supervisors inspired one Lurana W Sheldon to write a poem, titled 'Recreation by Rule', for publication in the *New York Times*.¹⁹ Noting that the city wished to 'Teach the children how to play by scientific force', she continued:

They wish the parks and playgrounds to be under supervision,
So all the games of children may be subject to revision.
And as for Park Instructors, Playground Mentors and the like ...
They are going to teach the youngsters how to play with common sense,
And they'll surely make them wretched at considerable expense.

This wish to regularise play found its signature expression in the attempt, during the Progressive Era, to make playgrounds conform to something like the widely admired principles of Scientific Management.²⁰

Two signal markers of the gathering modernity of the nineteenth century were the related trends toward specialisation and professionalisation. Inevitably, playground advocates decided to form a nationwide organisation to foster their goals. The National Playground Association of America was founded in Washington DC, in April of 1906.²¹ President Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent advocate of both strenuous activity and national efficiency, was made vice president while the position of president went to the prominent physical education leader, Luther Halsey Gulick.²²

Gulick had begun his study of physical education at Oberlin College in 1884.²³ The following year he attended the Sergeant School of Physical

Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in 1889 earned his MD from the City University of New York. In 1891, as head of the gymnasium department of the Young Men's Christian Education's Springfield Training School, he assigned one of his students, James Naismith, the task of designing a game around a set of simple rules he gave him. The resulting sport of basketball quickly grew in popularity and complexity. Naismith, later a professor of physical education at Kansas State University, was said to have told a former student going off to become a college basketball teacher 'Why, basketball is just a game to play. It doesn't need a coach'. By 2010, however, Naismith's 600-word rule book had grown to more than 30 000.²⁴ It was a metaphor for what was to happen to the playground movement itself.

Gulick was, in 1906, the head of physical education for the New York City school system, the president of both the American Physical Education Association and the Public School Training Association. The following year he became the chairman of the Playground Extension Committee of the Russell Sage Foundation, a philanthropic organisation that was a hotbed of Taylorite ideals of social efficiency. Gulick fitted in well, writing a book, *The Efficient Life*, in 1907 and having already worked to establish standards of athletic accomplishment by taking moving pictures of athletes in much the same way that Frank and Lillian Gilbreth studied adult workers.²⁵ Meanwhile the Russell Sage Foundation was sponsoring books which studied schools as 'factories of learning', producing, for examples, flow charts to maximise movement through that school's plant.

Working with Gulick was Lee F Hanmer, who moved from being a physical training supervisor for the New York City schools to Field Secretary of the new Playground Association of America, and then secretary of the playground extension committee and associate director of the department of child hygiene at the Russell Sage Foundation. In 1912 he was made director of the foundation's recreation department, a post he held until his retirement in 1937.²⁶

Seeking funds to continue its work, the Playground Association turned to the Russell Sage Foundation, which gave it \$20 000 and undertook to pay Gulick's salary directly.²⁷ Almost immediately the executive committee of

19 *New York Times*, 28 April 1910.

20 The following section on Scientific Management draws heavily upon William Brian Mitchell, 'We Want a Play Factory', Scientific Management and Urban Playgrounds 1907-1929: The Example of Cleveland, Master's Thesis, Case Western Reserve University 2000. I am grateful for his help.

21 This same year a Playground Association, also guided by scientific research and aimed both at producing healthier, stronger children and stamping out larrikinism, began opening playgrounds in Sydney. Jan Kociumbas *Australian Childhood: A History*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin 1997, 161-162.

22 *The Washington Post*, 13 April 1906.

23 Some brief biographical information on Gulick is provided in Thomas Winter 'Luther Halsey Gulick', *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*. Accessed 17 October, 2005. Available from: www.infed.org/thinkers/gulick.htm.

24 Kansas State Historical Society 'James Naismith'. Accessed 23 July 2010. Available from: http://www.kshs.org/portraits/naismith_james.html.

25 The Gilbreths filmed workers, broke down their motions into 'therbligs' (Gilbreth spelled backwards more or less) and then rearranged them into more 'efficient' patterns of work.

26 *New York Times*, 28 April 1961.

27 Mitchell 'We want a play factory', 19.

the Association called for two studies: one of 'the relative time that should be given to sleep, to concentrated effort, that is to work, and to play', and a second which would identify the 'plays most beneficial for special groups'. The point of the latter was to 'develop precise timetables so that playground engineers could manufacture and target play programs' at specific groups, such as emigrant and working-class children.²⁸ In 1913 A E Winship, the editor of the *Journal of Education*, published an article in the Playground Association's journal *Playground*, titled 'Science and Art in Play'.²⁹ It was the science he seemed to be most interested in, declaring: 'play must be as definite as mathematics. Play must be as scientific as the laboratory. There must be all the relationship of cause and effect that there is in business.' Behind science lay the issue of class: another writer in *Playground* asserted that 'there are types of play which can be made the best method of teaching children to work, and that the desire to play ... can be directed to inculcate habits of industry leading to good citizenship'.³⁰

Lee Hanmer himself developed and published a set of athletic standards and exercises, which, if precisely followed, would result in the highest possible development of the talent of each child. Children were to compete, not against each other, but against the standard, and be rewarded with a badge for their success. The process was not unlike that used by the recently formed Boy Scouts of America. These standards were praised in a *Playground* article in 1914: 'the aim of the badge test of the PAA is to secure greater efficiency in the lives of growing boys'. The author claimed as well that 'the present tests correspond to the methods of scientific management ... they are based on modern principles of efficiency'. John H Chase, who was Head Social Worker at the Goodrich settlement house in Cleveland, Ohio, a centre of Taylorist play, told the readers of *Playground* in 1909:

We want a play factory; we want it to run at top speed on schedule time, with the best machinery, and with skilled operatives. We want to turn out the maximum product of happiness, to utilize all the space, to be awake to new inventions, to use our minds for planning and our hearts for enthusing.³¹

The class basis of playground development was clearly evident in historian Roy Rosenzweig's analysis of the patterns of working class leisure in one industrial city, Worcester, Massachusetts. As early as 1879

complaints were made that parks accessible to the working class of the city were neglected, while resources were poured into those in upper-class neighbourhoods. Indeed, while the latter were parks oriented toward the horticultural production of calming and contemplative places of beauty and serenity, workers demanded not parks but playgrounds, venues for active recreation and games.³² Indeed, these 'playgrounds' were apparently desired as much for adult workers as their children.

Rosenzweig asserts that in the 1890s the dominant protestant business class was losing its 'old Calvinist suspicion of play' and itself beginning to embrace 'competitive sports and outdoor recreation'. In 1917 Worcester's old Parks Commission was reconstituted as the new Parks and Recreation Commission, and attention was turned to the control of working-class behaviour, especially among children. This urge, coupled with a new academic interest in play, according to Rosenzweig, 'made play reform a central project of progressive reformers'.³³ In 1908 the Massachusetts Playground Act was passed to ensure that the state had at least one playground for every 20 000 residents. The Worcester Parks Commission 'began constructing special play facilities for park users, such as baseball fields, tennis courts, wading pools, outdoor gymnasiums, picnic groves, swings, sandboxes, and seesaws'. The commission had previously installed 'primitive playground equipment [in one park] ... in 1898 but by 1909 it was experimenting with the latest steel gymnastic apparatus'.³⁴

Such facilities, of course, tended to dictate what types of play would occur with them. This structuring of acceptable play was made explicit with the move to hire playground supervisors to direct activities. The Worcester Playground Association, formed in 1910, took as its main mission not the adding of playgrounds or equipment, but their supervision. Paid staff oversaw organised athletics, drama, folk dancing, storytelling and such crafts as gardening, sewing and basketry. Playgrounds tended to be dominated by one ethnic group or another, rather than randomly integrated, but efforts at 'Americanization' proceeded in all of them through the scheduling of American games, the singing of American patriotic songs and staging American folk dances. In 1912 it was reported that many children, disdainful of efforts to teach them how to play, either ignored the supervisors or simply stopped

28 Ibid, 19.

29 Quoted in Mitchell, 'We want a play factory', 21–22.

30 Ibid, 23–24.

31 Ibid, 25–27.

32 Roy Rosenzweig *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, 132.

33 Ibid, 140, 143.

34 Ibid, 145.

going to playgrounds altogether.³⁵ It was a form of cultural resistance which mirrored the often successful efforts of adult workers to preserve their leisure time for 'what they would'.

The playground movement in Cleveland, Ohio, began modestly enough with the Progressive mayor, Tom Johnson, calling in 1901 for the removal of all 'Keep Off the Grass' signs from the city's parks. The philanthropic Cleveland Foundation, which was set up in 1914, quickly commissioned a survey of the city's schools. Next it turned to playgrounds, and in 1920 issued its report on *A Community Recreation Program*. It was estimated that for every 1000 hours a child spent in school, she or he spent another 1800 in play away from the school. In the aggregate, it was a large amount of time and the report's introduction claimed that 'just as the West was for long the great treasury of resources for the country, so spare time is the great treasury of unused or partly used resources of modern life'. The director of the study was Leonard P Ayers, and the director of the survey itself was Rowland Haynes, brought in from the Russell Sage Foundation. It was the first of a projected seven volumes, which were to include reports on 'Delinquency and Spare Time', 'School Work and Spare Times' and 'Wholesome Citizens and Spare Time'. The volume most directly concerned with playgrounds was titled 'Public Provision for Recreation' and was based on the assumption that, as the report had it, 'the most serious business in life for at least one-fifth of Cleveland's population is play'. The authors made a great show of using scientifically generated statistics to demonstrate that, for example, children 4 to 10 years of age needed 87 square feet per capita for directed play and 174 for undirected play. By assuming that half the city's children, at any one time, were playing happily at home under parental supervision, the survey concluded that the city had sufficient play area and any problems were caused by inadequate playground supervision, asserting that 'play leaders must be generals of children'. In Cleveland these leaders had originally been put through a course of instruction, but this had later been dropped, presumably to save money. Female supervisors were paid less than men, but men were much more likely to quit their jobs. Of the play leaders, 27 per cent were judged to be only fair, and another 20 per cent were ranked mediocre to totally unsatisfactory. In the bottom two categories men outnumbered women two to one.

The physical condition of playgrounds was equally unsatisfactory. Only one of the city's 17 playgrounds was ranked as acceptable, with the list

of needs including resurfacing, 'holes filled and leveled, proper fencing, adequate shading, more play apparatus, repair of equipment and more recreational supplies'. As the report on delinquency had found, for large numbers of children the available playground technology, scientifically designed play programs and schedules, and the supervising play engineers could not match the appeal of the city's streets, lakefront and industrial infrastructure. Ironically, to some extent it was adult technology that trumped mechanised play regimes. One boy reportedly stole some money, which he promptly spent on buying a 'junior' auto, an Erector set (the American analogue to Meccano) and a pair of field glasses to be used, he said, to 'sight airplanes'. A city bond issue was passed to buy equipment and upgrade apparatus, but the maintenance of the playgrounds was to come from the city's operating budget and by the 1920s they were once again rundown and little used.³⁶

Also by the 1920s the extreme, and perhaps naïve, enthusiasm for Taylorising playgrounds had begun to wane. In part, no doubt, the faddish aspects of Scientific Management – the excited belief that, as Taylor himself said, 'the fundamental principles of scientific management are applicable to all kinds of human activities, from our simplest individual acts to the work of our great corporations' – proved difficult to impose on the messy reality of social intercourse.³⁷ In part as well, American participation in the First World War from April 1917 absorbed the time, effort and ingenuity of play professionals. The construction of large military bases for the training of a newly recruited citizen army created centres of vice from which troops were to be diverted by organised sports and ample, wholesome recreation facilities. Lee Hanmer, for example, was made a member of both the War and Navy Departments' committees on training camp activities, and in 1918 Gulick came out of retirement to chair the YMCA's International Committee on Physical Recreation of the federal War Work Council.

It was also true however that the aggressively Taylorist style of playground management had never been unchallenged, as we have seen in Lurana W Sheldon's poetry and Charles Zueblin's sociology. A different philosophy, centred in Chicago rather than New York City, advocated a more creative, even aesthetic approach to child recreation. Howard Bradstreet, the New York based President of the Association of Neighborhood Workers, wrote that if in a playground

36 Mitchell 'We want a play factory', 28–30, 36–45.

37 Frederick Winslow Taylor *The Principles of Scientific Management*, New York: Harper & Brothers 1911, 7.

simple apparatus is erected, and a man placed in charge who understands boy nature and enjoys associating with them, the situation is changed. It is the personality which has the power of attracting and directing boys and which makes for the success of the playground, while the apparatus is but a device for keeping them occupied.³⁸

The case for a different approach was put by an unsigned editorial in *The Washington Post* in 1906, at the very founding of the Playground Association. It charged that

while the leaders of the movement are busily advocating playgrounds for the children, they are at the same time determined to dictate to the little ones what they shall play and how they shall play it ... What healthy child, we should like to know, would give three straws for a so-called playground if there had to be some one there with authority to forbid this or limit that? Who wants to be watched, and lectured, and restrained and pulled and hauled about, and slapped, and straightened, and washed behind the ears, and tagged, and registered and kept account of and generally browbeaten from the time he or she enters the alleged playgrounds until an escape shall have been achieved? That isn't sport, or freedom, or enjoyment for youngsters. That's getting nagged, not to say spanked and put to bed.

Directed play may have been a realistic preview of and preparation for the working world, but the strong advice of the writer was 'Let the children alone!'³⁹

In the decade following the war the foundation of accomplishment laid down by the Progressive playground pioneers proved a durable platform for continued growth despite competing ideologies and the fluctuation of municipal budgets. In 1916 Carmelita Chase, who had trained as a teacher and worked with Jane Addams at Chicago's Hull House, married the patent lawyer Sebastian Hinton. At Hull House she had taken a two-year course in playground management and after her marriage she established a kindergarten in her home. Like the movement for playgrounds, that for kindergartens was a key part of the Progressive intervention in the experience of childhood.⁴⁰ In 1920 her husband patented a metal climbing device marketed as a 'Jungle gym', though later often popularly referred to as 'monkey bars'. It was claimed that Hinton's father, a mathematician,

had built a similar structure out of bamboo to help his children grasp the concept of Cartesian coordinates. Hinton himself seems to have had a more realistic appreciation of its use. 'I have found', he wrote in his patent application, 'that children seem to like to climb through the structure to some particular point and there swing head downward by the knees, calling back and forth to each other, a trick which can be explained of course only by the monkey instinct'.⁴¹

The continued interest in playground equipment was more than matched by the multiplication of sites for their use. Central Park in New York City had had no playgrounds until the philanthropist August Heckscher donated money for the first, which was opened in 1926 near the southwest end of the park.⁴² Elsewhere in the country municipally supported recreation thrived. The Playgrounds Recreation Association of America claimed, in 1927, that a million children were using such facilities every year and that 790 cities reported having more than 10 000 separate play areas 'under leadership'. It was asserted that in earlier playgrounds, children's 'pursuits were entirely physical. But since the war playgrounds have been going in for other things as well. Music in particular plays an important role, and the drama follows close behind'.⁴³

Speaking in 1933, at a celebration of the opening of the first playground in Central Park, Heckscher called for the building of playgrounds at every entrance to the park.⁴⁴ Under the 'reform' administration of the city's Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, and with a significant infusion of money from the New Deal's Works Project Administration (WPA), eleven new playgrounds were opened in the city in 1936, including eight in Central Park. Another ten were planned along the park's margins. 'They are equipped', it was reported, 'with slides, swings, jungle gyms, play houses and sand boxes for small children'.⁴⁵ In November of that year the *New York Times* reported that two more playgrounds had been opened, bringing the total of new playgrounds built since 1934, when Fiorello La Guardia had become mayor, to 188. One of the new facilities was the first of 24 only recently authorised. This site had 'swings, seesaws, sand tables, playhouses and a jungle gym for younger children, as well as

41 Obituary of Carmelita Hinton in the *New York Times*, 23 January 1983; 'Carmelita Hinton', *Wikipedia*. Accessed 1 August 2011. Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carmelita_Hinton; quoted in 'Jungle gym', *Wikipedia*. Accessed 1 August 2011. Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jungle_gym. United States Patent 1 488 245 for a Climbing Structure, application filed 1 October 1920, granted 25 March 1924.

42 *New York Times*, 30 March 1925, 15 July 2000.

43 *New York Times*, 7 August 1927.

44 *New York Times*, 8 September 1933.

45 *New York Times*, 5 April 1936.

38 *New York Times*, 5 January 1908.

39 *The Washington Post*, 15 April 1906.

40 See, for example, Ann Taylor Allen 'Gender, professionalization, and the child in the progressive era: Patty Smith Hill, 1868-1946', *Journal of Women's History* 23, Summer 2011, 112-136.

handball courts, play apparatus and a large open play area with a softball diamond for the older children. There will also be a comfort station for men, women and children.⁴⁶

* * *

The subsequent history of playgrounds in the United States saw an effort by a number of landscape architects, beginning in the 1930s, to introduce the modernist vocabulary of new materials and free-flowing spaces in place of the traditional flat, paved grounds with steel play equipment. This was, in a sense, a harking back to the more environmentally-oriented Chicago and Boston approaches to playgrounds. In 1933 the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi proposed to build what he called a 'Play Mountain' in New York City, which would use his technique of 'molding earth' by tilting and excavating a city block. The sculptor himself claimed that the Play Mountain 'was the kernel out of which have grown all my ideas relating sculpture to the earth. It is also the progenitor of playgrounds as sculptural landscapes.' The scheme was turned down, however, by the same New York park commissioner, Robert Moses, who was so enthusiastically building traditional playgrounds.⁴⁷

Noguchi went on to reinvent swings and a spiral slide, but was rejected for a project in Hawaii and again in New York where it was considered too dangerous. This last unrealised project, called the Contoured Playground, had no equipment at all, but was characterised by an undulating landscape. 'I felt obliged', Noguchi wrote,

to answer the dire warnings of the danger to which I would expose small children with my play equipment and so designed a Contoured Playground. This would be proof against any serious accidents, being made of entirely earth modulations. Exercise was to be derived automatically in running up and down the curved surfaces. There were to be various areas of interest, for hiding, for sliding, for games. Water would flow in the summer.⁴⁸

It was turned down in 1941, in part because of American entry into World War II.

46 *New York Times*, 11 November 1936.

47 Quoted in Leslie McGuire 'Isamu Noguchi's playground designs', *LandscapeOnline.com*, 2010. Accessed 27 July 2011. Available from: <http://www.landscapeonline.com/research/article/7115>. Roy Kozlovsky 'Adventure playgrounds and postwar reconstruction', in Marta Gutman and Ning de Conick-Smith (eds) *Designing Modern Childhood: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children: An International Reader*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2007, 188.

48 Quoted in McGuire 'Isamu Noguchi's playground designs'.

After the war the new ideas came from Europe, particularly the Netherlands, where the wholesale devastation of cities cleared room for a rethinking of playgrounds, and Scandinavia, which was acquiring an international reputation for good design. The first Adventure playground was actually organised in Copenhagen during the German occupation. A professional supervisor, present only to give advice, watched children build with rubble and a few hand tools. As one student of the subject has written, 'these playgrounds seduced kids by making them believe that they had entered a forbidden zone, gaining access to materials that appeared inappropriate for play, and tools that usually were reserved for adults'.⁴⁹ Amsterdam, with the work of Aldo van Eyck, became a centre for such playgrounds and, under the leadership of Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Adventure Playgrounds also arrived in Great Britain in the 1950s.⁵⁰

In the United States after the war, those thinking about playgrounds fell into one of two groups, coming from either the older recreation movement or the newly-interested art world. The former thought in terms of individual pieces of equipment (still the traditional sandboxes, slides, seesaws and swings) and programmed activities (such as folk dancing and dramatics) under the direction of supervisors, of whom there were some 50 000 in 1948. It was a split reminiscent of the 1906 New York-based champions of scientific play and the Chicago-based advocates of more free-style activities. Significantly, before the war the Playground Association had changed its name to the Playground and Recreation Association of America, underscoring its de-emphasis on Taylorite play and reorientation toward organised activities.

In the art world the connection between playgrounds and sculpture was emphasised. Once again a plan by Noguchi – this time for a playground for the new United Nations site – was thwarted by Moses, who allegedly called it a 'hillside rabbit warren'. A model of the proposed construction, described as resembling

in part a contour or relief map, indicates that much of the equipment would be built like sculpture. There are tunnels, climbing areas, some of curved shapes, others a sort of step-like mountain of brightly colored triangles, spiraling paths and a sloping area of

49 Susan G Solomon *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*, Hanover: University Press of New England 2005, 13.

50 Lianne Verstrate and Lia Karsten 'The creation of play spaces in twentieth-century Amsterdam: from an intervention of civil actors to a public policy', *Landscape Research* 36, February 2011, 85–109; Lady Allen of Hurtwood *Planning for Play*, London: Thames and Hudson 1968.

multiple slides in addition to jungle gyms, a framework for swings, sheltering wall, a wading pool, etc.⁵¹

Noguchi revealed his intentions by noting that 'a jungle gym is transformed into an enormous basket that encourages the most complex ascents and all but obviates falls. In other words, the playground, instead of telling the child what to do (swing here, climb there) becomes a place for endless exploration, of endless opportunity for changing play.'⁵²

An intervention of New York's Museum of Modern Art proved futile, and the argument that this project had 'possibilities of stimulating the child's sense of space and form through a playground designed as architectural sculpture' fell on deaf ears: the playground design that finally was approved came from Moses' own department. MOMA, however, went on to exhibit the model of Noguchi's playground in its Young People's Gallery in 1952. Philip C Johnson, the director of the museum's Department of Architecture and eventually to become one of the country's most famous and influential architects, claimed that Noguchi's model was meant to demonstrate ideas rather than prescribe a solution. 'The playgrounds authorized by our parks and recreation authorities', he admitted, 'are characterized by skillful engineering and landscaping, careful planning and well-conceived commercial equipment.' He added, however, that 'Although such playgrounds meet the requirements of safety and supervision while withstanding hard use, there have been few efforts to go beyond solving mechanical and functional problems.'⁵³

Two years later, in 1954, MOMA was again the venue of a playground exhibit inspired by Noguchi's UN model, this time co-sponsoring a 'Play Sculpture Competition'. The other two sponsors were *Parents Magazine* and the commercial firm, Creative Playthings. Winners of the design contest, which had been announced the previous year, were promised cash prizes. Creative Playthings would manufacture the winning designs and the museum would be given ownership of the designs themselves.⁵⁴ A critic writing in the *New York Times* called it a 'strange and wonderful world of color and shapes', noting that

in general form and concept the 360-odd entries follow the recent directions in the playground field. There are geometric, constructive shapes, from cubed jungle-gyms to elaborate polyhedrons; there are plastic or sculptural shapes; there are animals, realistic and fantastic;

there are variations of conventional play apparatus such as swings and slides; and there are variations on the 'junk-yard' theme of pipe sections and other oddments which have special attractions for the young.

Artistically, he was less enthusiastic, lamenting that 'only occasionally does an entry have the authority of form and the integrated concept of Noguchi's project for a UN playground', and that they lacked 'cognizance of mass production possibilities – which a Charles Eames would have brought to the problem'. He concluded by observing that to visit the show 'might even be a civic duty. Perhaps then the next time New York has an opportunity to have a playground as fine as the one Noguchi designed for the UN site, the citizenry will prevent a Moses "thumbs-down"'.⁵⁵

An article in *Art and Architecture* saw the competition as helping to overcome a most unsatisfactory status quo. 'Playgrounds for children', it affirmed, 'are an essential part of modern city planning, and the quality of their play equipment is of vital importance. However, the cement-floored, wire-fenced patches of recreational areas set aside in city parks and schoolyards, and fitted with monotonously identical metal constructions for physical exercise, are cogent proof of how inadequately we have estimated their importance in our communal life.'⁵⁶

The critical role of Creative Playthings signalled the growing importance of commercial manufacturing firms in the playground-supply business. The firm had its roots in a shop established in 1945 that carried playthings from a variety of manufacturers. To these they soon added some of their own design, most famously a line of hardwood blocks. The owners, Frank Caplan and Bernard Barenholtz, sought the help of the Museum of Modern Art in bringing a modernist sensibility into the aesthetics of play, and in 1949 succeeded in commissioning the architect Marcel Bruer to design hollow cubes for the playroom. In 1951 they set up their new firm Creative Playthings to commercialise their new designs. Caplan hoped to create a 'complete playground that could be planned by a "small panel of key designers" and then be marketed to public institutions such as housing authorities, park department, and school boards'.⁵⁷ He managed to recruit the sculptor Robert Winston, held talks with Noguchi and on a trip to Europe contacted Egon Moller-Nielson, a Dane who had actually built pioneer abstract playground pieces in Sweden. Even Henry Moore signed on, though apparently he never got around to producing any designs for Caplan.

51 *New York Times*, 7 October 1951.

52 Quoted in McGuire 'Isamu Noguchi's playground designs'.

53 Quoted in *New York Times*, 25 March 1952.

54 *New York Times*, 3 August 1953.

55 Solomon *American Playgrounds*, 29; *New York Times*, 4 July 1954.

56 Solomon *American Playgrounds*, 30.

57 *Ibid*, 27.

At the annual meeting of the National Recreation Congress, held in Philadelphia in 1953, Creative Playthings 'attracted keen interest', according to the *New York Times*. Their exhibit of the company's products included 'concrete mountains, with built-in caves, slides and climbing arrangements, a metal climbing gymnasium, a fiberglass turtle with hollow sculptured shell to form a tent and a see saw in the shape of an airplane'. The concrete and stone slide was a modernist creation clearly showing the influence of the sculptors working with the firm.⁵⁸

During the 1950s and 1960s, the company was quite successful, becoming the major source of toys for some 60 000 of the nation's nursery schools and kindergartens. As importantly, it became the vector by which middle-class parents, already wearing Marimekko fabrics, sitting on Aalto stools and dining off Arabia dinnerware, could introduce modernism into their children's nursery. It offered over a thousand items, ranging from 'a two ounce teething ring to a four-ton piece of playground equipment'.⁵⁹ An early success of Creative Playthings' Play Sculptures division was its selection to supply equipment for the American National Exhibition held in Moscow in July 1959. The playground, rather than advertising itself as a community resource, stood next to the model middle class home fitted out with all the latest, modern appliances and conveniences – where President Richard Nixon and Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev had their infamous kitchen debate.⁶⁰

In fact, the playground was perhaps even less 'typical' than the domestic dream next door. Both were aspirational; the Play Sculptures represented a high end of American playgrounds at mid-century, not their common design. Nevertheless in the late 1960s there was a brief efflorescence of landscape-inspired design in New York City, led by the landscape architects Richard Dattner and Paul Friedberg. The latter's Jacob Riis playground on the Lower East Side was described as

a profusion of nooks, crannies, angles, pyramids and mounds of richly textured rock. There is a maze, another splashing pool with a miniature waterfall, a tree house. It is a vast sandbox with all the pieces set inside. It invites movement, horizontal as well as vertical, what Friedberg calls 'a continuous play experience'.⁶¹

Dattner created an Adventure Playground in Central Park and in 1967 the Museum of Modern Art once again became involved, cooperating with the New York City Housing Authority and the Park Association of New York City to design a 'complex of vaults, with spaces to climb in, slide over and hide in'.⁶²

This is also a good description of the modular 'PlayCubes' patented by Dattner in 1969. Made of fibreglass, they were hollow with openings on all sides and meant to be fitted together to create an endless variation of shapes and passageways. He claimed that they were particularly useful for the new 'pocket parks' that were being 'carved out of empty lots, oftentimes of irregular shape ... [and with] little uniformity between different play areas'. He envisioned that they would also be useful for 'homeowners in yards'.⁶³ In 1974 he designed a variation called 'Habitot', a play on Terence Conran's fashionable British interior design brand, to be used by very small children.⁶⁴

Noguchi himself made one more attempt to build a playground in New York City when he was commissioned, along with the architect Louis Kahn, to build the Adele Levy Memorial Playground along Riverside Drive. Between 1961 and 1966, the design went through six iterations and the site was shifted three times. Although originally having the support of the city administration, it was opposed by a group of local residents who eventually succeeded in blocking it completely.⁶⁵ Charles Starke, the city's Recreation Director, was unenthusiastic as early as 1962, in part because, he said, 'we haven't seen any new type of equipment that in our opinion appeals to children more than what we've been using'.⁶⁶ Noguchi was finally able to realise one of his 'playscapes' in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1976. Building on a site once used for the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition (which had included a Phoenix Wheel, scenic railway and Shoot the Chutes), Piedmont Park allowed Noguchi to create a playground designed to familiarise children 'with shapes, colors and textures'.⁶⁷

58 *New York Times*, 3 October 1953.

59 Thomas Meehan 'Creative (and mostly upper-middle-class) playthings', *Saturday Review* 55, 16 December 1972, 45.

60 For the exhibit itself see Karen Ann Marling *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1994, 242–283.

61 *New York Times*, 6 November 1966.

62 *New York Times*, 19 May 1967. See also Richard Dattner *Design for Play*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1974.

63 United States Patent, filed 22 July 1969 and granted 4 January 1972, number 3 632 109.

64 Response by Dattner to blog 'daddytypes.com', 25 March 2009. Accessed 16 August 2011. Available from: http://daddytypes.com/2009/03/25/richard_dattners_habitot_the_ur-playcubes.php.

65 McGuire 'Isamu Noguchi's playgrounds', *New York Times* 24 October 1962, 5 February 1964, 6 October 1966.

66 *New York Times*, 9 December 1962.

67 'Playgrounds', Piedmont Park Conservancy, 2009. Accessed 27 July 2011. Available from: <http://www.piedmontpark.org/do/playgrounds.html>.

Figure 2. Drawing accompanying Isamu Noguchi's patent application for a Playground Module

The application was filed 5 March 1969 and granted 30 May 1972, No. 3 666 266. Richard Dattner applied for a patent for his very similar Modular Recreational Unit (PlayCubes) four months later but received his patent four months sooner, Patent No. 3 632 109.

In 2007 New York announced that the architect Frank Gehry would, as a newspaper put it, 'bring his daring deconstructionist aesthetic to the monkey bar and seesaw' with a new playground at Battery Park.⁶⁸ In 2010 an 'Imagination Playground,' the design of architect David Rockwell, was scheduled for opening at the South Street Seaport. With almost no fixed equipment (certainly not the so-called 'four 'S's' of older playgrounds: swings, slides, sandboxes and seesaws), the site featured Rockwell's 'loose parts', large 'lightweight blocks made from bright-blue molded foam', which came in various shapes. Wooden wheelbarrows, tyres, plastic barrels and similar parts were also available. Such high-end facilities were expensive, of course, made more so, in the case of the Imagination Playground, by plan to have it staffed with 'Play Workers'.⁶⁹

Even in their heyday these 'playscapes' were far from typical. The purchase of Creative Playthings by American media giant Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1966 was followed by a wave of consolidation in the industry. Some older companies survived: Miracle Recreation Equipment Company had been founded in 1927 to manufacture merry-go-rounds and at the end of the century was offering eight different modular 'play systems' as well as more traditional slides and swings.⁷⁰ However, by the late 70s four large companies dominated, selling so-called post and platform combinations made of heavy logs. Since wood structures and fibre nets eventually deteriorated, however, brightly coloured polyethylene became more prominent. The apotheosis came with the more than 8000 indoor and outdoor playgrounds at McDonald's fast food restaurants. Basically post and platform creations in garish colours, designed to look larger and bolder than they really were, they offered children the play equivalent of burgers and fries: kids could climb up, cross over, and go down – then start over. Not surprisingly in light of its ubiquity, the McDonald playground threatened to become the American standard for play facilities.⁷¹

By the start of the twenty-first century, however, the popularity of 'Adventure' playgrounds was long over. In 1999 it was recognised that 'these adventure playgrounds represent a period in time – much like the monkey bars of the 30's. Play equipment rooted in 60's idealism ... [was being] replaced by the flashier mass-produced equipment of the 90's.' Michael Gotkin, a landscape designer, lamented that

⁶⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 2007.

⁶⁹ Mead 'State of Play', 33–34, 36.

⁷⁰ 'About us – Playground equipment company', *Miracle Recreation Equipment Company*. Accessed 1 August 2011. Available from: <http://www.miracle-recreation.com/about-us/about-us.html>.

⁷¹ Solomon *American Playgrounds*, 82.

there was a brief window when artists, architects, sculptors and parents got together and created a playground revolution. It was so recent but is so entirely gone. You don't really design playgrounds now. You order them out of a catalogue.

The problem, complained Friedberg, was the old issue of risk: 'we are protecting the child too much'.⁷²

Figure 3. Dual concrete slides, a long-time feature of the Children's Playground

The Children's Playground opened in 1887 as a part of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Note the cardboard under the girl to increase her speed. Source: *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 July 2007. © Paul Chin/Corbis.

The old worry about safety, which was instrumental in getting the playground movement started at the turn of the twentieth century, was never far from the surface of public concern. Surprisingly, even some of the judges of the MOMA/Creative Playthings competition of 1954 were said to have privately referred to some of the entries as '101 Ways in Which to Kill Your Child'.⁷³ Although over a dozen Adventure Playgrounds in the European style were established, their apparently chaotic design led the American insurance industry to ignore their excellent safety record and to refuse or make it prohibitively expensive to insure them, leaving their continued operation virtually impossible in the United States. Together with the legal profession, they conjured up visions of parental litigation that few public agencies could afford to ignore. When Lady Allen toured the country in 1965 she called the country's playgrounds 'an administrator's heaven and a child's hell'. The three principles in their design seemed to be cheap cost, low maintenance, and avoidance of litigation. Americans, Lady Allen remarked, 'seem to be terrified of risks – they are dogged by fear of insurance claims resulting from accidents in public playgrounds. I've never seen anything like it.' Her own position was quite different: 'I think it's better to risk a broken leg', she said, 'than a broken spirit'.⁷⁴ The widespread concern about litigation, however, was not entirely misplaced. In the 1980s the Chicago Park District, after paying nearly \$10 million in claims, removed spiral slides, high monkey bars and merry-go-rounds from its sites. New York City got rid of seesaws.⁷⁵

The concern for playground safety was nestled in a much larger national obsession. Partly in response to well-documented instances of corporate disregard for consumer welfare, a Consumer Product Safety Act was passed and in 1973 the resulting Consumer Product Safety Commission began to target areas of particular danger using data collected from 119 hospital emergency rooms. Playground equipment quickly emerged as a prime offender and in 1981 the Commission issued guidelines for public playgrounds. One student of the subject has argued that, despite the wave of privatisation and deregulation that swept over the country subsequently, playgrounds remained targets of sometimes draconian concern. Since 1991 the National Recreation and Park Association has backed a National Playground Safety Institute that runs two-day

⁷³ *New York Times*, 4 July 1954.

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, 16 May 1965.

⁷⁵ Solomon *American Playgrounds*, 78.

courses in the subject. Graduates become Certified Playground Safety Inspectors who conduct safety audits and are empowered to close down any project that involves play.⁷⁶

Despite all this, the *Scientific American* in 2001 reported on a study in the journal *Ambulatory Pediatrics* that claimed while a quarter of all emergency room admittances of children and adolescents were for accidents, of these only 5.3 per cent happened in playgrounds, and only 9 per cent of those occurred in public parks or playgrounds. Nevertheless, the story was headlined 'More Children Are Seriously Injured on Playgrounds Than in Traffic'. The following year the Ralph Nader-inspired Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) claimed that

on average, 17 children die each year playing on playgrounds. Many of these deaths and injuries can be prevented if playgrounds, from equipment design to surfacing content to the playgrounds layout, were designed with safety in mind.⁷⁷

The perhaps inevitable result of this kind of assault was the continuing stripping of traditional play apparatus from sites across the country. A count in 2004 showed that while 94 per cent of playgrounds had slides, only 13 per cent had seesaws and 7 per cent had merry-go-rounds. A 2008 report found that

though smaller swing sets still dot backyard lots, the glorious 16-foot models that generations of kids grew up loving and fearing, are vanishing. Disappearing as well: traditional seesaws, sandboxes and those merry-go-rounds from which you tried to throw your little brother. (Somehow he always hung on.)⁷⁸

The result has led one critic to declare that childhood was 'becoming undermined by risk aversion'.⁷⁹

That the new culture was not entirely hegemonic was suggested by the results of a request, early in 2009, by the *San Francisco Chronicle's* blog for parents, the 'Poop', that its readers identify 'public places that are good for kids – a.k.a., playgrounds'. A list of six was published: one, Howarth

Park in Santa Rosa, was praised for having 'huge, complex climbing structures, lots of water features for hot summer days, volcanoes, Native American dwellings and a mini "Tech Deck" skate park'. Ryder Park in San Mateo was described as a 'big kid play area [with] ... a 12-foot-high rope climbing structures, [and] funky art that doubles as play equipment'. And one reader identified the Koret Children's Quarter in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Singled out for praise was the fact that 'the architects weren't complete wussies when designing the playground: They created several semi-dangerous additions, including a concrete slide and a giant rope-climbing structure.'⁸⁰ Whether such resistance would ever be sufficient to outweigh the commercial interests of lawyers and insurers remains to be seen.

The story of American playgrounds over the past century reveals a dense tangle of technology, politics, economics, class bias, professional aspiration and cultural idealism. Technology is both cultural process and cultural product. During the Progressive Era, from roughly 1890–1920, the subject of children's play, as so much else in the United States, was driven by ideologies of science and reform.⁸¹ By mid-century, however, as Nicholas Sammond has argued, science and reform had been replaced by the new media and child consumerism.⁸² Where children in playgrounds *produced* play, at Disneyland they *consumed* play. While playgrounds still existed in their thousands, they had lost the Progressive cultural imperative which had given them such a prominent place in the cultural construction of childhood – and such a clear claim on the public purse.

The classic schoolyard playground, the regimented Taylorite sites, the European Adventure Playground, the Noguchi playscapes, the McDonald's play areas and the sanitised and neutered modern playgrounds each represent a menu of philosophy, design and equipment from which social intention can, and did, in Huizinga's phrase, create 'temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart'.⁸³

76 Ibid, 79.

77 US PIRG Reports, 'Playing it safe: the sixth nationwide safety survey of public playgrounds', 20 June 2002. Accessed 25 November 2008. Available from: <http://www.uspirg.org/home/reports/report-archives/toy-safety/toy-safety-reports/playing-it-safe-the-sixth-nationwide-safety-survey-of-public-playgrounds>. PIRG and the Consumer Federation of America had reported similar findings in 1994. *New York Times* 29 May 1994.

78 Greg Toppo, 'The great American swing set is teetering', USA TODAY, 25 November 2008. Accessed 25 November 2008. Available from: http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-03-19-swing-sets_x.htm.

79 Tim Gill *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Adverse Society*, London: Calpuste Gulbenkian Foundation 2007, 10.

80 Reyhand Harmanci 'The Bay Area's best outdoor playgrounds', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 March 2009. In the UK *The Sunday Times* carried an article titled 'Playgrounds go full swing to revive forgotten sense of danger', reporting that there was a 'movement against a safety obsession of councils' and some councils were re-installing traditional rides and climbing frames. *Sunday Times*, 4 September 2011.

81 See Ronald D Cohen 'Child-saving and progressivism, 1885–1915', in Joseph M Hawes and N Ray Hiner (eds) *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, Westport: Greenwood Press 1985, 273–309.

82 Nicholas Sammond *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930–1960*, Durham: Duke University Press 2005, 6.

83 Huizinga *Homo Ludens*, 10.

About the author

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