

Design in urban settings

with children and nature in mind

By Helle Nebelong



As we become more urbanized - living in towns and cities and spending more individual time in front of screens and smart phones - the provision of natural environments and contact with nature should be part of all governments' political agenda to ensure that children, young people and their families have access to nearby green spaces and opportunities to play, hang-out and socialize.

Lack of daily contact with nature can be damaging – access to natural environments can greatly contribute to our mental and emotional wellbeing. Stress is one of the biggest threats to public health in our part of the world.

American scientists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan developed the Attention Restoration Theory (ART), which emphasizes the restorative benefits of nature. The theory asserts that people can concentrate better after spending time in nature, or even looking at scenes of nature.

They state that we all have two different types of attention:

Directed attention; used when we direct ourselves to focus and concentrate on a specific task that requires mental effort – to achieve this we must eliminate unnecessary noises and other distractions that interrupt our concentration. The human capacity for directed attention is limited; according to the Kaplan's theory we may suffer with directed attention fatigue if we keep trying to go beyond the limit by trying to solve more and more complex problems. Access to natural green spaces can contribute to overcoming this type of fatigue.

Involuntary attention; instinctive, automatic attention which emerges when we are under the influence of nature's sounds, smells and changes of temperature. We use this type of attention when we are in natural environments or are connected to nature. It demands no special mental effort and it helps to make us calm.

It follows that we are developing good, sustainable solutions to providing urban play spaces we may need to address some potential challenges to create an environment that fosters involuntary attention.

In many communities, public playgrounds are becoming more and more artificial with fixed equipment made of plastic and steel placed on synthetic turf and rubber surfacing, which is the opposite of providing natural environments and giving children natural experiences.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that decision makers should always think about what is best for the child. When it comes to play spaces, what are children's preferences?

All children regardless of age, gender, ability, disadvantages and competencies want to take challenges and enhance their skills, which can increase their independence and courage, through play and practice. At the same time it is essential that children are connected with nature from a very young age. Children enjoy playing with elements such as water and soil and natural loose parts like sand, sticks, stones, cones, leaves, flowers, berries and other natural elements that stimulate the senses and develop creativity.

Playing in a natural setting with stones, tree trunks and water encourages children to practice their motor skills, stimulate their senses and it contributes to developing the kinesthetic awareness of muscular movement and position.

As a landscape architect I would recommend the following advice when considering developing a natural play space for children and young people:

- Don't waste the money on fixed equipment
- Focus on using locally sourced materials, loose parts and plants/shrubs – which can include left over materials
- Use the EN/BS Standards in conjunction with your common sense
- Don't over protect children – they have to learn about life through trial and error and experience
- Focus on the play value not on maintenance costs
- Don't choose 'egotects' (designers or architects whose main consideration and aim is the aesthetic value of a space or building rather than play) to design children's play spaces – their design may not be targeted towards children or focus on children's play needs and preferences



Helle Nebelong is an internationally recognized designer, speaker and author, and a key pioneer of the natural playground movement. She is an advocate of free play, using local and natural materials, and is well known for creating accessible play spaces that ignite curiosity in children and adults alike. Helle is running her own private practice, hellenebelong.com and was earlier employed by the City of Copenhagen Park Department for more than 10 years. She held the position of President of the Danish Playground Association (an NGO supporting children's play areas and children's right to play) 2004-2014. As representative in the leadership of Nature Action Collaborative for Children (NACC), she is a strong advocate for children's right to play as well as their right to access nature and a healthy environment.

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