



# nature's playgro

DANISH LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT **HELLE NEBELONG** OUTLINES HER APPROACH TO NATURAL PLAY SPACES WITH THE HELP OF FOUR SUPPORTING CASE STUDIES

Above: A view over part of the Nature Playground in Valbyparken, Copenhagen with climbing trees and the green tower in the background

WHEN RESIDENTS IN Copenhagen today are asked what they want for their local play area, they are likely to answer natural materials, like stone and tree trunks, earthworks and plants. It is a reaction to decades of standardised and unimaginative playground equipment, with a limited play value.

The public playground is an important place for children's development. It is the stage where they rehearse different roles and find their own identities through meeting others. The scenery and properties of the playground can, therefore, have a big influence on the quality of children's play.

By working consciously with natural materials, inner-city children improve their knowledge of them and of nature as a whole. The idea behind the 'nature playground' is that themes and possibilities for play are introduced, but it is the children, with their own imaginations, who give colour to their play and bring things to life.

It is an adult idea, created by misunderstanding, that everything to do with children must be openly amusing and painted in all the colours of the

rainbow. Children need to be able to relax their eyes and their minds when they come outside. Nature's own colours are perfect for the playground, maybe spiced up here and there with a few artistic colour splashes.

#### What children are looking for

To outdoor computers and television, the environment has to be attractive and well maintained. Children and youngsters do not like bland, risk-free playgrounds. They are longing for natural spaces, where they can meet one another – prearranged or spontaneously – and be challenged physically, psychologically and socially. They demand quality, and they don't like dirty or rundown places.

Play spaces for children should obviously appeal to children and youngsters so that they feel welcome and responsible for the surroundings but, at the same time, you must ensure that the design preserves the spirit of the place or *Genius loci*. This can be a part of a building, a tree with character, something that happened at the place, an old sculpture or something else. ▶

#### The Nature Playground, Valby

Valbyparken is the biggest park in Copenhagen and during the past eight years it has been totally renovated. Water holes, meadows and hills have been created on what used to be a rubbish dump, and in 1996 when Copenhagen was the European Capital of Culture, 17 circular theme gardens were constructed in the park.

The Nature Playground is 20,000m<sup>2</sup> and was constructed as part of a project for unemployed people from 1996-2004 (see plan, right).

From the beginning of the design process the original woodland and the wide stretch of meadow outside the playground were identified as the spirit of the place.

The most important of the new elements is a row of hillocks; a circular 210m wooden bridge, which 'floats' above the ground and is made using planks from elm trees felled in Copenhagen due to disease; and five towers, designed by four students from Denmark's Design School. The towers are placed at precise points on the circular bridge to pull the space together, and each has its own theme – the light tower, the wind tower, the green tower, the bird tower and the tower of change.

Other elements in the playground are a large area with sand and gravel; a village of woven willow huts and plaited fences; a wild flower area; and a large snail-shaped mound





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with a path spiralling up to a look-out point. It was my ambition to design a playground that would become a good alternative to the many commercial amusement parks, which are appearing everywhere. The playground is now a favourite place for nursery schools, schools, and after school clubs, who visit it on day trips. At weekends it is also very popular with families.

Aalholm School, Valby

This project was for a local community school, built in 1934, for 650 children between six and 16 years of age. The school yard is open outside school hours – the gate is never locked – but it was one big asphalt desert with a lost lion in the middle. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that the lion was in fact an old granite drinking well made by a famous Danish sculptor in the 1930s.

“The lion has to go!” said the headmaster, to which I replied that: “The lion is the only thing worth keeping!” I had already started to think about distant Spanish gardens – especially The Lion’s Court in Alhambra – and I knew immediately that the lion was *Genius loci*. Many of the teachers applauded, as they too liked the lion and the children obviously cared since when one of them saw the diggers start to eat their way through the school yard’s asphalt, he shouted out in panic: “Oh! Where is the nice lion!” So the whole school yard then developed around the lion.



The pupils’ school council held a competition for suggestions on how the school yard should look in the future, involving all the classes. A theme that came up in many suggestions was that the school yard should be greener with more hideaway places, more meeting places and more activity spaces.

When the renovation of the school yard began, the children themselves planted a grove of plane trees – 26 trees in all – one for each class. They have all survived since they were planted five years ago, so it seems safe to conclude, that the children watch over and take care of the trees because they were involved in the planting.

The rest of the school yard was thematically transformed into a South Atlantic sea playground with the ‘remains’ of a shipwreck spread all over the area, which one can run in between, hang in and relax on – which some of the older children especially like to do.



Above: The lion water fountain surrounded by the grove of Plane trees in Aalholm School yard

Left: A plan of the Nature Playground in Valbyparken, Copenhagen

Bottom: Aalholm School yard has been transformed into a South Atlantic sea playground with scattered ‘remains’ of a shipwreck



- ▶ *Genius loci* is an important starting point and can be used to decide the design of a new space.

### The safety issue

Safety is another factor that needs to be considered when designing play spaces. The European Safety Requirements are guidelines and, as such, are useful when combined with common sense. But they have been allowed to go too far. The child's real need for play and development is set aside with good intentions.

“Standardisation is dangerous because play becomes simplified and the child does not have to worry about his movements”

I am convinced that ‘risk-free’, standardised playgrounds are dangerous – just in another way from those with obvious risks. When the distance between all the rungs in a climbing net or a ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where he puts his feet.

Standardisation is dangerous because play becomes simplified and the child does not have to worry about his movements. This does not prepare him for all the knobby and asymmetrical forms he is likely to be confronted with outside the playground and throughout life.

The ability to concentrate on estimating distance, height and risk, for example, requires a lot of practice and is necessary for a person to be able to cope successfully with life.

Above: View over the Murergaarden playground in Norrebro, showing the terraced slope which has become a central feature.

Below: The Tarmacked paddling pool is connected to a channel and spring on the upper part of the playground



### Murergaarden, Norrebro, Copenhagen

This is a small 1,050m<sup>2</sup> playground in an integrated institution – nursery school, kindergarten and after school club all in one – which looks after 64 children up to six years old and 100 children aged seven to 14. It is located in a rough residential area and the space is used outside opening times by local children and young people, so it is subject to a lot of wear and tear.

The old playground from the 1970s was completely rundown and had to be renovated. The social services decided to hold a workshop for the leaders of children-centred associations and groups in Copenhagen. They were asked to put forward their ideas for the ‘perfect’ playground and it was my job to collate the many suggestions and, on the basis of these, design a new playground.

The result was a little oasis with organically-shaped planting, which complemented the massive surfaces of the surrounding buildings. The higher and lower levels are connected by a terraced slope and this has become a central feature in the playground.

At the bottom of the slope is a wide, bending sandpit. This is bordered by bits of palisade and tree stumps and stones, which are all good to balance on. The little paddling pool is Tarmacked and is connected to a channel and spring on the upper part of the playground. In the summer a fire-hose is used to fill the steps with water, which falls down to the paddling pool. It takes a couple of hours to fill and then the water is turned off and allowed to stay in the pool until it is emptied in the evening.

The pool is encircled by a willow copse where willow stems can be picked, for use in plaiting smaller fences, basket weaving, and so on. Butterfly bushes have been planted, along with perennial flowers, and these attract butterflies and other insects.

At the beginning there were many reservations about the new playground – parents said that it was dangerous, with all the big stones and the institution's employees said it was just too boring. But the children who use it love the space.

The playground has now been in existence for more than five years. Not one child has been seriously hurt and the parents now say that the children are happier when they come home. The head of the institution says there are fewer conflicts in the playground and they are really happy with the playground, especially with the water.

An interesting by-product of the playground is the fact that it has stimulated a constructive debate between parents and the institution's employees about how far one can protect a child.





## Garden of Senses, Faelledparken, Copenhagen

I was employed by the City of Copenhagen to tackle this special task because I have my own firm which specialises in gardens and playgrounds for the disabled. My earlier assignments had been for private institutions, so it was, therefore, a big



challenge to design a garden of senses, which would be open to the public, situated in the busiest public park in Copenhagen.

I designed a garden which was to be like a maze with winding paths leading the visitor past many different experiences. There are several 'wonder spaces' with tangible sculptures – one sculpture for each of our senses. There are crossings; a riverside scene with rocks and a lake scene without water; a lavender island; a maze of stakes; a bamboo shrub; a small fragrant garden with a fountain; prickly evergreens; shrubbery with old, crumbling sculptures; a pavilion; a grove of ginkgoes; a butterfly garden; and a lot of other elements to discover.

The idea behind the Garden of Senses is to give children a glimpse of the richness of nature, in order to awaken their interest and help them to learn about nature and to respect it.

The first sensory gardens were created for residential homes for children and young people with multiple

disabilities who were unable to go out and experience 'real' nature. These gardens are usually small plots just outside the homes.

The Garden of Senses in Faelledparken has been designed to be explored and enjoyed by adults and children of all ages. There is a wide variety of plants – some have sweet and spicy scents, others display beautiful colours or have exotically shaped flowers and leaves.

The Garden of Senses has become popular and has many visitors. At weekends parents and grandparents go exploring in

the garden with their children. Many people with visual and physical disabilities also use the garden. Children of all ages come and train their mobility and concentration – although they do not realise it.

Faelledparken's Garden of Senses is the largest sensory garden in Denmark and was the first to be open to the general public. It is now eight years old and still in good condition. Although the garden is a bit worn, it has patina too. The sculptures have been vandalised a bit, but they are still essentially okay.



The focus on safety is essential, but it must not lead to a lack of care about design and atmosphere, and it should not lead to the purchase of boring play equipment because it is easy.

In the future, I hope that children and youngsters will be more involved in the design process. It might take more time to do a project, but the children will get a feeling of ownership and take care of the place.

In conclusion, my recommendations to people designing play spaces are:

- Try to forget your grown-up ideas and approaches and don't trust your imagination of what is good for children!
- Watch children play and listen to their desires.
- Try to incorporate the desires of the children into the design of the play space.
- Think of children and youngsters as a collection of individuals, with different needs depending on their age and abilities.
- Think of your own childhood. Where did you like to play? What was the most exciting experience you had? Did you miss anything?
- Make it aesthetic and use only good and durable materials.
- Plant a lot of different plants to make the space change character during the year. ■

Above left: A girl playing in sand in the Garden of Senses

Above: There are several 'wonder spaces' in the sensory garden with different sculptures designed for each of our senses. This sculpture is to stimulate hearing

Left: Two girls balancing on the stones from an old granite bridge in the Garden of Senses