# DISEGNO

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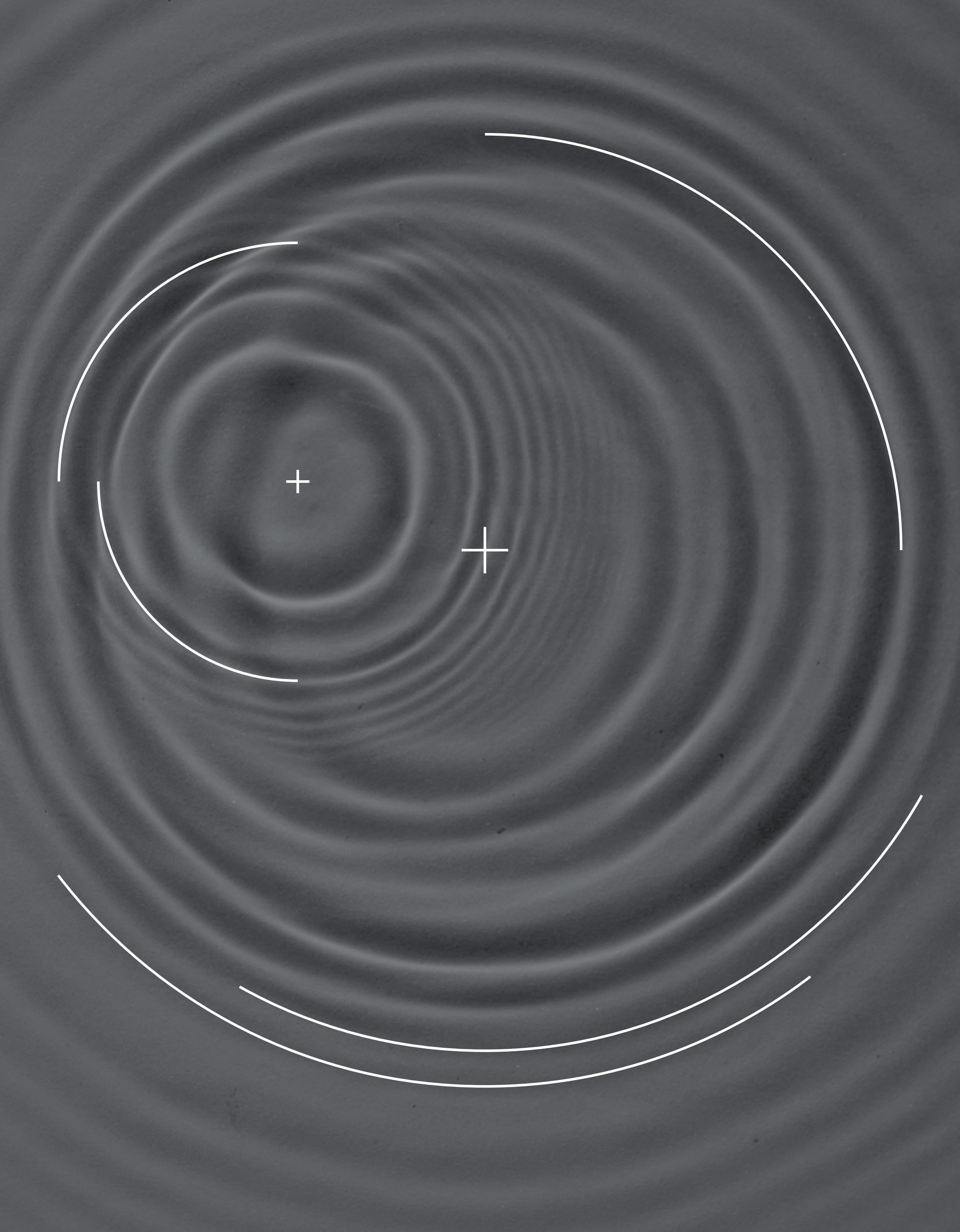
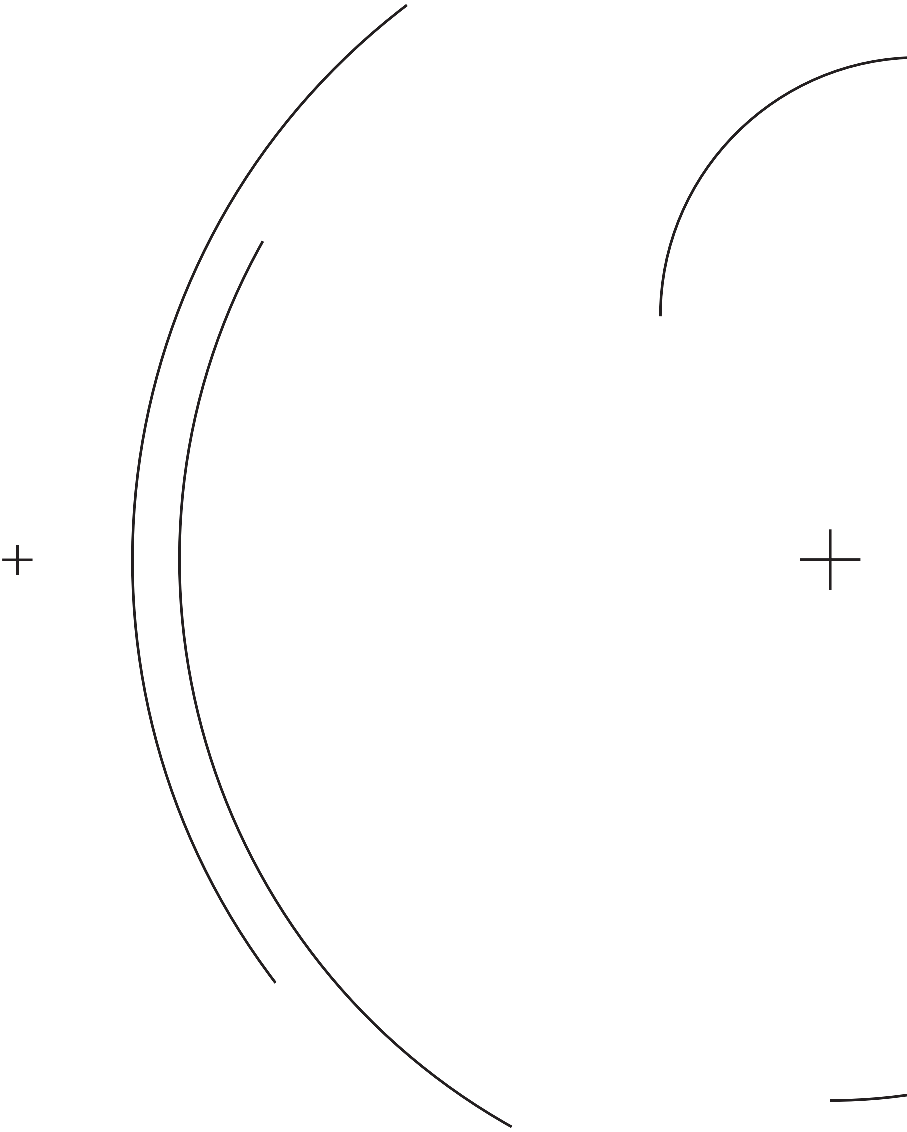
## *_Aesthetic Histories of Design Culture*





# *Disegno*

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# EXPERIMENTAL PLAYGROUNDS, LOOSE PARTS, AND THE EVERYDAY AESTHETICS OF PLAY

**Ben Highmore**

**ABSTRACT**

*This article draws together discourses around children's playgrounds in Northern Europe and North America from the early twentieth century onwards, and the work of the British design pedagogue Simon Nicholson, whose theory of "loose parts" from the 1970s, was influenced by the experimental playground movement that emerged after 1945. These experimental playgrounds, often referred to as junk-playgrounds and adventure playgrounds, encouraged city children to build their own shacks and dens on areas of rough ground, just as children living in rural areas might build dens. This activity of imaginative place making should be seen as a fundamental and everyday aesthetic activity that children take part in whether within a playground or outside one. Whether play is an imitative or an intuitive activity such placemaking would constitute a basic orientation towards design. As such the experimental playground could be treated as a crucial element of design culture.*

#Simon Nicholson, #experimental playgrounds, #loose parts, #play, #democracy

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## INTRODUCTION

This article argues that the experimental playgrounds that emerged in the 1940s in towns and cities primarily across Northern Europe and North America, could be central to how we think about design education.[1] These were playgrounds that encouraged the building of rudimentary dwellings by providing children with tools and building materials. Because these playgrounds were sited on rough ground and because of the handmade nature of the den buildings they had a shambolic appearance, quite distinct from the ordered nature of the conventional playground of swings, slides and seesaws set in asphalt or rubber matting. Less immediately, the experimental playground also facilitated physical forms of world building, in the shape of developing collective and autonomous forms of social organisation. The art and design pedagogue Simon Nicholson argued that "we can discern a natural evolution from creative play and participation with wood, hammers, rope, nails and fire, to creative play and participation with the total process of design and planning of regions in cities" (Nicholson 1971, 33). His argument, which he entitled a "theory of loose parts," treated children's play as the basis for how we shape our total environment. Providing children with the conditions for deep, constructive, destructive, and convivial play would be the foundation for good design and planning; rob children (and adults) of these conditions and you will end up with authoritarian design and poor urban planning.

In what follows I set out to do several things. First, I will explain how play is best thought of as an everyday aesthetic activity that we are all engaged in. Second, I want to provide a quick sketch of what post-1945 experimental playgrounds were like (and, in some instances, are still like). Third, I will draw out some of the underpinning ethos of the playgrounds by looking at both their intentions as well as their reception. Fourth, I will look at Simon Nicholson's arguments about "loose parts" and show how experimental playgrounds were foundational to his argument. Fifth, and finally, I will briefly make the case for the cultural importance of experimental playgrounds now and as we head into a precarious and troubling future.

The reasons behind this article are twofold. The phrase "loose parts" is now well-known amongst playworkers who have a strong sense of what the term means within children's play environments but don't know that it is connected to design theory. Design theorists, on the other hand, often advocate play but rarely have a strong sense of the importance of experimental playgrounds and the way that they were taken up by design pedagogues such as Nicholson.[2] It is therefore worth reacquainting these different areas and showing that Nicholson was not an originator of a theory, but an intermediary and a conceptual shaper. The other reason is more important. By insisting on the generative nature of the experimental playground movement, I want to insist that "play"—as encouraged by these experiments—was never simply about the physical manipulation of materials like wood and bricks but was always concerned with the activity of world-building and that this world-building was deeply social. Experimental playgrounds were in the business of design as a *social* activity of creating different possible worlds.

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[1] *For various reasons (to do with access and language) my research has been limited to English language archives in the UK, Canada and the US. Some of the ideas around experimental playgrounds have also been important in Japan and India and in Latin American Countries. I haven't looked at this playground culture nor have I looked at playgrounds in Central and Eastern Europe during the Soviet period or since.*

## PLAY AS AN EVERYDAY AESTHETIC

For children, play is a mainstay of their everyday world; it is their sensual and imaginative interaction with the world, their aesthetic activity. The word "play" is exceptionally capacious and can refer to wildly different states of mind, intentions, practices, and values. Play can be relaxing but it can also be intense, even anxious. It can be frivolous and suspend our usual ideas about intention ("don't get upset, I was only playing"), and it can also be deeply felt and intended. It can be collective or competitive, or in the case of team sports, both. Its antonym is uncertain. To claim it as the opposite of "work" quickly comes unstuck, not just when we think of all those activities where play is a profession (the sportsperson, the musician, the actor), but when we look at the intense concentration of a child drawing or constructing something.

Looking at children's playgrounds and the discourses that surround them can help clarify some of the major issues at stake in thinking about play as a form of everyday creativity. Within Northern Europe and North America, playgrounds across the last 150 years fall into roughly three major categories.[3] The most dominant playground has been the orthodox playground which is usually a flat parcel of land with fixed devices such as swings, slides, a jungle-gym, and see-saws. In the United Kingdom it started appearing in municipal parks in the late nineteenth century and today constitutes about four out of five playgrounds. This is the playground type that the artist Peter Friedl documented between 1995 and 2008 as he travelled around the world from Ramallah in Palestine to the townships of South Africa. His book of 236 alphabetically ordered photographs of playgrounds show us a world of desperately uneven wealth in children's play facilities, but also a surprising standardisation in devices (Friedl 2008). The second type of playground was

[2] *The literature here is extensive so I will just give a couple of representative examples. Perry Else, a course leader for a degree in Children and Playwork uses the term "loose parts" in his book* The Value of Play *(2009) without connecting it to design. On the design side, countless design theorists advocate "play" as a methodological value, for instance, Bayliss et al. (2009), without any reference to playground culture.*

[3] *In my forthcoming book (Highmore 2024) I identify some other playground types (for instance, the traffic playground which mimicked networks of road at half the size of actual road networks) but the three I discuss here have definitely been the major types.*

dominant in the USA during the early decades of the twentieth century and are associated with the early Playground Movement. These were often large playgrounds with some fixed devices but also larger areas for playing sport and buildings for indoor pursuits. They were always managed by adult supervisors who would organise games and other activities such as dancing or needlework lessons. The third type is the experimental playground that emerged primarily in Northern Europe in the 1940s. These rarely had fixed devices and were characterised by a permissiveness that meant children were encouraged to follow their own inclinations. Here the adults were called playworkers rather than leaders or supervisors. These three types of playgrounds very loosely and unevenly connect to discourses around children's play.

The idea of children's play as an exuberant yet frivolous activity that comes from a surfeit of undirected energy in children was a popular idea up until the mid-nineteenth century when writers such as the German pedagogue Friedrich Froebel and the philosopher and psychologist Karl Groos challenged such beliefs, and in their different ways argued that play was a crucial developmental activity (Froebel 1885; Groos 1901). You can still see the idea of play as excessive energy in the way that orthodox playgrounds of slides, swings, and seesaws (the three s's) are designed to exhaust children without offering them anything that might encourage concentrated and imaginative play. For Froebel and educators such as Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Margaret McMillan, and others (who are often referred to collectively as "early years pioneers") play was a serious business. Play, for these theorists, was the urgent work of children and young people as they grapple with a complex world (Jarvis, Swiniarski, and Holland 2016). Paediatric psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott employed play techniques to observe children "working-through" family dynamics and traumatic memories in concentrated play (Winnicott 1971, 1977).

You can see the seriousness of play echoing through the early Playground Movement of America and their accompanying playgrounds. This is Joseph Lee, who set up the first children's playground in Boston in 1898:

> *In truth the play of children is in the main not play at all in the sense in which grown people use the word. It is play in the sense of being spontaneous, agreeable, undertaken for its own sake and not for an ulterior object. It is not play in the sense of being mere relaxation or diversion, or a thing of secondary importance. Of course children like to play; all good workmen like their work; but it is none the less serious on that account.* (Lee 1915, 2)

Lee, and others associated with the early playground movement, saw play and playgrounds as ethical laboratories where children could develop an ethos of playing that wasn't simply about the discipline of the parade ground or the competitiveness of the sports field, which they saw being instilled by playgrounds that used outdoor gymnastic equipment (ropes, jungle-gyms, ladders, and so on).

One of the unresolved issues that animated these early discussions concerned how far play was an innate human capacity (a sort of genetic coding) and how far it was an imitative activity. Take for example this reminiscence by Luther Gulick, who was the first president of the Playground Association of America (formed in 1906): "At the age of four I was given an umbrella, which I set up on my bed. I found a shawl and some pins and draped the shawl over the umbrella so as to make a little house to sit in. I said to myself, 'This is *my* house.'" (Gulick 1920, 33) It is a common enough experience. A child using materials to build a rudimentary dwelling, a place of their own. On the one hand it can be thought of as a child imitating the world around them and remaking it. But it can also be thought of as a rudimentary and generative design activity. Making some form of shelter, enclosure, or intimate space—and having some control over it—is an ordinary, everyday aesthetic activity that you can witness the world over. For many philosophers of play it is elemental, natural, a characteristic of human capacities for invention.

The question of whether play was mainly imitative or intuitive had extensive implications. If it was imitative then it might benefit from being taught; if it was intuitive then perhaps it was best to leave it to the children to organise it themselves. Of course, the middle position might be to say that it is a bit of both. But the cultural politics around these two polarities of play had serious repercussions, and one way of looking at the history of playground movements is to suggest that the early playground movement (from the late-nineteenth century to the 1930s) tended to treat play as something that required instruction, while the experimental playground movement's position (mainly from the 1940s to the 1980s, but continuing into the present) radically refused the notion of instruction. In these experimental playgrounds—sometimes called junk playgrounds and adventure playgrounds—play was treated as an autonomous and intuitive activity that didn't require instruction so much as careful nurturing, particularly when it came to making safe structures.

The shift in emphasis was connected to changing theories of childhood and also with a larger cultural politics and the changing reality of the world. One shorthand explanation of this shift would be to see the early playground movement as trying to hold on to (and inculcate within children) an idea of Christian civility against the emergent dog-eat-dog world of entrepreneurial capitalism. The philanthropists who put their time and money into championing playgrounds, saw themselves as "child savers," and were fully immersed in a form of muscular Christianity. The experimental playground movement that emerged in the wake of World War II were facing a different reality. There is overlap too: the activists and philanthropists in the postwar period often saw themselves as child savers and were often connected to religious movements such as the Quakers. But there was also, in the postwar period, a much stronger emphasis on progressive and permissive education, on community-based politics emerging out of anarchism, and by 1968 a fairly firm resistance to the new reality of rampant consumerism. In this context to think of children simply imitating the adult world was to see them reproduce the world as it was in all its malignancy—obsessed with profit and murderous international politics. In this context perhaps children and children's intuitive play could be seen as the antidote to a world of commodities, aggression, and individualised competitiveness. It is, admittedly, an impressionistic historical sketch, but it might just do.

## THE EXPERIMENTAL PLAYGROUND MOVEMENT.

To talk about "*the* experimental playground movement" probably suggests something more coherent and cohesive than was actually the case. The reality was that a number of experiments in playgrounds started appearing in the wake of World War II. Many of these took their inspiration from a junk-playground that was established in Emdrup on the outskirts of Copenhagen in 1943. The experiments that followed differed in scale and in practice and this was partly due to different national contexts. But there was enough shared ethos between the various playgrounds and nations that when the International Playground Association (IPA) was set up in Copenhagen in May 1961 it brought together playground experts from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Finland, and Switzerland.[4] What the different people involved all shared was a general antipathy towards the orthodox playground—the playground that consists of static devices (slides, swings, roundabouts, and sand pits) all set in a flat patch of asphalt and that were mainly aimed at children between the ages of five and eight. The criticism was that such playgrounds had a limited attraction for young children and that they clearly didn't satisfy older children and young people. Such playgrounds also had a very limited understanding of play, and privileged vertiginous excitement and calisthenic exercise. Imaginative and creative play and the sort of play that demanded sustained concentration was simply absent.[5]

The experimental playgrounds were the antithesis of the orthodox playground. Instead of amusing small children for an hour of so they were usually more like youth centres where children and young people would go after school or spend most days at during the weekend and during school holidays. A central feature was often the availability of a large amount of "waste" building materials (wooden planks, bricks, nails, and tools) that were donated by local building merchants. The playgrounds usually included a large area of rough ground for building shacks, having bonfires, and digging. In London, the playgrounds were often located on bombsites from World War II. Alongside shack building, children and young people were supported in starting magazines, putting on theatrical shows, repairing bicycles, and so on. What was important was that these activities were self-directed, and where adults were involved, it was through invitation only.

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[4] *Since 1961 the IPA has expanded beyond Europe. The IPA's triennial conferences have been based in Canada (Ottawa 1978), Japan (Tokyo 1990), Australia (Melbourne 1993), Brazil (Sao Paulo 2002), and China (Hong Kong 2008). The IPA also held an Afro-Asian conference on Play in India which wasn't part of the triennial circuit (New Delhi 1983). The 2020 IPA triennial conference was meant to be held in India but was called off due to the Covid-19 global pandemic.*

[5] *As far as this went the experimental playground movement was in accord with the early playground movement who were also hugely critical of the orthodox and unsupervised playground of static devices set in asphalt.*

You can get a sense of the ambitions of these playgrounds when Katherine Markham, who was involved in the first bombsite junk-playground in London (St Luke's Junk Playground 1948–1951), writes: "The natural environment for a child's development is, of course, the countryside, and it is only the Industrial Revolution that has deprived them in such numbers of their birthright, and robbed them of the raw material for their activity" (Markham 1948, 183). Cities and their hostility towards children were seen as the problem that playgrounds needed to respond to. St Luke's was established in a particularly deprived area of South-East London and was set up to provide an area for children's play away from the dangers of traffic and the possibilities that children playing in the street would lead to criminal charges. But the ambition is larger than simply providing a safe haven for children's play: "The recent war, however, tore holes in the fabric of our so-called 'civilisation,' and it is the aim of our Committee to claim some of these 'holes' as oases in the urban desert, where natural life can re-assert itself and children play in congenial conditions" (Markham 1948, 183). The experimental playground was established to restore past conditions for children's play and to go some way to repairing the social and psychological damage inflicted by the war.

Another bombsite playground was set up in the working-class neighbourhood of Lambeth in South London (Lollard Adventure Playground 1955–1960). Such a neighbourhood was typical of the places where experimental playgrounds were established: the housing was overcrowded, with nothing in the way of private gardens or public parks in the vicinity. There was also a constant fear of juvenile delinquency. An experimental playground sought to answer the creative needs of children (particularly those children who abhorred the authoritarianism of organised activities by churches and groups like the Scouts and Guides) and to stop them getting into trouble with the police:

> *The Lollard Adventure Playground is an experimental project supported by the London County Council, the National Playing Fields Association and others. It will open in the spring as a playground where children will find scope for a great variety of activities—excavating, building, camp-fire cooking and so on. Experiments elsewhere have shown that playgrounds of this sort attract children off the streets and offer a constructive outlet for the energy and enterprise which in other circumstances often leads children into trouble.* ("Announcement of Lollard Adventure Playground" 1955, unpaginated)

Such playgrounds often only had a short lifespan because the agreement with the local authority was that they could use the land while it was awaiting rebuilding. (The site of Lollard was a bombed school that was rebuilt in 1961.)

The playgrounds were often run democratically with the children taking the lead in what activities took place. This meant that the adult "supervisors" had to learn how to step-back from any inclination towards leading the children, though how far this ethos was consistently adhered to is hard to fully ascertain. My sense is that it differed from playground to playground and depended on a number of factors, including the temperament of the adults involved. The words of Agnete Vestereg, a playworker at the Danish Emdrup playground, give some sense of the ideal (and idealised) permissiveness that underlay the experimental playground:

> *In order to approach most nearly to the ideal children's playground, everything which may serve to remind the children of authority is excluded. They are not subject to direct education, there is no compulsion, and they talk to me as they talk to their playmates, freely and easily, about defeats and victories, about plans and aims. They are free to criticise the playground and suggest improvements. If the criticism is justified, we talk about what can be done to remedy the defect. We lay plans and try to realise them. Gradually the children have come to feel that I respect their opinions: this gives them a feeling of assurance and ease and they can give themselves up fully to their play.* (Vestereg 1953, 9)

This sense of an adult's role within the playground as someone who communicates with children on an equal footing, was a way of the playgrounds refusing contamination by what it saw as the two institutions that were central to childhood and which the playground movement believed were orchestrated by obedience: the family and the school.

## THE ETHOS OF THE EXPERIMENTAL PLAYGROUND MOVEMENT

We have already seen something of the ethos underpinning these playgrounds—the belief in equality and self-reliance. These experimental playgrounds were often propelled by a sense of social activism, targeting the needs of the most deprived and vulnerable enclaves of children within the city. They were part of a child-saving movement, attempting to stave off the worst dangers of the city, which in their minds were the ways that cities criminalised poorer children (and, in the UK context, this was particularly true for the children of parents from former colonised countries) as well as the increasing danger from traffic. The sense of reparation, of somehow repairing a damaged world, was particularly strong amongst playground practitioners in the years immediately following 1945, and along with that a sense that these new playgrounds could somehow protect children from the lure of fascism.

This sense of reparation of a recent traumatic past and inoculation against the attraction to fascism in the future was the experimental playground movement's most speculative ambition. You can see it in many of the early playground statements. In one sense it was simply a warning about deprivation: fascism, according to playworkers like Marie Paneth, recruited from the "desperate youths" (Paneth 1948, 120) who populated deprived areas where there was little or no play provision for children and young people. But in another sense, it was a strong belief that if a playground could equip a child with confidence in their own capacities and a sense of an autonomous self, then these were the essential ingredients for developing an anti-authoritarian personality. Aligned with this was a commitment to grassroots democracy. This was a democracy based around both radical equality and an understanding of differential needs. There was no simple recipe for establishing such an ethos, but this should be seen as the fundamental problematic facing the playgrounds. We could pose the problem like this: if the experimental playground is committed to the free play of all, then how can this be maintained when some of the young people were teenagers while others were tiny children? It could be seen as the central problematic facing any society: how to you allow everyone to flourish when there is such a disparity of needs and capacities? This is hardly solved through the usual protocols of representative democracy, which might suggest that a playground should allow the majority (who are often simply the largest and loudest minority—often teenage boys in the case of playgrounds) to hold sway. Freedom, then was a central feature, but only if it didn't interfere with the freedoms of anyone else.

It was the way that playgrounds addressed these issues and offered experimental solutions to inequality that alerted the British anarchist movement to the importance of experimental playgrounds. In the 1961 issue of *Anarchy*, the Lollard Adventure Playground was treated as a "parable of anarchy." For Colin Ward, the editor of the magazine, playgrounds like Lollard, were not so much a revelation as simply a testimony to the capabilities of children when they weren't under control:

> *That there should be anything novel in simply providing facilities for the spontaneous, unorganised activities of childhood is an indication of how deeply rooted in our social behaviour is the urge to control, direct and limit the flow of life. But when they get the chance, in the country, or where there are large gardens, woods or bits of waste land, what are children doing? Enclosing space, making caves, tents, dens, from old bricks, bits of wood and corrugated iron. Finding some corner which the adult world has passed over and making it their own.* (Ward 1961, 194)

"Spontaneous" and "unorganised activities" are the key terms here. It is because an activity occurs without prompting, without direction that makes it important.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of the parable occurs in an example from Minneapolis. The Yard was a junk playground set up in Minneapolis in 1950 with money from the women's magazine *McCall's Magazine*. In a story retold countless times (and referred to in the 1961 issue of *Anarchy*) we see what happens when children are left to their own devices:

> *When THE YARD first opened, it was every child for himself. The initial stockpile of second-hand lumber disappeared like ice off a hot stove. Children helped themselves to all they could carry, sawed off long boards when short pieces would have done. Some hoarded tools and supplies in secret caches. Everybody wanted to build the biggest shack in the shortest time. Glen [an adult supervisor] watched the dwindling stockpile and said nothing. Then came the bust. There wasn't a stick of lumber left. Highjacking raids were staged on half-finished shacks. Grumbling and bickering broke out. A few children packed up and left. But on the second day of the great depression most of the youngsters banded together spontaneously for a salvage drive. Tools and nails came out of hiding. For over a week the youngsters made do with what they had. Rugged individualists who had insisted on building alone invited others to join in—and bring their supplies along. A dozen groups tore down their first attempts and started over with fresh recruits. New ideas popped up for joint projects. By the time a fresh supply of lumber arrived a community had been born.* (Lagemann 1953, 13)

It is the fact that this collective and community action happens spontaneously, while Glen says nothing, that is the crucial lesson of the parable. No doubt this is an overly romanticised version of the playground ethos with all the bickering and occasional punch-ups left out. But the romanticism was crucial and drove the discursive framing of the adventure playground. It was a movement that was trying to be utopian.

Children might live in a world where competition and individualism are celebrated but left to work out how to use finite resources on their own, an intuitive sense of sharing and collectivism emerges. Such a parable suggests that it is not so much that children need to learn to share, but that they need to unlearn the lessons that they see all around them in advancing capitalist society. They needed to leave behind the competitiveness that is often at the heart of the way physical education is taught in schools and always at the heart of entrepreneurial capitalism. Unlearning would happen spontaneously, partly because competitiveness was an inefficient use of resources, and partly because left to their own devices the intuitive play practices of children would emerge unfettered.

## LOOSE PARTS

In 1971 Simon Nicholson, the son of artists Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, published an article in *Landscape Architecture* titled "How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts" Nicholson was the product of a progressive co-educational boarding school (Dartington Hall School), famous for its liberal attitudes and its refusal of competitiveness. He went on to study art and then archaeology and anthropology and developed an influential approach to creative and democratic pedagogy. The article was aimed primarily at children's play but was also addressed to adults, and against those elites who decide what kind of a world we live in, and whose creativity gets valued. A world of loose parts is the antithesis of a world of fixed elements. A world of fixed elements and devices is a world where children "cannot play with building and making things, or play with fluids, water, fire or living objects, and all the things that satisfy one's curiosity and give us pleasure that results from discovery and invention" (Nicholson 1971, 30). You can imagine such a place easily enough: a museum where everything is in a cabinet or else fixed to the wall; an airport terminal with its fixed seating and endless signage telling you where to go; a static playground with devices fixed into the asphalt. Such places are symptoms of a world that has failed to share the potential for invention, a world where a very few have hoarded creativity, and where the rest of us are simply cheated and left depleted:

> *What has happened is that adults in the form of professional artists, architects, landscape architects, and planners have had all the fun playing with their own materials, concepts and planning-alternatives, and then builders have had all the fun building the environments out of real materials; and thus has all the fun and creativity been stolen: children and adults and the community have been grossly cheated and the educational-cultural system makes sure that they hold the belief that this is right. How many schools have there been with a chain-link and black-top playground where there has been a spontaneous revolution by students to dig it up and produce a human environment instead of a prison?* (Nicholson 1971, 30)

The fact that we answer Nicholson's rhetorical question with "not any that I know of" is testimony to how deep the problem goes. The very fact that the orthodox playground is the image that pops into our head when we hear the word "playground" is proof of how our imaginations have been colonised by a specific fixed cultural form.

Nicholson's essay was a clarion call to the design community to learn from the experimental adventure playgrounds of the recent past as well as from such radical experiments as the "People's Park" in Berkeley, California (Mitchell 2003). Nicholson taught at the University of California, Berkeley between 1966 and 1971, where he offered a course on design where the students' work was assessed by local children (Stott 2019). In 1971 he returned to England where he joined The Open University as chair of the radically interdisciplinary course "Art and Environment"—a course where the adult students, with no previous training, were asked to do things such as compose a piece of music using household implements. It was the very essence of the theory of loose parts. Nicholson's theory was simple: "in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (Nicholson 1971, 30). Produce an environment where there are no variables—nothing to combine, tamper with, pull apart, destroy, remake, and remodel—and you have an environment destined to stifle creativity and invention.

While Nicholson's essay took experimental playgrounds (as seen through Ward's special issue of *Anarchy* on adventure playgrounds) as one of its key examples he was wary that these playgrounds could also become fixed, conventional and lose their inventiveness. He was also concerned that they were mere consolatory appendages to a broken system. His real aim was the complete refashioning of the educational system:

> *It is hard to talk about environmental education without mentioning that the whole educational system, from pre-school through university, is on the verge of changing. Who needs these institutions in their present form? The prototype for education systems of the future are [sic] almost certainly those facilities that take children and adults out into the community and, conversely, allow all members of the community access to the facility.* (Nicholson 1971, 32)

It wouldn't be enough to have experimental playgrounds, the whole educational system should be part of a social world of experimentation, of testing by the community. That was in 1971. Seen as an ecosystem, the educational system is now (at least in the countries I'm familiar with) even more cut off from the community, even less inclined to the radical experimentation that Nicholson envisaged as being the bedrock for good social design. Experimental playgrounds might well be just a small consolatory enclave, but if that is all there is, how much more important it is to protect them.

## EXPERIMENTAL PLAYGROUNDS: A CASE FOR SUPPORT

If we follow both the examples of experimental playgrounds and the idea of loose parts, then we could envisage the beginnings of another reality. This would be a reality where design, rather than being a specialised activity, would be part of the everyday aesthetics of play. To follow Nicholson at his most ambitious you could imagine an infrastructure of spaces that were like laboratories of play. They might include experimental playgrounds, but they could also include allotments, places of repair, and a whole host of other places where invention could take place for adults and children alike. Who knows, they may even supplant some of the space we dedicate to more formal forms of education.

I want to end with a simple proposition: historically the more professional design that goes into children's play, the less often inventive design results from the playing. Given that there is a massive, multi-billion-dollar global industry aimed at finessing toys and games for children, my proposition is also perhaps a provocation. A global industry involved in producing commodities for children (or rather, aimed at their parents' and carers' disposable income) might well try and sell us "creativity," yet another more generative form of creativity might be a good deal cheaper and might result from salvaged and scavenged materials accessible to all. In a world of finite resources, that have been squandered in the name of commodity culture, such a future reality may well need to become a reality sooner than we think. If the children creating a community in the Yard are anything to go by, it might be our best hope for a realisable future in a precarious world.

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