

# Child's play? Enabling play in urban settings

*Play can emerge whenever conditions allow, it is interwoven into everyday life, mo(ve)ments that feel alive, where anything is possible<sup>1</sup>*

Three out of four New Zealanders live in urban areas of more than 10,000 people with half concentrated in 4 cities. At the recent Green Pavlova conference, [Dr Kate Bishop](#), co-editor of *Designing Cities with children and young people* (2017) outlined the challenges for providers of quality play spaces. Childhood increasingly occurs 'indoors and in private spaces', and children have less contact with natural environments. We are still learning how to design nourishing environments.

[Urban renewal projects](#) don't generally cater for children, who occupy 'leftover' real estate to create their own fun. Children need champions for the cause of play.

***'Design is a social act – outdoor space is an active physical envelope and decisions made in the design process have social consequences'*** [[Dr Kate Bishop](#)]

Designers and providers need to understand:

- Your people: consult or co-design [with children and young people](#)
- The characteristics of the place
- How the people and place do or might interact - what the possibilities are.

## The Right to Play and Child-Friendly cities

***Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.***

*Article 31 of the UN Convention*



Image: Auckland Council

The right to play is embodied in the UNICEF initiative [Child-Friendly Cities](#), including three principles that are key to providers in Aotearoa. Child-Friendly Cities are places where children:

- Have access to green spaces
- Meet friends and have places to play and enjoy themselves.
- Express opinions and influence decisions that affect them.

In supporting children's right to play, it is important to pay attention not simply to the external expressions of play, but to the conditions in which 'playfulness' thrives.

## What makes a good play space?

Greater understanding of the vital importance of play in the lives of children, has changed play area design away from the 'static and sterile' to something more flexible and reflective of how children actually play.

***The new places [play areas] recognise the nature of play and use design principles that accommodate a variety of space and landscapes, natural features, different heights, a range of flexible and variable materials, access to the elements. They contain a collection of loose parts with which children can experiment freely, creating an environment that gives children the feeling that the world is full of things to explore and where space and resources can be adapted to what is needed at the time.***<sup>2</sup>

[Dr Wendy Russell](#), an expert in Play and Playwork researches play sufficiency and [spatial justice](#), considering 'how' children play over the what they play and where. She notes:

- Play has value for children's *wellbeing*
- Attend to the *ways* children find time and space for playing in everyday life
- Cultivate the *conditions* for play.

Find out more on [play sufficiency](#) or link to her [presentation at Green Pav here](#).

## Canberra Playgrounds Study

This audit of destination playgrounds informs the design of future play spaces. The following design features work:

- Shade, age-appropriate enclosures and extreme weather protection
- More challenging and diverse forms of play
- More and better facilities, equipment for a wider range of ages
- Natural features
- Make larger, quality playgrounds NOT more, smaller playgrounds
- Improve older playgrounds
- Proximity to where people live, cafes and other facilities.

## Play for all seasons

Mara Hupara Playground in Auckland offers a return to traditional Māori games:

**...after interactive workshops with local school children, it became apparent that a ngā aro tākaro playground was an ideal fit with the restoration of Te Auaunga Awa. [Mark Lewis, Boffa Miskell landscape architect]**

'playgrounds can't be cotton-wool' Sarah Collins, landscape architect, Boffa Miskell.



Image: Boffa Miskell

## Enabling inclusive play

Allplay is an initiative to create new pathways to inclusion, with a focus on children and young people typically not included in mainstream play activities. Based on extensive collaborative research, the programmes offered includes AllPlay Footy, AllPlay Dance and AllPlay Learn.

Design can also influence who uses spaces and how they are used, as evidenced in the Gladstone Lions Park, Queensland. For this, designers used:

***a sensory design methodology in playspace design to achieve a truly inclusive space – beyond accessibility.....And at night the space becomes a sensory wonderland again, with motion activated lighting and misting allowing for increased use of this destination playspace.***<sup>3</sup>



Image: playscape creations

## Principles into action

- Capture the history and characteristics of place
- Create opportunities for flexible and challenging play
- Maximise the use of natural features and green
- Conduct research and co-design with children and young people
- Balance risk against perceptions

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Russell W, and Lester, S. Playful movements and the creation of play space, Presentation for IPA Conference, Canada, 2017
- <sup>2</sup> Lester, S & Russell, W. (2010), Children's Right to Play: An Examination of the Importance of Play in the Lives of Children Worldwide in *Early Childhood Development* (57)
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.playscapecreations.com.au/lions-park-gladstone/>

## Research and Reading

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