

Adventure Playgrounds in Scotland?

Thoughts and aspirations from
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Adventure playgrounds

Carl Theodor Sørensen, a Danish landscape architect, noticed that children preferred to play everywhere but in the playgrounds that he built. In 1931, he imagined "A junk playground in which children could create and shape, dream and imagine a reality...His initial ideas started the adventure playground movement.

Renowned Danish landscape architect C. Th. Sørensen opened the first playground of its kind, a skrammellegpladsen (junk playground) near Copenhagen in 1943 as part of a housing project for disadvantaged families. Sørensen's aim was "to create a place where children themselves are the creators." The idea soon became hugely popular, and is still very much in use today. Another well known landscape artist and an advocate of children, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, who visited Sørensen's park in 1946, is credited with bringing the idea to Britain. These "junk playgrounds" became known as "adventure playgrounds." From the late 1960s—fuelled by a liberal atmosphere and changing attitudes towards child rearing—adventure playgrounds rapidly spread throughout Europe, becoming especially popular in Switzerland and Germany.

Japan

Living in one of the world's largest and most densely populated metropolitan areas, where parks and playgrounds are often sterile, boring or unsafe, many parents may be surprised to learn of local parks that are quite the opposite. At adventure parks, children are free to run around and explore, climb trees, play with water, dig in the mud, and create their own world with nothing but wood, stones, soil and the power of imagination.

Thirty years ago the first adventure or junk playgrounds, here also known as 'play parks' or bouken asobiba, were founded in Japan, and they now form an integral part in the lives of many city children. There are over 200 of these playgrounds nationwide, about half of which are located in the Kanto plain.

Contrary to what parents may expect, less accidents happen on these make-shift playgrounds than on traditional ones.

In Japan, first interest in the topic sparked in the second half of the 1970s, after Lady Allen's book on adventure playgrounds, *Planning for Play*, published in 1968, was translated into Japanese. The first permanent adventure playground in Japan—which still exists today—was set up in the year 1979, inside Hanegi Park in Setagaya ward, Tokyo. From the 1990s, almost 20 years later than in Europe and in spite of bureaucratic hurdles, the adventure playground movement became popular throughout Japan. The play parks are now organized as non-profit organizations (NPOs) under the Japan Adventure Playground Organization.

Adventure playgrounds and their influence

To this day the concept is roughly the same worldwide: the parks are



often set up on wasteland or in a corner of an existing park, and usually offer:

- opportunities for deep engagement with the elements - water, fire, air and earth;
- opportunities for woodwork and building – often taking the form of huts and settlements;
- an abundant supply of raw materials and scrap/junk materials often on a larger scale than is usually available to children (planks of wood, wooden pallets and crates).

Many adventure playgrounds also raise animals such as chickens, goats or pigs and because they operate all year round seasons are important as are the evolution of their own traditions and rituals.

A key concept is that the children who use the adventure playground can make genuine physical changes to the space itself. They can dig channels and deep holes, build huts, make temporary structures, set things on fire, cook, create and destroy in a cycle that evolves over time. Adventure playgrounds have often embedded very democratic principles within their ways of operating – although anarchic and chaotic elements are part and parcel of them. Opportunities for play can be very inclusive when the playground is facilitated mindfully.

Adventure playgrounds invariably have staff and often volunteers. The staff members are variously called youth workers, pedagogues in many parts of Europe and Scandinavia, 'play leaders' in Japan and playworkers in the UK. This is sometimes seen as a contradiction to the original idea of letting children play freely and unsupervised, but in most countries the presence of an adult is required in order to be able to offer the type of experience that is unique to adventure playgrounds. Adventure playground workers tend to operate on the principle of low intervention / high response and are an integral element of the operation of a successful space.

Adventure playground workers are in a very privileged position in relation to children at play. Many of the thinkers and influencers of play, starting with the originators Sørensen and Hurtwood, have come from adventure playgrounds (for example in the UK – Bob Hughes, Harry Shier, Theresa Casey, Wendy Russell, Stuart Lester, Jane Hutt and many more). Sørensen and Hurtwood were also founder members of the International Play Association in 1961 and the political nature of adventure playgrounds is also apparent in that organisations work in relation to children's play as a human right as expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In this way adventure playgrounds can be seen to have a wider influence on the culture of playwork; play in other settings (schools, out of school care, public play spaces); children's rights and broader questions of childhood and society.



Adventure playgrounds in Scotland?

There are currently no adventure playgrounds in operation in Scotland using this established understanding of what makes an adventure playground an adventure playground. The term has been claimed for adventurous physical play and there are settings which use elements of the model.

In the last 3 years, schools in Scotland have been buying into the Scottish Government funded programme co-ordinated by Grounds for Learning which have as a starting point: sand, water, risk, challenge, loose parts and a very child directed focus and as much community involvement as is feasible. Traditionally schools have functioned in a way that is counter cultural to free play. However with this project's generous investment of staff support, play training and the necessary management by senior staff, the appetite for this sea change of experience is burgeoning. Significantly the programme has meant that local authorities have bought into the ethos of adventurous playgrounds and begun to dismantle the many barriers that act against the development of quality play experiences.

In recent years considerable new attention has been brought to play politically and in relation to children's rights. Funding for play has increased and a potentially vibrant culture of play is beginning to emerge. There are some clear gaps however:

- an understanding of where the current best practice and thinking comes from
- Documentation and dissemination of emerging good practice to help sustain what is always vulnerable in times of financial crisis
- connecting into the lively engagement with play practice and theory which is happening in other parts of the UK and Europe and developing a stronger Scottish network to push forward the debate and aspirations for play
- physical spaces – well “designed”/well-conceived adventure playgrounds – that allow play practitioners and others to really experience why play matters to children.



Question: is it the right time now to re-examine the possibility of adventure playgrounds in Scotland?

A starting point:

a feasibility study mapping the place of adventure play within the current opportunities and aspirations for play in Scotland (the best place in the world to grow up?) looking in detail at the potential that exists to build on and expand current projects and provision in Scotland, including the Play Ranger model and some of the ground breaking work being done in school grounds.



Update 2015

Since presenting this paper to the Scottish Government and Inspiring Scotland, the work of Judi Legg and Sue Gutteridge of **Wildside Scotland** continues to inform, deepen and deliver meaningful play opportunities for children across Scotland. Contributions include:

- ⇒ Their loose materials training programmes can be viewed on www.youtube.com “This Place is Like a Building Site” or on www.wildside.scot.com along with the fully illustrated publication of the same name, also available at www.playlink.org and www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources.
- ⇒ Delivery of inclusive designs for outdoor play at Carronhill Special School, Aberdeenshire and The Yard, Edinburgh www.theyardscotland.org.uk.
- ⇒ Play landscape schemes featured in the UK Government guidance document Designs for Play and Managing Risk in Play Provision
- ⇒ Judi has been the consultant Creative Director for the Scottish Government National Play Project delivering 31 school grounds play landscapes at GFL for the last three years <http://www.ltl.org.uk/scotland/programme>
- ⇒ Design of £400K Adventure Playground for Adventure Aberdeen
- ⇒ The Tree house Project delivers tailored programmes working with vulnerable children— working with tools to build playable structures in schools.
- ⇒ Development of service delivery in: outdoor learning (featured on HMIE website 2012), CPD, Forest Schools and John Muir Awards
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