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. 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 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.

Aalborg School, Valby

This project was for a local community school, built in 1954, 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 genial but many of the teachers applauded, as they too liked the lion and the children obviously cared for it. 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 rare lion?” So the whole school yard was 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 green areas, more meeting places and more activity spaces.

When the renovation of the school yard began, the children themselves planted a grove of plane trees around the lion sculpture – 26 trees in all – one for each class. They were 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 scattered ‘remains’ of a shipwreck.

Below: A view over part of the Nature Playground in Valbyparken, Copenhagen with climbing Playground in Valbyparken, 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; priddy overgrown; shrubbery with old, crumbling sculptures; a parrot; a grove of ginkgos; 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 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. As weekends parents and grand-parents 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 some 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 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 sund in the Garden of Senses.

Above: There are several ‘wonder spaces’ in the sensory garden with different sculptures designed for each of our senses.

The sculpture is to promote hearing.

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