

# What good design

Standardised play areas brimful of brashly coloured prefabricated equipment can not only be boring for children, they can actually also be dangerous. So reckons Danish landscape architect and children's play champion Helle Nebelong. "The prefabricated playground tries to live up to 100 per cent safety standards based on media horror stories. Yet standardised playgrounds can be dangerous. When the distance between ladder rungs is the same the child has no need to concentrate.



HELLE NEBELONG

"Play becomes simplistic and children no longer have to think about their movement. The ability to concentrate on estimated distance, height and risks needs practice. And the playground is where that practising should begin," she told delegates at the CABE Space Leaders Programme.

Nebelong's own childhood was shaped by playing on rocky coastal crags and in wild gardens. "Blood flowed from wounds and tears from eyes," as she put it. She follows up the ideas of Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, theorists on restorative environments.

The best natural environments, argue the Kaplans, restore our mental well-being, stimulate fascination and include some mystery. Colour in playgrounds, added Nebelong, needs careful control and should be used in small splashes.

"A common misunderstanding is that everything in the playground must be in bright colour," she said. "But after hours of colour saturation in day-care centres, watching TV and shopping with parents in supermarkets, they need to relax their eyes and minds."

Nebelong — who praises the work of Monstrum ([www.monstrum.dk](http://www.monstrum.dk)), Lappset ([www.lappset.com](http://www.lappset.com)) and Alfio Bonanno ([www.alfiobonanno.dk](http://www.alfiobonanno.dk)) — has won high acclaim for landscapes in and around Copenhagen.

She transformed the Garden of Senses, originally a 4,000sq m swath of Tarmac, into a sensory garden of contrasting textures and forms, and it has become the most visited park in the capital city. The maze-like garden includes bamboo, lavender and *Ginkgo* alongside riverside scenery.

"Decay is suddenly mystical and beautiful in this green setting. The idea was to give glimpses of the richness of nature and help people learn to respect it by opening their eyes, pricking up their ears and flaring their nostrils to take in the scents."

Valbyparken, the biggest park in Copenhagen, includes 17 themed gardens, and Nebelong turned an old rubbish dump into a 20,000sq m natural playground with meadows and wildflowers, winding paths and hills. A 210m-long bridge 0.5m above the ground wraps around the site and links five small towers. "Children don't want unimaginative play equipment with no outlet for their own imaginations. They want to be creators of their own playscapes."

She said playgrounds and design ideas need to evolve constantly to ensure play spaces do not become "static". But change can only be assured with widespread public backing. After Nebelong's ground-breaking work in Copenhagen, the local authority pledged to spend £5m raising the standard of public play grounds in the capital city.

*Helle Nebelong runs her own practice, Sansehaver.dk, and is president of the Danish Playground Association, vice-president of International Play Association Denmark and since 2007 has been a member of the leadership team for the Nature Action Collaborative for Children.*



## CASE STUDY: LEEDS AT CHELSEA



**Scent of a Roman: Leeds' 2007 entry to be built in business park**

The 90th anniversary of the end of the World War One has inspired one of this year's entries to the Chelsea flower show. Leeds City Council's design is based on a garden at Poperinghe, Belgium, used by soldiers to rest from the blood and mud of trench warfare.

A lawn, pond and heart-shaped paths are punctuated by structural plants such as *Buxus*, *Acer* and *Taxus*, while softer planting includes the Flanders poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*.

Kris Nenadic, officer for landscape construction in parks and countryside in Leeds, said: "All those who want to can be involved in design, planting, landscaping and marketing the garden. This improves staff morale and may encourage potential career changers."

Sean Flesher, an area manager for parks and countryside, said that last year's Chelsea garden is to be relocated to a business park in the east of Leeds. The city's 2004 garden now graces Millennium Square in the centre of Leeds. Sponsors past and present have included GMI Property Services, ToCH and Royal British Legion, Munroe K and Thorpe Park Developments. Former chief recreation officer Denise Preston said: "To increase their appeal and visitor numbers, cities across Europe aim to attract events, facilities and media coverage. Leeds' presence at Chelsea provides all of these."

# can do for us



Above: Valbyparken in Copenhagen includes a natural playground with meadows and wildflowers. Above right: the Garden of Senses design saw a 4,000sq m swath of Tarmac transformed into an area of contrasting textures and forms

## WHAT MAKES A GREAT PARK?



### Alex Garvin, president, Alex Garvin & Associates

Alex Garvin has spent much of his life pinpointing what makes parks and urban spaces “physically, financially and politically feasible”. He believes answers lie not only in modern masterworks such as Millennium Park in Chicago and Seattle’s Olympic Sculpture Park. Good practice also manifests itself as far back as the reconstruction of Paris by the civic planner Baron Haussmann in the 1850s and work by Frederick Law Olmsted, whose ground-breaking designs included Central Park in New York.

“There’s confusion about what makes a good park,” Garvin told delegates at the Leaders Programme. “They are not just about recreation, environmentalism and restoration – they are also devices to improve satisfaction and quality of life in the city and, properly backed, encourage capital investment.”

### Elements of a great park

- They bring people together. Crime in Bryant Park, New York, peaked in the 1970s with 150 robberies, at least one murder and 900 other criminal acts. Instead of bowing to demand to shut the park, the authority encouraged activities: a new café and restaurant, and movie nights – *The Wizard of Oz* pulled in 12,000 viewers.
- They give a sense of “enlarged freedom”, from a huge expanse

like Prospect Park in Brooklyn to a 60sq m “outdoor room” in Portland Oregon. The latter includes raked mounds and a fountain by Lawrence Halprin. Visitors “disappear into a world completely masked by running water” from traffic 30m away.

- They help nature conservation. Carefully sited walkways in Stanley Park, British Columbia, ensure thousands of visitors a year can enjoy, but not destroy, wildlife.
- They help green the city. Vermin, crime and prostitution in New York’s Lower East Side prompted residents to start a community-parks movement in the 1970s. They rented over 100 vacant lots and turned them into microparks. Mayoral plans to sell them off for housing resulted in Bette Midler buying them all to ensure they remained community gardens.
- They involve entrepreneurial management. New York’s Bryant Park set up crisis-management and business committees. Taxes from the surrounding properties paid for park upkeep while rents from the café, stands and fashion shows helped boost finances.

*Alex Garvin was managing director of planning for NY2012, New York’s Olympic bid for 2012, and vice-president for planning, design and development for the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site following the 9/11 attacks. His books include Parks, Recreation and Open Space: a 21 Century Agenda.*