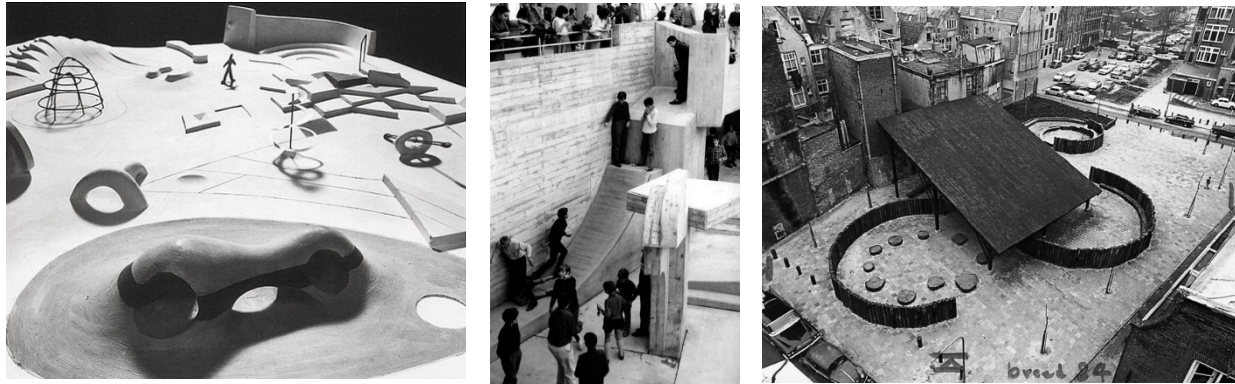


GROUNDS FOR PLAY



Isamu Noguchi playground proposal United Nations, Aumatten Primary School by Michael Frossert, Nieuwmarkt by Aldo van Eyck

Play is our human instinct. We play to experience joy, to exercise our creativity and to explore the world. We play to learn cooperation, flexibility and grit—arguably the most important traits an individual can possess in our time. And, perhaps most critically, it is through unfettered play that we learn. Over the last three decades, there has been a growing body of research on the emotional, social and neurological benefits of play for children. Scientists know that active play (as opposed to more passive entertainment) leads to the development of the cerebellum, a critical region of the brain that fuels other learning. Brian Sutton-Smith, a leading psychologist and author on the purpose of play, wrote that, through play, children learn human truths, both positive and negative, that no teacher will teach them, but that are critical for developing “successful human relationships in marriage, business and war” and the flexibility to adapt in an unpredictable world.

Spaces designated for play are most typically oriented on the physical ground, and we tend to think first of outdoor play areas. Today’s archetypal outdoor playground is defined by the ubiquitous climbing gym as its centerpiece. But the playground as program has its origins in a more open-ended past. In the original kindergarten, spearheaded by Fredrich Froebel in the forests of Germany in the 1837, children spent a great deal of time outdoors—contending with and observing nature. The first “junk playground” arose in Emdrup, Denmark, in 1943, designed for youths seeking refuge under German occupation. It was a minimally designed landscape that evoked the beach, meadow and grove, where children could use scrap materials to build and create. In the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by Emdrup, an Adventure Playground movement took shape, most notably in Japan with Hanegi Playpark. There, children were invited to play with water, tools, scraps, equipment and even fire. The array of activities — the type of play — would constantly change, constructed by the children themselves on the same plot of land.

In the mid-twentieth century, a handful of architects and artists worked to elevate play using abstract landforms to create urban interventions. The playground designs of Isamu Noguchi were sculptures carved from the ground itself — essentially earthworks and large-scale sculptures that suggested many kinds of use, inviting the children to define their own fun, disoriented from the mundanity of the ground plane. Similarly, Aldo van Eyck, who designed more than 700 playgrounds in the Netherlands, employed materials and abstract shapes to invite children to configure their own play using the ground as their canvas. With their abstract forms, his playscapes signaled to children the occasion to play. Through his network of playground spaces throughout Amsterdam, he gave credence to the child as a citizen.

Although the image of the outdoor playground can act as a starting point for our discussion, we will not be limited by that convention. Beyond the outdoor playground, educators have long created play spaces indoors, as well, many

times defined as much by the objects within them as by the architecture itself. Caroline Pratt, the pioneer of educational theory and practice who founded Manhattan's City and Country School in 1914, believed children should learn by observing, questioning and making. Collaborative block play was central to her methodology, and so, in collaboration with Patty Smith Hill, Pratt designed a radical set of oversized blocks to encourage play within the classroom. The enormous blocks required several children to work together to move them, and they had to be played with on the floor where students used their bodies to build models of their city. Her focus on education through play was prescient – she provided the grounds for cooperative problem-solving and allowed students to define space through their own activity and construction.



Swarovski Kristallwelten by Snohetta, Hanegi Park in Japan, City and Country School in New York City

In the context of a New York City school today, where open space is at a premium, the available space and time for play is limited. The footprint of a school's property may allow for a ground-level or rooftop playground, and the daily schedule may allow for a meager 20-minute recess period – the minimum required by the Department of Education. Given the known benefits of play on childhood development and well-being, can we build schools that incorporate more integral spaces and opportunities for play? Learning from the playgrounds and play objects that we study, how can a building inspire wonder by engaging children in their environment?

Within the tight-knit urban fabric and constraints of our particular project site, an expanded space for play must extend beyond the physical ground plane. Can multiple grounds be woven, stacked, laced or reconfigured to define spaces for play throughout the school? How do spaces for play interface with classrooms, circulation spaces and other programs? Though the horizontal plane is a natural site for play, what is the potential to reorient aspects of play vertically? Our studio will explore materials and geometry, through the tools of sectional design and physical model-making, to activate volumetric space for play and learning experiences to co-mingle.

Intentional and thoughtful playspace need not result in a funhouse of monkey bars, nor an endlessly flexible lounge space that lacks specificity. We will instead propose new typologies of play spaces by deliberately bringing the public realm into the walls of the school. Not unlike CBJ Snyder, who incorporated open-air theaters, swimming pools, bowling alleys and game rooms into his turn-of-the-century buildings, and not unlike John Dewey who created play spaces that simulated aspects of "real" life within the classroom, we will pull elements of outside program *in* to create new modes of play within the *child's* realm. We will stitch threads of the city's infrastructure onto the school grounds, and in doing so, foster opportunities for bridging the unfettered joys of childhood with the joys of adulthood, in hopes of nurturing the next generation of great minds.