

Why Our Playgrounds are Boring to Today's Wired Child

Paper by Jay Beckwith at the Minnesota Recreation and Parks Association 63rd Annual Conference – 11/5/00

Historical Background

Since the early 70's I have been designing unique play equipment options for kids. First doing custom built structures and then in '76 creating School Yard BigToys. In 1980 I designed the first modular post and clamp play system, PlayBoosters, for Mexico Forge. When Landscape Structures bought that company I recreated the concept for Iron Mountain Forge, now Little Tikes, as KidBuilders. This was followed by the development of the 10 Plus concept for Kompan.

I have been sometimes been called the father of the modern playground. In fact there were many others, such as Richard Dattner, Paul Friedburg, and Steve King who also were also influential in the early development of architectural alternatives to the then dominant form of play equipment, swings, slides and climbers made from pipe. I mention this history because it is important to remember that in those years, creating playgrounds was an exciting and creative pursuit. There were lots of wonderful options for designers then that have subsequently disappeared from the market.

I created post and deck system to fulfill a specific design requirement ... play equipment for elementary schools. The concept of attaching play events to linked platforms was intended to take advantage of the characteristic style of play for 1st through 3rd graders; games of chase and tag. A large complex play structure perfectly matches the physical and developmental needs from 7 to 11 in a high-density setting.

In those days we talked a lot about "play environments." These were envisioned as diverse spaces with all manner of play opportunities. We did not intend that post and deck play structures become the total play space, which is now sadly the rule.

Even if our vision of thirty years ago had been fully realized it would not be right for today's children. Kids now are fundamentally and profoundly different than children of even a decade ago. If we are to invest in the creation of recreation spaces that are relevant now and have a chance of some utility into the future we must better understand what today's kids need and why our own childhood prevents us from seeing those needs clearly.

How the Past Prevents Seeing Today's Needs Clearly

As a "grown up" you have a point of view that effectively puts on blinders that prevents you from fully understanding the present needs of kids. You need only look at the friction between your City Council and the kids demanding a BMX track to see that there is a lack of understanding and shared values.

When we grew up one belonged, more or less to one of four groups: Jocks, Preppies, Nerds and Geeks. What is interesting is that membership in one of these cliques was determined largely by one's selection of leisure activities. Obviously the more you were into football or basketball the more you became a jock. Tennis or golf, and to a lesser extent baseball and track were the leisure pursuits for those bound to become the "suits" of the next generation.

The nerds shunned physical activity and focused on science and technology often to exclusion of a social life. Of course the nerds have had the last laugh, growing up to be the Bill Gates of our world and coming out the real winners.

The geeks just hung out. They were non-conformists and sought lifestyle alternatives. They became the beach bums and hippies. A popular leisure activity for this group was surfing which was soon transmogrified into skateboarding. If there was no beach around, these kids often got involved with backpacking, which evolved into rock climbing.

Now, of course, these characterizations are gross over simplifications. But it is useful to remember that adults today bring some of this history with them and it colors how they see today's kids and thus how they make choices in the creation and support of leisure activities.

Let's look, for example, at how these attitudes color our feelings about skateboarding. While recently skateboarding has come into the mainstream it is not very long ago that most adults perceived skateboarders as losers and malcontents and their activities were seen as vandalism. If you were a Jock or a Preppie you hated Geeks ... and still do. So if you are now a grown up jock or preppie who has become a Parks and Rec Commissioner you will bring along a bias that makes it impossible for you to see the development of a skatepark as a good thing. If you do allow one to be built, you will be certain to vote for a location that is as far way from the mainstream of community life as possible.

Support for rock climbing as a leisure activity in recreation programming suffers not only from some of this historical bias but also of the nature of the sport itself. The geeks who went off into the woods for recreation were by nature loners. Unlike, skateboarders who are "in your face", climbers disappear. Not only do they vanish but they also won't tell you where they go or what they do. Like fisherman protecting a special "hole" a climber won't reveal the best climbing venues. Park and recreation professionals can and have ignored them as part of their constituency for decades. Its is only when they brought their pursuit indoors so they could practice in the winter did we take note of them.

Both climbing and skateboarding have gain popularity, due mainly to exposure in the X-Games. It is amazing how often riders and climbers are shown in advertisements when the product wants to associate with what is "now" and "hot." For decades proposals for skating and climbing facilities where ignored or declined because these were thought to be fad pursuits. No one can think these are fads now. We must stop thinking of these as kids hung up on a temporary fad and see them for what they are, legitimate athletes engaged in very interesting and demanding sports.

The high end of these sports will be "extreme" and are more appropriately done in the controlled conditions of indoor facilities. The beginner and intermediate players need free access to facilities in which to practice and develop their skills. Park departments have traditionally provided the support system that feeds the higher levels of sports.

Do you think this kid plays on swings and slides?

The Wired Child

Consider this, today's ten year old has never known a time without a personal computer, the Internet or 150 TV channels. Heck, they've never even seen a black and white TV or computer screen. They've always lived in prosperity and without war. And most importantly for those concerned with recreation, every playground they have ever played on has had essentially the same play structure.

They've rooted for Tony Hawks while he struggled to be the first to land a "900", two and a half rotations in the air above a half-pipe. When he landed it at the X-Games it was for their generation the equivalent of the first steps on the moon. They know Tony as a world-class athlete, father of two, and the star of the video games ProSkater I and II. Which, by the way have grossed more sales than all but the very top Hollywood blockbusters.

The Twentieth Century for these kids is just one block of time. For a Halloween costume they might choose a flapper's dress, poodle skirt or tie-dye shirt and bell-bottoms, and consider any of the choices simply "retro."

Today's kids grow up faster and stay young longer. The play structures that used to attract kids in the 70's from five to preteens are now used only a little by the 8 year olds. A 10 year-old plays there only when there is no other option.

For adults the "Information Age" is still largely external. We think of it mainly as computers. These kids swim in a sea of information like dolphins in a warm ocean. And because of this immersion their very cognitive processes are fundamentally different. The root cause of the "crisis" in education today is that you might as well have donkeys trying to teach chimpanzees for all that teachers and kids share in their perception of the world.

In trying to understand what this change means, what kids will respond to and respect. I've spent a lot of time among the kids and with the literature in this field. From my studies I've developed eleven basic rules. These have really helped me better see the world through their eyes. They have also illuminated my design practice. I use them every day to make choices about what to build so that I am sure the kids will like what I make.

The following terms and concepts are all language used with computers and the Information Age. It is important to understand that their application is not limited to computers. These ideas have become part and parcel of the reality construct of today's kids.

1. **Layered** - think about the hidden levels in the game called Doom.
2. **Linked** - one thing leads to another, the Net/web.
3. **Non-linear** - envision the child exploring information on the web like a dog on the beach, not in a straight line but as interest dictates.
4. **Configurable** – Being able to change the color of your cell phone is not just cool, it is the signal that mass production can, with the addition of information systems, also be personal.
5. **Virtual** - I am "me" except when I'm on-line, then I'm "Doctor Play".
6. **Interactive** - when physical constraints and consequences disappear in the virtual world I experience unlimited behaviors and come to expect a very high level of responsiveness from my environment.
7. **Recordable** - The sense of time begins to change when I can record the weekend football game for later replay, or record my actions and then return to an earlier point in the process and take a different direction.
8. **Embedded** – Intelligence leaves the computer and enters the environment. Consider the "information" packed into the McDonald's Logo.
9. **Real-time** - waiting will increasingly become obsolete. Entertainment increasingly becomes live (sports) or interactive (movies with various endings). As kids increasingly live virtual lives they will consequentially also seek more "real time" direct experiences.
10. **Operating Systems** – information is controlled by various operating systems, the control of which brings power and status.
11. **High tech, high touch** - when I am in my virtual self I am out of body. When I am in the physical world I am intensely aware of my senses. This explains the seeming dichotomy of heavy computer use on one hand and the popularity of extreme sports on the other.

Are You Still Building Yesterday's Parks?

While Baseball and Basketball are still popular, the real growth in leisure pursuits has been in what are loosely called "alternative" sports, rollerblading, skateboarding, kayaking, snowboarding, BMX, and climbing.

The pattern of family leisure time has changed as well. The neighborhood park has been largely abandoned in favor of the large "destination" park that has facilities for fitness activities like biking and well as something different and unique on the playground.

Everyday I see plans for playground renovations come across my desk that have formula that consists of a ball field; a basketball court and the same old play structure. It breaks my heart to see good money being spent on facilities that are already outdated and irrelevant to the needs of most families and will be underutilized.

Yes, there is a sudden resurgence in interes skateparks. But again, these are generally just copies of concepts that are 20 years old, bowls or street courses. I have yet to see anywhere a park development that truly embodies the needs of today.

I am not suggesting that ball fields and play structures won't be part of playgrounds for decades to come. I am proposing that they are not the be all and end all. Designs that are limited to these features will be less successful and popular than those those also include well-designed trails and have BMX options or even ramps and other tricks along the route. Up to date parks will have skateparks as well but these will tend to be smaller and less expensive and the events will be changeable so that the activities can be constantly refreshed. And they will have bouldering walls. These walls will not be lame plastic add-ons to play structures but valid climbing challenges that will engage the whole family.

These are exciting times. The way families spend their leisure time is undergoing a tremendous transformation. I hope you are as excited about adapting to these new opportunities and the new concepts that your departments are implementing. I hope the ideas we have shared today will provide insights that reinforce your efforts.