PLAYGROUND 2.0: BUILDING BODIES AND MINDS

# Monkey bars are so old school

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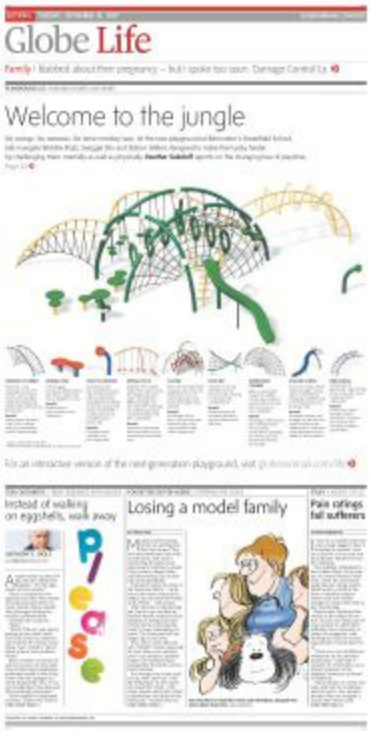
MONTREAL -- When Edmonton's Greenfield School officially opens its new playground with a ceremony later this month, there will be no swings for parents to push or seesaws for children to clamber on.

Instead, the $200,000 play area has features such as Wobble Pods, Swiggle Stix and an Orbiter Spinner, which together resemble a suspension bridge, twisted and sliced every which way. There is also a massive, spiral rock-climbing wall.

Greenfield's playground, designed by Landscape Structures, represents some of the latest thinking in playground design, which aims to get children playing harder and longer by tempting their brains as much as their bodies.

With the push to get children active, playground innovation has suddenly taken on new importance. Designers are wising up to something parents have long suspected: Traditional playgrounds are boring to most children past age 5 or 6 - especially in today's climate, in which concerns over safety dominate design and limit risk-taking features.

**Print Edition - Section Front**


Globe Life

Welcome to the jungle

Losing a model family

Enlarge Image

In many parks, monkey bars have almost vanished and slides are lower and slower because of fears of litigation. Sandboxes are often scrapped because they require costly upkeep.
"A playground that is just swings and slides does not foster imaginative play," says Roger Hart, co-director of the Children's Environments Research Group at The City University of New York.
The platforms and ladders ubiquitous in schoolyards and municipal parks have not changed much since playgrounds were first conceived to keep children off the streets of New York City at the turn of the century, says Dr. Hart.
To make new playgrounds more appealing, designers now routinely start by consulting their clients - children.
In Surrey, British Columbia's largest and fastest-growing school district, for example, new elementary schools regularly open without playgrounds so students and parents, who are responsible for much of the fundraising, can help design the structures.
Children at Edith Cavell Elementary School in Vancouver picked out features such as a log-rolling structure that requires balancing on tilting cylinders and a twisted monkey bar set called the Cosmic Warp in the design of their new playground, built in August.
The $60,000 structure was built by Kaboom!, a Washington-based non-profit that constructs playgrounds through- out North America with funding and volunteer support from Home Depot and other corporations.
Landscape Structures, based in Minnesota, spent years developing the new playground purchased by Greenfield
Elementary in southwest Edmonton, testing it with elementary-school-age children.
The concept was designed to appeal to all ages, but especially children aged 8 or 9 or older who are bored by ladders and slides, says John McConkey, marketing manager of Landscape Structures.
"You have kids that age doing dangerous things like jumping off platforms and tunnels," he says, "because they are not being challenged."
Greenfield parents felt the design would increase children's physical activity, says Joan Corbett, a parent who chaired the school playground committee, explaining that much of the structure wobbles or bounces, forcing children to engage their muscles as they climb and explore.
"There is not a floor or a ramp where you can just relax."
Parents spent three years raising about $100,000 and received a matching grant from the province to pay for the structure, installation and extensive landscaping.
The playground will also be used to meet Alberta's requirement that elementary school children have 30 minutes of physical activity a day. Similar structures have been installed in Vancouver's Stanley Park and in a municipal park in Chilliwack, B.C.
Playground advocates applaud the designs, saying they are crucial to children who tend to spend much of their day indoors with playtime eroded by scheduled activities and homework.
According to Joan Almond, spokesperson for the Alliance for Childhood, a Maryland-based group that advocates for causes such as playground innovation and longer recess, most parents do not allow their children to play outside or walk to school because of fear of abduction or injury.
The renewed interest in playgrounds is attracting minds such as renowned architect Frank Gehry, who announced in June that he will create his first playground, at Battery Park in Lower Manhattan.
This summer, the City of Denver announced the first phase of an overhaul of its 150 municipal playgrounds. And later this year, construction is slated to begin on Manhattan's Imagination Playground, designed pro bono by the architect David Rockwell, known for his adult play spaces such as chic casinos and restaurants.
Imagination will be one of the few playgrounds in North America to employ "play workers," or staff trained to help children haul around loose objects to build structures that can also be torn down.
There will be a system of pulleys and ropes for children to lift and transplant objects, as well as water and sand to build dams and canals, says Dr. Hart, who is consulting on the project.
Allowing children to build at a playground is radical in the North American context, but is common in Europe, where about 1,000 "adventure playgrounds" staffed with play workers have existed since the end of the Second World War.
The playgrounds provide children with opportunities to engage in fantasy play by being able to move objects, says Dr. Hart. "You can't mess around when the environment is fixed."
For that reason, the best playground - and it doesn't cost $200,000 - is a yard covered in snow heavy enough for packing and building, says Dr. Hart. Come winter, that is something most Canadian children have in spades.

**Welcome to the jungle**

No swings. No seesaws. No lame monkey bars. At the new playground at Edmonton's Greenfield School,
kids navigate Wobble Pods, Swiggle Stix and Slalom Gliders designed to make them play harder by challenging them mentally as well as physically. **Heather Sokoloff** reports on the changing face of playtime,

CRESCENT CLIMBER

Similar to a rope challenge course, this climber allows kids to move from outside to inside the playground system without touching the ground.

Benefit: Rope angles change as kids climb, building balance, coordination and full-body strength.

WOBBLE POD

These wiggly, spring-mounted benches give kids a unique way to play together or solo.

Benefit: Builds balance andpromotes social interaction.

CHATTER NOODLE

Byspeaking into the noodle's talk piece, kids can experiment with sound and talk long-distance to friends across the playground. A tube connects the noodles and carries sound from one to the next.

Benefit: Promotes social interaction on the playground.

SWIGGLE STIX

Kids step from pod to pod as they move across the playground; each pod is mounted at a different height and secured to the overhead arc and the ground by cables that safely limit their movement.

Benefit: Improves balance and depth perception while promoting collaborative play.

O-ZONE

Kids climb through these hanging rings, which are fastened to a pair of overhanging arcs and to the ground for more stability.

Benefit: Challenges kids to figure out the best way to go through, over or around the inside of the playground.

HELIX NET

A durable climbing net that connects to two arches, creating a hammock with a vertical twist.

Benefit: Builds balance and provides kids with a place to watch other kids play.

HEMISPHERE CLIMBER

With no prescribed routes, this netted climber gives kids the opportunity to choose their own way up, over and down.

Benefit: Challenges kids to figure out climbing routes, while building coordination and agility as climbers balance and counterbalance during play.

SLALOM GLIDER

Similar to a slide without sides, the glider's wavy shape is aesthetically intriguing and offers kids a challenging way back to the ground.

Benefit: Promotes balance andstrength as kids use their hands to hold on for added control. Side grips and glide angles ensure safety all the way down.

RINGTANGLE

A collection of galvanized rings that kids climb on top of or cross hand-over-hand underneath.

Benefit: Builds upper-body strength, spatial awareness, problem-solving skills and improves hand-eye coordination.