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The Work Behind Child's Play

An exhibition outlines the evolution of playgrounds.

By CAROL KINO

Remember that glorious moment at the top of a long, narrow metal slide, when you screwed up the courage to zoom into oblivion? Or, even better, the chance to escape into a tunnel, safe from the prying eyes of parents?

Risky contraptions and hiding places are on the wane in the safety-conscious playgrounds of today, but they've been rediscovered in an exhibition called "The Playground Project," at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh through Aug. 11. Mounted on plywood panels that suggest the walls of an impromptu recreation room, this jam-packed show uses photographs, film, books, architectural plans and models to illuminate the golden decades after World War II, when cities around the world felt the need to build new play areas in parks and on streets.

Artists and architects buoyed by the work of child psychologists like Bruno Bettelheim and Jean Piaget reinvented the playground's look and dreamed up new equipment. Once regarded as a holding area where children could be controlled and contained, by the 1960s the playground was seen as a zone for creative exploration and cognitive development.

The show begins in the 1940s with the Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sorensen, who advanced the radical notion that children were happiest when playing with junk, and ends after the 1970s Do-It-Yourself playground building movement, where community organizers helped parents build playgrounds, swept America. Along the way, it also examines the contributions of well-known avant-gardists like M. Paul Friedberg and Richard Dattner, and lesser-known lights like Joseph Brown, a Princeton professor who developed play equipment made with ropes.

Like a museum, the playground is "a domain in which public opinions about education, exploration, aesthetics, and public space abound," wrote Gabriela Burkhalter, the show's curator, in an essay to be published later this year in the catalog for the 2013 Carnegie International, the museum's contemporary-art survey in the fall.

The show is something of a warm-up for the International itself, which embraces play as one of its themes. "A playground is a place where you explore things," said Daniel Baumann, one of the survey's three curators, who is also Ms. Burkhalter's husband. "And that's also what a museum should be." (When the International opens on Oct. 5, "The Playground Project" will reopen along with it, expanded with playground-related artworks as well as projects produced by the museum's Summer Camps program.)

Ms. Burkhalter has used early-20th-century Pittsburgh photographs to demonstrate the public playground's roots in the 19th century, when forerunners like the sand garden and the kindergarten — literally a garden for children — first appeared in Berlin. The concept soon spread to America, often viewed as a way to keep urban youth occupied while their parents toiled in factories. "Cities had become so crowded," she said in an interview, "and some philanthropists began to think about places where they could be safe and have some education. That's how it started."

TOM LITTLE

Playgrounds of the past: Top, at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, a Lozziwurm, designed in 1972. Second row, from left, one of Richard Dattner's designs in Central Park, the 1972 Ancient Play Garden near the Metropolitan Museum; Joseph Brown's Whale Yard equipment; and a "junk playground" in Emdrup, Sweden, in 1952. Above, the Carnegie Museum's "Playground Project" show.

From holding pens to 'environments' to cookie-cutter play equipment.

By the 1930s, public playgrounds had become fairly common in the developed world, but also formulaic. As well as a sandbox, "you had the slide, you had the jungle gym and maybe a wading pool," Ms. Burkhalter said. "It was all on asphalt, and it was fenced in," she added, with the bywords being "cheap" and "indestructible."

Change arrived in 1943, when Sorensen built his first skrammellegeplads, or "junk playground," in a housing development in Emdrup, a Copenhagen suburb, during the German occupation. Having designed many playgrounds already, he had noted in the 1930s that children routinely decamped for nearby construction sites. His new creation provided bricks and other construction materials and encouraged them to explore and create — forts, tree houses, even fires — on an empty lot supervised by a play leader, with no parents allowed. (The show includes a 1966 Danish television segment that demonstrates a skrammellegeplads in action.)

Soon after the war, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a British pacifist and educator, brought the idea to England, hoping to mold what she called "peace-loving citizens," by letting children join in postwar reconstruction by building things at places that had been bombed. The first was founded in 1948 on the site of a ruined church in the London district of Camberwell, and many of the rest, as captured in the photographs shown at the museum, don't look much different from the rubble they replaced. To appease critics, Lady Allen re-branded them "adventure playgrounds" in the 1950s.

The concept never put down strong American roots. Favored instead was the so-called landscape playground, a reimagining of recreational areas as sculptural environments. Part of the show is devoted to the work of Aldo van Eyck, a Dutch urban planner charged with creating play areas throughout Amsterdam after the war, eventually building more than 700. He placed them in surprising locales, like alleyways, and made each one site specific, with sandboxes, climbing bars and paving stones arranged in geometric compositions that suggest a de Stijl painting.

The show also includes models by the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, who began dreaming up transformative playground ideas for New York City in 1933. (His most ambitious, designed in the early 1960s with the architect Louis Kahn, would have resculptured eight acres of Riverside Park into a hilly environment that suggested a lunar landscape.) All were shot down by his nemesis Robert Moses, and Noguchi's first playscape, represented here by a group of color photographs, wasn't constructed until the mid-'60s in Yokohama, Japan.

Yet his ideal of a variegated topography inspired others like Mr. Friedberg, who filled his groundbreaking 1965 playground at the Jacob Riis Houses on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with granite igloos and tunnels and wooden mazes, creating an urban wonderland where one experience led into the next. "These are not playgrounds, they are play environments," Mr. Friedberg said in an interview about his work, shown here in a slide show and photographs, meant "to sustain and promote the idea of play, which is a very important part of anyone's development."

Mr. Dattner's first playground, raised in 1967 in Central Park next to Tavern on the Green, was also filled with mounds, pyramids and tunnels, but added a pint-size amphitheater, a splash pool, a play leader and a lot of slotted panels that children could use to make things. Although reconstructions of the panels are on view here, the playground itself has since been retrofitted with railings, access for the disabled and no moving parts. But at the museum you can see another of Mr. Dattner's Central Park playgrounds as it used to be in the zany music video "Sisters and Brothers" (lifted from Marlo Thomas's 1974 "Free to Be You and Me" television special), which features the Afro'd members of the Voices of East Harlem singing as they gambol throughout the space.

By the 1980s, the playground revolution was fizzling out, squelched by the triple whammy of economics, new safety regulations and increasing litigiousness, with visionary designs replaced by mass-produced play equipment from a catalog, Mr. Dattner said.

"If a kid fell down in my playground in the 1960s," he added, "their mother or father would kiss the boo-boo. If it had happened 20 years later, they would pick up the phone and call their lawyer." But the idea of play hasn't been forgotten at the Carnegie, which recently put up a Lozziwurm, a twisting tubular plastic play structure designed by the Swiss sculptor Yvan Pestalozzi in 1972 that is still being produced. (Mr. Baumann first encountered one as a child in Burgdorf, Switzerland, at a nearby shopping mall.)

Placed by the entrance, near works by Richard Serra and Henry Moore, the serpentine orange, yellow and red Lozziwurm has been an irresistible magnet. While "the first impression is this could be another sculpture," said Marilyn Russell, the museum's curator of education, "kids just automatically know what to do with it."

Mr. Baumann said he hopes it may lure them into the galleries, too. "It is a tube, it's colorful, and you want to go in," he said. "Once you go inside, it's slightly uncanny because you dive into the unknown." Just like the most exciting art, he added, "you don't know where it takes you."