

# Enabling play friendly places

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Cover image: A brick spillway is articulated by steps, niches and platforms to provide for walking, climbing and sitting at Stawell Steps by Monash Architecture students and Japanese artist Hiroshi Nakao (Image: Peter Bennetts)

## Abstract

A balanced mix of play activities is critical to a child's development. However for many children in Australia, as elsewhere in the developed world, the proportion of active, outdoor play is declining due to many interconnected environmental and social factors. This has significant adverse physical and mental health implications for young people, the adults they become and their communities. The environments we design can influence these environmental and social factors and contribute to making a place more conducive for play.

'The right to play is the child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life.  
No community can infringe that right without doing enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens.'  
- David Lloyd George 1926 (Brown and Patte 2012)

# Part 1: Introduction

Playing is essential to help children and adults face the challenges of life. Without it a child's ability to realise their fullest potential is diminished (Brown 2014).

The key messages behind this paper are that:

- Play is a child's right (United Nations 1989);
- Play can contribute to people's lives in many ways, even after they become adults;
- Play is innate in children (Crain 2010) and will happen unless strenuously deterred. Potential settings for play are not limited to dedicated play areas, such as parks or in schools, but also include areas that children occupy as part of their day to day life, like their homes, streets, shopping centres;
- A rich and varied mix of play activities that includes outdoor play is essential for a child's development, yet many social and environmental factors discourage children from playing outside (Simeon Packard in Play England 2008b);
- There is an increasing trend towards indoor, *screen-based* play and a decline of *active* play in Australia and elsewhere, which has significant mental and physical health implications (Planet Ark 2011, Whitebread 2012);
- Each child's optimum mix of play activities is subtly different and is informed by their tastes, gender, age, culture and their parents or carers' concerns and values, among other things. Thus there is no 'one size fits all' solution;
- The decisions made by architects, planners and allied professionals can sometimes inadvertently contribute to the deterrents to play, particularly outdoor play;
- Appropriate design can help 'let the play come out' (Longridge and Mitchell, 2014). This can be achieved by ensuring a wider range of places can be interpreted by children and their carers as being playable and by diminishing the difficulties in getting to dedicated play areas;
- Creating play friendly places contributes to social sustainability: 'Within the built environment, this means creating the physical, cultural and social places that support people's wellbeing and encourage a sense of community' (EDG 78 NP: Palich and Edmonds, 2013).

This paper is based on the author's practical experience on urban design projects that have sought to equip urban environments to better meet children's needs, and associated research in this field.

## 1.1 The scope of this paper

This paper examines the importance of outdoor play and the design of outdoor spaces such as streets, squares and private open spaces that are not dedicated to playing but represent potential settings for play. It looks at the *playability* of these spaces and how they might be designed so that the people who experience them may enjoy the many benefits of play. The second part of this paper provides background on what play is, its significance for children and communities. The third part explores how built environments influence the mix and amount of children's play. The final part of the paper looks at what architects, planners and built environment professionals can do to contribute to creating, 'play friendly' places that are rich in the cues that children and their parents/guardians (carers) will interpret as making play possible, legitimate and appealing.

It is intended to provide an introduction to playability in the built environment - presenting it as a way of thinking rather than a detailed manual. It is not envisaged the design strategies outlined in this paper will themselves *make* children play outside, they are instead intended to ensure that children, their carers and the wider community are more likely to see their surroundings as inviting play.

Although dedicated play areas are important this paper is not about designing them or other dedicated 'children's places'. Consequently it is not aimed at practitioners who specialise in play spaces, but rather at a wider audience of designers, allied professionals and policy makers who influence the qualities of the public realm in order that more of the settings of urban life are conducive to play or, at least, are less deterring to play.



## Part 2: About play

### 2.1 What is play?

The term play encompasses a very wide range of activities that children and young people do when adults stop telling them what to do. It is more than just the obvious games or activities that adults recognise as play and can be social or solitary and involve vastly different levels of activity. The settings for these activities can be as diverse as the activities themselves.

Play is diverse, fluid and can fit into multiple categories or move between categories (adapted from City of Marion 2008):

- Individual play can include observing, sitting, thinking, pondering, daydreaming, visualisation or other autonomous activities;
- Social play might involve interacting with others. Such social play activities can include team games, role-playing, problem solving, imitation, creation and other related activities;
- Active play can include ball games, running, sliding, jumping, swinging, rolling, hopping, spinning, bouncing, crawling or other physical activities;
- Cognitive and creative play provides the opportunity for imagination and problem solving, weighing up and considering the relationships between things. Activities can include digging, shaping, constructing, demolishing, exploring, discovering and other related activities.

All children have a unique and diverse set of play needs, according to health and ability, tastes, age, gender, culture, what they see other children or adults doing and what is happening in their lives.

The mix and balance of these different types of play has been described as a child's 'play diet' (Simeon Packard in Play England 2008b).

### 2.2 The importance of play

Playing is central to children's physical, psychological and social well-being (Play England 2008a) and enhances their chances of thriving and fulfilling their potential as the adults they will become.

'Play is the way that children learn about themselves and the world they live in. In the process of mastering familiar situations and learning to cope with new ones, their intelligence and personality grow, as well as their bodies' (Whewey and Millward 1997).

A rich, varied 'play diet' with a good mix of different types of play has a range of benefits across many aspects of a child's development. These benefits also contribute to the wellbeing of the wider community, a goal 'increasingly recognised by various organisations, including government and community groups as being of key relevance to people's lives' (Palich and Edmonds, 2013).

However recent years have witnessed a rise of indoor, screen-based play at the expense of other forms of play (Clements 2004) particularly outdoor, active play (Carver and Crawford 2008). This has reduced levels of activity and unbalanced many children's play diet to the detriment of children's wellbeing, resulting in an increase in adverse health outcomes associated with inactivity (Gray 2013). For example a Play England study (2012) found that a child's body mass index is directly proportional to time spent in front of a screen and inversely proportional to hours of outdoor play.



Figure 1 and 2. Play will happen wherever children see an opportunity  
(Image left: Gregory Dunn [www.stoneybutter.com](http://www.stoneybutter.com); Image right: courtesy of Judy Schwartz Haley)

The contribution that play makes to wellbeing extends beyond children. Being active in childhood has lasting benefits (Carver et al 2014). An American study (Magnusson 2013) found that young adults who identified as playful were more adept at dealing with stress than their less playful counterparts. At a community level, the links forged between children through play can greatly help community cohesion. The more social networks children have in a neighbourhood, the greater the confidence parents have in the safety of that area. Play can support community cohesion amongst adults as parents establish networks through their children (Play England 2008a). Palich and Edmonds (2013) quote Kelly et al (2012, p 5) finding that 'being socially and culturally connected is so important for health and wellbeing that, "for many people, improved relationships are a much more realistic path to a better life than increased income".

## Part 3: The playability of the built environment

The extent to which an individual finds their surroundings appealing or unappealing for any particular activity is a function of many physical and psychological variables that are bound together in a complex relationship (Porteous 1977). Consequently both need to be considered to understand the way children see the world around them and the messages they receive from their surroundings.

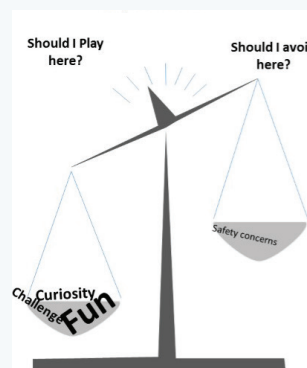
Children see the world differently to adults, they draw different conclusions from it and have different sensitivities. In their report to the City of Greater Bendigo in Australia, Rudner et al (2011) found that the relationship between children and their surroundings was influenced by the built form character of that place and also the time, activity, and the other people within specific spaces. The emphasis that children and young people gave to these variables depended on a complex mix of 'personal characteristics, experiences and images of places, as well as the experiences and images of others in terms of how spaces and places are socially constructed materially and in the imagination' (Rudner et al 2011).

Children's perceptions are much more variable and more influenced by imagination than adults (University of Sheffield 2010). Consequently different people might see the same place and draw very different conclusions about it, depending on their own subconscious interpretation of the factors of which they are aware. For example, a child may see a ruin and find it appealing as somewhere to explore and a catalyst for their imagination; was it a castle? However their parents are more likely to interpret the ruin primarily in terms of the risks it poses, giving less emphasis to their curiosity (Figure 3).

Somewhere like this may be interpreted differently...



...by a child



...than her carer



Figure 3. Children and adults will pick up on different cues and give them different weights when weighing up the playability of a place (Images: Author)



### 3.1 Deterrents to outdoor, active play

A number of social and environmental factors can deter outdoor, active play.

#### 3.1.1 Social deterrents

##### Competition from other forms of play

Children are particularly motivated by fun and will be drawn to wherever they consider the most fun place to be. A Planet Ark study (2011) revealed that a preference for indoor screen time was noted as the equal most important deterrent to children playing outside. Although children see health benefits as important, they are more attracted by 'unhealthy' activities if they are more fun than 'healthier' activities (Hemmings 2007).

##### Perceptions of safety/risk

Planet Ark (2011) found that risk played a significant role in the decline of outdoor play, noting that '72% of respondents played outside every day as kids compared to only 35% of their children and the average child spends over 600% more time watching television than exercising'.

##### Diminished Independent mobility

For children (particularly younger children) to play, approval and permission of a carer or older sibling may be particularly important (VicHealth 2015a). For this reason both the child and carer typically need to agree that the environment encourages play for it to attract play activity. However carers are becoming increasingly reluctant to approve. 33% of the respondent parents of a 2011 Planet Ark survey indicated that safety concerns were a barrier to outdoor play today, compared to only 9% who said it was a barrier when they were young. This fear of the public realm and resulting reluctance

to allow street-based play has contributed to a significant reduction in children's independent range in recent years (Gibbs et al 2012, VicHealth 2015a), greatly limiting available play choices.

##### Carers' constraints

Given the heightened concern about letting children out unsupervised, outdoor play and independent mobility becomes vulnerable to carers' constraints. Veitch et al (2007) noted that other demands on parents' time or being 'too tired' to take children out to play also diminished play opportunities.

##### Societal priorities

In many developed societies there is a perceived distinction between play and learning, where schooling is considered serious and play frivolous. In such societies parents seek to focus their child's attention on education rather than play (Whitebread 2012). These societal norms and the peer pressure on parents who challenge them (Vic Health 2015b) results in less 'unstructured time' for children as compared with those in the past (Active Healthy Kids Australia 2014).

#### 3.1.2 Physical deterrents

Play can be deliberately denied by specific rules or physical barriers that exist to ban play from places where it is inappropriate. However it is more often subtly deterred when access to places that may otherwise invite play is difficult, unappealing, time consuming or perceived as unsafe for children or their carers. These environmental cues are often the unintended result of a range of disconnected design choices that have the cumulative effect of deterring play and reinforcing those deterrents.



Figure 4 and 5. Signs

(Image left: Lydia, 2008 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lydiashiningbrightly/3030594722/>;  
Image right: Gregory Dunn [www.stoneybutter.com](http://www.stoneybutter.com))

Environmental characteristics that tip the balance of influences against outdoor play are:

- Car orientated neighbourhoods where a car is needed for almost every trip. These generate a high volume of traffic and feature wide, fast and busy distributor roads that create barriers and unsafe roads, leaving little scope for independent trips that may allow incidental opportunity to play (Figure 6);
- Residential streets where the houses are isolated behind high walls or dominated by garages (Figure 7). These provide limited passive surveillance, increasing the perception that a place is unsafe and unwelcoming, particularly for younger children (Freeman and Tranter 2011);
- The trend towards larger houses that occupy a large proportion of a lot (Hall 2010) reduces the opportunity for safe unsupervised outdoor play in private open space (Figure 8);
- Exposure to pollution or ultra-violet radiation.



Figure 6. Areas divided by busy roads are one of the ways vehicle usage inadvertently restricts a child's independent range. (Image: Orderinchaos via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 7. A disconnection between houses and the surrounding public realm increases perceptions of a place being unsafe (Image: Author).



Figure 8. Small lots occupied by large houses 'squeezes out' room for outdoor play in private open space (Image: Orderinchaos via Wikimedia Commons)

Other deterrents to play include vandalism, dog fouling, litter, discarded syringes and the presence of older children or adolescents whose behaviours and activities can be seen as intimidating (Play Wales 2012).

### 3.2 Irrepressibility of play

Despite these deterrents to outdoor active play, children are very resourceful in finding a way to play unless it is extremely and aggressively deterred. In a Swedish study by Van der Burgt and Gustafson (2013), children found creative ways of playing in high density urban areas that weren't designed for the families that ended up living there. These children compensated for the lack of variety of play spaces by turning 'places not for play' such as private amenity focussed courtyards in the neighbourhood into 'play spaces'. The study cites Tom, who along with his friends, memorized the door codes for each apartment building courtyard in order to play in more than just their own. Thus, they 'create space for play' (Van der Burgt & Gustafson 2013).



## Part 4: Play friendly environments

This section outlines some key place characteristics that allow children and their carers to see more of their surroundings as 'playable'.

Given that a balanced play diet demands access to a variety of play experiences and different children will have different needs and tastes, a 'play friendly' place needs to offer a wide variety of play opportunities.

These opportunities need to be where the children are, and not isolated in places that they cannot easily or frequently access (i.e. distant areas to which they have to be driven). Consequently even the best play area does not alone make its neighbourhood play friendly.

Play friendly places are those that offer a variety of appropriately safe and welcoming play choices. These include spaces primarily intended for other purposes – streets, gardens, footpaths, street furniture – which can also be rich in incidental opportunities for play with appropriate design. These are places that present fun challenges, are catalysts for the imagination, minimize parental and carer concerns and contribute to the accessibility and usability of dedicated play and recreation areas.

As a propensity to play is not solely determined by a child's surroundings, this paper does not suggest that creating such places will invariably result in a more balanced play diet; however it will help ensure that the built environment is not the problem. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to identify how built environment design professionals may change attitudes directly, there are a number of design characteristics we can give places that will make them seem more fun and not prohibitively risky. These are touched upon in the remainder of this paper.

### 4.1 Characteristics of play friendly places

Play friendly places invite play by:

- **Providing a catalyst for imagination.** Providing children with surroundings that are rich in cues that stimulate their imagination allows them to create meaning for what they see. These cues might evoke things that are a big part of their lives (their home and family structure, trees, dogs, cats, etc.) or capture and inspire their imagination (their imagined home, fairy habitat, castles, dragons etc.). Imagination can also be nurtured by providing loose materials for play such as 'flowers, leaves, gumnuts, sand, soil, pebbles, twigs, branches and logs that can be used for imaginative and creative play' (City of Launceston, n.d.).



Figure 9. Sculpture that provokes the imagination and exploration, is playable and speaks of the industrial heritage of a creekside suburb in inner Melbourne (Image: Lee-Ann Joy).



Figure 10. Warin (wombat) in City Square, Melbourne, was designed and made by Des McKenna to be of a size and a material that invited touch and facilitated children to clamber all over it (Image: Editor).



Figure 11. Sonic play feature in Christchurch, New Zealand (Image: Author)

- **Stimulating the senses.** This can be achieved by interactive features that offer a range of sounds, textures, colours and smells.
- **Providing opportunities to explore interests and abilities.** Allowing children opportunities to set and meet low risk challenges will assist children to explore their capabilities and gain a sense of satisfaction about their relationship with their surroundings (and maybe show off!). This requires providing catalysts or props for interaction. This need not be play equipment but might include interventions such as retaining walls terraced to be low enough to jump off (Cover image and Figure 12) and playable public art that inspires children when they see other children using it. In Figure 11 (above) the challenge was producing a pleasant tune from the sonic play feature.

- **Providing respite and comfort for children and carers.** This can be achieved, for instance, with seating that overlooks playable features in multiple shaded, high amenity settings. This allows carers to see their children and sit and chat as well as allowing children to rest, minimising the potential for discomfort or tiredness to deter play or bring it to a premature conclusion. In this case, social sustainability is supported by combining 'the design of the physical realm with design of the social world' (Woodcraft et al in Palich and Edmonds, 2013).
- **Reassuring carers.** Alleviating *play unfriendly* characteristics, such as perceived risk from strangers, a lack of passive surveillance, high traffic volumes (Appleyard 1981) or fast traffic (VicHealth 2015b), will change the balance of influences and help reassure carers that playing is a good idea. This can be achieved through such measures as barriers that stop children running onto a busy road. It might also be achieved by changing the behaviours that cause the risk through measures such as slowing traffic down (traffic calming – Refer Section 4.2.2.). Note: when traffic calming measures are co-ordinated with other measures to increase the appeal of walking, passive surveillance can be enhanced, putting 'eyes on the street' and diminishing 'stranger danger' which is a major concern for parents (VicHealth 2015a).



Figure 12 (left). Changes in topography are one way of providing a challenge to be overcome, Heller Street Park & Residences by Six Degrees Architects (Image: Patrick Rodriguez)



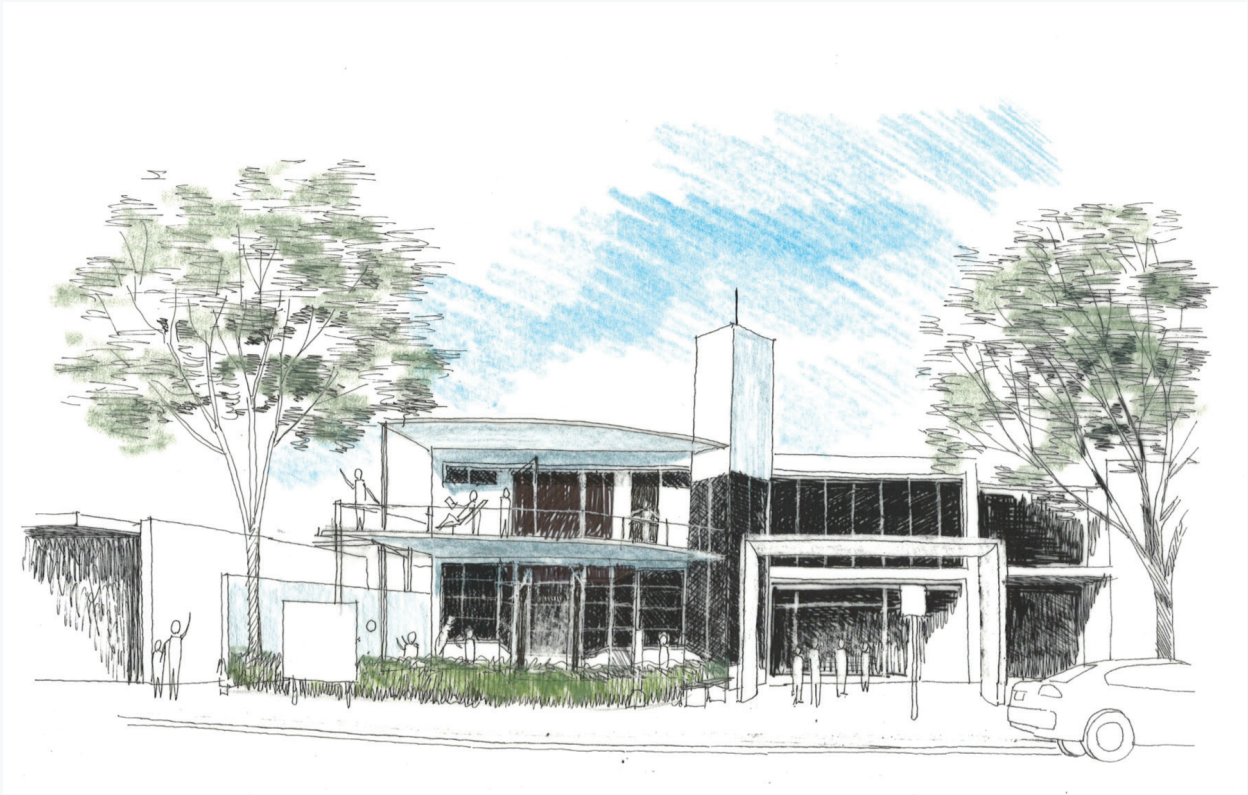


Figure 13. Hamilton Arts Precinct Concept design. The proposed redesign of the library incorporates an outdoor play area that allows children to play outside but is only accessible from inside the library, offering reassurance to parents/carers who might also visit the library while their children play (Image: Author).

- Providing access to nature.** Nature was the medium within which we evolved and was for most of human history our classroom (White 2004). Allowing people to experience a place's flora and fauna, and diurnal and seasonal changes, brings with it a range of benefits including motor fitness, balance and co-ordination, and imagination (Fjortoft 2004, Louv 2008). Access to nature engages children because it is constantly changing, provides opportunities for them to manipulate their environment and the medium to take challenges (Figure 14).
- Integrating play with other functions in the public realm.** Elements such as signs, streets, paving materials and retaining walls, intended primarily to serve another purpose, can also complement the range of locally available play opportunities with appropriate design (Figures 15 and 16).



Figure 14. Play in nature can inspire children's interest in the world around them. It stimulates the imagination as well as provides opportunities to develop skills. (Image: Jason Tyndall - Nature Play SA)



Figure 15. Playful traffic control seats in Christchurch, New Zealand (Image: Author).





Figure 16. Careful choice of materials and presentation at the renewed Waterloo Youth Family Community Centre, by Collins & Turner with City of Sydney, facilitate the established use of the area as a skate park (Image: Richard Glover).

- **Responding to a diversity of perspectives.** Ensuring that a place can be looked on through diverse eyes and interpreted broadly as playable can be achieved by creating a wide variety of opportunities and places that children can occupy. These should be designed to provide choices that enable the child to interact with and/or be seen by peers, or play privately, depending on what they find most fun at the time or find an alternate setting for play if a favoured one is occupied.
- **Ensuring play accessible features are easy to find and access.** Locating play compatible features where they are visible and can be easily and safely accessed from areas of significant pedestrian flows gives more opportunity for spontaneous play (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Birrarung Marr, Melbourne - A variety of shapes, sizes and arrangements of boulders allows ample opportunities for people to sit in their own groups and interact with the space in a variety of ways, adjacent to, but not interrupting pedestrian flows (Image: Author).



## 4.2 Opportunities to make places play friendly

This section explores a number of key areas for enabling play: the interface between play areas and the wider world, the layout and design of streets, the relationship between houses and their surroundings and the distribution of private open space within a house lot.

### 4.2.1 Interfaces with play areas

Allowing play to safely escape designated play areas will help diffuse play and widen the range of choices and experiences available. One of the means of achieving this is locating all those elements of play equipment that are required to be fenced for safety behind 'fuzzy edges' (Play England 2008a). This means using boundaries that are less tightly drawn around play areas and playable areas to include loose fit, open spaces (Figure 18) and ensuring those edges that have to be provided are not just defined by fences but include, for instance, changes of level and hedges.



Figure 18. An example of loose fit space surrounding the play area, Birrarung Marr, Melbourne (Image: Author)

### 4.2.2 Street layout and design

Streets are literally the most accessible shared space for many people.

A walkable environment that allows children safe access over a relatively large range will provide the best chance of a child being able to independently and easily access areas rich in play opportunities, increasing the chances of finding one that they are inspired by. Pedestrian friendly layouts are also considered to be one of the strategies for supporting social sustainability objectives (Palich and Edmonds 2013). Personal mobility and a child's independent range can be enhanced through physical design (Carver and Crawford 2008). Techniques to make a place more walkable include:

- Aligning pedestrian friendly streets to adjoin, or allow access to, open spaces, natural features and water bodies. This may improve the visibility of these features and hence their surveillance as well as making them easier to access;
- Site planning to allow highly connected grid-like streets that facilitate traffic distribution and minimise the need to concentrate traffic in busy roads. Providing multiple alternative routes through an area also enables street closures for events and parties. Such temporary transformations provide an opportunity for play and for strengthening a sense of community cohesion;
- Installation of significant tree canopy and understorey planting;
- Inclusion of pedestrian shortcuts that help ensure pedestrian connectivity is greater than vehicular connectivity. This can help make it relatively more convenient to walk or cycle than drive, as found in a study of UK housing estates (Wheway and Millward 1997)
- Provision of continuous footpaths that are separated from vehicle movements, relatively direct, wide enough to accommodate streetside activities such as hopscotch or pavement chalking without interrupting pedestrian flows;
- Design for slow vehicular speeds that minimise vehicular appropriation of the street and facilitate greater sharing of space;
- Adequate lighting;
- Consideration of shade and visual interest;
- Provision of a range of street furniture that provides the props for walking and resting such as seats, directional signs, bubblers.

Designing streets that embody these characteristics can make them places to be rather than just spaces to pass through. In such places play becomes possible and other aspects of social connectivity are supported. This change of priorities in street design has informed the 'woonerf' approach to design in the Netherlands that has been widely adopted throughout Europe (Marcus and Sarkassian 1986). This street type has been demonstrated to widen the options for street play and increase the propensity for children to choose street play (Eubank-Ahrens 1985, Play England 2008a). (Refer Figure 19 and text box).

Interruptions in the continuity of the vehicular surface, by narrowing the road, changes of surface material or direction or vertical deflections have the effect of diminishing the perceived dominance of the road and vehicular priority for pedestrians and drivers alike (Figures 20 and 21). 'Pause places' created through variations, either in lot line or road pavement edge, gain space for landscaping - inviting pedestrians of all ages to stop within a pleasant environment and break up what may otherwise be a prohibitively long trip.



Figure 19. Woonerf-type street in Abbotsford, Victoria (Image: Author).



Figure 20. Spaces like this Perth thoroughfare connect two roads with a pedestrian shortcut that also provides opportunities for play, enhances amenity and helps to make walking relatively more attractive than using a car (Image: courtesy of DLA (Aust)).

## Woonerfs

Woonerfs, literally "living streets" are roads that have been designed to incorporate devices that simultaneously slow vehicular traffic and encourage pedestrian usage. They are legally defined and designed so that drivers relate to other users as having equal priority. The design reinforces a sense that walking pace is the most practical travelling pace and eye contact is required to establish priority. Woonerfs are shared by pedestrians, cyclists and slow moving vehicles (Figure 19). While allowing through movement, they generally do not have a defined and dedicated roadway and require careful vehicular manoeuvring to pass through. They feature extensive landscaping and often include seats and tables, creative street furniture, chalkboard walls, water features, sand pits or robust sculptural features that also provide catalysts for play.

Amos Rapoport (1987) found that complexity and visual interest also favoured walking and deterred vehicle traffic. This conclusion is shared by Jan Gehl (2010) who points to its contribution in creating a 5km/hr environment as opposed to a 50km/hr environment. 5km/hr environments are spaces that attract occupation and are most interesting and rewarding when passed through at walking pace.

Given such environmental stimuli have a greater influence on children than others in the community, this paper suggests that comfort, richness and complexity as well as 'traditional' considerations of distance and footpath width will contribute to increasing children's walkable range and hence the likelihood of finding an appealing play opportunity.



Figure 21. Traffic calming measures in Turnpike Lane Langham-Road, London, minimise the vehicular dominance of the street after Sustrans Street Design work (Image: Sustrans ©Sustrans)



### 4.2.3 Relationship between dwellings and their surrounds

Domestic architecture can support the extension of children's range into the surrounding public or shared realm by creating a sense of engagement between dwellings and the street. Ensuring garages and crossovers do not dominate the street face (Toderian 2014) facilitates passive surveillance. This can be achieved by orientating habitable room windows, entries or porches over a street-facing front yard. Such relationships between buildings and open space can also facilitate the supervision of children and provide adequate space for significant landscaping that contributes to the amenity and interest of a street. Areas less than five metres in depth are unlikely to become appropriated for car parking.

Low front walls and visually permeable property boundaries to the street or surrounds will help extend children's visual catchment into front gardens (Figures 22 and 23). This will enhance the visual complexity and variety of stimuli and increase awareness of potentially uncomfortable and scary experiences such as which gardens have dogs in them (Rudner et al 2011). Such fences also facilitate the passive surveillance of the public realm which can diminish the perception of crime and further encourages use (Jutras 2003).

Where a requirement for solar access into open space requires that the private open space adjoins the street, the need for privacy and the need to facilitate passive surveillance can conflict. This can be reconciled through a change of level or use of a mediating semi private space (Figures 22 and 24). Vehicular access through a rear right of way, particularly if it is short and necessitates slow speeds, can provide a robust communal environment that is ideal for informal social and sport activities.

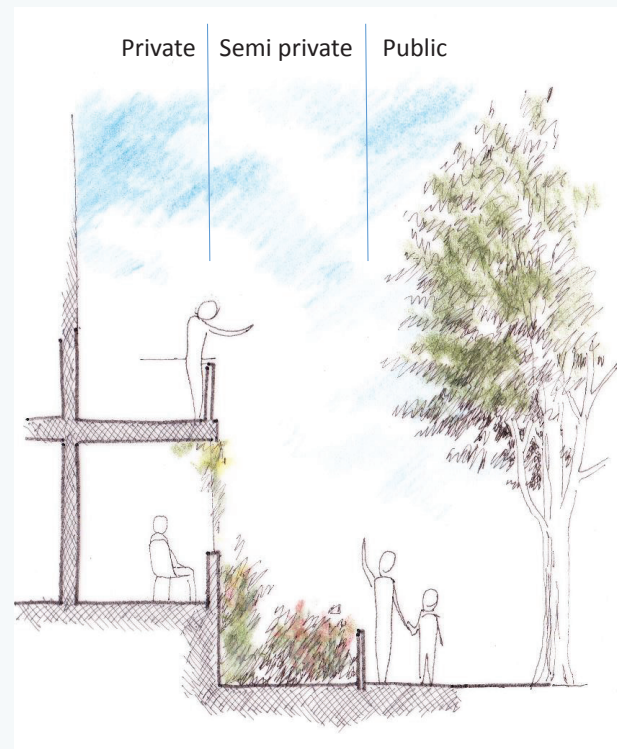


Figure 22. Semi private spaces (Image: Author).



Figure 23. The relationship between the houses and surrounds illustrated in Heller Street Park & Residences by Six Degrees Architects provides opportunity for passive surveillance and engagement with the shared realm. (Image: Patrick Rodriguez).



Figure 24. Fairfield Hacienda house by MRTN Architects provides a mediating wall between the house and the street offering greater privacy near the house. Note although surveillance of the street is reduced, this arrangement still allows for some contribution (Image: Peter Bennetts).

#### 4.2.4 Open spaces within a house lot

Meeting outdoor play needs within a lot requires provision of private open space that receives direct sunlight and can be managed to offer habitat value for people and companion animals. This is particularly important to meet the needs of young children and complements the opportunities available to older ones.

Locating the house or apartments to the front of the lot and protected outside area to the rear will provide a secure area for children and pets. For spaces dedicated to a particular dwelling this secluded back area should be directly accessed from a living room via a covered,

protected area for storing play equipment/muddy boots and adjoin other secluded back areas as part of perimeter blocks to ensure a balance of privacy and security (Bentley et al 1985). This will also facilitate a green 'core' of more significant landscaping than would be possible with scattered open spaces (Figure 25).



Figure 25. Perimeter block illustrating some techniques for increasing the playability of adjoining public and private spaces (Image: Author)



#### 4.2.5 Transitional spaces

Play will colonise the spaces available to it and in any community there are often significant areas of land that are either between uses or not permanently in use. This land can provide play opportunities to supplement those of more formal play areas and create unique opportunities for children to play/interact with their surroundings (VicHealth 2014). The temporary use of such spaces can contribute to the social infrastructure, in the process enhancing social sustainability (Palich and Edmonds 2013). Examples include temporary play streets (Figure 26) and vacant space interventions such as those created by Gap Filler in Christchurch, New Zealand (Figure 27). Fallen trees left in situ (Figure 28), once made safe, create an opportunity for children to see natural processes at work (Play England 2008a).



Figure 26. Play Streets, temporary street closures for play, provides positive and safe play experiences and reinforces a sense that play is a legitimate and valued activity. (Image: Play Streets Australia, a program of CoDesign Studio)



Figure 27. Gap Filler's experience of finding temporary uses to enliven vacant lots in Christchurch, New Zealand, has created a wide range of opportunities for children and adults to play. (Image: Gap Filler <http://www.gapfiller.org.nz/gap-golf/challenge/>)

Figure 29. (Right) Children participating in the creation of an 'Outdoor lounge and Art Space' in Christchurch, New Zealand, through a participatory design process in collaboration with Youthtown (Image: Gap Filler <http://www.gapfiller.org.nz/mar-27-rock-on-eastside/>)



Figure 28. Felled tree made into a play feature in situ (Image: London Play).

#### 4.3 The process of creating play friendly environments

Enabling the potential for playability in a place requires the collaboration of people at all levels of design as well as those people who may potentially play there.

##### 4.3.1 Involving children and adolescents

A participatory design process that engages children, and particularly adolescents, in the design and implementation process of public or shared facilities encourages a sense of 'ownership' over the resulting open spaces, communicates that their views are respected (Geason and Wilson 1990) and contributes to social sustainability by deepening connections between people to others in their community and the environment they share (Palich and Edmonds 2013). This increases the likelihood that the space and their intervention becomes embedded within the social landscape of the surrounding community and decreases the likelihood of misuse or vandalism. Gap Filler used a participatory design process for their transitional spaces in Christchurch, New Zealand (Figures 26 and 29).





Figure 30. Birrarung Marr concrete terraces and steps by Urban Initiatives for the City of Melbourne  
(Image: Drew Echberg)

#### 4.3.2 Embedding playability into all levels of design

Decisions that influence a place's playability are made by many different people. To optimise playability and avoid inadvertently precluding it, awareness needs to happen across the disciplines, at multiple stages of the development process and at all levels of design: master planning, engineering, architecture and landscape.

#### 4.3.3 Adaptability to changing patterns of use

Children and young people will 'appropriate' particular areas to facilitate a particular activity. Examples include informal skate boarding and BMX courses or mudslides. All too often measures such as fences and keep out signs are taken to deter these emergent uses. Play England (2008a) suggest a better approach would be to adapt management strategies to respond to emerging play practice and seek to ensure interventions do not deter this informal play but instead accommodate it safely.

## 5 Conclusion

Play is essential in order for our youth to grow up to be healthy, engaged and creative members of society. Yet their play diet is becoming less balanced as our built environment is inadvertently deterring active outdoor play. This will have profound impacts on the wellbeing of our youth and eventually society at large.

Creating environments that invite a wide range of play activities in multiple settings can help alleviate some of the many deterrents for outdoor play. Although they will not make children play they will help children see their surroundings as more 'play ready' if or when play is sought. Play friendly places can also support a sense of vitality, facilitate wider social connection and encourage active living in people of all ages. These principles contribute to many of the wellbeing and community objectives of social sustainability. By considering a place or element for its potential playability, decision makers in the built environment have a role to play in enabling play friendly places.

## About the Author

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