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**Assignment 5: Dissertation**

Slides, sandpits and sustainability:

children's play in London parks and public spaces 1970 to the present  
day

Student Number 0190730825

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Frontispiece: Woodland Playground, Burgess Park, Camberwell, 2012

source: <https://www.bablands.com/20/06/15/londons-coolest-playgrounds-by-area>

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines how play facilities for children in London's parks and public spaces have evolved from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day; it focuses on the changes which were needed to manage the cuts in public spending from the mid-1970s to the present day. It considers social, political, educational and public health factors which have influenced the history of the play landscape and then asks two questions:

- What is play?
- What is the state of play provision in London's parks and public spaces?

The study period, 1970 to the present day, was chosen because it has been a time of rapid political, social and economic change. Municipal playgrounds had previously benefitted by almost a hundred years of relatively stable management by the London County Council (LCC) and later the Greater London Council (GLC). The study is not restricted to the old LCC playgrounds; its case studies include a playground run by a charitable trust, a playground managed by a community group, a play garden managed by an academic institution and a new public play space in a private development.

The study topic was chosen firstly because of national concern about children's physical and mental health following the enforced lockdowns of the 2020-2022 Covid pandemic; secondly because the play sector in London is likely to undergo funding cuts in the aftermath of the pandemic and looming cost of living crisis; and thirdly because the pandemic was a reminder of the therapeutic role the natural world plays in our lives, the importance using natural materials sustainably, and the changes which must be made as we adapt to climate change.

### Background

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNCRC) affirms the right of every child to relax, to play and to take part in cultural and artistic activities;<sup>1</sup> Article 24 states a child's right to health and a clean environment, Article 28 the right to education. The United Kingdom ratified the Convention in 1990. Progress in implementing the Articles is formally reported every five years and indirectly reported through UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) commissioned Innocenti Report Cards. A UNICEF European survey, which included British children, showed higher mean happiness scores and lower stress levels in children who played outside daily compared with those who rarely played outside.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989*, [www.unicef.org/what-we-do/unconvention-child-right/](http://www.unicef.org/what-we-do/unconvention-child-right/). accessed 3.05.2022.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, 'Understanding what shapes children's wellbeing in rich countries', *Children's World Survey Wave 3 2017-2019*, cited in *Innocenti Report Card 16-17*, (Geneva: UNICEF, 2020).

Childhood obesity levels, used as a proxy marker for an unhealthy diet and inactive lifestyle, suggest 40% of London children between 5-19 years old are overweight or obese.<sup>3</sup> There are warnings that obesity is, for some children, limiting their ability to participate in active play.<sup>4</sup> There are concerns that London children, who are growing up in zones with high air pollutant emissions, have smaller lungs and reduced lung capacity compared with rural children; research suggests the damage is difficult to reverse.<sup>5</sup> Teenage knife crime, occurring in public spaces including parks, is an insidious threat to London's young people; thirty young male deaths due to stabbing injuries were recorded in London in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

A World Health Organisation review, *Urban green spaces and health* (2018)<sup>7</sup>, cites studies which consider access to green space stimulates children's gross and fine motor skills, their cognitive, emotional and social skills and reduces behaviour disorders.<sup>8</sup> For older children, urban green spaces are a place to 'hang out', to forge friendships and develop social networks, and a safe space to practice risk management.<sup>9</sup>

Child health indices from the 21<sup>st</sup> century make it difficult to grasp the poor physical health and high mortality of children born poor in 18<sup>th</sup> century England; when Captain Thomas Coram opened the Foundling Hospital in London in 1746 'few parish children lived to survive apprenticeship'.<sup>10</sup> Anthony Astley Cooper, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftsbury, described the children he had seen early in his career as 'a set of sad dejected cadaverous creatures...the sight was most piteous, the deformities incredible. They seemed to me, such were their crooked shapes, like a mass of alphabets'.<sup>11</sup> He was describing severely malnourished children with rickets and scurvy. Young children worked long hours in factories; they were employed as chimney sweeps until the Chimney Sweepers Act of 1840.

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<sup>3</sup> London's Child Obesity Task Force, *Every child a healthy weight* (Mayor of London: 2019). <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/health/londons-child-obesity-taskforce>. accessed 25.06.2022.

<sup>4</sup> John Sutterby and Joe Frost, 'Making playgrounds fit for children and children fit for playgrounds', *Young Children*, 57 (2002), pp36-41.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Mudway, Isobel Dundas, Helen Wood, 'Impact of London's low emission zone on air quality and children's health', *The Lancet*, 2018, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/52468-2667\(13\)30202-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/52468-2667(13)30202-0).

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Green, CEO, The Ben Kinsella Trust, [www.interview.euronews.com/2022/01/05](http://www.interview.euronews.com/2022/01/05). accessed 9/07/2022.

<sup>7</sup> WHO, *Urban green spaces and health: A review of evidence*, (Copenhagen: UNICEF, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> S Strife and L Downey, 'Childhood Development and access to Nature: A New Direction for Environmental Inequality Research', *Organisation and Environment* 22(1) (2009), pp 99-122;

<sup>9</sup> Natural England, *Wild Adventure Space: its role in Teenager's Lives*, Natural England Commission Report NECRO025, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> GM Trevelyan, *English Social History*, (London: Longmans, 1944), p360.

<sup>11</sup> *Hansard*, volume 220. 9<sup>th</sup> July 1874, pp 1326-40.

English charity schools showed benevolence to poor children but ensured that formality, social distinction and subordination were maintained.<sup>12</sup> In contrast Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) the German educator fostered an enlightened understanding of children's learning; he considered 'play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul'.<sup>13</sup> His philosophy informed the curricula and teaching practice in his 'kindergartens' where children learned through play and contact with the natural world.

In Britain, there was a slow awareness of the importance of open spaces in the growing industrial towns. The Slaney Select Committee Report 1833 promoted the importance of 'Public Walks and Places of Exercise' and the concept of 'rational recreation' to provide 'improvement without which physical health and morals would decline'.<sup>14</sup> Donations of land and money by philanthropists to create urban parks followed, prompted by civic pride and public health need. There were vested interests as a park increased land and property value and attracted speculative builders.<sup>15</sup> In London Victoria Park (1845), Finsbury Park (1857) and Battersea Park (1858), were created under the auspices of the London Metropolitan Board. Children's swings, separate for boys and girls, had been installed in Manchester's Queens, Phillips and Peel Parks in 1846. (The separation was not on moral grounds, but to ensure the girls 'got a turn on the swings').<sup>16</sup> The Interdepartmental Fitzroy Report on Physical Deterioration 1904 highlighted the poor health, development and nutrition of young British recruits in the Boer War, and the need for improvements in child and adolescent welfare including safe play spaces 'away from busy streets and their attendant vice'.<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 1 and 2).

Amherst (1907) described the London municipal parks, which by then had been managed by the London County Council, for 18 years; they had

cricket pitches by the dozen and space for numerous goal posts in the larger parks. Children were provided with gymnasia, intended, under the supervision of a gymnastic teacher, to build their physical strength. There were swings for the smaller children, bars, ropes and higher swings for older boys and girls.....fancy ducks and geese attracted small children on the ponds and some parks had enclosures for deer, rabbits, guinea pigs and other small animals. Sand gardens or 'seasides' were often included.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Trevelyan, *English Social History*, p379, pp 557-558.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Froebel, *The Education of Man*, first published 1826, (New York: Appleton 1906).

<sup>14</sup> Nick Piercey, *A Brief History of British Public Parks before 1870*, <https://playingpasts.co.uk/articles/the-great-outdoors/a-brief-history-of-public-parks-before-1870>, accessed 4.04.2022.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Slaney, *Report from the Select Committee of the Health of Towns together with the minutes evidence taken before them*, UK Parliament, 1840, p xiv-xv.

<sup>16</sup> Hazel Conway, *Public Parks*, (Princes Risborough: Shire, 1996), p79.

<sup>17</sup> Almeric FitzRoy, *Report on the inter-departmental Committee of Physical Deterioration*, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1904.

<sup>18</sup> Alicia Amherst, *London Parks and Gardens*, (London: Constable & Co, 1907), pp 123-124.



Fig. 1. Children stroll safely in newly planted LCC Myatt's Fields Park, Lambeth circa 1890. Source: Lambeth Archive.



Fig. 2. Children at the drinking fountain Sydenham Recreation Ground (now Mayow Park), Lewisham opened in 1878 'to prevent young people loitering on the roads and becoming a moral pest and nuisance' letter to Sydenham, Forest Hill and Penge Gazette 1875. Source: Lewisham Archive.

Finsbury Park and Myatt's Fields (1889) were the first LCC parks to have gymnasia, separate for boys and girls, and 'grassy children's play areas'.

A spur to the development of children's playgrounds in London was given by the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) founded in 1882 by Lord Reginald Brabazon, (1849-1929). By 1892 the MPGA had acquired 82 sites, they established gardens with seating and set up 116 children's playgrounds situated on small parcels of waste land or in disused cemeteries in densely populated parts of the city.<sup>19</sup> Brabazon, later Earl of Meath, was a staunch advocate of children's rights, in line with the Association's aims 'to give to the people gardens, and to the children playgrounds'.<sup>20</sup>

The LCC Parks Department embraced the play movement, they added playgrounds in Battersea, Ravenscourt, Victoria, Bethnal Green and Peckham Rye Parks. Lt Colonel Sexby, Head of the Parks Department, writes 'in Battersea the little ones have not been forgotten, for two children's playgrounds have been formed where they can swing and skip to their hearts' content'.<sup>21</sup> By 1924 the LCC was managing 117 parks and open spaces, a total of 5,183 acres; 48 of the parks had a children's playground, they were 'conventionally fitted with roundabouts and swings as their sole play amenity'.<sup>22</sup> Park keepers were employed; among their responsibilities was the policing of park byelaws.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the planners' enthusiasm for children's playgrounds, Norman Douglas, writing in 1907, recalling the games of his youth, said that children often preferred to play in the streets nearer to home. 'The fact is our boys don't much like playing in the park anyhow... and they aren't allowed to go because their mothers say, 'You've got no decent clothes' ... [the boys] prefer the streets,... for one thing the keeper is always coming up in the park and interfering'.<sup>24</sup>

In 1925 the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) was set up by the Duke of York, later King George VI ; 471 public recreation grounds were created with the aim of protecting green spaces and ensuring their use for sport and recreation, more were added in 1936 as a memorial to his father King George V. In 1930 the NPFA (now called Fields in Trust) devised the Six Acre Standard in which it recommended that 6 acres of recreational land be made available per 1,000 people.<sup>25</sup> The NPFA

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<sup>19</sup> Tim Brown, 'The making of urban 'healtheries' the transformation of cemeteries and burial grounds in late-Victorian East London', *Journal of Historical Geography* 40 (2013) pp 12-23.

<sup>20</sup> MPGA, *Minutes*, November 1892.

<sup>21</sup> John James Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces of London; their history and associations*, (London, Eliot Stock, 1905), p 15.

<sup>22</sup> London County Council, *London Parks and Open Spaces*, pp v-vii.

<sup>23</sup> David Lambert, *The Park Keeper*. (English Heritage, 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/the-park-keeper/>, accessed 12.07.2022.

<sup>24</sup> Norman Douglas, *London Street Games*, (London: St Catherine Press, 1916).p 108.

<sup>25</sup> Fields in Trust, *Guidance for Outdoor Sport and Play: Beyond the Six Acre Standard*, England, (Fields in Trust, 2020).

standards continue, with modifications, to be used in planning the numbers, kinds and positioning of recreational spaces.

In Kettering, Charles Wicksteed, an engineer, entrepreneur and philanthropist, began to rethink the design of children's playgrounds. In 1913 he intended to build model housing for his workers but after World War I he focused instead on creating a leisure park. He had a relaxed approach to play, recognised children's playfulness, creativity and need for 'freedom to run about'. He supported progressive education, understood that children break things and that playground equipment should be robust, safe and shared. His factory's metal and wood play equipment included plank and see-saw swings, witches' hats, slides and water chutes (Fig. 3). In Wicksteed Park, boys and girls played together and there were refreshments and a narrow-gauge railway.<sup>26</sup> He anticipated the modern theme park; his Park was a show piece and attracted park managers from across the country, eager to purchase the company's products.



Fig. 3. A plank swing in the Equipment Catalogue, Charles Wicksteed and Co, 1926. Source: digital archive.wicksteedpark.org.

<sup>26</sup> Jon Winder, 'Revisiting the playground: Charles Wicksteed, play equipment and public spaces for children in early twentieth century Britain', *Urban History, First View*, 2021, Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926821000687>.



By the late 1930s the larger LCC parks were offering children's holiday entertainment, including outdoor cinema, mime, magic and Punch and Judy shows.<sup>27</sup> The Public Health Act, 1936 required local authorities to provide public baths and swimming baths; in response, the LCC built paddling pools and outdoor lidos to meet the demand for water play and outdoor swimming (Fig. 4). London's Royal Parks operated independently of the LCC, and had their own attractions, there was boating lake and Peter Pan memorabilia in Kensington Gardens and a playground near the zoo in Regents Park. During World War II, park usage changed; London parks suffered direct bombing, were used as dumping grounds for bomb site debris, or converted to allotments; metal fencing and playground equipment were appropriated as part of the 'war effort'.



Fig. 4. Brockwell Park Lido, Lambeth opened in 1937, pictured in 1948. Source: Lambeth Archive.

After World War II children competed successfully with architects and town planners in defining their play needs; with adult encouragement, they created autonomous 'junk play areas', later re-named 'adventure playgrounds', from scavenged and bomb site debris.<sup>28</sup> Marjory Allen, an international advocate of children's rights, worked tirelessly to support the adventure play movement after seeing the Emdrup playground in post-occupation Denmark in 1946.<sup>29</sup> She recognised the movement met the play needs of children who 'do not enjoy organised games,

<sup>27</sup> W Eric Jackson, *Achievement: a short history of the LCC*, (London: Longmans, 1965) pp118-126.

<sup>28</sup> Roy Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood*, (London: Routledge, 2016) pp 47-93.

<sup>29</sup> Marjory Allen and Mary Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975) pp 196-198.

playground asphalt and mechanical swings'.<sup>30</sup> There was more support from Drummond Abernethy, head of the Children's Play Department at the NPFA; in his view they 'transferred the attractions of the street - light colour, movement, sound excitement and a sense of danger- to the playground'.<sup>31</sup> The movement's make-do ethos was in keeping with the community spirit and austerity of the times.

The post-war reconstruction of London was guided by Abercrombie's *The County of London Plan* (1943). The plan rationalised road links into and around the city, established a circular 'green chain of parks', cleared slums and war damaged areas, constructed neighbourhood housing estates and 'built back better' (Fig. 5).<sup>32</sup> Playgrounds in London's new housing estates and satellite 'new towns' were influenced by Aldo van Eyck's post-war Amsterdam playgrounds; his playgrounds had minimalist play equipment, his designs employed simple motifs of geometric shapes made from *brut* materials, concrete, metal bars and sand (Fig.6).<sup>33</sup> The progressive play spaces in European cities were adopted by British architects and advocates of outdoor children's play.<sup>34</sup>

In 1963 the LCC, responsible for much of London's post war reconstruction, was expanded to include outer London suburbs and became the Greater London Council (GLC) with all municipal parks under its control. By 1969, to the consternation of local councillors, the management of local parks was transferred to their home boroughs; south of the Thames the GLC retained responsibility for only Blackheath, Battersea, Dulwich, Crystal Palace Parks, and the evolving Burgess Park.<sup>35</sup> The 1970s and 80s saw cutbacks in government funding to local authorities. Reports of playground accidents, deteriorating equipment and 'tea leaf' paddling pools (so called, because of their broken beer bottles) raised concern about playground safety.<sup>36</sup> Local authority statutory duty had, by then, been reduced to providing recreational support in three areas, libraries, allotments and youth/adult education; only discretionary powers remained, not always realisable, to support community groups and children's play. The GLC was finally disbanded in 1986, leaving financial disarray.

Since the mid-1980s the ownership of funding, design and safety of children's play spaces has been contested by organisations, professional groups, statutory bodies, developers, charities and local

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<sup>30</sup> Marjorie Allen, *Adventure Playgrounds*, (London: NPFA, 1953) pp1-3.

<sup>31</sup> Drummond Abernethy, 'Playleadership' in JH Leicester (ed), *Trends in the Services for Youth*. (Oxford: Pergamon, 1967) p391.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Abercrombie and John Forshaw, *County of London Plan, 1943*, (London: London County Council, 1943).

<sup>33</sup> Ingeborg de Roode and Liane Lefavre, *Aldo van Eyck: Playgrounds and the City* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Tim Gill, *Urban Playground*, (London: RIBA, 2021), p 14.

<sup>35</sup> Anon., 'Who is to pay for public parks? Opinion', *South London Press* 8.10.1969

<sup>36</sup> C Illingworth, P Brennan, A Jay, '200 injuries caused by playground equipment', *British Medical Journal*, 1975, 4, pp332-4.

government. As neo-liberalism took hold, funding became increasingly insecure; there were redundancies across the park and play sector.



Fig. 5. Front cover of the 1945 Penguin edition of *The County of London Plan* explained by Carter and Goldfinger. Source: [architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/in-house-the-council-architect](http://architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/in-house-the-council-architect)



Fig.6. Zaanhof playground, Amsterdam, van Eyck's second playground, 1948. Source: <https://artbooks.yupnet.org/2015/01/16/sneak-peak-aldo-van-eyck>

Funding for playground development became dependent on successful bids to the Big Lottery and other funding bodies, corporate donors and bids for Section 106 monies.<sup>37</sup> Construction and maintenance contracts became subject to competitive tendering. New playground equipment varied from the minimalist to the fantastical; playgrounds became a patchwork of old, adapted and new equipment. London Councils, established in 1998, provided funding to set up London Play 'to be a catalyst for strategic and rational play provision across London', its early successes included supporting the publication of a Play Strategy by every London borough, input into borough Children and Young People's Plans, projects to re-invigorate adventure playgrounds and safe street play; as of 2021, borough Play Strategies are undergoing revision.

Over the past forty years, family life in London has changed; often both parents need to work to meet high housing costs. As a result, more pre-school children attend full-time day nurseries and school children attend adult supervised after-school and holiday playschemes. Time to 'play out' near home has reduced. Vehicle ownership makes street play unsafe, small family size mean fewer opportunities for peer-to-peer play, 'helicopter parenting' continues until children reach secondary school age when they are allowed, tentatively, to independently navigate the public transport system. Children are growing up in a consumer society; they have visited 'thrills and spills' theme parks and digitally experience exciting imaginary landscapes on television, tablets and laptops. Public playground safety standards, once minimal, are now stringent and equipment is not designed to test risk management skills.<sup>38</sup> The Covid pandemic 2000-2002 raised unanticipated barriers to play; children, families and play providers were unable to meet and were isolated for long periods. The consequences of the pandemic are still being played out, as seen in young people's anxiety when, this summer (2022), after almost two years of forced exclusion from school attendance, they prepared for national examinations. A positive effect of the pandemic, for children lucky enough to have access to an outside space, has been their increased exposure to the natural world.

Educationalists and some parents have reacted to these changes by returning to Froebel's concept of learning through and in the natural world. Local parks have become venues for Forest Schools, a place to learn about ecology, as well as retaining their traditional role as 'a play space for all'. The limitations of the 'formal playground' are being realised; there are attempts to revitalise adventure playgrounds, to revive of 'safe street' play and re-landscape parks to encourage exploration of the natural world. It is anticipated these changes will be a small step towards meeting the goals of Articles 24, 28 and 31 of UNCRC<sup>39</sup>, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, and 11 and the challenges posed by climate change.

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<sup>37</sup> Section 106 agreements under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 are developers contributions which aim to mitigate the impact of site specific development, [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/8/section/106](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/8/section/106). accessed 25/07/22.

<sup>38</sup> David Ball, Mariana Brussoni, Tim Gill, Harry Harbottle, Bernard Spiegel, 'Avoiding a dystopian future for children's play', *International Journal of Play*, 8 (1) (2019), pp 3-10.

<sup>39</sup> Linden Groves, *Beyond the Playground*, (London: The Garden History Society, 2010).

The following research questions were investigated through archive searches, site visits and interviews with professionals working in the field of children's play

1. What is play? Do theories of play, child development and learning affect professionals' decision making? How has play provision evolved during professionals' working lives? How will play patterns change over the next five years? How did the Covid pandemic impact on their practice?
2. What is the state of children's play in London's parks and public spaces? How have public spaces adapted to the changing concepts in children's play? How has the commissioning, funding, landscaping, equipment, safety, maintenance and usage of play spaces changed in the professionals' working lifetime?

## Methodology

Primary, historic and contemporary, and secondary sources were accessed, including material from the British Library, Institute of Child Health and RIBA Libraries. Archival material was accessed from the London Metropolitan Archive, Local Archive Offices in Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham by online and in person visits. On-line searches of the National Newspaper Archive and YouTube video archive were made. Developers and landscape architects site evaluation and masterplans were accessed.

Site visits were made to 65 free-to-enter children's play areas across London, the visits included 44 playgrounds listed in *London Parks and Open Spaces* (1924); the remaining 21 play areas were in the Royal Parks, or in parks, adventure playgrounds, skateparks, BMX tracks and housing schemes constructed after this date. Data was collected using a checklist; it included a history of the site if available, description of playground design, construction materials including ground surfaces, types of playground equipment (eg kinetic, imaginary, sensory), planting, and the kinds of provision for children of different ages and ability. Site features relevant to the study were photographed.

Interviews were carried out, using a semi-structured questionnaire, with nine professionals experienced in children's play provision: they included a Borough based Senior Park Manager, the Head of Horticulture in a park used extensively in children's education, an Adventure Playground leader, a Landscape Architect specialising in playground design, a representative from London Play, a member of the PLAYLINK consortium, a consultant/academic with a special interest in children's play in historic settings and a designer of rural play spaces. Interviews were conducted face to face or by telephone; contemporaneous notes were made.

Ethical approval was sought from the University of London Examining Body.

## Structure

The Introduction to the dissertation begins with a historic overview of children's play provision in London's parks and public spaces from 1888 to the mid-1980s followed by a brief outline of the social changes which have impacted on children's and families lives from the mid-1980s to the present day.

Chapter 1 addresses the research question ‘What is play?’; it considers definitions and theories of play, as developed by psychologists and educationalists, and their interpretation in contemporary practice. Interviewee responses inform how key organisations and professional groups have adapted to change, following the introduction of the market economy, through their roles as commissioners, policy makers, town planners, designers, providers and activists. Their varying experiences provide insights into the challenges the play sector has overcome in the recent past and is likely to face in the short, medium and long term.

Chapter 2 addresses the question ‘What is the state of play?’ It combines observations made at site visits to a range of play spaces including in-depth studies of five sites recommended by interviewees, as representative of different stages of playground history: these are Myatt’s Fields Park, Lambeth; Horniman Gardens, Lewisham; King Edward Memorial Park, Shadwell; Glamis Road Adventure Playground, Tower Hamlets; King George V Park, Ealing; and Elephant Park, Southwark. They are studied with respect to the lessons to be learnt from different approaches to playground rejuvenation and/or re-landscaping to create ecologically sustainable play spaces. The sixth site, Elephant Park, opened in 2021, demonstrates how a child friendly traffic free ‘natural play space’ in a contentious high-rise re-development project is helping to re-invigorate the neighbourhood and the local economy. A short section examines play provision in London’s housing estates, initiatives to support the re-introduction of street play and the space given to children in eco- and wildlife parks.

Chapter 3 synthesises the two research strands and considers the strengths and limitations of London’s present-day children’s play provision as seen by professionals engaged directly and indirectly in play related areas. It examines how London’s planners might learn from play initiatives in comparable European cities and summarises the choices and decisions which will need to be made in future developments. It considers how the relationships between planners and local community members can be strengthened to achieve best outcomes.

## CHAPTER 1

### ALL ABOUT PLAY

#### What is Play?

This chapter explores the What? Why? Who? Where? and How? questions about children's play. The findings are based on literature and media searches and on interviews with eight professionals engaged in different aspects of 'play work'.

Historic and recent definitions of play acknowledge its complexity; in his essays Montaigne (1533-1592), the French philosopher and commentator, stated 'children's play is not just a game; children's play should be considered their most serious-minded activity'.<sup>40</sup> Almost four centuries later, Lloyd George, at the Inauguration of the National Playing Fields Association (1926), used a rights-based definition: 'The right to play is a child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life'. Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), Dutch cultural historian used a sociological definition: 'We might call it a free activity, standing quite consciously outside the "ordinary"; life, as being not serious, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected to rules...it promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy...'<sup>41</sup>

Roger Caillois, (1913-1978), French sociologist admitted his struggle to define play but described six core characteristics: participation in play is free and not obligatory, play is separate occupying its own time and space, it is uncertain in its outcomes, in terms of wealth it is unproductive, it is governed by its own rules which must be followed by players, and that play involves make believe when set against real life.<sup>42</sup> He introduced the Greek word 'ilinx' into the play lexicon using it to describe the perception of dizzying loss of self-control or 'buzz' provided in thrill play.

The New Charter for Children's Play (1998) definition, broadly accepted within the British playworker community, states: 'Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing children learn and develop as individuals and as members of the community'.<sup>43</sup>

An interviewee added his own definition 'Play can mean doing anything-or nothing-it is the embodiment of freedom'. A second confessed 'the more I work with children the less sure I am there is an adequate definition of play, it's too complex... It's child, worker and situation

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<sup>40</sup> Michel de Montaigne, first published 1580, *The Complete Essays xxiii* (London: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*, (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1949), p13.

<sup>42</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1961) pp3-10.

<sup>43</sup> Children's Play Council, *New Charter for Children's Play*, (Children's Play Council, 1998).

dependant... and changes over time'. A third added obliquely 'when children and teenagers are seen and heard in play in the public sphere, it's a sign of a society at ease with itself'.

Seen through a different lens, Chris Smith, in 1998, then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was pragmatic. He focused on play's long term creative and economic benefits: 'I cannot think of anything that offers so much to children [as play] - all those benefits and fun too! Play is not only important to the quality of life of children, it is of great importance to the countries future, to the creative industries and the economy'.<sup>44</sup> He followed up his statement with a generous £200 million funding package for children's play from the New Opportunities Fund before being removed from office after the Labour government 2001 general election victory.<sup>45</sup> Smith challenged workers in the field of children's play to bring together knowledge of best practice and make the case for ongoing public provision of high quality environments suitable for play. This resulted in a partnership between the NPFA, the Children's Play Council and PLAYLINK, a nongovernmental organisation with its roots in adventure play; together they published '*Best Play: what play provision should do for children*' (2000) an important document which identifies best practice and reasserts the fundamental right for children's play.

Frost, Wortham and Reifel provide a helpful synopsis of philosophy and psychology of play through the ages.<sup>46</sup> The Ancient Greeks acknowledged Agon, the conflict and competition aspects of play, Mimesis, the mimicry and dramatic aspects of play and Chaos (or Alea), its elements of chance, although in the context of adult rather than children's play. Plato's writings suggest he considered children's play had little purpose unless it was used to inculcate the social and political virtues of good citizenship.<sup>47</sup> Centuries later John Locke (1632-1704), the Enlightenment philosopher, expressed a contrary view; he saw play as an important part of a child's life and hinted at its underlying freedom: 'Recreation... depends not only on Reason but oftener on Fancy, it must be permitted [that] children not only divert themselves but to do it after their own fashion'.<sup>48</sup> Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805) expanded the concept believing that play is any creative activity which is driven by 'excess energy remaining after work and survival' and that play provided the route to a higher-level spiritual thought. Froebel built on Schiller's work; he saw a child's surplus energy as the opening to learning based on connectedness to the natural world and humanities.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chris Smith, 1998, quoted in Mel Potter, Sandra Melville, and Tim Gill, *Best Play: What play provision should do for children*, (London: NPFA, 2000) p4.

<sup>45</sup> Adrian Voce, 'Getting serious' in *Policy for Play*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press) pp 83-90.

<sup>46</sup> Joe Frost, Sue Wrotham, Stuart Reifel, *Play and Child Development*, (Columbus: Pearson, 2012) pp 6-27

<sup>47</sup> Armand d' Angour, 'Plato and Play: Taking Education Seriously in Ancient Greece', *American Journal of Play*, 5, 2013, pp 293-307.

<sup>48</sup> John Locke, *Some thoughts on education*, (London: J and R Tonson, 1779). p. 148, [https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=7J0IAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.PP4&hl=en\\_GB](https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=7J0IAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.PP4&hl=en_GB) (accessed 31.08.2022)

<sup>49</sup> Froebel, *The Education of Man*. (1826); Frost, *Play and Child Development*, (2012). pp 6-11.



In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Darwinism interpreted the prolonged nature of human childhood as a pre-requisite for the time taken to develop the complex skills required to function as an adult. In this context, play, in the form of physical exercise, was perceived to be needed to build a strong adult body. It led to the enthusiasm for gymnasia and playing fields in the newly opening public parks. The twentieth century saw the development of psychoanalytic theories by Erik Erikson, Melanie Klein and Anna Freud and the concept that children's fears and earlier trauma could be resolved through play. The social and communication skills children used to shift into and out of pretend play, verbal and non-verbal, were interpreted as rehearsals for the multiple roles demanded by adult life. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) a Russian psychologist, whose work only became known in the West after his death, explained the rule-based content of imaginary play and the way simple toys can help liberate children's imaginations. He also helped explain how older children and adults can help younger children through to their next developmental stage by providing the support or 'scaffolding' as the child learns a new skill through play. Vygotsky called this the 'zone of proximal development', a key concept to understanding and justifying the support role of play workers.<sup>50</sup> Jean Piaget (1896-1980) developed the concept that play allowed for 'assimilation followed by accommodation' of newly acquired skills, and further, that cognitive development follows a linear pathway. Unlike Vygotsky, Piaget's focus was on individual developmental pathways rather than development through shared social play.<sup>51</sup> More recently the acquisition of social skills has been interpreted through the 'Theory of Mind' concept, that proposes how, as a part of normal development, a child learns to understand and becomes aware of the mental state of themselves and others by developing an ability to 'read' the non-verbal cues of emotions, anger, anxiety and distress of others. He/she then learns how to respond and empathise appropriately.<sup>52</sup> Brain imaging techniques, genetic testing and pharmacological studies are beginning to identify the structural, neurotransmitter and inheritance patterns which underlie developmental and behavioural differences in socialisation and play.

One interviewee said he had 'indulged in play theories and then pushed them to one side'. The majority said they did not consciously refer to theories of play in their day to day practice, but the front-line workers and the landscape architect, when talking about how best to support and create play spaces for children with complex special needs or challenging behaviour, incorporated concepts of play theories into their explanations. The landscape architect had designed gardens for children with autism and children with visual impairment; he spoke of the satisfaction of seeing children respond positively to the spaces created and materials and plants used. The adventure playground leader explained the therapeutic play opportunities she had created for children dealing with family trauma, the importance of managing acting out behaviours safely, and the patience and resilience needed to sustain the support over time. She described the frustration of working with troubled children when, despite multi-agency intervention, problems spiral out of control. This was balanced

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<sup>50</sup> Lev Vygotsky, 'Play and its role in the mental development of the child', *Soviet Psychology*, 12. 1966, pp 62-76.

<sup>51</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of Intelligence*, (London: Routledge, 2001), first English edition 1960. Joe Frost, *Play and Child Development*, pp 38-42

<sup>52</sup> Boris Korkmas, 'Theory of Mind and neurodevelopmental disorders of childhood', *Pediatric Research*, 69, 2011, pp101-108.

by meeting playground graduates, now grown up, who told her how much their time at the playground had meant and given to them. Interviewees were in agreement about the powerful Proustian emotions the recall, sights/sites, sounds and smells of childhood play can evoke in adults. They explained how it can be used to positive effect in subtly breaking down barriers in negotiations with officials and potential funders who may unexpectedly 'come on side and get things moving' as they begin to recount stories of their own childhood 'daring do'.

Perhaps the final word in defining play should rest with Sutton-Smith, a leading authority: 'We all play occasionally, and we all know what play feels like but when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is we fall into silliness'.<sup>53</sup>

### **Why play?**

The Mayor of London's Plan for London 2012 provided a concise summary of the benefits of children's play. The immediate benefits are described as freedom, exercise, and learning control over actions; it offers opportunities to test boundaries, to learn how to manage risk and provides a wide range of physical, social and intellectual experiences. Longer term benefits are cited as fostering independence and self-esteem, developing respect for others, staying healthy and offering opportunities for creativity and learning.<sup>54</sup> Play helps children learn to play cooperatively, to work in teams and, at its best, leads to long lasting friendships.

The importance of Early Years play for pre-school children was recognised by the Labour Government in 1998 with an additional £400 million funding to set up the Sure Start Programme. It attempted to redress 'play deprivation' with early intervention programmes for children under 4; 3,500 children's centres were built across the country, concentrating on poorer inner-city wards. The children's centres offered family support, primary child health care and good quality play facilities. Imaginative indoor and outdoor play areas were built in newly constructed Sure Start Centres across London.<sup>55</sup> Central funding stream was withdrawn by subsequent governments; many local authorities have since been forced, by financial constraints, to reduce the number of children's centres and restrict their play offer. The private sector, including forest schools, has partially filled the gap by strengthening their Early Years care and play provision, although fees can be prohibitive for less well-off families.

### **Where (theoretically) does play in London happen?**

From a child's perspective play can happen anywhere they can find and use a space; 'No Ball Games' and 'No cycles, scooters and skateboard' signs in public spaces are signals for feisty children to

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<sup>53</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997) p1.

<sup>54</sup> Greater London Authority, *Shaping Neighbourhoods: play and informal recreation*, Supplementary Planning Guidance, (London: GLA, 2012) p11.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Bouchal and Emma Norris, *Implementing Sure Start Children's Centres*, (Institute for Government, 2015).

transgress (Figs 7 and 8). The Mayor of London's Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) 2012 for play and recreation identifies seven types of recognised play spaces.



Fig.7. Sign on the gate of Martineau Estate, Tower Hamlets, a 'local playable space'. Source: author.



Fig. 8. Graffiti (signed 'rude kids') in Newham, showing a boy with a football next to a 'No Ball Games' sign. Credit: Vickie Flores.

These have set structural and functional criteria.<sup>56</sup> Firstly there are ‘multifunctional’ spaces such as large parks which offer recreation for all ages; secondly ‘incidental playable’ spaces with features that ‘make it attractive to play’; thirdly ‘dedicated’ play spaces such as playgrounds, playing fields, shopping centre play areas and private gardens open to the public; fourthly ‘doorstep playable’ spaces near homes, for young children under 5 with their carers; fifthly ‘local playable’ spaces with landscaping and equipment suitable for children from 0-11; sixthly ‘neighbourhood’ spaces with similar facilities but to include over 11s; and finally ‘youth’ spaces defined as social spaces where young people aged 12+ can congregate and socialise. The SPG urges boroughs to pay attention to play provision in housing developments and to ensure, through planning and audit procedures, that benchmark standards of the SPG are being met and sustained. The standards are based on calculations by Fields in Trust, originally devised in the 1930s and revised in 2008. The standards also advise on the number of facilities to be provided and their walking distances from people’s homes. Boroughs are expected to ensure that play facility maintenance costs are met through ongoing developer contributions and/or the Community Infrastructure Levy.<sup>57</sup> Responsibility for the maintenance of estate-based play facilities becomes problematic when housing stock and estate management is sub-contracted out to management companies or housing trusts which subsequently fail to deliver to the expected level.

Secure funding for play space maintenance was a major concern for interviewees with site-based responsibility. They agreed that signs of wear and tear were the signs of a well-used, well-loved play area; they were less concerned about the size and siting of play spaces, provided they were easy to access and welcoming to all-comers. In respect of larger play spaces, where visits were likely to be longer, interviewees stressed the importance of access to clean toilets and nutritious snacks (and coffee for the grown-ups) at family friendly prices; again, these services are usually sub-contracted out and require careful quality control. The Supplementary Guidance quoted relates to The Plan for London 2012; the new Plan for London 2021 has yet to issue guidance for play and recreation but has charged London boroughs to map and audit their play provision and update their Play Strategies (which date back to 2012). These actions were delayed by the Covid pandemic.

### **How to play (and play safely)?**

Play workers have devised their own taxonomy to describe different types of play and made pictorial adaptations for different play environments. Play types described include symbolic play, rough and tumble play, social and socio-dramatic play, creative play, deep play which involves risky challenges, like leaping and balancing activities, exploratory play, fantasy and imaginative play, role and object play; one game can include different play types (Figs 9 and 10).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> GLA, *Shaping Neighbourhoods* Glossary, p vii.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p 3.

<sup>58</sup> Bob Hughes, *The Playworkers Taxonomy of Play Types*, (London: PLAYLINK, 1996).

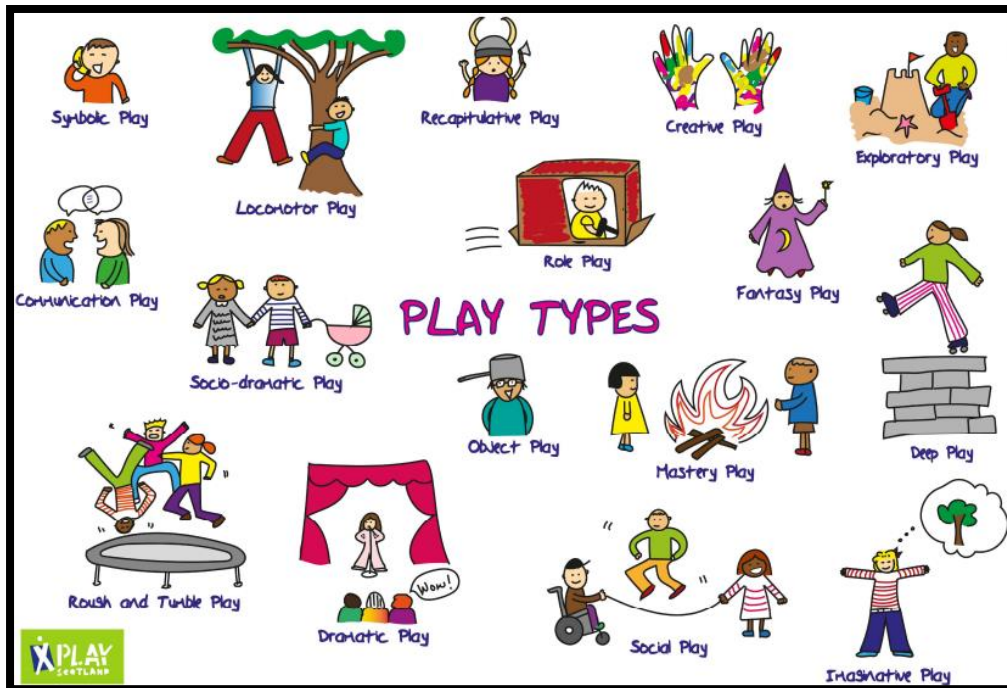


Fig.9. Play Scotland’s Poster of Play Types Source: [playscotland.org/resources/play-types-poster](http://playscotland.org/resources/play-types-poster).



Fig. 10. Play Types poster adapted for Forest Schools. Source: [forestschooled.com/post/2017/02/11/](http://forestschooled.com/post/2017/02/11/).

The authors of *Best Play* consider ‘play is a key element for children in learning to take calculated risks fundamental to the development of confidence. Children seek out opportunities for risk taking and it is the responsibility of play provision to respond with exciting and stimulating environments that balance risks appropriately’, it continues, if children do not find excitement in the playground they will seek it elsewhere in more dangerous places.<sup>59</sup> The ‘dumbing down’ of playgrounds in the late 1970s and 80s resulted in older children looking elsewhere for thrill seeking play, skate boarding provided an outlet, and on the basis that children create their own play spaces, unofficial sites were appropriated. An example is the concrete undercroft of London’s brutalist South Bank Centre which, despite a 40 year plus love/hate relationship with the Centre’s owners, has become the spiritual home of skate boarding’s, now extensive, London community (Fig. 11).<sup>60</sup> Today over 95 skateboard venues are listed on the group’s London website; the majority are free to use outdoor sites (Fig. 12). The sites are of varying degrees of difficulty, made of concrete, composite or metal and host a thriving subculture of, mainly but not exclusively, teenage boys. Injuries when mastering the skill are regarded as a rite of passage.<sup>61</sup> The South Bank skate park, after almost fifty years, has earned official blessing: it has been allowed to extend along the undercroft and features as a visitor attraction on Trip Advisor.

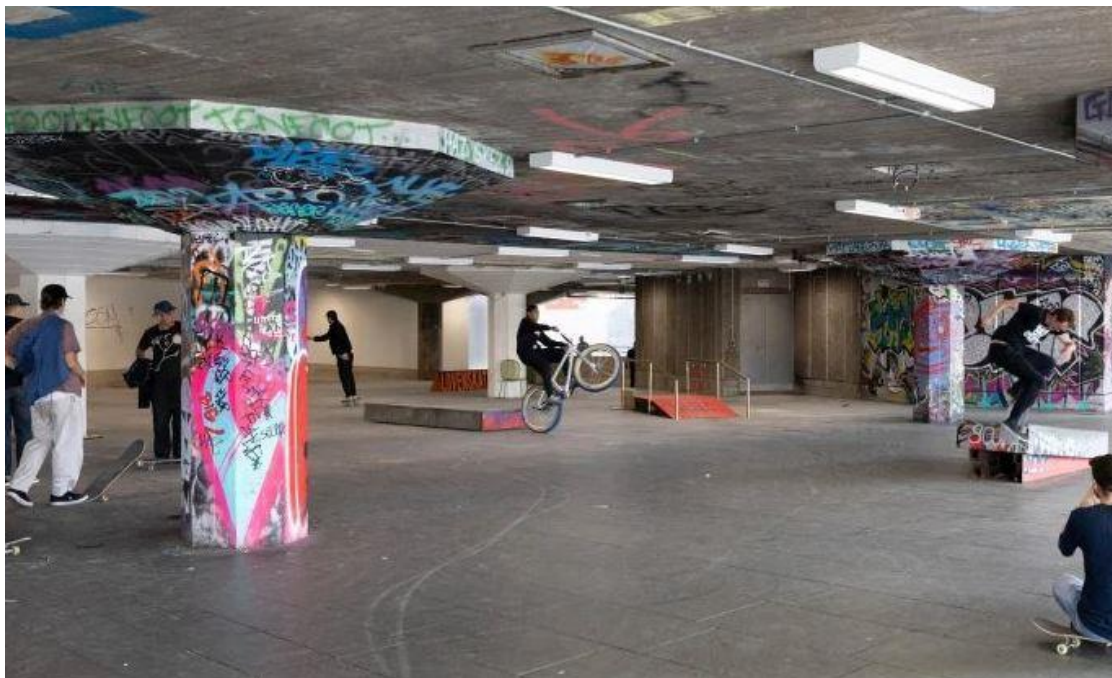


Fig. 11. Refurbished undercroft, South Bank Skate park, 2019, designers Fielden, Clegg, Bradley Studios source: [dezeen.com/2019/08/08/undercroft-skate-park-southbank-centre-london-fielden-clegg-bradley-studios](https://dezeen.com/2019/08/08/undercroft-skate-park-southbank-centre-london-fielden-clegg-bradley-studios).

<sup>59</sup> Potter, Melville and Gill, *Best Play*, p24.

<sup>60</sup> BBC London, *Skateboarding gets a new lease of life*, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=Ls61fy4gF0c>. (accessed 3/08/2022).

<sup>61</sup> *Complete guide to skateparks across London*. <https://www.skateparks.co.uk>. (accessed 30/07/2022).



Fig.12. Crystal Palace Skate park, May 2022. Source: author.

For the interviewees, ensuring their play spaces are safe, but provide a degree of risk, is a challenge. They must create a space that ‘provides excitement, pulls children into play, and has them wanting to go back for more’; it also has to meet the standards of annual ROSPA (Royal Society of Protection of Accidents) inspections required by most insurers. In addition, they have to address local pressure group concerns, for example demands to fence playgrounds, the competing expectations of dog owners and children’s carers, provision of safe path and playground surfaces, managing the urban fox ‘risk’, making planting choices (e.g. avoiding ‘toxic’ yew and prickly *Pyracantha* hedges) as well as ensuring playground accessibility and inclusiveness. Interviewees expressed their frustrations with a risk averse society and conflicting policy documents; set against this was their overall determination ‘not to be forced into sanitising play’.

The play sector must adhere to complex legislation, which includes the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, the Children Act 1989 and 2007, Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007, Data Protection 2018, Environmental Protection Act 2021 and regulations that relate to horticultural management. Staff working with children require regular DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks. Play sites need clear Health and Safety Policies, and regular Risk Assessment of the

site, structures and all planned activities.<sup>62</sup> Guidance issued during the Covid pandemic, which of necessity often changed, compounded difficulties in interpreting the legislation.

An overwhelming concern, for interviewees working in the charitable and NGO sector, was access to reliable funding streams, either through contracts, grants, or donations, which are needed to ensure continued delivery of safe play facilities. Their worries were exacerbated by frequent reminders of the material poverty of some of the families who depend on them. Knowledge of secure funding allows teams to forward plan and concentrate on safe high-quality service delivery. Successful bids to the Big Lottery (established in 2004), London Marathon Charitable Trust and corporate trust funds have encouraged new developments but are time limited and do not ensure continuity of employment or service delivery. Two interviewees who were active professionally at the start of 1980s neo-liberalism recalled job insecurity, redundancies and re-alliances as employers, voluntary organisations and institutions adapted to the market economy; younger interviewees were more positive, they recognised the organisational and financial flexibilities and freedoms the market economy had brought and were less aware of the scars it had left.

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<sup>62</sup> Islington Play Association, *Health and Safety Policy, 2015*, [www.islingtonplay.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Health-and-Safety-May-2015.pdf](http://www.islingtonplay.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Health-and-Safety-May-2015.pdf). (accessed 3/08/2022).



## CHAPTER 2

## THE STATE OF PLAY

**What is the state of children's play in London's parks and public spaces?**

Children's play spaces in London have adapted to change in idiosyncratic and unpredictable ways, with greater and lesser degrees of success. The following are examples of ways in which play spaces from different eras have adapted over time to meet the perceived needs of today's children.

The chronology of Britain's play space design outlined in the introduction has been summarised by Hicks and Hicks as follows<sup>63</sup>: the Monumental period, 1880s-1920s, characterised by swings, gymnasia, metal fences and flower beds, the Social and Natural period, 1920-49, characterised by investment in playing fields, tennis courts, paddling pools and lidos, interrupted by the war time appropriation of parks for allotments, homeless accommodation and anti-aircraft installations, then the Scrapyard period, 1950-70, characterised by adventure and revived pre-war playgrounds. The Super-safe period, 1970-2000, resulted in closure of the lidos, draining of paddling pools replacing water with sand, and the removal of equipment linked to playground injuries. The factors which led to these changes were public spending cuts, media led safety campaigns, an increasingly litigious society, staff redundancies and deterioration in playground maintenance. Design trends since the Millennium, post-dating the Hicks' analysis, requires new descriptive terminology. For this dissertation the terms 'Bounce Back', 'Inclusive' and 'Naturalistic' playgrounds are being used. Bounce Back playgrounds were installed with safety conscious, brightly coloured, off-the-shelf equipment, fenced and with low impact surfaces, (known by landscape architects as KFC playgrounds (K(it) F(ence) C(arpet) an allusion to the take-away fried chicken franchise), Inclusive playgrounds with equipment accessible to all children, including those with disability and more recently, Naturalistic playscapes with minimal play equipment other than sand, stones, streams, and logs.

London's Victorian, Edwardian and later parks and playgrounds have adapted to changing fashions; they are multi-layered, retain features from different periods and with practice can be 'read' in the same way as historic gardens. Park changes provide a measure of its local community's investment in their children, as demonstrated by the first case study Myatt's Fields Park.

Myatt's Fields Park is an example of a 'Monumental' park, it is a small-scale Victorian park with a children's playground dating back to its opening. Change here has been affected by community action. The park was originally part of a 118-acre farm, situated on the Camberwell-Lambeth border, owned by the Huguenot Minet family. Between 1818 and 1869 fields on the farm had been tenanted by the Myatt family, market gardeners famous in South London for their 'Surprise' strawberries and 'Early Victoria' rhubarb. With the advent of railways, the Minet family sold the farm for building development, bestowing 14-acres of land for a park, building a free library, church and

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<sup>63</sup> Judith Hicks and John Hicks, 'Razor blades and teddy bears-the health and safety protocol' in *Children's Spaces*, ed Mark Dudek, (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2005), pp195-213.

church hall as amenities, in the hope of attracting builders and residents to the area.<sup>64</sup> The MPGA undertook the work of setting out the park; it was designed by Fanny Rollo Wilkinson (1855-1951), a suffragist and London's first woman landscape gardener (Figs. 13 and 14). She later designed over 75 gardens for the Association.<sup>65</sup> The Lord Mayor's Mansion House Fund provided £10,000 for the hire of 220 jobless labourers to assist in the laying out of the park. It was opened on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1889 and was one of the first municipal parks to be taken over by the newly formed London County Council. Planting other than turfing was minimal on the opening day.

The park was managed by a Superintendent, with a staff of two park keepers, a carpenter, sixteen garden labourers and a donkey (for pulling the Ransome lawn mower). There was an on-site lodge for the Superintendent. The children's playground had a brick shelter/watch box for the keepers, separate gymnasia and toilets for boys and girls. The playground was asphalted, equipment included 'Giant Strides' swing frames, parallel bars and seesaws. There was a part time gymnastic instructor, Mr Astor, who worked across three parks.<sup>66</sup> The park was requisitioned in World War I as a military hospital, an annexe of the London General Hospital, Camberwell; in World War II, the park housed air raid shelters, trenches were dug, and railings removed; the post war restoration costs were £1747. The original children's toilet block was still in place in 1960.<sup>67</sup>

By 2000 the park, by then managed by cash strapped Borough of Lambeth, had become 'an unwelcoming place, a place where you'd be afraid to go alone'.<sup>68</sup> In 2002 a group of women from the local community took matters in hand and formed Myatt's Field Park Project (MFPP), a stand-alone social enterprise funded initially with £1.5 million from Parks for People and £700,000 from London Borough of Lambeth. The project resulted in landscaping works to re-establish Wilkinson's original park design, to introduce a nature conservation area, to redevelop the children's playground in consultation with local children and their parents, to renovate the Under 5's One o'clock Club building and repair of the Victorian bandstand. Three part-time development posts were funded by Lambeth Council taking the project to 2012 when the second phase of the project began (Fig. 15). The second phase focused on play facilities for older children and young people, and food growing activities. Funding came from City Bridge Trust, the National and Heritage Lottery Funds, London Community Foundation, Tesco and Battersea Power Station Foundation. A partnership between Nike and Jadon Sancho, (England and Borussia Dortmund footballer, born and

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<sup>64</sup> Marie Draper, *Lambeth's Open Space's: An historical account*, (London: London Borough of Lambeth, 1979), pp 50-53.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Crawford, 'Fanny Rollo Wilkinson', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref.odnb/97936>, accessed 11/07/22.

<sup>66</sup> Rebecca Preston, *Myatt's Fields Park : An extended history*, <https://www.myattsfieldspark.info/extended-history.html> accessed 6/5/22.

<sup>67</sup> Draper, *Lambeth Open Spaces*, pp 50-53.

<sup>68</sup> Will Eadson, *Growing a Community: Myatt's Field Park, Lambeth*, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University 2020.

raised in Camberwell) resulted in the creation of an enclosed training pitch, LED lit, with polyurethane surfacing in a shaded area of the park for Lambeth Tigers youth football team.



Fig. 13. Fanny Wilkinson, (1855-1888), Landscape Gardener. Source: Bodleian Library.

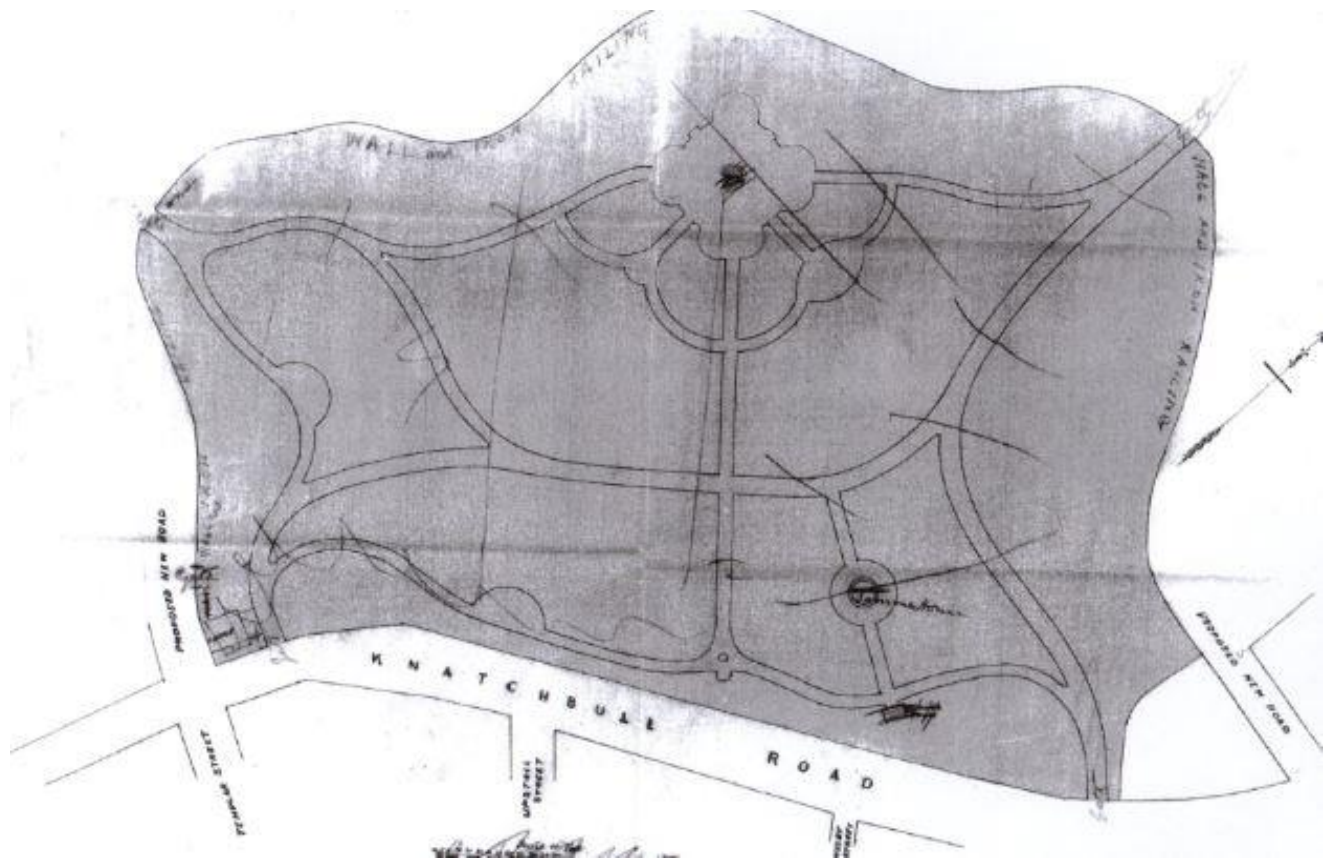


Fig. 14. Miss Wilkinson's annotated plan for Myatt's Field Park, 1888. Source Guildhall Library courtesy of MPGA in *The London Gardener*, Vol 10, 204-5 p38.



Fig. 15. Myatt's Fields Park sign, the Project Group's work and partners. Source; author 2022.



Fig. 16. Nautical theme, junior playground, Myatt's Fields Park, 2022. Source: author.



Fig. 17. Wet Play Zone, Myatt's Fields Park, 2021, source: [greenflagaward.org/park-ummary/?park=854](http://greenflagaward.org/park-ummary/?park=854).



Fig. 18. Volunteers pond planting, Myatt's Fields Park, 2010. Source: [myattsfieldspark.info](http://myattsfieldspark.info).

Lambeth Landscapes, a direct services agency within Lambeth Council now takes responsibility for ground maintenance, the Council provides an annual grant of £24,000/year. The children's play area remains in the same location as in Wilkinson's original plan. It is hedged, infant, junior (nautically themed) and senior play areas are separate but within the same space, allowing children of different ages to help and encourage each other (Fig.16). There is a central water play area with chutes and water hoops, and shaded seating areas for parents (Fig. 17). To one side is the Mulberry Centre, an outdoor classroom; across the park, a wildlife garden and pond (Fig18). A central all-purpose grassed space was advertising visits by the Go Ape Ariel Runway team and a performance of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* (not on the same day). The park has a small café run by an Ecuadorian family; it also sells honey made by the park's bees.

A second park from the 'Monumental' era, Horniman Museum and Gardens, post-dissolution of the GLC, has re-invented itself as an academic institution; it is run as 'a charitable company limited by guarantee'. A large part of its funding comes from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport as Grant in Aid; it operates at arm's length from central government. The site hosts year-round schoolchildren visits to the museum and gardens: pre-school children can attend a weekly outdoor Messy Play programme; playable percussion instruments are placed around the site and crazy golf is set up every summer. The old paddling pool has been drained and is used for ball games.

The museum and gardens occupy the site of Frederick Horniman's old house Surrey Mount on the crest of Forest Hill with panoramic views over London. Son of John Horniman (1803-1893), a Quaker grocer and co-founder of a tea blending and packaging company, Frederick (1835-1906) took over the business in 1869. He travelled widely and built up an eclectic collection of ethnographic material, musical instruments and natural history. In 1888 he opened his collection and gardens to the public for short periods; a purpose-built museum in the Arts and Crafts style, designed by Charles Harrison Townsend was opened to the public in 1901.<sup>69</sup> The same year the museum and gardens, originally 9 acres, were handed over 'to the London County Council as representing the people of London for their recreation, instruction and enjoyment' (Fig.19). Over time a paddling pool was constructed at the site of the park's pond, a putting green, bandstand and children's play equipment were introduced (Fig.20).

Horniman Museum and Gardens made a serious commitment to the environmental studies in 1996 when, as an independent entity, it opened the CUE (Centre for Understanding the Environment) in a building constructed on Passivehaus principles (Fig. 21).<sup>70</sup> The current gardens, maintained by an on-site team, reflect these principles with planting adapted to the changing climate and linked, through child friendly explanation boards, to environmental exhibitions in the museum. The Covid pandemic closed the Museum and Butterfly House (Fig. 22) for long periods. The Museum opened on timed tickets for a short period in the summer of 2021 before closing again for the winter. The

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<sup>69</sup> Horniman Gardens, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing>. accessed 04/06/2020.

<sup>70</sup> CUE at Horniman, [www.architype.co.uk/project/centre-for-understanding-the-environment-horniman](http://www.architype.co.uk/project/centre-for-understanding-the-environment-horniman). accessed 19/07/22.

gardens with their percussion instruments (fig. 23) remained open throughout the pandemic and provided a valued breathing space for the local children and their families.



Fig.19. Frederick Horniman's Garden, 1895. Source: [horniman.ac.uk/history](http://horniman.ac.uk/history).



Fig.20. Plan of Horniman Garden, 2020. Source: [dominiccole.net/project/the-horniman-museum-london](http://dominiccole.net/project/the-horniman-museum-london).



Fig. 21, Centre for Understanding the Environment, Horniman Garden, Forest Hill. Source: [architype.co.uk/project-centre-for-understanding-environment-horniman](http://architype.co.uk/project-centre-for-understanding-environment-horniman).



Fig.22. The Butterfly House, Horniman Garden, Forest Hill. Source: [enthusiasticgardener.com/2020/10/12/Horniman-museum-garden/](http://enthusiasticgardener.com/2020/10/12/Horniman-museum-garden/)





Fig.23. Part of playable percussion installation, Horniman Garden. Source: [externalworksindex.co.uk/entry/134787](https://externalworksindex.co.uk/entry/134787)



Fig. 24. Old paddling pool, now a football pitch, Horniman Garden, 2020. Source: [enthusiaticgardener.com/2020/10/12/Horniman-museum-gardens](https://enthusiaticgardener.com/2020/10/12/Horniman-museum-gardens).

Both ‘Monumental’ sites were set up by prosperous local families with philanthropic intentions, both welcomed children from their inception. Today they continue to engage with issues relevant to their local communities, both sites are active in the Black Lives Matter movement; Horniman is open about its dubious business practices in 19<sup>th</sup> century China tea trade and the museum is planning to return its contested Benin bronzes to Nigeria. Both the Myatt’s Fields and the Horniman sites have strong local volunteer groups, a factor which helps explain their longevity and ownership by their local communities. Both outdoor sites remained open during the Covid pandemic, strengthening local loyalties.

The third case study, representing the ‘Social and Natural’ period, 1920-1949, is the King Edward VII Memorial Park, Shadwell, opened in 1922 by King George V to commemorate his late father (Fig.25). It is in Tower Hamlets in one of the poorest parts of the city, adjacent to the Thames, on the site of a derelict fish market previously owned by the City of London Corporation. Investment in the Park by the Borough of Tower Hamlets declined over a long period into the early 2000s. Its rejuvenation, which is work in progress, is linked to the ongoing Thames Tideway Sewage project which has resulted in major works on the park’s river foreshore (Fig.26). Under a Section 106 agreement, a sum of £3.1 million has been set aside for improvements in King Edward Memorial Park and other local parks as mitigation for the disruption and damage caused by the Tideway ground works.

The original laying out of the park was delayed by World War I; its design was simple, two low terraces parallel to the Thames foreshore overlooking 8 acres of playing fields and the decorative northern airshaft of the Rotherhithe Tunnel.<sup>71</sup> The park originally provided two children’s playgrounds, one at each end, a bowling green, club house, hard tennis courts and a paddling pond. All were in varying states of disrepair when a masterplan for the park was drawn up in 2016 (Fig.27). A pre-plan audit noted additional problems: unsafe access and traffic noise caused by the A13 road, poorly demarcated entrances, anti-social behaviour in the park and littering.<sup>72</sup>

On a June 2022 visit to the Park, the Tideway project was well underway. Spoil excavated during sewer construction was being shipped, from a pier on the foreshore, to Rainham Marshes where the project is creating a wildlife biodiversity site. An Inclusive, small, wheelchair accessible children’s playground for under 8s has been constructed using mitigation monies. Situated on a mound in the southwest corner of the park, near the foreshore, it has a minimalist wide slide (Fig. 28), a wheelchair accessible roundabout and ramp approach contained within a brick ‘stockade’. The surrounding ‘Park Park’ art installation requires good literacy skills possibly beyond those of an average 8-year-old, (Fig. 29). A hundred yards away in the grass play area there are colourful basket swings and a slide which pre-dates the current masterplan (Fig. 30).

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<sup>71</sup> London County Council, *London’s Parks and Open Spaces*, pp 46-48.

<sup>72</sup> *The King Edward Memorial Park Master Plan 2017*, [https://170615\\_final\\_KEMP\\_masterplan\\_report\\_lores.pdf](https://170615_final_KEMP_masterplan_report_lores.pdf) documents. accessed 15/07/22.



Fig. 25. King Edward VII Memorial Park Shadwell, disused pavilion, June 2022. Source: author.

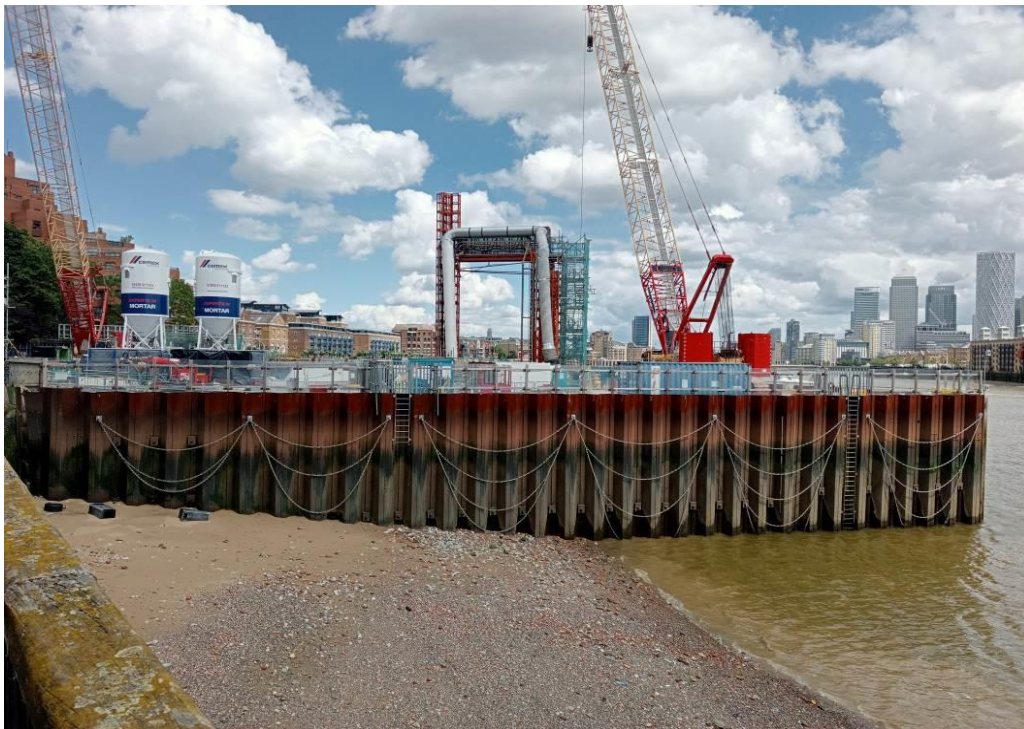


Fig. 26. Tideway pier on Thames foreshore of King Edward VII Park, shipping spoil from the Big Sewer construction down river. The Tideway project mitigation monies have funded the King Edward VII Memorial Park playground reconstruction project. Source: author.

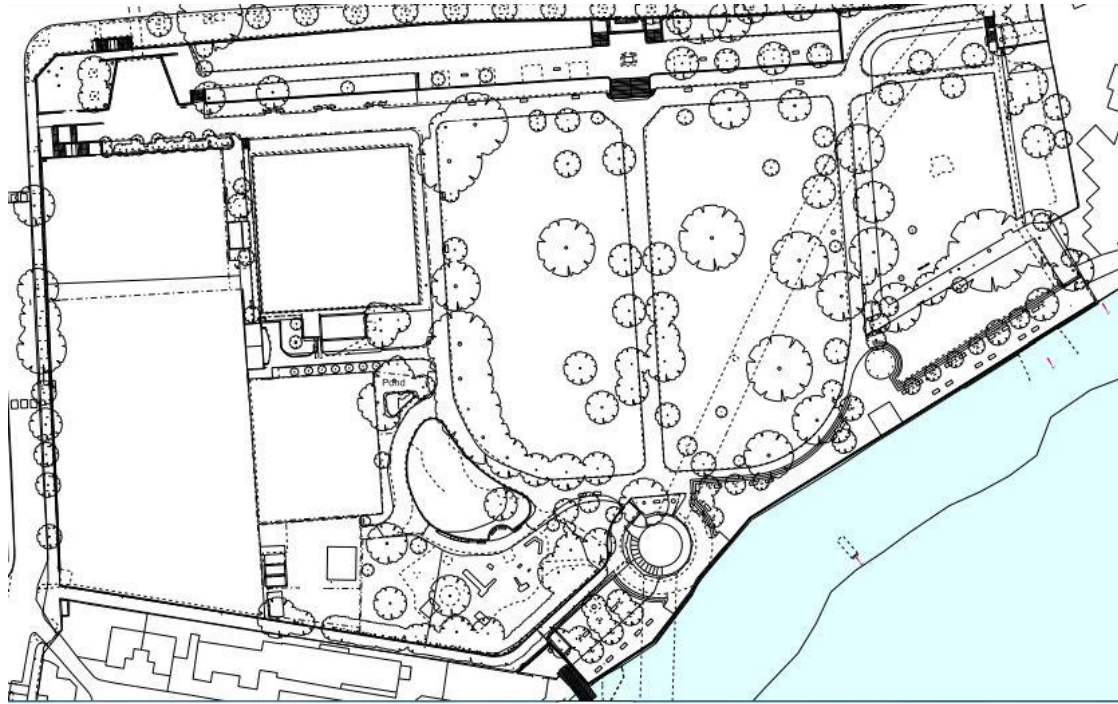


Fig.27. Plan of King Edward VII Park, Shadwell, Tower Hamlets. The Tideway Project children's playground is in the semi-circular area lower left centre. Source: KEMP Shadwell Master Plan pdf.



Fig.28. Two person slide in the Inclusive Tideway playground, King Edward VII Memorial Park Shadwell. June 2022. Source: author.



Fig.29. Play wall with descriptions of traditional games, Tideway playground, King Edward VII Memorial Park, Shadwell, 2022. Source: author.



Fig.30. Older grassed playground, King Edward VII Memorial Park, Shadwell. Source: author.

There is a play space for older children on a vertical wall to adjacent to the sports courts.<sup>73</sup> Apart from grass cutting, horticultural maintenance in the park was minimal. The park is in Shadwell ward where 25% of the population is under the age of 15 (compared to the 19% London average), residential density and deprivation levels are high and levels of income below the median. The Tideway project has been delayed by the Covid pandemic by about 18 months; it is due for completion in 2025 by which time it is hoped there will be a catch up in the planned park renewal projects including more facilities of the promised facilities for children's play.<sup>74</sup>

The 'Scrapyard' period reached its peak between 1950-1970, but is still alive in London's adventure playgrounds, despite many challenges. The Glamis Road Adventure Playground in Shadwell is an example, it is about 200 yards north of King Edward Memorial Park, shares the same demographic and is a potential beneficiary of the Tideway mitigation monies. Glamis Road Adventure Playground was the first of its kind in Tower Hamlets; it was established by the GLC in 1967 on the site of the old East London Hospital for Children in Shadwell (1868-1963) (Fig. 31). The hospital was built following the 1866/67 cholera epidemic which badly affected East London. The epidemic was one of many drivers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century public health and open space reforms which included Bazalgette's construction of London's original Victorian sewage system.<sup>75</sup> The playground thrived initially but, after the loss of the GLC, funding dwindled; it eventually closed in 1992. The site became derelict and was overrun with cats.<sup>76</sup> It re-opened in 2002 after pressure from the local community, it has a local management committee, and is now run as a charitable trust. Activities at the site include structures for climbing, swinging and performing, shelter making, bonfires, cooking, helping in the playground's allotment, a children's café and holiday schemes (Fig.33). The site is fenced, has a wooden cabin with an office, a kitchen, and an area for indoor activities (Fig.34). Opening hours are restricted; when open there is always a playworker present.

Candace Lewis, the playworker and manager since 2019, stressed 'this is a playground not a park'. She explained the realities of running the site: supervising ongoing structural maintenance, finding an insurer, securing funding, formal inspections, competitive fearless children (mainly boys), managing a staff of ten and finding trustees willing to engage. She described the challenge of being the site's first female manager, in what has historically been a 'man's job', and a child's early comment 'this job ain't for you, miss'. The site had closed during the Covid pandemic; the playworker team made regular phone calls and distanced doorstep visits during lockdowns.

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<sup>73</sup> King Edward Memorial Master Plan, Section 5.4.5.

<sup>74</sup> *Tideway Project Report 2020/21*, <https://www.bazalgette-holdings-limited-interim-report-and-financial-statements-3>. accessed 19/07/22 .

<sup>75</sup> Valentine Swain and Lilian Goodall, 'East London Hospital for Children, Shadwell, 1868-1963. Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children, Shadwell', *British Medical Journal* (1968), pp 696-699.

<sup>76</sup> Nils Norman, *The Architecture of Play: a survey of London's adventure playgrounds*, (London: Four Corners, 2003) p41.



Fig.31. East London Children's Hospital, Shadwell (1866-1963), the earlier building on the site of Glamis Road Adventure Playground. Source: British Medical Journal 1968 p.696.

**SCP**  
**SHADWELL COMMUNITY PROJECT**

**Precautions for Covid-19**

Shadwell Community Project  
 Glamis Adventure Playground  
 10 Glamis Road  
 London E1W 3EG  
 Telephone: 020 702 8301  
[info@shadwellcommunityproject.org](mailto:info@shadwellcommunityproject.org)  
[www.shadwellcommunityproject.org](http://www.shadwellcommunityproject.org)

What measures are Glamis APG taking to minimise the risk from Covid-19?

- Our playground is now open-access again, however we are limiting the number of young people to 50 persons.
- We have a 2-bubble system in place in order to help maintain social distancing.
- Children should be registered on our website if they aren't already!  
<https://www.glamisadventureplayground.org/>. There will be limited facilities to register onsite but if at all possible children should be registered before.
- As children and staff arrive on site, they should wash their hands thoroughly. There are a number of hand sanitisers outside and children will be regularly told to use these and wash hands.

Fig.32. Covid Precautions on notice board, Glamis Road Adventure Playground, June,2022. Source: author.



Fig.33. Glamis Road Adventure Playground, Shadwell, June 2022 Source: author.



Fig.34. The Cabin, Glamis Road Adventure Playground, Shadwell, June 2022. Source: author.





Fig.35. Book exchange, Grove Adventure Playground, Lambeth, July 2022. Source: author.



Fig.36. Entrance gate, Grove Adventure Playground, Lambeth, July 2022. Source: author..

Regaining child and parent confidence after long periods of isolation was proving a slow process. 'The children have been slow to come back; their mothers want to come with them' (Fig. 32).

Grove Adventure Playground in Brixton also has a chequered history. It began life as part of Angell Town GLC Amenity (1970-72), moved to Elem Road Open Space (1972-1986), then on to Gordon Grove where it is a colourful fenced playground wedged between the railway line, a scrapyard, and garages (Figs. 35 and 36). It operated under different names and funding streams until it closed in 2015. Loughborough Junction Action Group oversaw its re-opening in 2017; it is now part of Building Young Brixton Consortium and has a lease on its present site extending to 2031. Like Glamis Road Adventure Playground, it has a female manager, Ashlee Aderele. In a recent you tube interview she explained the struggle to obtain funding 'we can get funding for projects like food for the kids, or for providing sessions for children with special needs, and we are surviving but there is very little money just for play'.<sup>77</sup> The Playground operates as a charity with support, at present, from BBC Children in Need and Lambeth Community Fund<sup>78</sup>.

In November 2021 Play England commissioned an update into the state of adventure playgrounds in England and found that the majority (67/126 ie 55%) were in London, eight London playgrounds had been lost since the 2017 audit . Reasons for their closure included structural disrepair and playworker redundancy following local authorities' budget cuts. In 2017 50% of London's adventure playgrounds were run by the local authority this had fallen to less than 16% (11/67) by 2021 with voluntary and community groups taking over the financial and management responsibilities.<sup>79</sup> Adventure playgrounds have stayed true to their core principles and made fewer concessions to style trends than other play spaces. They offer children a local playground, with benign adult presence, where they can learn about responsibility and creativity through freedom in play. Their survival for the foreseeable future looks likely to depend on community activism and imaginative bids for short-term funding for individual projects.

The 'Super-safe' parks era (1970-2000) was in retrospect driven by a sequence of events: a 1975 medical report of playground injuries received widespread press coverage; this was followed by media campaigns which exacerbated parental anxiety. Local authorities, by then strapped for funds had a cover story when making reductions in play provision, (which was, in any case, no longer a statutory requirement). A typical response was to remove high risk equipment and materials, for example monkey bars, witches' hats and asphalt surfaces, and replace them, if at all, with less risky wood and rope structures and impact absorbing surfaces of sand, bark and rubber-based materials.

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<sup>77</sup> Harriet Grant, 'It's heart breaking: adventure playgrounds disappearing across England', *The Guardian*, [https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/mar/10/its-heart-breaking-adventure-playgrounds-disappearing-across-england?CMP=Share\\_ios-App\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/mar/10/its-heart-breaking-adventure-playgrounds-disappearing-across-england?CMP=Share_ios-App_Other). accessed 20.07.2022.

<sup>78</sup> *Grove Adventure Playground*, <https://groveadventureplayground.com>. accessed 22/06/2022.

<sup>79</sup> *Play England: Report into Adventure Playgrounds in England*, <https://www.playengland.org.uk/Play+England+Report+into+Adventure+Playgrounds+in+Winter+2021-22>. accessed 20/07/2022.

A modest example of a Bounce Back playground is in King George V Playing Field, Hanwell in Ealing Borough. The playing field, only 1.2 acres in size, was earlier known as Poor's Piece; it had been set aside for the poor, in compensation for loss of grazing rights, after the 1816 Hanwell enclosures.

Later it was turned into rented allotments, the monies raised were used to buy coals for the poor of the parish. As an NPFA recreation ground, it was intended to commemorate King George V after his death in 1936; World War 2 intervened, delaying its opening until 1951. Its original children's playground was terraced, had metal equipment and an asphalt surface.<sup>80</sup> By 2009 the equipment was rundown, and the play surface had been changed to wet poured rubber (Fig. 37). Adam White and Andree Davies, landscape designers, then working for the environmental charity Groundwork London, were invited to transfer their RHS Gold Medal winning natural playscape to the Hanwell Playing Field (Fig. 38). The original hard landscape fenced playground was transformed into an unfenced grass and sand play space using earthworks, woodland planting and equipment made from natural materials (Fig. 39).<sup>81</sup> It was immediately popular, won community support, and has worn well over the intervening years (Figs. 40 and 41).



Fig.37. Playground King George's Field, Hanwell, pre-makeover 2009. Source: courtesy Adam White.

<sup>80</sup> Anon. *Hanwell Parks*, [https://www.ealing.gov.uk/info/201136/park\\_in\\_the\\_borough\\_/664/hanwell\\_parks/3](https://www.ealing.gov.uk/info/201136/park_in_the_borough_/664/hanwell_parks/3). accessed 21/05/2022.

<sup>81</sup> *George's Field Playscape, Hanwell, London Borough of Ealing*, [www.davieswhite.co/portfolio/georges-field-playscape/](http://www.davieswhite.co/portfolio/georges-field-playscape/). accessed 21/05/2022.

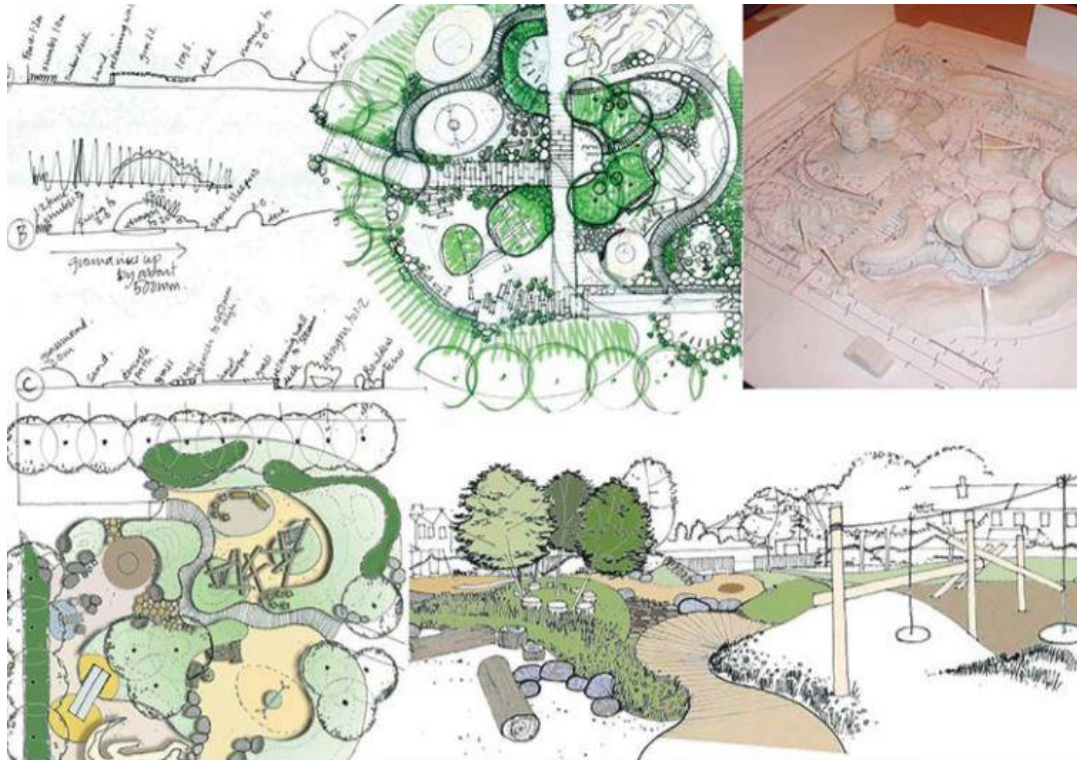


Fig.38. Conceptual drawings for the Naturalistic playground, King George V Field, Hanwell, 2010. Source: courtesy Adam White.



Fig. 39. King George V playground Hanwell post makeover, 2010. Source: courtesy Adam White.



Fig.40. King George V playground, Hanwell, June 2022. Source: author.



Fig.41. The Big Slide, King George V playground, Hanwell. Post exam A-level students, June 2020. Source: author.

A similar sand-based safety transformation took place in 2010 at the Horniman Triangular Playground (once part of the then LCC managed Horniman Museum complex, transferred to London Borough of Lewisham in 1976). Vegetation on the sloping site was semi-naturalised, and its old paddling pool was drained, filled with sand and construction toys; a spider's web climbing wall was installed for older children. The older metal climbing frames remain on site (Fig.42). In Royal Greenwich Parks under 8s playground, a similar more extensive area has been created with sandy hollows, water pumps, naturalised planting and wooden play equipment. It has a nautical/farm theme and was funded by the London Marathon Charitable Trust. Both the Greenwich and Horniman Triangular sites have small cafes and toilets.



Fig.42. Horniman Triangular Playground managed by London Borough of Lewisham. Mixed styles, naturalised planting, retained metal equipment with low impact surface, alongside an old paddling converted to a sand pit. The sand serves as low impact surface for the wooden climbing frame. July 2022. Source: author.

The Bounce Back response in London Borough of Southwark's Burgess Park, a post-World War 2 park developed along the site of the old Surrey Canal and blitz damaged properties, has been different. Its original playground, which opened in the 1970s, was situated at the edge of the park. The playground had 'street cred' across southeast London because of its high Wicksteed type slide, notorious for inflicting friction burns, and for the fearless local children. The playground was eventually closed because of safety concerns and has been relocated to Chumleigh Gardens, a site in the centre of the park near the café and other amenities.<sup>82</sup> The new play area which opened in 2012 is spacious, fenced and clinical, the impact absorbent surface is laid in brightly coloured circles,

<sup>82</sup> *Burgess Park Masterplan, 2010*, <https://modern.gov.southwark.gov.uk/documents/s79358>. accessed 20/06/2022.

parallel scooter tracks are marked across the playground's mounds and hillocks (KFC re-modelling on a grand scale) (Fig.43). A long-tunnelled slide accessed by scrambling up a grassy slope dominates the play area where there are netted wooden climbing masts and concrete table tennis stands. The aim of the park's 'Master plan 2010' was to create a family friendly 'day destination park'; progress has been slow, there was considerable resistance to the park initially, homes and industry were lost, but 50 years on, Burgess Park is seen to be succeeding. The Woodland Play area on the west of the park has designer wooden climbing frames, aesthetic versions of rougher adventure playground structures (frontispiece). Everchanging graffiti enlivens a nearby tall fence (Fig.44).



Fig.43. New over 5s playground, Burgess Park, Southwark, a landscape architect rendering, 2014. source: [davisia.wordpress.com/2014/04/11/burgess-park-over-5s-play-area-walworth-london](http://davisia.wordpress.com/2014/04/11/burgess-park-over-5s-play-area-walworth-london)

Burgess Park is also home to a state-of-the-art BMX track, opened in 2012 and achieved through grass roots activism. BMX bike riding, popular with 7-14-year olds in south east London, was well established on grass tracks in Brockwell Park, Lambeth and Bird in the Bush Park, Peckham (Fig.45) Parents and the Peckham BMX club pushed for a competition standard arena. A Southwark Olympic legacy project, with funding from British Cycling resulted, after 6 years of planning, in the new track; it is now the base of the Peckham BMX Club with activities open to everyone from beginners to Olympic medal standard cyclists (Fig.46).



Fig. 44. Graffiti on boundary fence in Burgess Park, Southwark, June 2020. Source: author



Fig. 45. Original Peckham BMX Club track, Bird in the Bush Park, circa 2018 Source: [ianvisits.co.uk/articles/londons-pocket-parks-bird-in-the-bush-park-se15-47517/](http://ianvisits.co.uk/articles/londons-pocket-parks-bird-in-the-bush-park-se15-47517/)





Fig.46. New home of Peckham BMX Club opened in 2012 in Burgess Park, Southwark. June 2022. Source: author



Fig. 47 Dinosaurs installed 1856 in Crystal Palace Park, June 2020. Source: author.

'Day destination' play attractions for older children in London include free skateparks (95 across greater London, some converted from decommissioned paddling pools), and five BMX tracks. Boating in eight parks requires payment, but visits to the dinosaurs at Crystal Palace Park's boating lake, a childhood rite of passage for London children, are free (Fig.47).

A recently opened play area, recommended by three interviewees as an example of a Naturalistic playground is Elephant Park, created on the site of the Heygate Estate in North Southwark. The history of Elephant Park's development is complex and demonstrates the dilemma's local authorities face in meeting their community's housing, shopping and leisure needs in a profit based neo-liberal world. The Heygate Estate was designed for the GLC in the late 1960s by Tim Tinker, in the Brutalist style, and when completed in 1974 management transferred to the of London Borough of Southwark. It comprised 1214 council homes, mainly flats, with good transport links to central London. It was initially a desirable estate; by 2000 the adjacent shopping centre was dilapidated and the housing stock although structurally sound was in decline.<sup>83</sup> In 2007 Southwark Council, keen to regenerate the area, but without the financial means and with no recourse to government funds, sold the 9-hectare estate through a third party, Southwark Land Regeneration, to the developers Lend Lease without proper tenant consultation. It was sold in the knowledge that only 82 of the proposed 2704 new homes would be available for social housing. Despite protests about procedural irregularities tenants were either 'decanted' to other parts of Southwark or evicted. The tight local community created over the estate's 40-year life was dispersed; the estate was demolished in 2013.

Elephant Park, the 2-acre centre piece of the new development was completed by landscape architects Gillespies (also involved in the Thames Tideway project) in 2021; construction of the adjacent shopping centre, restaurants and high-rise housing is underway. The park has lawns, rain gardens, a water-playscape, climbing nets and swings. There are waterfalls, fountains and rock scrambles over porphyry stone; climbing is encouraged. The planting is naturalistic, twenty-seven mature plane trees were retained from the Heygate site and provide the park's cool green canopy.<sup>84</sup> The park has an element of fantasy with unexpected sculptural interpretations of elephants dotted around the site (Fig. 48). It has quickly become a 'day destination' for parents with delighted (or alarmed) young children (Figs. 49, 50 and 51).



Fig.48. One of many model elephants the children's playground, Elephant Park, Southwark, June 2020. Source: author.

<sup>83</sup>Anon *Heygate Estate, London, England*, <https://brutalism.online/brutalist-buildings/13-uk/489-heygate-estate-london-england> . accessed 25/07/2022.

<sup>84</sup> Anon. *The Park within Elephant Park*, <https://www.udg.org.uk/directory/awards-finalists/elephant-park> accessed 24/06/2022.



Fig.49. Elephant Park, Southwark, landscape architect rendering. Source: [gillespies.co.uk/projects/the-phase-01-park-at-elephant-park](http://gillespies.co.uk/projects/the-phase-01-park-at-elephant-park).



Fig.50. Water and rock landscape, Elephant Park, Southwark, June 2022. Source: author.



Fig.51. Playground sited in conserved Heygate Estate trees, Elephant Park, Southwark, June 2022. Source: author.



Fig.52. Protestors pressing for judicial review, Elephant and Castle, Southwark, July 2019. Source: [35percent.org/posts/2019-07-03-why-we-are-challenging-elephant-and-castle-plans-in-court](https://35percent.org/posts/2019-07-03-why-we-are-challenging-elephant-and-castle-plans-in-court).

Despite the parks popularity the local community remains bitter about the lack of transparency in decision making, the gentrification of the area and delays in retail business and housing allocation. The community's 'Up the Elephant' campaign continues its fight for social justice (Fig.52).<sup>85</sup>

Children have access to authentic, less contrived natural surroundings in London's wetland areas at Barnes, Walthamstow and Woodberry Wetland; all three were part of London's early Victorian reservoir system. The Wetland areas are stopping off points for migratory birds and nesting areas for native species. All three allow free access to children and families, two have simple playgrounds and all offer free 'nature' activities to children during school holidays; one hosts a term time weekly pre-school group. Islington hosts two ecology parks, Gillespie Park and Ecology centre on a 2.8-hectare plot once the site rail marshalling yards and Stephens ink factory and Camly Street Natural Park, adjacent to Regent's Canal on the site of the Great Northern Railway's old 'coal drops'.<sup>86</sup> In Ruskin Park, Camberwell, the Mayor of London's Greener City fund has created a wildlife pond for invertebrate and wild birds with a dipping platform alongside (Fig. 53).<sup>87</sup> All are examples of initiatives across London which are engaging children in the natural world through play (Fig.54).

Identifying a representative sample of London's children's playgrounds and park-based activities, as the case studies demonstrate, is difficult. Despite town planners' best intentions, London's playgrounds are eclectic, their locations opportunistic and funding erratic. Four themes emerge from the case studies. Firstly, when a playground is under threat its survival depends on activists in the local community working in partnerships consisting of councillors, Friends groups, youth workers, parents and children themselves. Secondly, playground survival over the past thirty years has depended on business acumen, inventiveness, awareness of current trends, and the ability to make successful bids to lottery and corporate funds. Thirdly, infrastructure and property developers continue to play a role, whether through mitigation monies, or by including playgrounds in their masterplans; there are parallels between the Minet family's Myatt's Fields church, library and park 'amenities' to attract house builders and buyers in the 1880s and the shops, restaurants and park 'amenities' promised to buyers in Lend Leases plan for the Elephant Park in the 2020s. A recurring theme is how to maintain developers long term commitment, the Minet and Horniman families maintained their links to the parks across subsequent generations; it is uncertain whether Lease Lend and Tideway will do the same. Finally, there has been a return to the value, recognised by Froebel 200 years ago, of encouraging children's play in the natural world and teaching them of its fragility.

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<sup>85</sup> Jerry Flynn, *Fight for Social Housing at the Elephant*, <https://www.pilc.org.uk/blog/fighting-for-loca-housing-at-the-elephant/> accessed 26/07/2022.

<sup>86</sup> Anon, *Gillespie Park and Ecology Centre*, <https://www.islington.gov.uk/sports-parks-and-trees/nature-reserves/gillespie-park-and-ecology-centre>. accessed 30/06/22.

<sup>87</sup> Anon. *Update on Lambeth's Biodiversity Action Plan 2019-24*. <https://beta.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-25/lambeth-biodiversity-action-plan-update-2020.pdf>. accessed 2/08/2022.



Fig.53. Newly created pond with dipping platform in Ruskin Park, Lambeth. Source: [friendsofruskinpark.org.uk](http://friendsofruskinpark.org.uk).



Fig.54. Sign in Gillespie Ecology Park, Islington, June 2020. Source: author

There is a long tradition of Street play in London children's lives. In 1935 2000 children were found guilty of playing in London's streets, an indictment on the adults and the government of the day. The Street Playground Act 1938 allowed local authorities to 'close suitable streets at certain suitable times in order that they be used as children's playgrounds.' The Road Traffic Act 1960 reinforced the provision and by 1963 there were 750 street play areas (Fig.55); by the mid-1980s play streets had died out. London Play received Big Lottery funding between 2008-11 and 2014-17 and has championed the Play Street initiative since then. Today more than two thirds of London's 33 boroughs participate. In 2016 'School play on the Streets' was set up; in 2019 London's Car Free Street Day saw 385 streets open for play (Fig.56).<sup>88</sup> London Play continues to actively promote the initiative but the reality for children is that, at best, there is one afternoon every two to four weeks when they can safely play outside their home or school in a traffic free street under volunteer supervision. Street play as remembered by their grandparents' generation involved neighbourhood children devising long running games, negotiating roles and quarrels, gangs (predatory but, in the main, safe), ball games, noise and subversive behaviour, which with the best of endeavours is undeliverable when a street has to return within hours to through traffic and parked cars. Not all is lost, in today's version of street play, neighbours, parents and children get to meet, friendships develop, and community spirit improves.

London Play's other projects include supporting adventure playgrounds by running 'build in the wild' weekend camps where young people learn new construction methods. They have a joint project with Royal Parks running weekly play sessions in Regent's and Greenwich Parks, and are pioneering intergenerational play in elderly care homes in partnership with Hallmark Care Homes, using older peoples' memories to create shared play gardens. During the Covid pandemic, London Play adapted their street play work to Project Play Street Carousel where a suitcase of art materials travelled between the residents of eight streets in four boroughs. Residents were invited to share play memories and street games. A book of games was compiled from the responses and a film made of the project. The London Play team, four workers in total, developed Emergency Play Parcels which were distributed through adventure playgrounds and food banks in areas of high need; over 5,500 families benefited. Their Neighbourhood Play Havens project supported twelve adventure playgrounds; when the playgrounds re-opened post lock down, they worked to develop guidelines to ensure this could be achieved safely.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> London Play, our history, <https://londonplay.org.uk/about-us/our-history>. accessed 6/06/2022.

<sup>89</sup> Caroline Togut, London Play, personal correspondence , August 2022.



Fig. 55. Play street in East London 1960s. Source: [pedestrianliberation.org/2012/07/25/playstreets](http://pedestrianliberation.org/2012/07/25/playstreets).



Fig.56. Play street, Ladywell, Lewisham, 2019. Source: [ladywell-live.org/2019/05/19/reclaim-your-street-from-traffic-its-playtime](http://ladywell-live.org/2019/05/19/reclaim-your-street-from-traffic-its-playtime).



Spaces for play in housing estate developments remain an essential part of planning applications. Visits to six housing estates were made as part of this study. Play areas in Angell Estate in Lambeth and the Hillcrest Estate in Lewisham, both considered model estates in the 1970s when opened, were empty. The play equipment was structurally sound, but the adjacent landscaping on both sites was in need of repair (Fig. 67). Similar problems are reported in Alexandra and Ainsworth Estate in Camden, a large public housing scheme designed by Neave Brown and landscaped by Janet Jack. The park area, completed in 1979, was designed as a playable landscape with sunken outdoor rooms and is Grade 2\* registered. It became under used, there was lack of maintenance and planting was overgrown; play equipment had been removed and not replaced.



Fig. 57 Over 5s play area Hillcrest Estate, Lewisham, damage to hard landscape, litter, and torn mypex surface, August 2022. Source: author.



Fig. 58. Restored play area, Alexandra and Ainsworth Estate, Camden, 2019. Source: erect architecture.



Fig.59. The Streetz Football cage, Angell Estate, Lambeth, June 2022. Source: author.



Fig.60. Under 7s play area, Martineau Estate, Tower Hamlets unused by young children because of drug dealing in the immediate area, year 11 students are taking a break from exams, June2022. Source :author

Heritage Lottery money received in 2015 has helped restore sightlines to the play area by cutting back vegetation, has replaced equipment and improved access to the park area (Fig.68); a 10-year maintenance plan was devised.<sup>90</sup> It is uncertain whether playgrounds in less prestigious housing schemes would be considered worthy recipients of Heritage Lottery funding.

Angell Estate, Lambeth and Peckham Rye Park, Southwark have up to date, well maintained outdoor gym equipment suitable for young people and adults and state-of-the-art caged areas for football/basketball training, all were in use on recent visits (Fig.69). On an Islington estate, a newly constructed, cage fenced playground was locked. In a well-cared for playground for under 7s in Martineau Estate, Tower Hamlets a group of year 11 students 'hanging out' between exams explained parents did not allow their young children to play there as a nearby house was used by drug dealers, guns had been used in the past and the area was considered unsafe (Fig. 60). Their story was corroborated by adult workers at the nearby Adventure playground. The Elephant Park play area, surrounded by high rise flats, was the only estate play space visited where parents and

<sup>90</sup> Mayor of London, *Making London a Child Friendly City*, (London: GLA, 2019) p 84

children were relaxed, and the atmosphere was welcoming. After school football games were seen on two estates (next to 'No Ball Games' signs), an attempt by a small girl to ride her scooter on the pavement was thwarted by cars half parked on the pavement.

These are only anecdotal observations; it became clear during site visits that the history and present-day usage of nominated 'doorstep playable' and 'local playable' spaces, deserve their own detailed study and analysis. There are likely to be wide variations depending on local perceptions of neighbourhood safety and community engagement.

## CHAPTER 3

### NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

#### What next in play development?

Interviewees were asked about likely developments in play provision and to make predictions about best- and worst-case scenarios. (The interviews conducted in June/early July 2022, predated concerns about rapid rises in winter energy costs in 2022/23).

Worst-case scenarios included concerns that new austerity measures would squeeze local authority budgets further, that Heritage, Big Lottery and corporate funding would reduce and that some charities would go into administration. There were fears that more adventure playgrounds would close, and maintenance/safety levels decline. Three of the interviewees spoke of possible redundancies and how this would impact on their careers. The adventure playground leader was concerned that, in future, there would be no role models for both boys and girls, that fewer people would be willing to volunteer, that learning about play leadership would not be passed on and that people would forget the benefits play brings to children. The horticulturalists were worried about the future play landscape, the sustainability of planting schemes in naturalised play areas, losing plants to climate change, strategies to reduce water use and the urgent need to re-think rainwater storage methods.

Best case scenarios were the creation of play spaces that could be explored, that these were 'playful landscapes' rather than playgrounds, that there were places to play ball with plenty of grass, that there was community 'ownership' and support from local volunteers. The adventure playground leader's best-case scenario was 'we are still here and thriving'. The London Play team hoped lessons learnt in the pandemic about access to play and its mental health benefits would not be lost. The historian hoped that it would be possible to introduce children to games played in the past, an interest in tradition that was reflected in London Play's pandemic collection of oral play histories, and the Tideway playground's wall recording games played by earlier generations.

The Mayor of London, in *Making London Child Friendly* spells out an ambitious best-case scenario, he would like to see children out and about in the city, confident and moving around independently. He acknowledges the health impacts of today's relative immobility, concerns about traffic, air pollution, youth violence and resulting parental anxiety.<sup>91</sup> His approach is multi-pronged: setting up a multi-agency Child Obesity Task Force, capital investment in improvements to cycling and walking networks (Mini-Hollands in Enfield, Kingston and Waltham Forest) and using Housing Design Supplementary Planning Guidance reviews to address management disputes. There is now legal provision, following a debacle on Lillian Baylis Estate, Lambeth, to ensure that play spaces in mixed tenure developments are open to all.<sup>92</sup> The London Boroughs of Hackney and Islington have embarked on estate regeneration initiatives which have pedestrianised streets, introduced cycle

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<sup>91</sup> Mayor of London, *Making London child friendly*, pp11-16.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, pp27-32.

lanes, small play and shared ball game areas, pushchair/wheelchair friendly pavements and a re-configuration of street parking; he hopes these initiatives will be copied elsewhere.

Both the *Child Friendly City* initiative and Gill's influential *Urban Playground* have looked beyond Britain for ways to improve children's mobility and play, quoting case studies from cities as diverse as Recife, Paris, Tirana, Tel Aviv and Vancouver which demonstrate the value of joined up planning.<sup>93</sup> As the history of London's playgrounds indicates these are hard lessons for a city which, since the demise of the GLC has had a laissez-faire approach to play provision and has depended on the creative tensions between grass roots activism, philanthropy, national lotteries and corporate finance rather than central planning. Borough-based planning has been weakened by lack of funding and being tied to the modified Fields in Trust Six Acre Standards, based on 1930s lifestyles. Mapping of the different types of play sites is being carried out in the current borough Play Strategy reviews, a site usage audit would be a useful adjunct to planning and budget management.

Policy documents are hesitant about factoring in the work/life pressures of today's London families where both parents work (driven by high housing costs) and acknowledging the impact this has on children's play and mobility patterns. Families depend heavily on pre-, after-school and holiday play schemes and full-time nursery places for pre-schoolers; there are few weekday opportunities to 'play out' near home. At weekends and public holidays, a visit to a 'day destination' park allows parents time to pause and take stock. In 'safe' parts of London 'local playable spaces' are still social meeting points and are rated on Mums net and other websites, but as the site visits in this study demonstrate, there are wide geographical variations in their use - not all play areas are considered safe or reputable for an unaccompanied woman and her pre-school child, or for the unsupervised play of 8-10-year olds.

Nevertheless, access to a nearby safe outdoor space remains the ideal; as long ago as 1878 a Miss M J Vernon, member of the MPGA, published a paper in *The Sanitary Record* in which she said,

Parks are not all we want. They must of necessity be far apart, and we should have open spaces near together. Parish gardens, they might be called, where the invalid and aged would creep out of the close alley and dreary court to bask in the sunshine; where the child-nursemaid could safely be left to mind the little ones and older children would enjoy happy hearty play. How our decent poor would hail such gardens.<sup>94</sup>

A recent less emotive description suggests 'the play space should be stimulating and overlooked to enable passive surveillance, incorporate greenery and form part of the surrounding neighbourhood, be safely accessed from the street by children and young people independently'.<sup>95</sup> The aspiration for accessible, safe, green spaces and the re-assertion of children's right to move safely around their neighbourhoods are fundamental rights supported by UNCRC. They are to be welcomed, but neither the Mayor's manifesto nor Gill's writings provide convincing evidence that increasing children's

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<sup>93</sup> Gill, *Urban Playground*, pp 89-102.

<sup>94</sup> Brown, 'The making of urban 'healtheries' 'p16.

<sup>95</sup> Mayor of London, *Making London child friendly* p42.

mobility is an effective solution to the legitimate fears of violence and aggression, which contribute to the restricted horizons of London's children. Fears which are grounded in data on stab injuries in young people from the major East London trauma centre and in ongoing media reports.<sup>96</sup> The Victorian endeavour to provide a safe urban environment for its children, from infancy to adulthood, continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Over the years threats to children's health and welfare have included war, pandemics, road traffic, pollution and street violence, adults have tried with varying degrees of success to mitigate the worst outcomes. The reality is each generation faces new problems and must make time-based solutions, recognising that these may come from lessons learnt in the past.

## Conclusion

London's children have in the past managed to define their own spaces despite adverse circumstances: by creating junk playgrounds, make-do skate parks, ad hoc ball games, bike and scooter tracks, often to the annoyance of neighbours, park keepers, and planners. Planners would do well to listen and respond to children's 'noise' in whatever way budgets, circumstances and pandemics allow. Landscape designers make much of children's participation in adult-led planning exercises, but they should also observe and check with active/activist children on the ground and 'in the hood'. Ideally they should incorporate natural play spaces, which children can define as their own, into their master plans, be less precious about the aesthetics of their designs and remember their role is as facilitators in (not directors of) children's play; this may involve putting professional egoism, class, race and gender based assumptions to one side. As the grass roots challenges at the Elephant and Castle demonstrate, planners must show respect for the views of long-standing communities and show humility and patience in working partnerships; as a cautionary tale it has taken fifty years for south east London to 'own' and take neighbouring Burgess Park to its heart.

A lesson learnt from the study of 'Theories of Play' is the power of children's imaginations to create their own play narratives and their ability, when given freedom (in short supply over the past two years) and benign neglect, to create their own irregular, messy and subversive play spaces in which they can freely express their generation's energy, aspirations and inventiveness. Economic predictions for Britain in the short and medium term are grave, their impact on all aspects of children's lives is uncertain; the consolation is that children's basic play demands have been consistent overtime. This review reminds us that today's children, like their Victorian predecessors, still seek out relatively inexpensive sand, water, movement, risk and ball play and, although engaged in the digital world, are still intrigued by the natural world.

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<sup>96</sup> Paul Vulliamy, Mark Faulkner, Graham Kirkwood, Anita West, Breda O'Neill, Martin Griffiths, Fioona Moore, Karim Brohi, 'Temporal and geographic stab injuries in young people: a retrospective study from a UK major trauma centre', <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/8/10/e023114> 2018.

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