A New Way of Play

The Forms and Functions of Participatory Design and Critical Pedagogies

by

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A New Way of Play

The Forms and Functions of Participatory Design and Critical Pedagogies

A thesis by Alexandre Beaudouin-Mackay & Sarah Wagner

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 16, 2020 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

The playful distancing of academic work allows for freedom and innovation, yet architects have not fully explored the expansive opportunities inherent in a more political understanding of play. We conduct this exploration as both means for expanding and growing our own capacity for creativity and as a critique of our own architectural education, which has necessarily been focused on the delivery of defined assets. We are approaching play as a means of developing our own design philosophy.

By understanding play as a powerful methodology, architects can engage others in creative processes with the ambition of implementing new, meaningful, and imaginative design strategies. Play is not aimless but productive; it is the way in which we learn to exist in the world. Play changes the way we see our environment, the way we understand ourselves. It creates collaborations and moments of solitude; it is dynamic; it is static.

Like the imaginaries we engage, the design of play has always been intrinsically tied to the politics of its era. Today, “play,” as we know it, is controlled by an industry obsessed with risk aversion. Play spaces are standardized and generic, not open but relegated to risk-free, fenced off areas. Similarly, our design processes are often isolated, not attentive to the potentials of external communities to open up new possibilities.

In the midst of a global call for a new and equitable era, architects can return again to play, not just as a subject but as a method—as a way of working and a form of design research. In a world of increasing tensions and isolationism, architectural work needs to find new ways to be immersed in the world around it. Architects must learn to play with others.

This thesis states that for architecture to reimagine play, it must in-turn, learn from play to re-imagine the process and products of design.

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Introduction

“We need play precisely because we need occasional freedom and distance from our conventional understanding of the moral fabric of society.”

- Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters*
Isamu Noguchi
Contoured Playground • New York • 1941
Photo by Nicholas Knight
The playful distancing of academic work allows for freedom and innovation, yet architects have not fully explored the expansive opportunities inherent in a more political understanding of play. We conduct this exploration as both means for expanding and growing our own capacity for creativity and as a critique of our own architectural education, which has necessarily been focused on the delivery of defined assets. We are approaching play as a means of developing our own design philosophy.
Aldo Van Eyck
Laurierstraat • Amsterdam • 1965
Photo by Ed Suister
By understanding play as a powerful methodology, architects can engage others in creative processes with the ambition of implementing new, meaningful, and imaginative design strategies.
Notting Hill Adventure Playground
Faraday Road • England • 1958
Photo by The Guardian
Play is not aimless but productive; it is the way in which we learn to exist in the world. Play changes the way we see our environment, the way we understand ourselves. It creates collaborations and moments of solitude; it is dynamic; it is static.
Soviet Era Rocket Playground
Novocheboksarsk • Russia • 1962
Photo by Ivan Mikhailov
Like the imaginaries we engage, the design of play has always been intrinsically tied to the politics of its era. Today, “play,” as we know it, is controlled by an industry obsessed with risk aversion. Play spaces are standardized and generic, not open but relegated to risk-free, fenced off areas. Similarly, our design processes are often isolated, not attentive to the potentials of external communities to open up new possibilities.
Playkx
King’s Cross • England • 2019
Photo by Sarah Wagner
In the midst of a global call for a new and equitable era, architects can return again to play, not just as a subject but as a method—as a way of working and a form of design research. In a world of increasing tensions and isolationism, architectural work needs to find new ways to be immersed in the world around it. Architects must learn to play with others.

**This thesis states that for architecture to reimagine play, it must in-turn, learn from play to re-imagine the process and products of design.**
This thesis tests new design methodologies through a set of three exercises in play done in collaboration with willing and excited 9-12 year-olds at the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House at 71 Cherry Street is just a fifteen minute walk from MIT, and also a central provider of neighborhood resources to the Port community of Cambridge. The Port, once named Area 4, is a mostly residential area stretching between Central Square and Hampshire St. The area is known for the diversity of its residents, and also includes within it Washington Elms and Newtown Court, two large affordable housing complexes.

Margaret Fuller was an activist and writer associated with the American transcendentalist movement. In 1902, twelve years after her death, her childhood became a settlement house for immigrants in Cambridge, and has since been designated as a historic landmark. Today, the house provides the Port community with a computer lab, a food pantry, meeting spaces, and an after-school program.

For the course of this project, we worked with students in their after-school program, which aims to relieve stresses on working families by watching children in the time between school release and work release. Their programs run from 2-6pm daily, and accommodates approximately 40 students between ages 5 and 12.

We were working with a sub-group of 9-12 year-olds. While we had perhaps 10 of these young people in total involved in the design process, most of our sessions included only 3-4 students, as parent pick-up times would vary throughout the months. We consistently met with the group on Thursdays, and got to know all of the young designers very well. Every week from mid-September to mid-December we would show up with a new project and problem, and soon the kids were growing as designers alongside us.

The staff of the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House have been exceptionally helpful not only in the opportunity they provided us with, but also in their review of and comments on each of the exercises we would do with the children.
Choreographic Authorship

Authorship over the interactions between people and things, dictating rules and order.

Example: Dollhouse, H.O.R.S.E

Operational Authorship

The nuances of attachment and authorship that come from being the one to put it all together.

Example: Legos, Kapla

Corporeal Authorship

Authorship claimed by the body, by movement, by actions that are only one's own.

Example: skateboarding tricks

Reciprocative Authorship

Codependent creation and authorship of an experience, affecting and controlling one another's.

Example: see-saw, spinning wheels

Inhabitatitive Authorship

Marks of place that represent the personal, that exist in a liminal space between identity and authorship.

Example: the custom design, the handcrafted
Authorships

Over the course of twelve different hour-long sessions with the children, we have been testing and challenging different forms of architectural authorship. Each exercise gives the children a specific type of agency.

We defined five general types of authorship to guide our exercises. These explore different relationships between the self, the body, the collective, and the environment. While we do not intend that these become prescriptive categories, we used the titles to evoke for ourselves a new understanding of authorship that accounts for experiential knowledge, rather than limiting ourselves following the children’s spoken “ideas.” We took into account how they moved, how they defined test objects, how they made spaces and things their own.

Each exercise involved the children at different stages of the design process, giving them a specific aspect to control. The precise moment for their involvement in part determined the authorship claimed over the project. We carefully designed and guided each session, welcoming the dissonances that push both the students and ourselves away from the ordinary.

The emerging ideas were then transformed in order to build full-scale prototypes. These prototypes did not belong to any one individual, rather each exercise in authorship aimed to create something collaborative between both ourselves and the children. Each became both specific to the students that gave their input into the final project, and suggestive of a broader audience made possible through the diversity of contributions.

The collection of exercises done with the participation of students at the Margaret Fuller House iterates on different forms of play and authorship, valuing both the input and the embodied, experiential knowledge of the children as spatially significant contribution to design processes.
Choreographic Authorship

1. Throw a ball in different ways
For our first experiment, we wanted to begin with giving the children a direct form of collaborative authorship over a project: the ability to change the form of an object to dictate and open up new, specific interactions. We began with basketball, a sport they were already familiar with. We discussed the core principles of the game and the elements we might modify to change the game itself, going from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

We brought in a wide range of materials: sticks, strings, model magic, and more. We prompted them to prototype new types of balls, perhaps by adding weights to change the balance, or adding handles to change the throwing behavior.

At first, the prototypes were as we expected—Model Magic rolled into a ball, or a foam ball appreciated as-is. But with time and a certain necessary degree of boredom, the students began to break from their conventional understanding of the sport, and additions to their balls were accompanied with new rules for how each ball would be played with, new speculations on how many people could play and how easy or hard the game might be.

We began by drawing and cataloging the children’s ideas, extracting principles from their work that we would later apply to the creation of new prototypes. We included the children in this documentation process; we brought a packet to them the next week with each of their analyzed images, and asked for input not only on their own intentions, but on how they thought their peers’ creations might be used.

Choreographic Authorship

Authorship over the interactions between people and things, dictating rules and order.

Example: Dollhouse, H.O.R.S.E
Through the Hoop
Or (not) Basketball

What is basketball? What are the rules? How do the rules of the game make the game more fun? What objects do you need to play the game? Can you still play basketball without a hoop? Without a ball?

We’re going to make our own custom version of basketball. Do you still need the basket? Do you still need the ball? How can a ball be different? Can it be square? Can it have a tail? Can you only throw it by a string? Or by a handle?

How it works:

1. We will divide into teams of 2 or 3.
2. Each group will get a set of items (including a ball).
3. We will modify the ball to come up with a new game (not basketball!).
4. We will design and define the rules of the game.
5. We will test the games with each other and discuss everyone’s ideas.
6. We will come back next week with a new (specially made!) finished game to test and review!

The stuff:

Model Magic    Foam    Dowel Rods    Rope
Duct Tape      PVC Pipe  Foam Core   Hooks
Weights        Fabric
1 - holes made by punctures of handles into the ball allow for both catching and throwing
2 - foam allows for easy modification and gentle tosses
3 - holes also (conveniently) fit small fingers
4 - extra handles present extra opportunities, and lets friends join in the fun

1 - half ball half cube for interesting tosses
2 - hoop for catching, holding, and swinging
3 - Model Magic to hold things together
4 - duct tape to hold the Model Magic together
5 - a rope that makes the ball and hoop into a set
First, we began with the combination of a ball with holes and corresponding pegs and a second ball plus catching handle. Both of these were multi-part game systems, and we combined the two to create a system of wooden pegs and hoops with an accompanying silicon ball with holes on one side. The new game suggested immediate and familiar ways to catch and hold the ball; pegs fit into the holes, and the ball fit snugly into the hoop.

We also incorporated ambiguous color coding into the design to allow for creation and changing of rule sets depending on the number of people playing the game, and to allow for the continual redefinition of the objects through their interpretation.

When we tested the prototype, the game became not only a way of passing the ball, but also a play of balance. At times, it was a game for just one individual, until that game might transform into play for four. Over the course of an hour, the types of games it inspired completely transformed.

From studies of each of the objects, we created three aggregate prototypes, each based on two (or more) of the studies from the previous week’s session.
Machined Wood

Synchrony Handle Elevation

Cast Silicone

Synchrony Ball Elevation
1 - chain hooks through foam for an alternative method of handling
2 - two hollow foam spheres are taped together
3 - duct tape increases strength and covers a hole.
4 - a balloon with sand is taped inside the hollow shell, weighting the ball to a certain side and making its flight path unpredictable

1 - Model Magic exterior gives a soft finish and eases any impact
2 - handle is connected through the ball (into the interior) for extra strength
3 - wire handle allows for new ways of throwing and requires new ways of catching
4 - foam inside provides hidden structural support
Erratic

A second aggregate prototype explored a combination of handles and weights.

The combination of a ball with a soft exterior and one with a heavy and hard interior created a surprising prototype ball. On the outside, a soft furry ball made of felt hid an inside concrete core. The interior would offset the balance of the object, making an unpredictable flight behavior when thrown. A handle, attached to the interior of the ball, both further complicated this balance and provided new possibilities for both throwing and catching (or not catching) the ball. A secondary pattern of felt coloring suggests specific rules for catching, carrying, and throwing the ball.

Our play session proved some of our designed intentions correct. Although the handle did not last long against the basketball court ground, even the broken ball was an interesting play object. Jay, one of the older boys in the group, who doesn’t usually miss a basket, spent quite a few more shots than usual to try to get the prototype through the hoop.
Erratic Section Detail

- Wood Handle
- Felt Finish
- Foam Body
- Concrete Core
- Plywood Structure
| 1 | Model Magic ball inside is soft but hidden by the surrounding fabric |
| 2 | fabric stretches around the ball to create a tail in one continuous piece |
| 3 | a knotted connection holding the fabric to the ball suggests even another way of holding |
| 4 | the fabric tail both allows for swinging throws and traces ball's flight in the air |

| 1 | chain hooks through foam for an alternative method of handling |
| 2 | two hollow foam spheres are taped together |
| 3 | duct tape increases strength and covers a hole, which before it was covered allowed for throwing the ball from the inside |
| 4 | a balloon with sand is taped inside the hollow shell |
The final piece of the exercise was a prototype that actually resulted from an accident. During our design session, a hollow ball made of foam was broken during a test-throw, at first an upset but then a surprisingly interesting failure; the ball could now be thrown from its inside.

The prototype ball has a wooden skeleton with a plush interior and exterior. It fits itself around the hand and can be thrown and caught in multiple ways. A soft hidden knob is inside, both creating a very tactile experience, and providing a surprise that inspires new rules for the game.

In the following play session we found that the ball inspired under-the-leg throws and launches up into the trees. It encouraged less competitive games, more often it’s sensory qualities encouraged gentler lobs and moments of just holding, feeling, and quietly passing.

Our third prototype began with an interest in disrupting the touch and feel of throwing a ball to open new possibilities of play.
Haptic Section Detail
Corporeal Authorship

1. Build objects to be arranged into an obstacle course
Up, Down & Around
Or (not) a Parkour Course

Corporeal Authorship

Authorship claimed by the body, by movement, by actions that are only one’s own.
Example: skateboarding tricks

In the second exercise, with an interest in exploring an authorship of movement and the body, we started by discussing parkour, a favorite activity of the students. While the balls designed in the first activity had certain spatial implications, we also intended to expand our understanding of the space of play through an exercise that would begin not with one object, but with an arrangement of many.

Our first session began with very open materials, and students were given prompts of action verbs like “duck, crawl, bounce,” to create various obstacles. We found that many of the kids were defaulting to structures they knew, like slides and rock walls, a necessary starting point for many of the children, but something we wanted to quickly move beyond.
Up, Down, and Around
Or (not) a Parkour Course

What do you do when you move through a playground? How does your body move? How does it feel to be under something? To be up high? How does it feel to climb up something? To jump off? To be upside-down?

This week, we will begin working on the design of objects that can be arranged outside to make an obstacle course. We will work at a scale--imagining the objects as they might exist within a doll’s house before we make them for ourselves. We will be doing a couple of exercises to iterate (continue to make changes to make it better) until we have something we are excited to build.

How it works:

1. We will divide into teams of 2 or 3.
2. Each group will begin with a flat plane and some figures.
3. We will design based on the prompts of action verbs: such as, run, jump, climb, duck, etc.
4. We will imagine how color can make new rules for movement.
5. We will discuss everyone’s ideas.
6. We will come back next week with another exercise to continue working on our ideas!

The stuff:

- Foam Core
- Figures
- Model Magic
- Wood
- Wire
- String
- Fabric
- Markers
2. Arrange the given elements into a new circuit
The next week we came back with a set of more ambiguous forms. We also introduced a second of our defined authorships, with an interest in the creation of sequence and narrative through a plug-and-play system.

We encouraged the students to make sets of rules and sequences based on the circuit of elements they organized. We would ask the students to explain how they would move through the course they designed, and then also ask them to do describe the same for each others’.

Ambiguous forms allowed for multiple imaginative interactions, and from their ideas of interactions (recorded in video) we cataloged possible ways of interacting with the various elements.

**Operational Authorship**

The nuances of attachment and authorship that come from being the one to put it all together.

Example: Legos, Kapla
Up, Down, and Around
Or (not) a Parkour Course

When we see a slide on a playground, we know which direction we are supposed to go down (even if we don’t always follow the rules!). How do we know how to play on a playground? How do we know a slide is a slide?

Today we are going to think about the order and direction in play. When we move through an obstacle course, we have certain rules we follow. These rules can make the play more fun: what if you have to jump up right after crawling, or make a tight turn when running? We can test to see how quickly we can move, how flexible we are, how balanced we can be. We will be designing obstacle courses at a scale (not life-size) as we begin to think about what our next prototype (or design test) will look like.

How it works:

1. We will each pick an area of our site to work on. The site is the park behind the Margaret Fuller House. Do you recognize the rocks?
2. We will use the pieces given to plan an obstacle course. Think about how you might move in new and challenging ways.
3. We will mark our paths with colored Washi tape and notes.
4. We will switch it up! We will look at each others’ obstacles and make new paths.

The stuff:

<table>
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<th>Plywood Site</th>
<th>3D Prints</th>
<th>String</th>
<th>Wire</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fabric</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Washi Tape</td>
<td>Sticky Notes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Use parts to make new complex obstacles
We then broke these elements down into smaller parts, adding ambiguity to their assembly and opening the potentials for various interpretations. One object can be transformed into another with just a few additional pieces.

When the kids were creating their own obstacle elements, the constraints of the specific pieces (while at times frustrating) also inspired new potential forms that suggested unconventional interactions, like hoops connected into a massive chain that required balance both in its scale construction and its imagined potential play uses.

A combination of soft and hard elements created variety that allowed for sequences that contained not only physical obstacles, but corners for rest and time-out.

**Operational Authorship**

The nuances of attachment and authorship that come from being the one to put it all together.

Example: Legos, Kapla
Up, Down, and Around
Or (not) a Parkour Course

Often the play elements that are the most fun are those that can be used in many different ways. Sometimes a rock wall also has an opening that can be used as a hoop; sometimes a parallel bar is used for crossing and sometimes for flipping.

This week we will imagine our own play elements that can be used many different ways. We are working at a bigger scale than last week, so the pieces are larger to be combined more easily. We can think about not only our own creations, but also how we would play on our neighbors’ structures. There is a lot of room for creativity and new ideas!

How it works:

1. We will each pick an area of our site to work on. This time, the site is larger and does not include the park rocks. It is more abstract.
2. We will use the pieces given to plan an obstacle element. Think about how you might move in new and challenging ways.
3. We will mark handholds and footholds with colored Washi tape and notes.
4. We will switch it up! We will look at each others’ obstacles and make new rules.

The stuff:

Plywood Site 3D Prints String Wire
Fabric Wood Washi Tape Sticky Notes
Corporeal Authorship

4. Use elements to suggest new body interactions
Finally, we fabricated full scale, to test our hybrid creation. A system of repeated elements allows for agency and design at every instance of the obstacle course. A mix of flexible and rigid pieces both create constraints and allow freedoms, in both construction and interpretation.

The assembled obstacle elements are also similarly ambiguous. The specificity of the space comes entirely from those who have constructed it. 3D-printed joints connect wooden dowels and plastic tubes alike, and foam mounds provide both base support for standing up various elements and a system of stepping stones that can be jumped on or over. A few sewn fabric elements suggest more flexible movements, or perhaps could be used for a moment of respite amidst the chaos of the obstacle course.

During our play session, one of the children, Obama, stated, “I have an idea, what if we each have our own special way of going through the obstacle course?”—a comment affirming our ambition: demonstrating a special understanding of space that is exclusively one’s own through one’s physical experience of it. After that, the kids each developed their own journey through the space that they had collectively constructed.
Space In, Space Out

Or (not) a Fort

While balls suggest a collective game, and an obstacle course individual achievement, our third exercise, the fort, can be understood as a space that accounts for multiple people with different motives, that has room for varied but mutual ways of interacting.

We used a simple collage exercise to start conversations. Once again, we found that our initial, introductory exercise was the least successful—we were pursuing the topic with our own architectural imagination, and the kids helped us to expand our approach. We talked with them about what makes forts different from a typical space. We gave ourselves three general prompts that then guided our sessions: a fort for secrets, a fort for boundaries, and a fort for thrill.
1. Find ways to share a secret
Fort for Secrets

Reciprocative Authorship

Codependent creation and authorship of an experience, affecting and controlling one another’s.

Example: see-saw, spinning wheels

Choreographic Authorship

Authorship over the interactions between people and things, dictating rules and order.

Example: Dollhouse, H.O.R.S.E

Our first related session began with investigating communication. We divided our workspace with a soft wall, through which a set of objects could be passed, strung, and arranged. We had tubes which could transmit sound, mirrors which could transmit light, and hands which, when put through the wall, gave a disembodied transmitted touch. Together, we explored new ways of communicating through the wall, where one person’s actions would directly impact another’s experience on the opposite side.

The session transitioned back and forth between moments of silence and moments of loudness. We had whispered conversations through tubes, followed by a jam session of impromptu versus shouted through PVC pipes and accompanied by percussive instruments on a string. The surprise of a hand reaching through the barrier would change the dynamic between the two sides.
Space In, Space Out  
Or (not) a Fort

The inside of a fort gives us room to talk. It is a space to share secrets, a place to have conversations that are private and special. These conversations require communication. We tell each other things not only through our voices, but through touch, through body language, and though hand signs.

How else can we communicate? What are other cool ways to tell a secret? Have you ever come up with your own language? Do you ever know what your friend is thinking without any words at all? Today we’ll be coming up with new ways to communicate.

How it works:

1. We’ll put up a giant fabric wall with holes. Some are large and some are big.
2. The class will split in half. Some people will be on either side of the wall.
3. We will use the array of objects available and anything else you can think of (including your own body!) to try to communicate through the wall.
4. If we have the time, we will try a game of telephone without words! How crazy can it get if we can’t talk at all?

The stuff:

Fabric Wall  Tubes  Fabric  Wooden Pieces
Printed Caps  Periscope  Rope  Duct Tape
2. Push the boundaries of the space you’re in
Fort for Boundaries

Inhabitative Authorship

Marks of place that represent the personal, that exist in a liminal space between identity and authorship.

Example: the custom design, the handcrafted

Operational Authorship

The nuances of attachment and authorship that come from being the one to put it all together.

Example: Legos, Kapla

Our second session began with understanding the relationship between the fort and the room that houses it. We started with a simple cylindrical form with openings, and then worked with the kids to expand that form through a network of added hooks and ropes. The set-up gained stability from the room around it, so the students increasingly found themselves having to repurpose and rearrange room objects to solve structural challenges.

The specificity of the room around began to define the specificity of the central object, and the interstitial area, as one of our fellow designers pointed out, also became an obstacle course as a result of shaping the space within. The fort-like test—often with one person in the inside and one person outside—lent itself to games between the two situations, whether throwing a ball from inside to outside, or otherwise running between the obstacle ropes.
Space In, Space Out
Or (not) a Fort

When we build a fort, we are setting up boundaries between ourselves and the world around us. The inside and outside of the fort can be used in different ways. Maybe the inside is a space for pretending, and the outside is the real world. Maybe the inside is warm, and the outside is cold.

Today we are thinking about how we can change inside and outside. We will push and pull and stretch and open a test fort to imagine how the inside might connect with the outside. We will think about how this makes the person inside the fort feel. What crazy new ways of movement can it give you? How can people inside and outside of the fort interact?

How it works:

1. We will take turns with one person in the test fort at the time.
2. Everyone outside of the fort will help to shape the inside, by using hooks to pull the metal rings and attaching the fort to an outside network.
3. The person inside the fort will share their thoughts on the space inside.
4. We will switch so that everyone has a turn inside, and see what new ideas we can come up with for future versions!

The stuff:

Mesh fabric  Metal rings  Strings  Hooks
Fort for Boundaries Design Test Session 11/14/19
Reciprocative Authorship

3. It takes two to balance
Fort for Thrill

Our third session began with the desire to explore the collective shaping of experience through the movement of the body. We made three sculpted boards, each large enough to fit more than one person, and let the kids then discover new methods for collective movement. While the initial explorations were largely individual, soon (perhaps in an effort to introduce more challenge and risk) the kids began to fit as many as they could onto the board, complicating their collective movements.

One person’s actions began to shape another’s experiences, whether through balancing, or walking the boards, or even catapulting (with low harm).

**Reciprocative Authorship**

Codependent creation and authorship of an experience, affecting and controlling one another’s.

Example: see-saw, spinning wheels

**Corporeal Authorship**

Authorship claimed by the body, by movement, by actions that are only one’s own.

Example: skateboarding tricks
Space In, Space Out
Or (not) a Fort

Have you ever been in a fort that is high in the sky? What about a fort made from stacks that might fall over at any moment? Sometimes, part of what makes a fort fun is the *thrill*—the excitement that comes from a little bit of risk.

Overcoming risk requires trust and working together. We play together in ways that keep everyone safe. Today, we will be thinking about how we can help each other have a fun time by trusting one another. We are interested in *collaboration*—in how play becomes more fun with more people and more trust.

How it works:

1. We have 3 different balance boards we’ve made. But none of them have one way of being used. And all of them can be played with by more than 1 person. Pick a board!
2. Try different techniques of standing on the board. Can you stand on it with a friend? Can you move on it? What if one person is on the board and one person is off?
3. Can you come up with a new way of using the same board? How does including more people change the way you play with it?
4. An extra challenge: can we all play together with just one of the boards? Which board is the best for this? How should we play?

The stuff:

3 Balance Boards
Fort for Secrets

From the previous weeks’ exercises, we developed three forts. A fort for secrets makes more permanent the discoveries of the wall exercise, bridging interior and exterior with a network of devices for communication.

The fort has a plush velvet interior and a soft gray exterior, with stuffed spandex sleeves connecting the double-wall to allow arms and legs to reach through its walls. A system of tubes with white end caps also connects interior to exterior, where a whisper into one transmits sound that can only be heard by an ear close to the opposite end.

The interior is closed and intimate yet spacious, and the precarious fort sways with the presence of another, making those inside aware of those outside. Its base allows one sitting on the inside to feel the movement of one sitting outside, even when not visible.
Fort for Secret Play Session 12/16/19
Fort for Boundaries

A fort for boundaries creates a constructive system that relies on its exterior environment to be set up, automatically making not just an interior but claiming an interstitial exterior, which begins to blend the space for play with the world in which it lives.

The set-up for the fort requires more than one person. A network of inside and outside poles, ropes, sand bags, and hooks creates a shared interior-exterior space. The structure automatically engages the room around it, and inspires a new perspective on the surrounding room’s chairs, tables, and other objects to secure the stability of the fort.

The mesh transforms with play. Holes that were once entrances become skylights, hooks are unclipped, and poles that fall are repositioned. Each set-up is unique, dependent both upon the room it is situated in and those constructing it.
A fort for thrill introduces risk with low harm, requiring the coordination of bodies to create an experience of movement that is unpredictable and disorienting.

Those outside of the fort are necessary to guide the ride, and those inside must control the movement of their bodies to counter-balance themselves. The foam structure can fit one person or many people, depending on orientation and willingness to experiment.

The movement of the object itself suggests other interactions beyond the ride. At one point during our play session the children were running around to avoid the path of the fort. The movement activates the space of a room (even when in a small interior) to make possible these new invented ways of play.
Fort for Thrill Play Session 12/17/19
Conclusions

In the space of the Margaret Fuller House, each of these exercises developed objects with certain rules, certain assemblages. This depth of meaning goes beyond the design of the objects themselves and is embedded in the culture of curiosity developed through the set of experiments. As designers, we find ourselves making tools for engaging with creative space, learning more from the kids than they have learned from us, and together creating room for a fearless, imaginative, playful agency over our environment.

These processes present the possibilities of scaling up our design research on play to suggest architecture that contains within it the aspirations we have for a more inclusive society. These aspirations are not prescriptive but open-ended, allowing imagination and play to become a method of design both as we work with our neighbors and as we resist forms that assert specific interactions. The goal of this work is not only to reinvent and transform play, but to inspire the discipline of architecture with the potentials of play. We use the conventional to reach the unconventional, we resist all that is exclusive. We are for the enigmatic, the ambiguous, the space for interpretation that allows for repurposing and redesigning, for unexpected methods of play and forms of design.
Appendix
Interview with Alexandra Lange

07/19

ABM: An important part to the research topic we’ve started exploring is how do we involve non-designers (the community, in a broad sense) purposefully into design? Ultimately in our thesis we will work on developing a methodology, but how much do you think the community determines for itself the use of a playground?

AL: I think it can determine it a lot. It’s less about determining the specifics of design than about what the community needs, not just in terms of play pieces but in terms of the additional infrastructure, like the benches for the parents, whether there’s a coffee bar, how people see it being incorporated into their day. And in terms of community process I’ve seen a lot of really fun community playground events where they let kids and their parents build models of playgrounds out of paper. They made it participatory and creative as an activity. There was a process like this done in Brooklyn recently, and I’ve also seen people use processes like this designing children’s libraries. Making it as visual and playful as possible is a way to get better answers, especially from kids, than you would get if you just asked them a question. Often kids are really bad at answering questions. But they know how to build things. Actually, my daughter is in second grade, and she had an art project in school where they used paper to build a playground, and what she built you could see being transformed into a Noguchi-esque playground. She made ripples of paper—and it’s much easier to manipulate paper—but you get these beautiful abstract shapes, and she had ideas about what you could do when you’re playing in those shapes. Obviously it’s good in general for architects to create better participatory processes, but you can also have fun with the process when you’re talking about playgrounds and trying to extract from kids what they really want.

SW: That’s been something we’ve been talking about—we’re hoping to design a methodology rather than designing a particular playground, and to have a playground as a project that comes from the method. One of the things we’ve been brainstorming on is how to explore participatory processes, especially because we’ve been thinking about not doing these processes just with kids but also with adults, with an intergenerational group. How do we break from the very strict cultural imaginary form of a playground? There’s a slide, a ladder… One of the things we’ve been turning to in our earlier work has been some of the exercises of the Surrealists or the Situationists, to draw from a historical background, but then also of course the studio exercises we’re doing all the time, that we’re very familiar with at this point. One of the things I was wondering is if you have any ideas that might help us broaden our processes beyond our disciplinary situation.

AL: I think the Situationists are a great model. Once you start reading their work through this idea of playground it activates it in a new way, and it feels very parallel. As a baseline it’s really helpful to people to have something like a slideshow in which you say, “This is the playground you’re familiar with, with a post and platform system, but look at all these other ways people have made playgrounds.” A slideshow format showing them the sand garden, and the Van Eyck playgrounds, and a Noguchi playground. I have a talk I give for 45 minutes on the history of playgrounds, and people are really wowed by it, even though now it seems like very basic history. People do not know playground history. I always make a joke about the sand gardens—this vacant lot filled with sand—because I think that’s such a beautiful idea, and I always say, if you did that now, people would think it was the most avant-garde art project. But people were doing that in New York in 1900. This is just to get people thinking immediately that a
playground can be a vacant lot filled with sand. That immediately shifts their thinking to a much more broad place, an environmental place rather than an equipment place. Maybe you could work from the idea of blocks and abstract playground elements from different playgrounds into blocks, so then people could start building with them and see those as playground elements. Letting people get their hands into it is a great parallel to play and also is great for intergenerational discussions because parents could be working with kids or in parallel to kids. You might want to look at the Cooper Hewitt in New York. The National Design Museum has really great educational programs for kids, like Saturday art classes, which I used to take my kids to when they were younger. The educators there are really smart about making projects connect to design at a deep level. Design education for kids might help you figure out what you could do with that kind of workshop. You could get in touch with them, and they could send you some of their exercises. There was one day when we were playing with coat hangers and duct tape and my son made a 4 ft high Pokemon thing, and I realized I didn't even know how we got there. But I feel like this is the spirit that you want. That “I don't know how we got here, but it was really great.”

ABM: Yes, I think we're trying to trigger accidents, more than anything prescribed.

AL: Another book you might look at, although you're probably familiar with it, is The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces by William White. It's all about the sociology of public space, but he's looking at Midtown plazas at lunch. It might be worth looking at to do a little lay sociology. What are the things he's looking at in order to analyze those plazas that we can apply to playground behavior? Or what kind of benches do people like in a playground as opposed to what kind of benches do people like when they're trying to eat lunch? And also comparing kids with adults.

ABM: And degrees of removal as well. I think generally for parents in the United States the playground is gated. If you're a young teenager walking around it's unwelcoming. Whereas the alternative is no barriers, everything mixes, and everyone is playing more.

AL: Teenagers are really important, too. After I finished my book I wrote two pieces on teenagers in the city for Curbed, because I hadn't really been able to talk about them. Having places for teenagers to exist in the city, where they feel comfortable, is another important thing. There are times when they may have to be separated from younger children—that might be better for everyone—but creating as a typology what a teen playground might look like would be an interesting thought exercise.
ABM: Similarly some of the challenges our professors were giving us were, “What does a playground for seniors look like?” We were really inspired by a William Forsyth exhibit at the ICA, which included a jumble of rings, and you would see people from 4 years old to 94 years old playing in it. We’re really attracted to this multi-age space.

AL: Do you know the work of Toshiko MacAdam? She does the crocheted climbing structures. Those are amazing. I got to go to one in Japan, and it was being used by people of all ages. It sounds very similar to the experience you had with the William Forsythe exhibition. She’s almost not classified as an artist any more, because now her work is mostly used in children’s museums. But these boundaries should be fluid, because they are very fluid.

SW: I have another question, especially because you mentioned having a slideshow of a history of playgrounds to present people with to open possibilities, I’ve been thinking about finding examples. I love the link you sent to the Singapore playground. Finding examples outside of the typical canon, especially because so much of what’s touted as the best playground design is coming from wealthy European communities, but finding counterexamples to that is difficult. We’re also talking to an artist who’s name is Temitayo Ogunbiyi, and for the Lagos biennial she is creating a playground inspired by Nigerian hairstyles. I was wondering if you might have any other examples or places we could turn to in order to find some of these alternative examples. A lot of times they’re hard to find.

AL: I get that. That was definitely something I thought about as I was working on my book. For my purposes I tried to keep in mostly in America, definitely focused on the Northern world, but let me think. I went to a conference last year that was supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and they are doing work in Turkey and in India. They have people working on lower-cost things people can do and trying to get play solutions to developing countries. You might look at their website to see what kind of examples they have. Also at that conference I met several people from the UN trying to develop some child-related programs there. At the UN it’s generally under the rubric of health, or how to make sure children in cities around the world are healthy and able to play outside. I need to dig around to see which part of the UN is working on that, but organizations like that working around the world and focused on poor countries are definitely interested in this topic and would have some ideas. Even when I am talking to cities in the US, a lot of them say, “we can’t buy all this new play equipment, so what do you suggest we do?” So I say, well, cardboard boxes! Playscapes. There are things that are somewhat universal. But you’re right, you don’t want to narrow it to just being for industrialized cities.

SW: Another thing we’ve been thinking about with regard to that is how do we expand the mission of a playground to be more inclusive, also including other forms of shared public space.

AL: That’s why I think the Play Streets model is so important. In part of my history of playgrounds I talk about how in making playgrounds we took away children’s rights to the rest of the city. All of the work people are doing towards Complete Streets, the superblock project in Barcelona, things like projects in the Netherlands, all of these projects are saying that children can play in the streets again. That’s a real paradigm shift, and that’s about shared public space. Then we’re talking about what children need to feel comfortable in the street. Then maybe there’s a layer of play objects that might be more temporary and that can make the street more fun for them. Sort of like with the sand gardens, I feel like the play streets are a great thing to bring up because they’ve been around for over 100 years, so it’s something people may have forgotten they are familiar with, but they don’t see it as a totally brand new idea. That is often helpful if you’re trying to convince people to try something out.

ABM: Something else we’ve been thinking about, always with design but now with playgrounds specifically, is how do we evaluate or understand a playscape without being the proper users of them. We’re able to talk and think about them without being the main audience for them.

AL: That’s funny. I definitely found myself at some playgrounds that I was looking at, and if there were kids there I would observe what the kids were doing,
but if there were none around I sometimes got up on them myself.

ABM: That’s what we’re planning on doing.

AL: And that is fun. You have to put aside any adult self-consciousness and just say, “I want to do it.” But first of all, I don’t know if you’re familiar with Studio Ludo and Meghan Talarowski. She did a study of London playgrounds for a year, and I would look at her methodology. I’ve spoken with her, and she’s really smart and a playground designer and evaluator. She can look at playgrounds and see if they conform to the US standards. Her methodology would be much tighter than anything I would be doing as a journalist. This study she created has been really successful and now she’s been asked to do studies for other cities, and that’s become her practice. She has a much more rigorous set-up than anything I’ve come up with. In a way, it’s a version of a way any of us would evaluate a piece of architecture when you’re not the user: you have to walk around, see what people are doing, touch it and use it as much as you can. There is a certain amount of projection. You may also want to get data from whatever city you’re in, once you figure out which playgrounds you’re most interested in, about which are the most heavily used and which are the most popular among certain age groups (if they have that data). I’ve often been disappointed that there’s not more of that kind of study out there. But if it turns out to be something you can access then it could help you narrow it down and give you some points of evaluation.

ABM: Right, it seems like, and this is mostly true in the United States, regulations are the biggest driver of playground design. And interesting playgrounds exist in museums or biennales or more specific exhibitions. If there’s a way to hack, or rethink, or break these regulations, what would that be, or is that the future of playgrounds, ultimately in a more private space?

AL: I think you should definitely talk to Megan at Studio Ludo. People who are actually playground evaluators are fascinating because they work with communities that are making the standard equipment, but they also work with architects who are trying to make “un-standard” playgrounds to certify them. They understand more deeply than anyone else how small are the changes you have to make to turn something from an art project into a certified playground. I think that’s a really fruitful line of inquiry, and they have a kind of knowledge I don’t think anyone else has. The other place that might be interesting for you to investigate is that a lot of the top-of-the-line new playgrounds in the US, like the playgrounds in Brooklyn Bridge Park, or Gathering Place in Tulsa, are designed by landscape architects but a lot of the equipment is from a German company called Richter. I’ve heard from a lot of landscape architects that Richter makes the best equipment. For a long time, their equipment was only sold in Europe, but there were certain pieces architects would go over and spec and make sure were okay for the US. But now Richter is trying to enter the US market, and so they’re trying to tweak their project to conform to US standards. So again, people say the standards might be hard, but they don’t pick at the standards, but a company who’s trying to change things or playground evaluators understand what the problem is. Basically talking to all of these people convinced me that it wouldn’t take much to fix the problem. It’s not impossible for American playgrounds to be more fun, it just probably takes money and effort that frankly a lot of municipalities aren’t willing to put into it.

ABM: This starts to loop. The regulations are meant to minimize risk, whereas a lot of the playgrounds we have been studying, like the adventure playground, are successful because they allow children to start to evaluate and face a bit of risk. It’s more these two ideals that are at odds than the form of a playground.

AL: The best thing I read about that was Tim Gill’s book No Fear, which really articulates the idea that parents and supervisors of children have to be okay with children being afraid because that is how they learn what they can and cannot do. It’s a hard thing to say to people. I keep feeling like I’m going to get in trouble, because I find myself saying it’s not the worst thing if your kid breaks their arm. But for a lot of people that has become the worst-case scenario. I know plenty of my friends broke their arms—who knows what we were doing—but the idea that that has to be screened out of childhood play is deeply problematic. How do you articulate that for a group
of people who are very worried about their kids getting hurt?

ABM: Regardless I think children will seek their own risk by using a playground unconventionally, like trying to climb on things you’re definitely not supposed to. So it is an impossible question to answer.

AL: Yes, you’re forcing children to do unorthodox things when you make it too boring. I remember going to a tot lot playground when my daughter was 3 or 4, and her brother was 8, so he was bored and climbed on top of one of these houses on stilts. He said, “Hi, Mom!” and I looked over and thought oh, that’s probably fine, and then some other parents got mad at me because he was setting a bad example. But it’s that classic idea. He didn’t have anything challenging so he made a challenge, and he knew that he could handle it.

ABM: That’s what I remember my childhood to be like. Always trying to do stupid things. Turned out okay.

AL: I think with all of these things there’s a combination of cultural change and design change and political change. It’s hard sometimes to talk about all of those things at once and feel like you’re being convincing because people like to think of there being one switch that we have to flip and then all our playgrounds would be great, and that’s impossible. It’s more like moving forward on lots of fronts at once and having the dialogue.

ABM: Cambridge right now is redoing, updating, and upgrading a lot of their playgrounds. Two I’ve seen are high-end, with interesting form, soft grounds, but it might be interesting to talk with them to hear their vision of what an up-do-date playground is now.

AL: Yes, Cambridge seems like a place that would be up-to-date, and would have parents that would want to be able to deal with the complexity. It would be interesting to talk to the people putting in the new playgrounds and find out what prompted it, how far they think they can go. As I mentioned I grew up in Cambridge and I used to go to the playground at Dana Park in Cambridgeport, and it’s been redone maybe four times since I was a kid. But when I was a kid it was asphalt and metal monkey bars. It was kind of the worst of the worst version of the American playground, but even I won’t argue was better even though it was more risky, because it was bare and hard.

ABM: We’re trying to find a site for an intervention. I think it’s also about creating something temporary versus permanent. But hopefully this is some work we can continue after. We only have 3.5 months to do this, but it’s a topic that really interests us. Seeing how we find most of the thesis creating methodology, but then have a proof of concept that could be informed by a lot of these real life constraints. I think this is where we are trying to place ourselves.

AL: I think that’s a great idea. I love the art one off playgrounds, but I don’t think that’s really the point. The point ultimately is to have better play for more children, so the idea of creating a methodology makes more sense and potentially has more impact on the future. You might also look at a not-for-profit like The Better Block. I think they’re mainly based in Dallas. They’re hired as consultants to do workshops and then help people take over their blocks and make less spaces for cars and more spaces for communities. They created a methodology and now they’re selling it and themselves to different cities and neighborhoods that want to fix a problem. Something like that around playgrounds could also work.

SW: One of our interests too is that there are already a lot of participatory methodologies but usually those are on questions of planning and programming, and less on questions of design. That I think is a lot of why it’s so hard in architecture to really pursue participatory design. It tends to be more often planners who are invested in that. Maybe by fleshing this out with one particular topic we can begin to open the ideas of how architects might have a participatory design process that doesn’t feel like IDEO.

AL: I feel like it’s something people have been working on for so long yet they still haven’t cracked it. It’s always worth taking another run at it. There
are a lot of things in the public realm that are up for discussion now so it’s a good time to be talking.

SW: Have you seen or heard of any interesting or good examples other than the junk playgrounds of the appropriation of a certain landscape into a playground or the appropriation of a playground into something else?

AL: Not really. I feel like the junk playgrounds are the only example of that. It’s funny, I’ve written a little bit about the new Instagram museums, which sometimes people talk about as adult playgrounds. Those very often are inserted into retail spaces that people can’t lease or into warehouse spaces that are undergoing a transition from industry to something else. They’re interesting as real estate plays, and maybe there’s some parallel there, but I haven’t completely thought it through. Playgrounds, as pop-up things, become almost like a form of greenwashing as a certain building transforms from one type of real estate into another type of real estate.

ABM: Aside from the real estate issues, all of these Instagram museums are about a short span. We often think of playgrounds as set in stone even though they do change every 20 or 30 years, but that’s an interesting way to reformat or rethink about it as, “What’s a 1-year long playground look like?”

AL: A lot of the organizations that I know that are trying to bring back junk playgrounds also have a pop-up play periodic closing of a street and bringing out materials there. The people in the junk playground realm are very comfortable with temporality. They understand that you can use temporary fun to seed the ground for a more permanent fixture. There’s also now this whole question about playgrounds and parks and gentrification. There are a lot of neighborhoods that don’t want their park to be upgraded because they understand that will drive up real estate values. Again, groups that are involved in junk play, that also often have an understanding of social spatial justice, think of pop-up playgrounds as a way of bringing play to disadvantaged children without altering the real estate values around it. Which is incredibly complicated and frustrating, but it’s good that people are acknowledging that at the outset. I find it so frustrating because I want to just get better playgrounds for all the kids, but it’s very similar to some of the discussions happening around public education, like if you fix a school then all the renters in the neighborhood who are probably brown and black will be driven out by richer white parents who want to access a school. What do you do? It’s really hard sometimes to make a move, and temporary solutions actually can sometimes get around the big problems.

SW: Maybe as a last question, do you have any other further direction for us? People we should think about talking to?

AL: If you’re in London you should talk to Tim Gill. He wrote No Fear, and he’s a real researcher. I do research but I’m ultimately a journalist, so I don’t get into the nitty gritty in the same way people who do this for a living do. The other people who are also interesting in their own right and interested in playgrounds are ASSEMBLE, the British design collective.

ABM: Their Brutalist playground was the first image that triggered this whole thing.

AL: It’s funny, right, because that was a temporary museum show that probably adults played on, but it triggered a lot of people just looking at that. But the people at ASSEMBLE are very sincere, and they started a junk playground in Glasgow that I think is still operating. They would be good to talk to, too. When I was in London I was trying to figure out if there was an actual Brutalist playground I could visit, but it seemed like they were all gone. They have all these photographs, but then you realize all these photographs are from 1965. Those are the people I can think of right now. I’m excited for your project, and I like all your ideas. I hope you can make something great with it.

SW: It’s been fun so far!

AL: That’s how I felt about my book. The whole time it was fun. Talking about children is very activating and kept it in a positive place. Not every project can stay there.
Interview with Temitayo Ogunbiyi

07/19

TO: There are so many options when it comes to play and coming up with innovative ways of play that don't conform to standards. People just assume how things should be. I'm totally against the plastic too. In Lagos it just doesn't work. We're right on the equator so plastic deteriorates really fast here, metal rusts really quickly here, things break down really fast. It's been a great place to experiment with materials because I know that if I do something that can withstand the elements here, it could likely withstand the elements in other places.

ABM: You brought up something very interesting to us with the location of these playgrounds, thinking about how regulations dominate playgrounds in the United States, anything interesting and new infrastructure for play happens in a museum, at a biennale, at an exhibition. It's shifting where the new ideas of play are. These are much more temporary structures. How to questions of permanence find their way into your work?

TO: The structure that I did at Freedom Park, which is the one with the twine that is outdoors, is actually very permanent. There's a concrete foundation that goes down about 300 centimeters, there's a whole armature underground, so those pipes are pretty stuck. But I did become interested in indoor playscapes and indoor playscapes that can be reconfigured. So, for instance, maybe for the biennale that's coming up I might have a bunch of these and reconfigure them halfway through, or they might just be reconfigured as people use them. I'm also interested in that. These temporary exhibitions and short-term projects allow for a different kind of engagement. I've now decided that I'm going to use the twine more for indoor projects and temporary projects and try to focus on using the metal for the outdoor permanent project. I hope to do a lot of these and otherwise I imagine I'd go around to do maintenance on them all the time and would not have time to do anything else. I'm really interested in the two modes of play. Knowing that this thing is here and it's going to be here and it's not going to change much, and the other end of the spectrum where it was like this yesterday, and I came back, and all of the elements are in this direction, and I can tell something happened. For the indoor playgrounds I wanted really minimalist spaces, that also tied into what I like to call the phenomenon of the homemade gym here. There are gyms in the sense that you have Planet Fitness or LA Fitness or Crunch in the US, but they are few and far between, there aren't any massive chains, there are usually stand-alone, and they are also usually very expensive. You have to be upper-middle class to be able to afford membership each month, which I think runs about $80. So what a lot of people here do, especially people in the lower-middle and lower economic stratae, is cast the interiors of concrete buckets and put a metal bar in the middle and use those as dumbbells. Once I saw one I started seeing them everywhere. I became really interested in again thinking about gender roles with respect to exercise and with respect to the home. And so the concrete forms that you see in the images are concrete cast gas cylinders. Most people here cook with gas at home, so gas cylinders are something you see in most domestic settings, and they tend to be in close proximity to women. Especially in this context of a patriarchal society, unless someone has a cook cooking their food, a lot of times there's an expectation that women should be in the kitchen. So I started to experiment with casting other objects that connect with a certain understanding of femininity and even a mother's role in the home here in Lagos. I'm really interested in different degrees of permanence when it comes to play, because I think we are continually changing and our needs continually change. And I'm really interested in how I can layer the engagement of these forms even
more. So I might do a small satellite show in addition to the biennial. It would be a lot, but I’m thinking about it just because there’s an idea that I have that would need to be stand-alone. It might not work with the full play structures. And also how we define play. What is play anyways? I’d like to think about it from the mental, physical, social perspectives. I had a great conversation, a couple conversations. One is with an old friend who is a psychologist and she was telling me a lot about mental exercises that are given to reduce the likelihood of depression or to treat depression in young people. They’re called mindfulness exercises. I’ve also become increasingly interested in how psychological strategies could be incorporated into these playgrounds hypothetically. One way for instance that I have been doing but I’ve also found is a part of these mindfulness exercises is having these variations in texture, touching different textures and having that be a certain sort of therapy. There are so many ways I feel one could go about thinking about play and what play actually does, how it benefits us as individuals and as communities.

SW: You bring up something we’ve been talking a lot about when you talk about experimenting with different materials. Not materials in terms of cutting-edge architecturally, but what is culturally significant, what could embed a new meaning in a playground. Thinking too about fabrics and knitted structures. There’s an architecture professor at University of Michigan who’s been doing research on knitted play structures for autistic children. He’s been working on interactive surfaces that have a lot of interesting physical properties.

TO: That reminds me of the artist Ernesto Neto. I think his work is interesting. And Julia Jacquette’s *Playground of My Mind*. I’m thinking about influences that I didn’t see in your synopsis. Julia’s text was quite influential for me. I studied painting with her as an undergrad. She put out this book two years ago where she recalled playgrounds from growing up in the 1970s in New York through drawing, and she talks about how both she and her brother felt the way they played as children came to inform who they were as adults. I like the way she tells the story. She would be worth looking up. I feel like there’s so much potential. Maybe it’s because of all the bureaucratic hoops of fire you have to jump through, but I feel that so much more can be done for play, for the sake of play, and for the sake of improved social dynamics. But I know a lot of people that I talk to about how to engage with one playground project or another have just said that the rules and requirements that came up against were too much and almost eclipsed the creative side of things. I think that’s the challenge: trying to arrive to a point where you’re meeting all of the requirements in this area or region, but you’re also still working in a way that feels grounded in creative foundations. I think that’s the balance. But I haven’t talked to a lot of people about this.

ABM: It is a fascinating topic. We just dove into it over the past 3 months, and every time we talk to a new person it triggers a new set of ideas. It’s a fascinating endeavor. We feel like there are so many battles at every front, but that’s where it gets exciting, and hopefully where the best work comes out.

TO: Yes, I’m so excited for it. But we run into so many problems and restrictions. I’m hoping we can get around most of those.

ABM: Yeah, ask for forgiveness later. Being affiliated with MIT we’re hoping to get some things done on campus as more of a proof of concept, and hopefully that can evolve into some greater project with time.

TO: That sounds great!
Over the course of the past century architects and designers have taken ownership of the design of playgrounds. As mass production brought architectural design to the people (best exemplified by Charles and Ray Eames), architects took on a new project—the project of the child—embedding in their work not only the aesthetics of a new ideology but also their utopian visions. Playgrounds were imagined to be structures capable of forming young minds, whether by teaching cooperation on a see-saw or the not-so-subtle rocket imagery imposed on playgrounds during the Cold War.

After World War II, two distinct approaches to playground design emerged: one touting ideals of the Modernist, designing specific geometrical structures; and the other encouraging improvisational play, not prescribing form but instead allowing children to build their own playscapes.

The first planned “adventure playground” (or, alternatively named “bomb-site playground”) was built in England in 1943, inspired by the ideas of Carl Theodor Sørensen. Adventure playgrounds were founded on the premise that children should be allowed to take risks and shape their own imaginaries, turning junk yards into construction sites. These playgrounds were encouraged not only by new educational theory, but also by their symbolic value of Nazi resistance in post-war England, and are still a part of a social imaginary of resistance to oppression today.

A few years later Aldo van Eyck began designing playgrounds in the Netherlands inspired by similar theories of improvisational play. He built hundreds of playgrounds in his lifetime, inspired by the ideals of the CIAM while questioning their strict functionalism. Van Eyck was a fervent critic of the functionalist tendencies in design, insisting that architecture must facilitate human social interactions. His playgrounds embodied those ideals by exercising non-hierarchical compositions, breaking down the structures to equal elements in order to stimulate the imagination of users while providing a platform to climb, jump, talk, and exchange.

The objective with this research is to record the range of playground types in Western Europe and analyze different forms of play in order to understand how structure, form, texture and material might influence play. Throughout the past century, playgrounds reflected contemporary ideas on architecture, education, psychology, and sociology. Once meant as utopic scientific tools to develop children’s social and cognitive abilities, the playground has since forgotten this history and evolved from once experimental, precarious structures to overly safe builds, sheltering children from risks. By tracing this genealogy of playgrounds, we hope to gain insight into the history of playgrounds in order to imagine a new future involving children in the design of their spaces.
Surveys of the Aldo Van Eyck playground in and outside Amsterdam, understanding the effect of the playground on the urban plan. Studies of the formal shapes repeated throughout the city. Visit to the Amsterdam City Archive to analyze the plans of the city before and after Van Eyck’s interventions.
Afternoon at PlayKX in London’s King’s Cross with Penny Wilson, a play worker, organizing a public loose part play session with kids of all ages. Visit to the Tate Modern Art Museum inspiring families to build a collective cityscape made of LEGO. Tour of the Oasis Adventure playground with David Ogwe, designing with the students for sensory experiences adapted to handicapped children.
Public Play Session

MIT Westgate - 12/15/19

As a recipient of one of the grants offered by the Council of the Arts at MIT, we organized a public play session at Westgate, one of MIT’s graduate family dormitories. We were able to test our three forts in an afternoon with a range of younger children playing with their parents. We were happy to see that the forts designed with 9-12 year olds were easily adopted by the eager group of 2-6 year olds.
Westgate Play Session Video Footage 12/15/19
Final Review

MIT Media Lab - 12/19/19

Critics Florian Idenburg, Laida Aguirre, Mabel Wilson, Pedro Gadanho, Antonio Furguele, Sheila Kennedy.
Bibliography

Modernist Legacy of Playground Design


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Non Prescriptive Forms of Play: Adventure Playgrounds and Contemporary Forms of Play


Participatory Design Processes


Childhood Education


Material and Fabrication Logics


Understanding Cities


All photos except noted otherwise are taken by the authors: Alexandre Beaudouin-Mackay & Sarah Wagner.