

How to Grow a Playspace: Development and Design

Katherine Masiulonis and Elizabeth Cummins, editors (2017).
Routledge, 366 pages.
\$60.95 (paperback); ISBN: 978-1138907065

This is a brave, ambitious and unique collection of 43 chapters about playspaces. This book could be overwhelming to anyone with good intentions about creating a playspace, but who has no experience in doing so. What can seem simple actually requires considerable expertise, preferably multidisciplinary teams, negotiations and compromises, trial and error, and a lot of dedication. The editors warn, "If you are searching for a simple formula for a playspace, you will not find it here" (p. 3).

Staff from every early childhood education center and school, and anyone else with interests in developing playspaces for children such as local governments and private developers should read this book. The combined expertise and experience of the chapter authors highlights the value as well as the challenges of multidisciplinary teams. The role of children as partners in these projects is underscored throughout, as are the roles of the numerous other stakeholders. It also becomes apparent that one-off constructions and outsourced designs that fail to include those who will use the playspaces are unlikely to succeed. The editors use "grow" in their title, rather than "build," which I initially thought was a clever use of words to promote the idea of nature. I came to realize that the chapters are about the long-term, never-completed process of growing a playspace. The sections of the book are cleverly titled: *Ground, Sowing, Seedlings, Sprouts, Saplings* and *The Potting Shed*.

Chapter 1, *A History of Playspaces* is one of the best pieces of work I have read on this topic. It is a scholarly contribution to the playspace literature generally and works well as a standalone piece of writing. It also sets the context for locating current playspaces within the history of childhood. The chapter provides an important point of reflection on what is being achieved with contemporary playspaces and whether creation of some playspaces leads to children being confined to spaces identified as child-friendly by adults rather than having the right to play in any public space.

The final section of the book does address specific issues, such as safety regulations, but it is also interesting to read the case studies of how such issues have been dealt with by the authors. For example, in chapter 15 there is detailed discussion of the difficulties of ensuring the water features were not too risky for play and the water was of adequate quality. Early difficulties led to closure of the water features until these problems could be resolved. Water pumps also featured in various chapters, including problem-solving for unexpected methods of water

feature use by children that led to failure of the pumps. Solutions are considered site by site and it does not appear that there was pressure from the editors for an agreed-upon approach. For example, at one point there is a comment on the importance of fences, but the author of another chapter clearly does not value them. Again, this could be confusing or unwelcome to a reader who is seeking an instruction guide, but it is important and reflects ongoing debates such as those surrounding safety versus risk-taking. Authors also raise issues of what happens behind the scenes in sheds or at other sites. The reader has access to an understanding of resourcing and maintenance that is not always apparent even when visiting established playspaces.

The book's indexing could be improved. For example, on page 156 there is discussion of the installation of water pumps in the Lafayette nature-based playground and this page is included in the index, but on page 160 the difficulties arising from inclusion of the water pumps is discussed and this page does not appear in the index. Similarly, infant exploration is discussed on page 28 but not included in the index. There are many more examples of content not being picked up in the index.

Diversity of contexts considered is a strength of the book, which includes chapters from a wide range of countries and levels of urbanization. To some extent though, the emphasis on diversity conflicted with the approaches to child development promoted in sections of the book. Some chapters included statements on child development that were presented as universals and had limited discussion of the heterogeneity of development unless it was with reference to disability. Claims were included such as "because young children's concepts of distance and scale are typically inaccurate, spaces that are around a corner may feel private and comfortable, but those more than a meter or two off the beaten path may feel isolated and less secure" (p. 34). This claim seems inconsistent with current evidence relating to children's interactions with large or small environments. Unfortunately, there is no citation so I was unable to see the evidence used as the basis of the claim. While the focus on child development is important, in some places it could have been expanded by consideration of pedagogical approaches to extend children's thinking and interactions. Some chapters (e.g., chapter 14), do very well in showing how children's responses change with time and experience.

The chapters also work well when the demographics of the children engaged in the playspace are considered rather than decontextualized. Chapter 24 for example, follows the development of a playspace in which loose parts became a feature of play at school and adults were provided with sessions related to supporting play. An outcome noted was "no exclusions," despite the fact that children at the school had demonstrated social and emotional difficulties that had previously been more difficult to manage.

The enormous effort in producing this book has not gone unnoticed. As you might expect, this is a visually stunning book. Every picture is well selected and enhances the content of the chapter. However, like the playspaces discussed, it lacks clean lines and uniformity. It brings together diverse approaches from a wide range of disciplines that have variations in the expression of ideas, documentation of process and consideration of what can be presented as evidence. I recommend approaching the book as a playspace; allow for the challenges and enjoy the rewards.

Laidlaw (p. 154) concludes his chapter with the statement, “nothing teaches as well as experience.” What we have in this collection is the privilege of learning from many who have been involved in growing playspaces across the world, encountered obstacles, and solved problems creatively—typically in consultation with children, team members, authorities and other parties.

Review by Shirley Wyver

Shirley Wyver is a senior lecturer in child development at the Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University. She has published extensively in the area of outdoor play and is currently a lead researcher on the Sydney Playground Project (<https://www.sydneyplaygroundproject.com/>).

Editors’ Response

In considering this review of *How to Grow a Playspace: Design and Development*, we would like to clarify the philosophical basis of the book. Our objective was always to provide readers with the skills and information to think for themselves and make educated decisions about their particular circumstance, rather than to adhere to a single unified position.

We feel that divergent views and opinions are important, representing differing values, social perceptions and cultural views. Every site and community offers its own challenges, opportunities and circumstances. For this reason, we encouraged our many contributors to do more than simply pass on their ideas, but to be brave enough to reflect on their work and also share those parts that could have been improved.

As the book is primarily to provide a basis for thinking about playspace design, we deliberately steered away from an in-depth pedagogical discussion, as we felt that our expertise did not extend into this field, and that this highly contentious area continues to be successfully debated in many other publications.

We would like to thank Shirley Wyver for her review, and hope that we are able to spark some reflection and new thinking in this complex and varied field.