

Better a broken bone than a broken spirit

UK adventure playgrounds in the 21st century

Wendy Russell

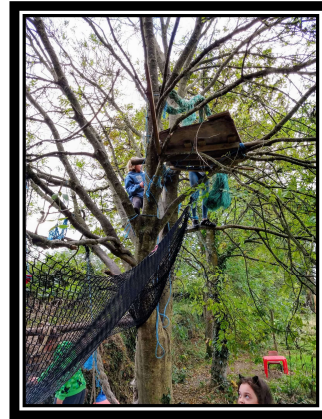


Image: Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground

1

One summer afternoon, some children had been investigating around the edges. One boy emerged with the red plastic slide from the kit house that is scattered around. He said "Look what I found! What can I do with it?" Several other children followed him. They decided to take it up the water tower structure. They worked together to lift the slide up the structure. They got to the level where the rope hangs over the sand pit. The group of 4-5 boys involved were all very competent climbers, so I decided to watch from a distance what happened next. They pushed the slide out over the end of the structure above the sand and two of them sat on the slide, stopping it from falling over the edge with their weight. Then after a countdown, the boy at the back got off and the slide dropped with one boy still on it.

He grabbed the rope just in time to stop himself falling along with the slide. The level of excitement was something I've not seen before on the playground. He climbed down. The other boys congratulated him on surviving. He said "That was sick! That was sick you know!" One of the other boys said "We could do this every day!" The first boy said "I didn't know I was going to make it! I thought I was going to die!" (Research participant's blog).

Risk-taking in play A classic tale

- Physical risk
- Playing at height (Sandseter's typology)
- Boys
- Playworker explicitly outlining her risk management process
- A success
- **Any thoughts/feedback on this take?**

2



How do we know children are taking risks?

- Sandseter (2007): (1) play with great **heights**, (2) play with high **speed**, (3) play with dangerous **tools**, (4) play near dangerous **elements**, (5) **rough-and-tumble** play, and (6) play where children go **exploring alone**
- Sandseter et al (2023): playing with **emotions**, with **taboos**, with **sexuality**, etc

3

What are playgrounds for?

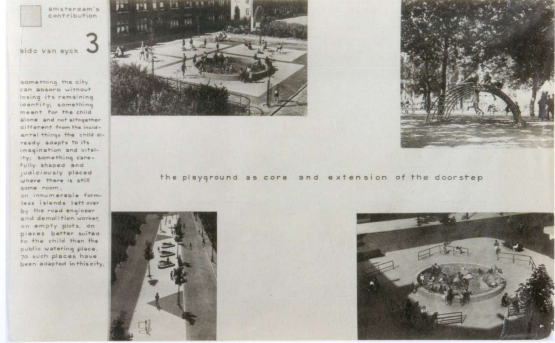
- A history of containment, redemption and nation building?
- Exercising of bodies and minds: physical and moral development
- 'an expression of societal longings oscillating between hoping for a better future [Utopia] and longing for the carefree past [Arcadia]' (Hahn, 2018, p195)
- Also seen as something that should be provided → campaigns
- Keeping as/at risk children off the streets ...



L.S. Lowry (1945) The Playground

4

Not in the Netherlands:
Aldo van Eyck



amsterdam's contribution
aldo van eyck 3


something the city can afford without losing its remaining identity, something meant for the child zone and not separated from the urban structure. The child zone should be fully shaped and carefully placed where there is still some room for intervention. Former lands left over by the road engineer and canal filmmaker in empty gaps, or grassy buffer zones to the vital than the public outdoor space. To such places have been assigned responsibility.

the playground as core and extension of the doorstep

Aldo van Eyck, *Lost Identity*, 1959

5

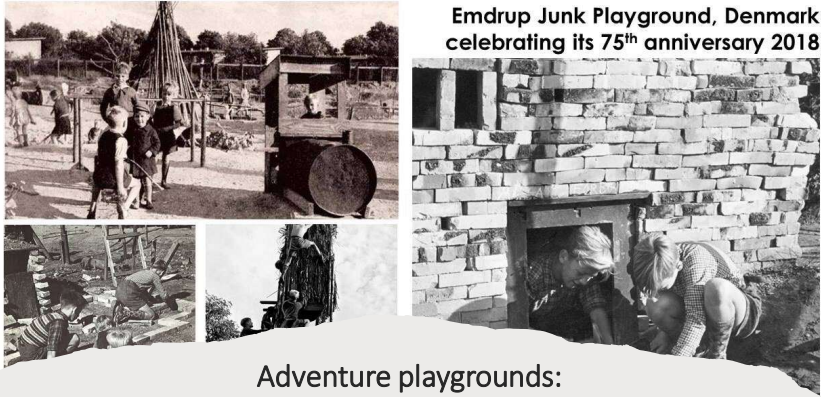
Not in the Netherlands:
Stop de Kindermoord



Action group *Stop de Kindermoord* occupied crossroads at Albert Cuypstraat in Amsterdam.
Rob Mieremet / Anefo, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

6

Emdrup Junk Playground, Denmark celebrating its 75th anniversary 2018



Adventure playgrounds:
The Emdrup 'creation story'

Image: Marc Armitage @marcatplay

7

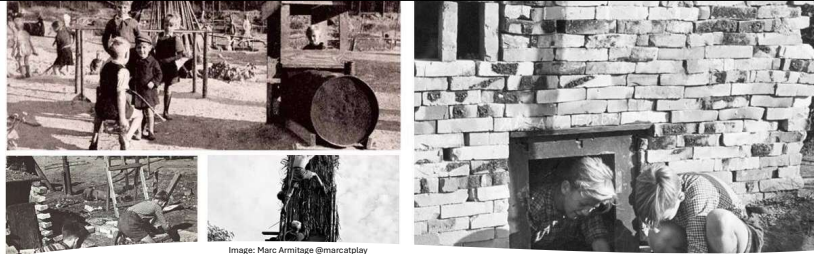


Image: Marc Armitage @marcatplay

'We should probably at some point experiment with what one could call a **junk** playground. I am thinking in terms of an area, not too small in size, well closed off from its surroundings by thick greenery, where we should gather, for the amusement of **bigger children**, **all sorts of old scrap** that the children from the **apartment blocks** could be **allowed** to work with, as the children in the countryside and in the suburbs already have ...

8

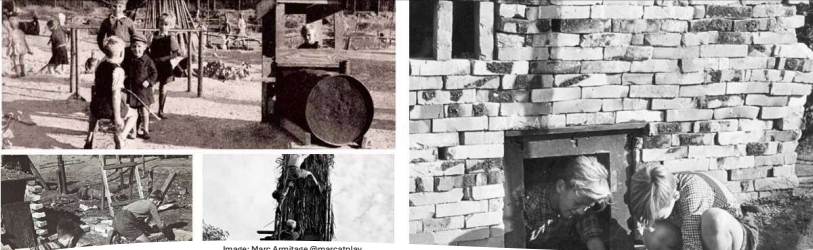


Image: Marc Armitage @marcatplay

... There could be branches and waste from tree polling and bushes, old cardboard boxes, planks and boards, “dead” cars, old tyres and lots of other things ... Of course it would look **terrible**, and of course **some kind of order would have to be maintained**; but I believe that things would not need to go radically wrong with that sort of situation’
 (Sørensen, 1935, cited in de Coninck-Smith, 1999, pp. 13-14).

9

Adventure playgrounds in the UK

- Lady Marjorie Allen and early APs
- Working with the ‘big toughs’



Image: Notting Hill Adventure Playground, c.1960, Donne Buck Archive, V&A Museum of Childhood

10



Image: Lockleaze Adventure Playground, Bristol

Adventure playgrounds in the UK

- Municipality involvement
- From dens to play structures
- Legislation
 - Health and Safety at Work Act, 1975
 - Children Act, 1989

11

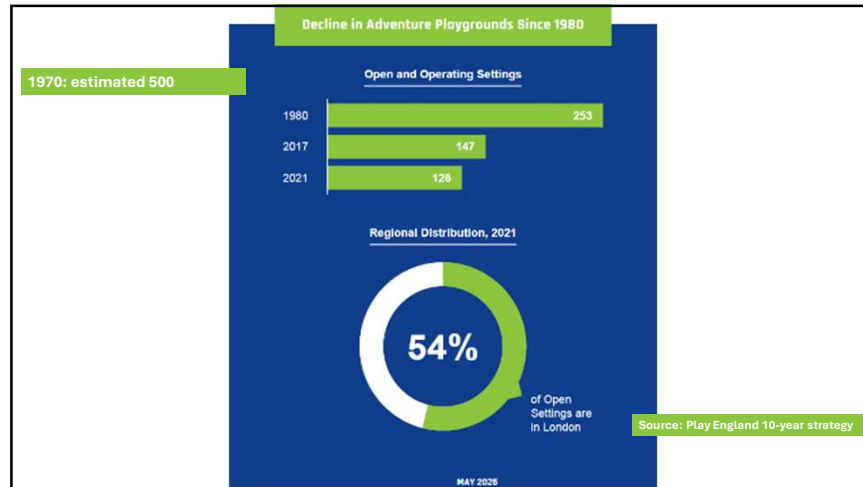
Adventure playgrounds in the UK

- Policy shifts
- English Play Strategy, 2008
- Austerity measures
- Tension between the original ethos and meeting policy agendas grows



Image: Homerton Adventure Playground, London, 2013

12



13

Adventure playgrounds and risk

“Insurance-conscious U.S. architects object that boards, bricks and nails are dangerous playthings. On the contrary, says Lady Allen, accidents are less frequent in her playgrounds than in conventional asphalt lots, probably because immovable playthings ‘bore children and breed a sort of mass hysteria.’ Anyway, she adds, ‘it is better to risk a broken leg than a broken spirit. A leg can always mend. A spirit may not.’”

(Time magazine, June 1965)

Image: Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground

14

Adventure playgrounds and risk

- Adventure playgrounds are rough and ready affairs built “entirely by the children themselves” under the permissive supervision of a “playleader”
- “They can take really dangerous risks and overcome them”

Pacemaker video, interviewing Lady Allen in the 1970s

15

Adventure playgrounds 'too risky' to insure

England children's commissioner and London mayor raise concerns after leading firm refuses to cover some playgrounds

© Felix Road adventure playground in Bristol has been warned that its insurance cover may not be renewed. Photograph: Visit Bristol

The Guardian, February 2019

Despite:

- 1980: Towards a Safer Adventure Playground
- 1997: Risk and Safety in Play
- 2002: Managing Risk in Play Provision: a Position Statement
- 2008: Managing Risk in Play Provision: An implementation guide
- 2023: BS ISO 4980 Benefit-risk Assessment for Sports and Recreational Facilities, Activities and Equipment (international)

16

Risk benefit assessment

- A key element of risk management in playwork
- Professional judgements
- Heavily focused on physical risk-taking

- An assumption that risk is natural, inherently good, to be encouraged
- **Who and what is not included?**




Image: Gweellan Tops Adventure Playground

17

Adventure playgrounds – a safe space?

- Making **judgements** on forms of play/not play that risk harm to others
 - Teasing/bullying
 - Discriminating
 - Perpetuating hegemonic norms
 - Excluding
 - Violence
- Challenge romanticised notions of play as inherently A Good Thing
- **What do we base judgements on?**
- **What are our ideas of good play/bad play?**
- **How does this fit with our understanding of ‘free play’?**
- **How do we create emotionally and socially safe spaces?**



Image: Gweellan Tops Adventure Playground

18

The real risks children face

- APs usually sited in deprived neighbourhoods
- Children’s everyday risks:
 - Structural marginalisation, risky public spaces
 - Poverty and associated risks
 - ACEs
- Global risks:
 - Geopolitics
 - Climate change
 - Global economics and neoliberalism
 - Pandemics and
 - New technologies



Image: Gweellan Tops Adventure Playground

19

How do these relate to risky play and its possible benefits?

- APs usually sited in deprived neighbourhoods
- Children’s everyday risks:
 - Structural marginalisation, risky public spaces
 - Poverty and associated risks
 - ACEs
- Global risks:
 - Geopolitics
 - Climate change
 - Global economics and neoliberalism
 - Pandemics and
 - New technologies



Image: Gweellan Tops Adventure Playground

20

In sum: what does the idea of risky play do?

- Risk taking is a big part of APs
- Playworkers have a history of recalcitrance
- ... **HOWEVER** ...
- Rather than risky play being a subversive act, material discursive practices imply
 - A duty on playworkers both to promote risk taking and keep children safe
 - A duty on children to engage in risky play in order to develop risk management skills
- Props up the neoliberal project through a personal responsibilisation to develop ways of coping with the hardships and dangers of life during late capitalism



21



Other ways of framing

- Working with ideas of uncertainty and vitality; joy and pleasure
- Working collectively rather than accepting the requirement for individual responsibilisation
- Does this happen anyway? Probably
- How might playworkers continue their subversive tradition?

22