

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained: Exploring Children's Playscapes

by Helle Nebelong

I grew up with my mom and dad and two sisters in a suburb of Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. We lived in a terraced house with a small garden on a cul-de-sac. My sisters and I played in the garden, which was surrounded by high evergreen hedges. It was a safe place and we spent hours playing in the sandbox, which I am convinced is the smallest one that has ever existed in the world.

The author's private photos



When I was six years old I was allowed to play in a wild, "secret" garden at the end of the road. Here, children of all ages came from the local townhouse areas. It was a wilderness with lots of old fruit trees, bushes, and high grass. We climbed the trees and we built caves. There were no adults present, and sometimes it was quite violent. Sometimes we came home with tears rolling down our cheeks and with bloody skin scrapes. But we learned a lot!



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It was nice to come home and be put in a hot bath together with my little sister and get a lot of care from mom and dad.

When I was eight years old, my family and I lived in Torshavn in the Faroe Islands for two years. The biggest change, I think, was to come from pancake flat Denmark to an archipelago in the Atlantic consisting of rugged cliffs and steep mountains. There were no traditionally equipped playgrounds, there was just great nature everywhere, and nature was the children's playground.

I played with some boys, and sometimes we played in the harbor on the cliffs below the lighthouse. We jumped around and it was a matter of getting back safe on the mainland before the tide came and swallowed us! The adults didn't know we were playing there; if they did, they probably would not have let us. I also remember from those days in the Faroe Islands that we ran on ice skates down the streets, which were sometimes covered with ice. In my childhood in the 1960s there was not much focus on what children did after school time — as long as we got home for dinner.

A Wrong Lesson Learnt

Today, parents in many countries are controlled by their imaginings of all the dreadful things that can happen to children. The fear is so enormous that many parents do not dare let their children play alone outside, unless there are adults present.

The paradox is that when you over-protect children, they don't get a chance to seek out challenges and harness their own, natural courage. If we prevent children from the fundamental curiosity of finding out how things work — learning by doing — they do not learn to prevent and handle hazards. And, if so, they will not grow up being resilient and prepared to meet the many unavoidable challenges of the future. It's therefore essential to teach children from the very beginning of their life that there are wonders, challenges, and dangers out there. Living is fantastic but risky.

Safety Is a Myth; Risk Is Reality

To learn about life takes time and demands courage and risk-taking. Grownups are responsible for giving children lots of time to play outdoors and explore and learn about life by practicing all kinds of skills. Instead, they let children stay indoors, sitting still in front of computers and television for hours caught up in fantasy worlds that are not their own. Hey, that's really dangerous!

Photo courtesy of Emdrup Skrammellegeplads (the junk playground)



Children today are not allowed to build towers to climb as high as they did back in the 1940s!

Danish Concepts

International Play Association, IPA, was founded in Denmark in 1961, and Denmark has a long tradition for promoting the child's right to free play. The junk playground — *Skrammellegepladsen* — was invented by landscape architect C. Th. Sorensen back in 1943. Sorensen saw how children found a hole in the fence around a building site and went there to play with all the loose materials when the workers were off duty. That gave him the idea of designing a junk playground — or adventure playground — where children could play with bricks, boards, and recycled materials. There are still some adventure playgrounds left in Denmark, and the concept has spread to other parts of the world and new adventure playgrounds have been founded. Here children learn to handle all the “dangerous” things. They learn to use tools — to saw, hammer nails, and cut sticks with a knife — and they learn to build and light a bonfire.

Staffed Play Yards

Another Danish invention is *Bemandede legepladser*, which means playgrounds that have educated trained staff (www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/detail/3566/Tanya+VINCENT). In Copenhagen today there are 26 staffed local playgrounds and a new one — number 27 — is on its way.



Photo by Helle Neelborg

The ability to concentrate on, for example estimating distance, height and risk, requires a lot of practice and is necessary for a person to be able to cope successfully with life. Children learn through play in natural, asymmetrical settings like climbing a tree.

A manned playground is “a place for free, daily, and often messy play: a back yard for families without their own,” says Tanya Vincent, a Sydney, Australia-based architect who made a study tour in 2012 to investigate Copenhagen's *Bemandede legepladser*. The concept is nearly 80 years old and it's quite brilliant because it functions as a local meeting place for families and children of all ages and cultural backgrounds. Children can play on their own or they can be directed by the staff if they don't know what to do. Many Danish parents don't spend so much time with their kids due to work, so the staff on these playgrounds can give the children some grown-up contact.

Cycle Safe — the Newest Play Concept

Children learn best through play. This goes for cycling as well. So, the Danish Cyclists' Federation has recently been granted funds to co-finance the construction of nine permanent bicycle playgrounds around Denmark.

Children who are “cycle safe,” meaning that they can start, stop, keep a straight line, and take one hand off the handlebar to signal, will be much better at remembering

traffic rules and watching out for other road users later on. The children will learn these skills through play. The playgrounds are not restricted only to children — they can also be used for training adults without cycling experience or people in need of a tune-up of their cycling skills.

The playgrounds have been developed in collaboration with the Danish Cyclists' Federation with funding by Nordeafonden. The playgrounds are being individually developed for each municipality according to the surrounding area with the overall theme: nature and sensory experience inviting institutions and families alike to play on bicycles.

Standardized Playgrounds

Most playgrounds today consist of brightly colored rubber surface and pre-fabricated equipment. It seems to be a grown-up thought that everything having to do with children should be colourful, fun, and as safe as possible. Play is about much more than fun and safety! Safety standards have been developed based on real, tragic accidents. As guidelines, the standards are very useful when designing playspaces for children and are combined with common sense, but they are, in my opinion, an enormous barrier to children's real need for play and learning about all aspects of life through play. A child's healthy development and resilience are accomplished through risky play and it should be every child's right to play in natural surroundings.

I've said it many times before, but I'll repeat again: I am convinced that standardized playgrounds are dangerous, because all asymmetry has been taken away. When the distance between all the rungs in a climbing net or a ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on



Photo by Helle Nebelong

where he puts his feet. Standardization is dangerous because play becomes simplified and the child does not have to worry about his movements. The kinesthetic sense is the one you use to estimate distances and move your body safely through a landscape. The more knobbly and asymmetrically-shaped a playscape for children is, the more this sense will be enhanced and the better the child will be to overcome challenges, which one is confronted with throughout life. The ability to concentrate on, for example, estimating height and risk, requires a lot of practice and is necessary for a person to be able to cope successfully with life. The focus on safety is essential but must not lead one to forget to care about design and atmosphere and make one buy boring play equipment because it is easy and secure.

I'll finish this little reflection on play and risk by sharing a quote from a speech given by Danish Queen Margrethe on New Year's Eve 2015:

"We should probably not worry so much about our children either. We cannot hold their hands forever. We must give them room and not protect them so zealously that they do not get the chance to learn any lessons of their own. Previously, children were left to play on their own, without any interference from adults and with plenty of room for imagination. Sometimes they would fall and hurt themselves.... 'Up you get' the grown-ups would say — and the children managed. It meant lessons learnt, which they might well have preferred to do without, but that is part of life itself."



Photo by Helle Nebelong

From the opening summer 2017 of one of the first bicycle playgrounds in Denmark