


Fig. 1. In 2014, I introduced playwork practice to everyday engagement at The New Children's Museum (located in San Diego, California). Playworkers, part of the exhibition staff, made small, daily changes to exhibit environments (such as this space, called *MAKE/SHIFT*) based on observed play needs.





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Playworking the Museum

What Can Exhibits Learn From Adventure Playgrounds?

Megan Dickerson

Find a piece of paper and a pen. Take a deep breath. Think of a space where you enjoyed spending time as a child. Map the space for eight minutes. What objects were there? Was anyone else there with you (human or nonhuman)? How did you spend your time in that space?

Really: do this exercise before you read on. It's worth it.

After working in children's museums for most of my career, I thought I understood children's play. Then two things happened. First, I traveled to England to study playwork, the practice that underpins adventure playgrounds: "junk" play spaces where professionals called "playworkers" support children as they create constantly changing spaces for play. Second, I engaged in the above mapping exercise with play scholar Stuart Lester.

Though observing children in adventure playgrounds was transformative, it was this mapping exercise that sparked new synaptic connections. By considering how we might *create spaces where children enjoy spending time*, I could think beyond hackneyed tropes of toys and playgrounds. I, and the many people with whom I have done this exercise subsequently, started *feeling*, remembering what it was like to carve spaces of autonomy in an adult-dominated world. We remember the complexity of spaces that, from the adult naked eye, appear to be jumbles of junk. Through the act of "feeling about" play rather than thinking about it, we become like Robin Williams who, playing an adult Peter Pan in the film *Hook*, suddenly remembers his "happy thoughts" and can, once again, fly.

In the following piece, I will share a brief introduction to playwork – the adult practice that makes the conditions of the adventure



Fig. 2. A quote from Lady Allen of Hurtwood on a wall in *MAKE/SHIFT*, an indoor adventure playground that playworkers and I co-created at The New Children's Museum.

playground possible – as well as some shifts in thinking that have made my work in exhibit design more playful and expansive. As we emerge from the crises of 2020 and beyond (COVID-19 pandemic, global reckoning focused on racial justice), adopting a playwork approach to children's exhibit design and development could have significant impact on how we create more equitable and playable spaces for children – and, even, for those of us who once were.

A Brief History of Adventure Playgrounds and Playwork

In your mapping exercise, you may have remembered things such as:

- Setting your own agenda, with little (or no) adult direction or intervention
- Using objects in ways that objects that were not designed to be used
- Losing track of time because you were so immersed in your pursuits

In remembering spaces of childhood enjoyment, it has been my experience that we inevitably identify the working definition of play used in playwork practice: Play is

a process that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated.¹

Playwork is a 75-year-old practice in which adults called “playworkers” support children in the creation of spaces in which they can play (fig. 1, p. 104). Playwork is not “play-based learning” in the way of Reggio-Emilia (considering the learning space as a “third teacher”) or Montessori (providing materials that allow children to independently explore interests). Unlike those methodologies, the playworkers protect the play space from adult-led agendas, including adults' desire for children to learn and be socialized. Playwork is not play-based – it is truly play-centered (fig. 2).

To understand how radical a departure this is, we must go to the roots of playwork, during and after World War II in Europe, where bombing leveled large tracts of urban space. In Nazi-occupied Denmark, public officials erected new playgrounds of the swing, slide, and sandbox variety, in hopes of maintaining normalcy in wartime. This created a natural experiment. The Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen observed that given the choice between an adult-built playground and a bombed-out lot, children were choosing the (more dangerous) lot: a place with endless loose parts and possibility. In response to these observations, Sørensen founded the Emdrup *skrammellegepladsen*, or “junk playground.” He and other adults (many of them, not so coincidentally, were active in underground resistance efforts against the Nazis), collected old cars, timber, and other waste materials and assembled them in a large empty lot. John Bertelsen, an artist and member of the Danish Resistance Movement, acted as the site's first “*pædagog*,” or

teacher. In addition to providing a place for children to engage in risky play, Emdrup's kid-made play towers were also, by some accounts, observation points for the Danish Resistance. By creating a radical place for play, radical activities could also hide in plain sight.

After World War II ended in 1945, word spread throughout Europe about the Emdrup experiment, intriguing the British landscape architect, Lady Marjory Allen, who advocated for early childhood initiatives as a way to create "peace-loving citizens" of the world.² In 1946, Lady Allen visited Emdrup and, blown away by the possibilities this child-led, democratically run model represented, began to evangelize for the concept in England in her speaking engagements, pamphlets, and

ultimately in an essay in *The Picture Post*, the United Kingdom equivalent of *Life* magazine in the United States.

Social service organizations such as local councils and the International Voluntary Service for Peace began founding junk playgrounds on bombed sites in London (fig. 3), ultimately renaming them "adventure playgrounds." The Danish *pædagoger* became "play-leaders," with Allen writing that the help children get from them "is useful to them emotionally as well as practically; in a child's world a friendly adult who exerts a minimum of authority and is generous with his time and attention, maybe something of a rarity; and the children respond as if they have been waiting for just this sort of friendship."³



Fig. 3. Adventure playgrounds popped up on bomb sites all over London, including this site in Islington, where several adventure playgrounds still exist today.



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Fig. 4. This red taxicab, rust and all, was once affixed to the top of the wood structure behind it at Homerton Grove Adventure Playground. After years of use, the cab was brought down by playworkers, whose shadows are in the foreground. On the day of the author's visit, children danced on the top of the cab, while a playworker recorded a "music video" to say goodbye to the beloved plaything.



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Fig. 5. The playworker Bob Hughes was once asked why urban adventure playgrounds, like this one at Homerton Grove in London, had tall wooden structures. "These?" Hughes answered. "These are for trees," meaning such structures offers kids in urban settings the thrill of learning how to move from branch to branch at great height.

Learning from Adventure Playgrounds

Today, play-leaders are called playworkers, and adventure playgrounds exist in Europe and in Japan, as well as in the United States, from the Berkeley Adventure Playground founded in California in 1979 to The Yard, founded 2014 on Governors Island, just off the tip of Manhattan.

On one of my visits to Homerton Grove Adventure Playground, in London, it was clear that children were in control. Past the tall fencing that shielded the space from the surrounding neighborhood, my presence in a grassy clearing was briefly noted by a group of 10- to 15-year-olds, who were inside and on top of a taxicab that had been gutted and painted in bright hues (fig. 4). I was told that playworkers had originally placed the cab, at the request of the children, on top of a 20-foot-tall wooden climbing structure (fig. 5) designed by the children and built with the support of playworkers. Playworkers had taken the cab down in preparation for the installation of a new vehicle, and the young people I saw were filming a music video to say goodbye to it. I quietly explored the rest of the large lot, encountering a garden where a small girl, on her own, tended sprouts, and farther along, a young child painting a piece of plywood. The space felt magical, autonomous, evolving: it felt like my map of the spaces I had enjoyed as a child.

In these spaces, playworkers are often quiet shadows, to the point that many people have heard of adventure playgrounds but have no awareness of the playwork practice that underpins it. They conduct daily front-end and formative evaluation (observations and team reflection) to understand children's voiced and observed needs and desires.



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Fig. 6. Adventure playgrounds attract children of all ages, including toddlers (who, at Homerton Grove Playground, must visit with an adult). Here, at Homerton, a simple playworker intervention suspends books on string to keep them from the mud.

They obtain materials (fig. 6), fabricate base structures, and care for and maintain all spaces, conducting daily site checks and making regular repairs. In that sense and others, playworkers are not so different from exhibit professionals, who work behind the scenes to create user-centered experiences.

Following the threads of that intersection, the following are a few of the characteristics of playful exhibit design that have helped me as I have struggled to bring my new understanding of children's play and playwork with the realities of current exhibit practice.



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1. **Wabi Sabi:** In traditional Japanese aesthetics, the idea of “flawed beauty” and impermanence might come in the form of a slightly ragged edge to a bowl, or a wilted leaf in a floral arrangement. Playful creatures – such as human children – find and use these slight imperfections in innovative ways. Consider planning impermanence into exhibit spaces. Can elements truly be changed and manipulated by kids? When a child comes a second or third time, will the space have been changed by other kids? Do not sacrifice

beautiful (the truly profound museum moment) in service of the much more palatable “pretty.”

2. **Secret:** Kids will find any available nook or cranny to make a big space (say, a department store) smaller and more secret (say, by hiding in a circular clothing rack). In exhibit design, creating the condition for secret spaces may require breaking some rules, such as a canonical desire for clear parental sight lines in children’s exhibits. For example, in *The Wonder Sound* (fig. 7),

Fig. 7. *The Wonder Sound*, a multi-level, climbable art installation at The New Children's Museum, created with the Playwork Principles in mind.

an exhibit I developed with artist Wes Bruce, we created a narrow crawl tunnel leading to a space with a ceiling hung with hundreds of spoons (fig. 8, p. 112). The nook obliterates sight lines, while also creating the conditions for some of the most profound conversations I have had in my life. In this cave-like space, I have heard children wonder aloud about life and death, telling stories about pets they miss (and finding comfort from others). On multiple occasions, I have seen two kids go into that space as strangers and emerge as fast friends, urging their caregivers to set up out-of-museum play dates. To me, this is why museums exist: to foster connections among people. To make this possible, we mitigate risk by training gallery staff to be attuned and physically stationed nearby to assist caregivers who need help with reuniting with their spoon-room-hidden kid (the first response to a lost kid call on the walkie? "Check the spoon room").

3. **(Hard) Fun:** So often we design to make kids feel "successful," which typically means according to our own measures and learning objectives. Playworker-facilitated spaces allow for what educator Seymour Papert called "hard fun": we like to do challenging things, but they must be the right things matched to the individual and the moment.⁴ Instead of focusing on problem solving, I suggest we think more about the conditions for problem creation. Two children chat on an adventure playground.⁵ They wonder: "What if the world was made of poo?" They then begin, with expert creativity, imagining an alternative universe where

stepping in poo would not be a big deal because our shoes would, also, be made of poo (as would our bodies). How might we create playful provocations that leave kids with more questions than answers?

4. **Big and Little:** Children are smaller than most adults. This may seem obvious, but big adults often forget it. Among the most talked about, long-ago children's museum exhibits is the 1970s "Giant's Desktop" (a room with a working four-foot pencil, a giant phone, and toddler-sized paperclips) at Boston Children's Museum. The Desktop's subtle reordering (making adults feel small in a world typically scaled for them) allowed kids a bit more power. Similarly, on adventure playgrounds, I have seen kids design spaces that make small people feel big and big people feel small. How might we further play with scale in exhibits, and, bonus points, allow children to control that?
5. **Real:** Give a kid a fake deejay deck, and they'll pose for a photo. Show a kid real turntables, and they'll stay for an hour. Children's museums, in my humble opinion, have often stagnated in creating dramatic play spaces with kid-sized adult uniforms and plastic simulations of real things. That's great for an adult-led photo opportunity, but it also reinforces the implicit belief that children's play makes children better adults. It might. But what I have seen it do is much more powerful: it makes a kid a better kid. Subvert the tyranny of the cute. Offer real stuff. Challenge the adults.

Fig. 8. Deep in *The Wonder Sound*, children discover a hidden room with hundreds of spoons suspended from the ceiling like glowing stalactites.



Conclusion: People Make Play.

“The satisfaction that [adventure playgrounds] give to children is directly proportional to the pain they cause some architects, planners and neighbors,” Lady Allen wrote, probably around the time she renamed “junk” playgrounds “adventure” playgrounds, and in some sense speaking to us as exhibit makers in 2022, as we emerge from multiple global crises. “The pain is real – but the conflict is not quite real. It is possible to give children what they need without setting up permanent eye-sores.”

Getting beyond the pain and moving into play requires examination of the unwritten rules that guide our thinking (frankly, those that make us think that mess is painful!). It requires moving beyond *thinking* about play to *feeling* about play, representing a significant shift in how we see children. I have often said that children are the keystone species of the thriving museum ecosystem. If we make it possible for a child to joyfully visit a museum, we make it more possible for

that child’s caregivers to visit, opening up possibilities for diverse, multiage groups to participate in our spaces. And when we start thinking about how children are or are not served in our spaces, we are opened up to think more deeply about the conditions we do and do not offer other stakeholder groups in our communities. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has required us to think differently about exhibit practice in so many ways. What might happen if in exhibits we, like Sørensen, shift from creating play spaces to creating spaces of childhood enjoyment? What else might be possible? ■

1 “The Playwork Principles,” Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff, 2005, accessed August 1, 2021, <https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples>.

2 Lady Marjory Allen and Mary Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975).

3 Ibid.

4 Seymour Papert, “Hard fun,” *Bangor Daily News*, 2002.

5 Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell, “Turning the World Upside Down: Playing as the Deliberate Creation of Uncertainty,” *Children* 1, no. 2 (2014): 241–60, <https://doi.org/10.3390/children1020241>.

Playwork Principles

The Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff, 2005

In 2005, a council of experienced playworkers from Ireland, England, and Wales met to formalize – as much as playworkers formalize anything – the norms of playwork as practiced over the previous 50 years. Even some of the original council members to this day engage in “what if?” devil’s advocacy around the principles (for example, is play “freely chosen” if a child feels coerced into playing a game with her peers?). That having been said, the principles remain a provocative insight into the quietly radical nature of playwork practice. For a closer look at these as well as other playwork terms (“adulteration” or “cloak of invisibility,” anyone?), I highly recommend Penny Wilson’s *The Playwork Primer*, one of the most simultaneously poetic and practical playwork resources one can find.

Scan the QR code to read
The Playwork Primer online.



<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d24bb215f3e850001630a72/t/5d3e1fd3f9125d0001881a4f/1564352467970/Playwork+Primer+by+Penny+Wilson++color.pdf>

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social need, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities.
2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.
3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult-led agendas.
5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
6. The playworker’s response to children and young people playing is based on a sound, up-to-date knowledge of the play process and reflective practice.
7. Playworkers recognize their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people’s play on the playworker.
8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well-being of children.