

Magical Playscapes

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The primary motive for writing this article was the authors' dissatisfaction with current developments in play environment design and development. Widespread misunderstanding of children's play has resulted in a growing tendency to replace vibrant, enchanting, natural and magical playscapes with overly slick, technologically-inspired, manufactured structures. Further, the child's life is growing increasingly structured and centered upon the achievement ethic in the mistaken notion that what adults think is good for adults is also good for children. Overly anxious parents and bureaucrats are robbing children of their right to play and, consequently, their sense of wonder and enchantment. We trust that this article will inspire designers, builders and others to reconsider their involvement in children's play, to think back to the magical places and events of their own past and look at play once more through the eyes of the child.

As adults, we often drift back to magical moments of childhood. We create works of art, build places and present spectacles intended to transport us into other worlds; we create realities and convey impressions that are not completely understandable. either to the senses of the intelligence. An instinctive desire for the mystical is universal; it is part of what makes us human. We have accumulated an astounding array of techniques to fulfill this need according to the tastes and technologies of the era.

At no time in life is a person more receptive to the magical than in childhood, when limits have not yet solidified and the mind is not yet bound by the physical and the rational. Indeed, leaps into the magical through symbolic, imaginative, make-believe or pretend play are the child's chief means of transition from the concrete to the symbolic, from primitive to elaborate thought and action.

We all have fond memories of mysterious, enchanting, dreamlike places in our pasts, when we were one with the world, in love with life, suspended in an eternal present. It might have been during a special party, a foggy lamp lit evening or some brilliant, dewy early-morning sunrise. We recall the places that best supported or evoked that state of mind: the beach, a rose garden, a

special park, Grandmother's yard, some state or national monument, a restaurant, a snowy meadow, a woods or creek or orchard. These are the places that enhanced us and lent sustenance to our highest selves.

Yet for a growing number of children these precious moments and places are all but lost to the trivialities and technologies of modern living. The natural, soft, sheltered places are giving way to concrete, steel and machines; the tender moments with parents, grandparents and close relations are being supplanted by a growing array of strangers; the magical playscapes, once created by the child, are now the domain of clever adult researchers, designers and salespeople. In our own clumsy, shortsighted ways we are seriously attempting, yet often failing, to satisfy both a very basic need and an exalted purpose—the experience of the magical in childhood.

We can create with children playscapes that are fitting for the magical child if we feel it is important enough. But we must be willing to transcend the traditional and the scholarly and engage once again in the mystical, the enchanting and the elusive. Toward this end we propose a modest outline that employs a range of design guidelines geared to the child's perspective.

Changes of Scale

Children's imaginations thrive on possibilities and resist limitations. For children, there really are giants up the beanstalk and leprechauns under the rosebush. The fantastic topographies and mini-worlds in storybooks don't just amuse children, they extend their capacities to imagine and dream. Alteration of scale forces us all to see the world more fully, freshly, closely. There seem to be three scales of operation that create novel responses in children and open the doors of the imagination: the miniature, the child-sized that puts the child in relative primacy, and the colossal.

Miniature Scale—The Precious. Children of all ages delight in the diminutive (Poltarnees, 1986). The words "charm" and "charming" derive their original meaning and potency from smallness. The authority children possess over the destinies of toys and tiny landscapes offers a deep satisfaction, a type of personal power, a way of validating the self; they can enjoy a sense of omnipotence and sovereignty in a world that so often seems to render their lives ineffective. This is the beginning of their taking control of their lives and their world and balancing the helplessness they feel with real and imagined strengths. Consider the magic children sense when

viewing a spiritual Christmas tree of nativity scene. Is it not, to a great extent, the character of the miniature that engages and transports them to other realms? Their fascination with model trains, dollhouses, model-building, insects, tiny animals and figurines belies a very special attraction to small cosmologies.

Taken to another degree of magnification, tiny becomes microscopic and new worlds open up. Children have a fascination with the myopic. The world seen close up reveals yet new wonders at the cellular level. New patterns, new structures, become evident. Many of these, such as a snowflake or the veins in a leaf, are reduced to mere geometries and abstractions. perhaps they suggest to the child Some of the inner-workings and energy patterns of the universe. or maybe the child can imagine himself reduced, not just to doll-sized but all the way down to antsize (or smaller), and involved in escapades in an entirely new world, where pebbles are boulders and a cocoon in a bedroom. Whatever the scale, children gain a sense of perspective over miniatures. They return from their escapades among the small, having gained a new perspective, a new sense of shape, clarity and interrelations, and more prepared to face an enormous and sometimes threatening “real world”.

Child Scaled—”Just My Size!” Environments and objects built exactly to the scale of the child create many of the same effects as do miniature objects. besides facilitating their daily actions in a world that is simply too big to function in easily, a child-sized place imparts a special message. It says, “You are right just the way you are. You are catered to and cared for. You are important, and this world is for you, too.” Notice how children respond to places like miniature golf courses, the small trains in parks and objects downscaled for their use.

The Heroic, Colossal Scale. In a place of huge scale, adults and children are essentially reduced to equals, both having lost primacy, and both are compelled to see things with new eyes. There is also a sense of grandeur not normally attained in the everyday world, a feeling that one is walking in a realm created by a higher power. Besides having gigantically scaled objects or places in the playscape, consider as well the Japanese gardening practice of “captured views”, a method used to help gain a vastness of scale. In “capturing a view”, some landmark in the distance is framed by the judicious pruning of vegetation in the garden to become, in effect, part of it. erecting a play tower might suggest a closer proximity with the vast worlds among the

clouds. Even locating swings on a hillside with an expansive view would help augment that larger-than-life feeling.

The Suggestion of Other Beings

Humans have always enjoyed imagining they share the world with small versions of themselves: brownies, goblins, pixies, elves, leprechauns, hobbits, fairies, little animals that talk and act as we do. This notion has been convincingly perpetuated through children's literature and folk tales (Gulliver's Travels, Thumbelina, Alice in Wonderland).

On the one hand, we're somehow less alone in a fully peopled world. On another, we seem to have an instinctive distaste for an existence that is thoroughly mapped and defined. We welcome tales of ice people, talking trees, undersea kingdoms, Mad Hatters, Toons and Star Wars animatronics. We feel joy in being a part of an existence in which the possibilities are endless. Children exhibit this joy everyday in their make-believe play.

Kids themselves are little people in a too-big world, surrounded by huge creatures. The idea is comforting to them that there are smaller folk who, by their own wits, are leading independent lives. They feel a sense of power in relation to these tiny beings and heightened self-esteem through comparison and domination over them.

A sense of magic is felt in a place that shows obvious signs that such beings inhabit it. Children love visiting Santa's workshop, and they never tire of watching The Wizard of Oz. These are the homes of magical creatures and therefore of expanded possibilities; anything can happen. Find a featureless wall in your playground and add or paint a hobbit homefront. Create a cozy garden setting, framed by trees and flowering shrubs, that defines a setting for children and adults to relive time-honored fairy tales through reading aloud and sharing stories. Storytime can become realtime when adults provide the freedom, space and materials for children to relive their fantasies through make-believe-play.

"Realness"

Children sense the difference between toys and real objects. In many situations, especially where size is not a problem, they prefer the real thing over the sham. Perhaps it has to do with physical attributes—a greater and

more minute degree of detail, its weight and heft, its strength and longevity, or its being constructed of denser materials. Or maybe it has to do with association—”This is the hammer my Dad uses”—that magically imparts attributes of the original user to the novice. Or perhaps its value, in terms of materials or time spent creating it, gives it a quality that a mere copy can never have. It might also be its actual usefulness; i.e., it will do more things better, longer or easier.

For instance, a real fire engine in a playground will have a much more profound impact on children than a climber made to remind children of one, especially if it has its original bell, hoses, gauges, chrome plating, tires and other details still intact. Things that actually do something help so much to create its rich character. In fact, the more working or mechanical parts it actually has that children can either control or relate to, the better. This gives it a specialness that no copy can match; and by association with both its original purpose and its history, it endows the new users with special capabilities.

Archetypal Images

Symbols and myths throughout the ages have given life meaning and direction. These images and stories can be found in all cultures. Childhood is perhaps the time we are most open to them. Our fairy tales (with their glass slippers, dragons and golden balls) and holidays (consider the Christmas tree and the Hanukah menorah) abound with such symbolism. As a matter of fact, many children’s stories are age-old myths handed down from generation to generation.

Childhood is a time before rational thinking has had a chance to crowd out these more subtle and profound thought processes. Observation reveals certain images almost universally common to children’s art, images such as the ever-present sun, circles, trees, the house and others. We could greatly enhance the range of experiences taking place in our playscapes by conscientiously incorporating some of these shapes, keeping in mind the preferences of children and the beliefs of the surrounding community. Even if children do not understand initially why we’re doing this, they will sense that such symbols are important. In time the meanings will surface.

Sense of “Placeness”

For a place to be magical, there needs to be a certain denseness of atmosphere, a degree of containment that serves to cut off the rest of the world. Don't children often feel more at home in corner places than they do in the middle of an open, exposed location? There is a certain specialness that only boundaries can create. A garden surrounded by a low picket fence will have a different feeling than that same garden with no fence at all. The very term "outdoor room" connotes entirely different images than simply "the outdoors". These places need not be completely enclosed since children like to be aware of what is happening around them.

Placeness might also be enhanced by having a mood-setting device, a heart of some kind. Consider such things as a statue, sundial, birdbath, Japanese lantern, ornate wind chime, stone or hewn-log bench, fireplace, hammock or pool. Anything having meaning or usefulness, that imbues the surroundings with ambience and creates an atmosphere apart, can make a special place little ones can just enjoy being in. Try involving children in the creation of an amphitheater surrounded by plants and covered with trellising.

Open-endedness

Forms that are over-defined tend to dictate meaning, and this is the antithesis of the magical state of mind we are seeking. Shapes whose meanings are not so clearly defined or measurable to the eye, on the other hand, lend themselves to more than one interpretation—they can become more than one thing. Remember the old story about the child who spends more play time with the box than she does with the didactic and one-dimensional toy that came in it?

When an object or environment is open to many interpretations and uses, the child holds the power to tell it what it is to be or do, rather than it giving the child some preconceived "correct" way to perceive or act. Consider the amazing differing functions of building blocks versus puzzles or coloring books.

Open-ended spaces and forms often have associative qualities that remind the child of various areas of meaning, but leave much for her to fill in. A conical peak can become a castle, a mountain peak or a rocket; an unknown rounded shape might become a lizard, a dinosaur or a dragon. The addition

of a steering wheel or a low counter to almost any platform or play enclosure will greatly expand its dramatic potential.

Nature and the Elements

Gardens, woods, jungles, groves and orchards have always been potent sources of enchantment. An increase in greenery of any kind will help to increase the probability of mystical thinking and enchanting experiences in our playscapes.

Things that are not human or machine made offer a level of meaning and support far beyond what is artificially available. Common sense and experience both tell us that we alter the natural environment at our peril. We read to our children of enchanted forests, wonderful briar patches and mystical places “where the wild things are”. Yet, look at the places that children actually have to play in! What can be done to close the gap, and how quickly can we begin? After all, weren’t most of the places we remember as magical also predominantly natural?

tradition has it that the world is made up of four main elements: earth, air, fire and water. As children learn concrete operations and learn to interact with the physical world, it is important that they gain knowledge of its major components. Only when they are adept at the manipulation of these basic building blocks can abstract thinking freely take place.

Make sure that the playground offers ample opportunity to interact safely in many ways with earth, air, fire, and water. Gardening, for example, is an excellent way of learning how to balance the four elements to create life (Talbot, 1985). What could be more magical than the growth process? Observing raw materials blossom into a beautiful flower or an ear of corn is a spiritual experience indeed.

Make sure that playgrounds offer sand and water play. Can some kind of paddle pool be provided? How about a fireplace, or at least an occasional bonfire or cookout in which the kids can take part? Or a safe tower or treehouse with a spyglass for sky watching and a cockpit of some sort with a steering wheel for “flying”? Have an ecology pond, a digging place, giant boulders or even some mud puddles.

Line Quality and Shape

For a child, there is more intrigue in a circle than a square, in a curved line than a straight one, in a multifaceted crystal than a cube. Why this is so doesn't matter so much as taking advantage of the fact and acting on it when we are creating places for children.

Why make a rectangular door when you can have an arched one? Why make a square-shaped platform when it could be cloud-shaped? Why have a cylindrically shaped tunnel when with a little more effort you can have a biomorphically shaped interior reminiscent of Jonah's whale? Why build a straight bridge when you can make it topsy-turvy, arched or hanging? Why have a beeline walkway when it can meander? And what about portholes for windows or a large old dead tree instead of a regimented jungle gym?

Children relate more easily to softened edges and curves, to anthropomorphic shapes, to eccentricity and whimsicality. What can we do to playgrounds to improve their line quality? Could we rout the sharp wood edges? Add an arched gateway? Install some rolling hills? Paint some friendly shapes? Add a winding trike track with tunnels and hills?

Sensuality

Places that engage the senses are more enchanting and remain more profoundly in our memories than those with little sensual stimulation. Rich color, fragrances, pleasant sounds, engaging textures, varied light qualities, all of these give heightened significance to any experience. Consider again your own memories: sycamores whispering in the breeze, the feel of lamb's ear against one's cheek, a tart pear from Grandmother's yard, the dank feeling under the porch.

Create a sensory walk for infants and toddlers in your play yard, with textures, sounds and fragrant blossoms, even impregnated smells, or simple vegetation and other natural elements. Fluid or viscous materials like sand, dirt, clay, water also engage the senses while enhancing the construction and symbolic play schemes of children.

Layering

Another aspect of magical ambience is layering, a term we use loosely. One of its meanings involves looking through things at other things. Objects or

views in the background are “framed” by layers of foreground objects or massing (such as walls, hills or vegetation). The sense of depth is heightened and a feeling of richness is obtained. Discovery and mystery are also enhanced because things are often hidden by other things, and movement by the child is required to see all the parts of the environment.

Thus a sequential revelation or a fragmented perception takes place which intrigues the imagination and requires effort to fully penetrate the environment, and then find and fit all the pieces into a whole. The resulting totality is less preordained and more enriched with meaning supplied by the child then, say, a play yard taken in at a glance. This opens the door to mystical thinking, transforming the environment to fit the child’s fancies.

The concept of layering may also pertain to levels of meaning. An object may have several levels of interpretation or degrees of complexity. These are discovered, and perhaps enhanced, by the child over time. For instance, imagine a large sculpture set in a playscape that is approached from the rear and appears to be, at first viewing, a large mammal of some kind with splayed legs. As it is approached, however, the front legs turn out to be wings. Upon further examination, the wings turn out to be slides and yet another set of legs come into view, which turn out to double as sitting benches. Furthermore, it is discovered that when the nose is pressed, water comes out of the mouth. A simpler example would be those large, open-mouthed lion or hippo sculptures that are also trash receptacles. A “not only / but also” rather than a merely “either / or” situation is thereby created.

Novelty

rarity, unusualness, specialness, unpredictability and incongruity—these are all things that intrigue youngsters. To come upon something that cannot be immediately categorized stretches the limits of a child, again opening the way for a multitude of interpretations. A playground having something not found anywhere else in town is unique. A sense of pride and specialness is endowed to those using it— an elevated state that a mere catalogue playscape will never provide.

What if your playground had a nicely made totem pole with neat, funny and scary faces, one that a child could even climb? Or what about the famous giant Rokugo Tire Dinosaur in the Ota-ku, Tokyo, playground? Or an extensive music center including Trinidadian steel drums, a real oriental

brass gong and giant xylophone? Wouldn't the mere novelty alter and expand children's perceptions of their world? Shouldn't the playground super-structure integrate some novel elements—a pipe telephone system or a unique enclosure for house play?

Mystery

What is it about fog or a snow storm that can so transform any landscape into a wonderland? And what is it about twilight that can render the most mundane and known places into magical realms? Children love surprises and discovery. The game of hide-and-seek is as popular as ever; and we know how intrigued kids are by the unfamiliar, if only by the popularity of spook houses and scary stories. We also know, from our own lives, how refusing to acknowledge and face those “things that go bump in the night” can ultimately confound our ability to function later as whole and centered adults.

Let's admit that the mysterious is an integral part of life. Allow a few areas in children's world to remain a bit secret and obscure. Keep the playground such that it can't be comprehended at once at the child's eye-level. Leave a few nooks, crannies and hidey-holes; or consider how the play yard might be softly lit and used in the evenings. Create an “enchanted forest” with vines, bushes, tall grass, hills, bridges, tunnels and other features children love so much; then add some appropriate music or sounds to complete the mood.

Brilliance

The mesmeric and transporting qualities of things that sparkle, glitter and shine are as old as history. “Every paradise abounds in gems” (Huxley, 1954, p. 101). In earlier times there were ancient bonfires, the stained glass of gothic churches, the fireworks of the Chinese, Christmas tree decorations and the rich pageantry of the Olympic games. In recent times we've experienced the full, transporting power of modern stage lighting, outdoor floodlighting, neon, the colorful, stroboscopic light shows and fireworks spectacles, the enveloping OMNI-MAX- IMAX motion picture and laser sculptures. Probably our all-time favorite light spectacle throughout the millennia has remained the glowing, colorful sunset. Children who have not yet been exposed to these various entrancing art forms are especially delighted by them. Infants and toddlers are enraptured during their early trips to the kitchen, with all its gleaming chrome, porcelain and tile. To

them, all that glitters really is gold. Crystals are especially intriguing to youngsters, as are fire, glitter, the metallic colors in their crayon sets and polished surfaces.

There are countless ways to make sure that play spaces offer these kinds of experiences. Surface mosaics of tile, polished stone, marbles, mirrors and even shells are not only attractive to children, but are also something they can create themselves. What about the use of gold, silver and copper enamel to paint a door? Or embedding quartz crystals into a wall or tunnel? Or perhaps one could impregnate clear polyurethane resin with color, glitter and other shiny objects. Could prisms be hung to liven up a wall at a certain time of day? Could we fit a play yard with low-voltage colored night lights having dimmer switches simple enough for children to safely use at night? Even a mural of rich saturated colors or a densely planted bed of brilliant flowers with a mirror ball could create an extra-special effect that would open up new vistas.

Richness and Abundance

So many yards and play spaces remind us more of sensory-deprivation chambers of post-holocaust deserts than anything else. There is no magic in them because very little can be created in a vacuum. We prefer an environment rich in possibilities, abounding with stuff, with no sense of scarcity.

A child feels freer, more powerful and confident when not constantly scraping the bottom of the junk barrel, reusing the same old toys or having to ration whatever is available. The environment must say, "As part of a rich and abundant universe, I support you fully." Whether it be in terms of details, things, building supplies and tools, vegetation, events, color and other sensual experiences or merely time, the play environment should be a varied cornucopia of endless possibilities. Yet, more is not always better when it comes to play environments for kids. More raw materials for creativity and more natural features do not necessarily mean showering children with an endless stream of store-bought trinkets and toys.

Connection with Other Times, Other Places

Age and history bestow a mystical aura. A hoary old oak has more magic than a sapling. It may be because in previous times magical thinking was

more prevalent and purely rational thinking did not dominate. Perhaps it is simply the richness of implied experience. Or could it be the unknown quality that leads to speculation as to what it may have been like back then, thus expanding the use of the imagination? It's as if an old place or object, having been through so much, is somehow alive and has more tales to tell.

It seems to be the nature of things past to develop a patina, an aura of the dream state. So important is this evocation that in the late 1800s there was a cult movement of Romantics who, longing for antiquity and all it suggested to them, would go as far as to build "ruins" from scratch! The underlying attraction to old things, often wrapped up in a fear of the dehumanizing tendencies of the Industrial Age, is still with us today. For instance, it is not often that modern fairy tales and modes of illustration affect us the way older ones do. Ancient, ivy-covered walls are "hallowed"; new bare ones are not. And it wasn't until the Velveteen Rabbit was really used that he became real. Creating "instant age" can be touchy business; but often in creating an environment choices will arise which allow one to opt either for something brand new, mechanical and hard or for something soft enough to show the passage of time or already having a sense of history. Many builders will scrape a site bare of all trees and stones, no matter what their age, before building. Right there is an opportunity to keep the older elements of the site intact. Whether to have child care in a new or older building is an opportunity to tap into the past. Choosing between new, fired brick and used, unfired brick for your patio or walkway is another. In general, when choosing materials for any building project, think of which materials "feel" older, which ones will gracefully reflect the effects of time and use (Alexander, 1977). Isn't that a major reason we seem to prefer, for instance, tile to concrete, additive building methods such as brick to poured or monolithic materials such as asphalt, or thicker and more solid walls and columns to thin modern ones?

Children's imaginations are also piqued by the exotic, that which is foreign, intriguingly not of their culture. Ali Baba's cave, Tarzan's jungle, King Arthur's court, the Taj Mahal. Oz, Morocco, China, even Hawaii; these are places that all conjure up potent images for the child in all of us. Many children's stories and movies get mileage from the fact that they take place in a "far-off land" where everything's strange and anything could happen. Since children don't know what it's actually like there, they are forced to fill in the gaps; and that is where they gain their magical power

over such worlds, very unlike their own everyday world where all the answers are accomplished facts.

What seems exotic to children? Spiral columns? Onion-shaped domes? Pointed arches? Filigree? “Jewels” and metallic colors? A yurt? Mosaics? Hieroglyphics? A sculpture of an elephant or lion? Palm trees? A turret? Zebra skin patterns? Doo Dog statues? Keep an eye out for what intrigues them and put it in their play space. Make it as detailed, multifaceted, lavish and lovingly as you can.

“Is-ness”

In driving through a neighborhood of hideous architecture, Huxley (1954) discovered that “within the sameness there is a difference” (p 61). A bank of geraniums was entirely different from a special stucco wall, but the “is-ness” or “eternal quality of their transience” was the same.

Objects, beings and places that have no other purpose than just to be express a meaning beyond utility and apparent reasoning. Much vision-producing art and architecture, magical in intent and rich with potential, don’t really do anything. They merely are. The cherubim and heroic figures of antiquity, the great mausoleums and monuments for old, fountains whose function is to elicit reflection and awareness of a larger order of things, Oldenberg’s great floppy canvas fan, the Olympic flame, madalas, natural cloudscapes, all of these have suggestive and transporting qualities far beyond their static natures. Their very uselessness allows them to do or mean whatever the beholder wishes and suggests transcendency and ritual in a larger sense.

Not everything in the play yard needs to be functional. Add something whose sole appeal is in its “Thing-ness”: a statue, large sphere or other geometric solid; a flower garden; a tree hanging; a freestanding arch or vault; some graphic design, symbol or map of an imaginary country. Whatever it is, it can be heraldic, whimsical, archetypal, mysterious, anything, as long as it has a profound, attractive and tangible energy that speaks to that which is not yet expressed in the children, something you know they will feel and notice.

Loose Parts and Simple Tools

Places built by kids themselves, even children with special needs, using scrap or natural materials are often more magical to them than those designed and built by adults. A hammer is the child's magic wand; we are constantly amazed at how, with a little support and encouragement, the child can bring about the transformation of mere junk into Rube Goldberg-ian wonderlands. The Japanese author Daisaku Ikeda (1979) understood this when he spoke of the overindulged as "glass children." Many children in industrialized countries have no toughness, so weak you expect them to break. Their fearful parents won't allow them to use tools for fear they might injure themselves, so ready-made plastic kits have supplanted the need. Seemingly minor matters such as these, repeated over and over, tend to shape the direction of the child's life.

The Illusion of Risk

There's no magic in avoiding challenge. The peak experience that occurs during a moment of risk is a potent one: the mind is in a state of alertness, resourcefulness and expectancy; the body is ready and open to change. The two are aligned in the face of perceived danger. It is a thrilling, exhilarating moment. Mastering the threat results in a concentrated, almost tangible growth spurt with transformational and empowering qualities. Each success has the potential to be a triumphant affirmation of life and personal power. The focus is on the timeless present, and this is a heady place to be. This is one face of rapture. This is a magical state of being.

On the other hand, not being allowed to take chances causes a debilitating timidity and fearfulness in later life. Risk is necessary in play, and children (not to mention adults deprived in childhood) will instinctively seek it out in unsafe and life-threatening places if it is not offered in safe ones. Growth simply demands the making and overcoming of mistakes. Play experiences can include heights without actual exposure to long falls, speed (such as zip lines, long slides, tall swings, bikes, sleds, skateboards), motion of all kinds (especially spinning), darkness, adventure hikes in the wilderness, diving, supervised play with fire, use of tools (scissors, saws, hammers), difficult balancing and climbing events (with resilient surfaces below). A common error of adults is assuming that "safe" on playgrounds means less challenging. With skillful planning we can have it both ways.

Doing Nothing

When Christopher Robin (Milne 1928) told Pooh, “What I like doing best is nothing,” he was living in a world that allowed daydreaming, reflecting and playing or not playing. Few contemporary children enjoy such luxuries. Rather, theirs is a tightly structured world of lessons, practices and schedules—a world that no longer values recess, free time, leisure and fun for fun’s sake. Adults unwittingly assume that television fills the need for privacy and reflection or reading; but in reality television structures time, distorts reality, channels thought and robs children of their own reflection and dreams.

The wise play leader understands that children must have time and places for truly free play. They must have opportunities for selecting their own playthings and themes, freedom from adult rules and restrictions, opportunities for messing around with valued friends in enchanting places, and time to just be kids and have fun.

Conclusion

The power to visualize, create and risk in a safe setting—these are the elements of childhood enchantment. They are important steps in the development cycle and a sound basis for developing children who are thinkers, wonderers, builders and who at the same time are confident, resilient and tough.

In sum, we propose design principles intended to transform traditional, mundane, over-slick, sterile or hi-tech places into magical enchanting playscapes. They are not the only qualities to be considered in designing playscapes, but they do address our children’s need for the mystical and magical and their sense of wonder. Such playscapes extend possibilities; expand awareness; transcend the common; and enhance opportunities for children to wonder, create and experiment, and thus to grow.

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