

As we emerge from a tragic pandemic, let's catalyze action among professionals in the fields that shape the physical housing and communities where we live. This series of case studies shares innovations that are advancing a set of **guiding principles** for built environment professionals—from creative ways to redress inequities and engage the public in participatory planning, to unique housing and community models that enable every resident to thrive.



Photos: PlayCore (left), Playing Out (top right), Percussion Play (bottom right)

## Intergenerational Play Spaces

By Stephanie Firestone and Julia Glassman

As Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw famously said, “We don’t stop playing because we grow older; we grow older because we stop playing.” Play is not only beneficial but essential for people of all ages. Today, there is increasing interest in the benefits of not only play itself, but specifically people from younger and older generations playing together. The built environment in our communities plays a critical role in facilitating this intergenerational engagement and play. Approaches such as Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs) introduce strategies for promoting social inclusion and belonging, employing novel ways of planning and designing public spaces to create intergenerationally enriched environments.

**Needs/Challenges**

**INTERGENERATIONAL PUBLIC SPACES**

The term intergenerational is often defined as a purposeful, regular exchange and learning between children and older people. This intergenerational sharing can bridge generational differences and provide mutual benefits as well as counteract ageism and age-related stereotypes. Yet, despite the prominent mid-twentieth century architect Lewis Mumford’s call for planners to design cities for “all phases of life,” even today few cities engage an “all ages” approach that would facilitate this sharing.

Prime real estate for intergenerational engagement is public parks. However, a **2014 study of 174 neighborhood parks in 25 major U.S. cities** found that while adults aged 60 and older accounted for 20 percent of the general population, they represented only 4 percent of total park users. Elements that deter their visits include areas that feel unsafe or risky in terms of potential for falling, as well as a lack of amenities such as clean and accessible restrooms and functional water fountains. Pedestrian paths are consistently rated by older adults as the most desired infrastructure feature to have in parks.

But bringing people from multiple generations to the same place is only the first step. In order for these spaces to facilitate engagement across the generations, they should include features that create opportunities for meaningful spontaneous interaction, communication, and connection across generations through shared use of the built environment. A global literature review frames park elements that successfully encourage intergenerational engagement as those that provide opportunities for reciprocal experiences in any of three areas: teaching, playing, or observing. Ideally, these are spaces that we frequent and thus provide regular opportunities for intergenerational engagement as part of our everyday lives.

**PLAY**

The **National Institute for Play (NIFP)** defines play as a state of being. Playfulness causes a cascade of neurological connections, lighting up neurons across the brain and creating a “**play state.**” It’s that feeling a person gets when they are so engrossed that time seems to stop. There are numerous types of play, including rough-and-tumble play, spectator play, ritual play, imaginative play, and storytelling or spinning yarns. Whole families at play can

include grandparents and great-grandparents. And as people with domestic pets such as dogs are well aware, play can even connect mammals across species.

Explains **Dr. Stuart Brown**, NIFP founder, “Play is a basic human need as essential to our well-being as sleep.” Play releases endorphins, which reduce stress and improve mood and cognitive function. Play also helps one develop compassion, empathy, communication skills and emotional regulation, thus improving relationships with other people. On the flip side, according to Brown, “play deprivation can [cause us to] get cranky, rigid, feel stuck in a rut, or feel victimized by life.” He says that to benefit most from the rejuvenating benefits of play, “we need to incorporate it into our everyday lives, not just wait for that two-week vacation every year.”

*“Play is a basic human need as essential to our well-being as sleep.” - Dr. Stuart Brown*

It is well-known that play among children is critical to normal brain and social development, yet there is far less focus on the importance of play in adults. One **study of young adults** found that those who rated themselves highly playful and open to “clowning around” reported less stress in their lives and possessed better coping skills. And for older adults, the nascent field of gerontoludics merges gerontology, the study of aging and old age, and “ludic,” which refers to undirected playfulness. Some academics hope gerontoludics will bring together a growing body of literature that breaks down stereotypes of older people and brings attention to new design principles, like “playfulness over usefulness.”



Photo: *Playing Out*

**Innovations**

**PARKS & PLAYGROUNDS**

Around the world, more older adults than ever are seen with grandchildren in play environments. Singapore thoughtfully facilitates this intergenerational play by co-locating facilities. In 2017, the country opened its first **intergenerational playground and infant and childcare center as part of a nursing home complex.** To promote interaction across generations, the playground has special features for young and old, such as a seesaw with a ramp to facilitate wheelchair access. The merry-go-round comes with wheel-lock features for wheelchairs and custom-built seats for toddlers.



Photo: *Ariffin Jamar*

Speaking at the playground opening, Dr. Amy Khor, Senior Minister of State for Health, said that by leveraging the simple yet universal concept of play, we “create more opportunities for seniors to gain from the infectious energy of the young, as well as for the young to better understand the seniors who share their community.”

In the United States, playgrounds are increasingly designed to enable access to a whole variety of users, going well beyond the minimum standards required under the Americans with Disabilities Act. This shift has emerged in a number of realms:

**Remaking play equipment.** Playground developers and equipment manufacturers are inventing new equipment and reimagining perennial favorites. The old-fashioned merry-go-round requiring a step up is sometimes being installed at the same level as the play environment and includes seats or benches so older people who wish to can also enjoy the spinning motion. The “Expression Swing” by **PlayCore** has a seat designed for a toddler or person with a mobility challenge across from a seat for a parent, grandparent, or other person with the ability to swing, propelling the pair. This eye-to-eye contact promotes attunement between two individuals as they experience the joy of their bodies moving through time and space.



Photo: PlayCore

**Providing adequate seating.** Sufficient appropriate seating with adequate shade and shelter is critical. Experts such as PlayCore’s Senior Vice President for Corporation Innovation, Tom Norquist, promote reversing the positioning of a park’s seating element from the traditional benches surrounding a play area to placement at the center, thus immersing people of different ages and abilities in the middle of the play experience rather than their observing from the outside. It is also important to make individual play elements—for example, musical installations –usable for people of different sizes and abilities by designing them within reach and providing adjacent seating for people who can’t stand for long.

**Including everyone in layout/design considerations.** Soliciting the needs and preferences of older people often uncovers priorities that may be less obvious. These might include a design that makes people feel they belong, a sense

of safety (which can result from indirect factors such as a park being filled with people), seating away from trash cans, accessible travel routes, and parking.

**FITNESS**

Increasingly, parks and playgrounds are including fitness equipment that takes into consideration the abilities and needs of older adults. In China, **outdoor fitness equipment for older adults** in public parks is not only ubiquitous but heavily used, with older people often lining up to have a turn. The Chinese government’s **National Fitness Plan** (2021 to 2025) sets ambitious goals, which include having fitness facilities within a 15-minute walk from one’s residence in every town and reaching 38.5 percent of the population regularly exercising, an increase of 1.3 percentage points from the previous five-year plan.



Photo: FitLots

Countries in Europe as well as the United States are also rapidly increasing the amount of all-ages or older-adult fitness equipment in parks. In 2019, AARP sponsored the building of outdoor fitness parks in every state as well as the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. These spaces are frequently used for a variety of programming including fitness instruction and exercise classes as well as nutrition and other healthy living experiences.



Photo: FitLots



Photo: Changxing Elementary School

**EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN**

In parts of Asia, **nostalgia for local playground heritage** is connecting the generations. Many schools in 1960s Taiwan included as part of their cultural heritage cement slides in the shape of an elephant—some at the entrance where they welcomed children every morning.

Of course, dated equipment may have outdated safety standards. A teacher at one elementary school explained that their elephant slide did not meet updated safety requirements and was sealed off in 2011. The children were dismayed and responded by taking it upon themselves to save their elephant slide. After hunting down the current manual of safety requirements for children’s playgrounds, they took measurements of the old equipment and found the deck around the barrier at the top of the slide to be too low. But adding another barrier to solve the problem would be too plain, they decided. The kids’ solution: to add a baby elephant on top. The slide reopened in 2018 and one woman started a blog, “In Search of Elephant Friends,” to crowdsource finding and documenting all the elephant slides across Taiwan.

Today, people are calling for the conservation of these early period terrazzo elephant slides. A parent who grew up with the elephant slide said, “It’s rare to find something that bonds three generations so closely in today’s society.” Another commented, “I hope my son, like me, will have in his memories a playground which always keeps him company and will guard his childhood.”

In Singapore, the country’s Housing & Development Board (the public housing authority) also leveraged nostalgia as a way to help children understand their place in the future. In 2018, the National Museum of Singapore curated an exhibit called “The More We Get Together: Singapore’s Playgrounds 1930-2030.” The exhibit highlighted how a linear park from the 1950s harkened to the orchard that once stood in that spot—installing play equipment with glass mosaic tiles featuring watermelons, mangos, and pineapples. Playground equipment in the late 20th century often depicted dragons, the national icon, as well as boats and rickshaws. Professor Ho Kong Chong from the National University of Singapore advises not to demolish old

playgrounds but rather build alongside those first-generation elements, so there is a connection between current users of the playground and those from different time periods. He stressed: “Iconic designs are tied to memories... It preserves this intergenerational communicative role.”

A massive recent undertaking in Singapore was the development of a **multigenerational Wellness Garden**, the work of a public-private partnership between the National Parks Board and global advisory services firm KPMG. The garden (to be completed by the end of 2023) is situated on a piece of land the size of a football field in the East Coast Park, which boasts 7.5 million visitors per year. It will have amenities that cater to people of all ages and abilities in one space, from active play and fitness to tranquil nature-based trails and therapeutic gardens that help people improve their mental wellbeing. A nature play-garden is designed for those with impaired mobility, with features such as a raised sand play box, a lookout platform accessible by ramp, and a raised musical play station.

In Tokyo, Japan, a flourishing **Playpark Movement** re-visions the definition of “playground.” Borrowing from Denmark’s 1943 “junk-playground” concept, the Playpark Movement involves local communities taking over empty plots of land and turning them into “playparks” as a landscape for inclusive, spontaneous community participation. Located on land owned by the municipality, the playpark is described as a “breach” of the formal city, where planning is traditionally very logical and efficient. Islands of trash and mud provide materials and inspiration for everyone to participate in fun, creative intergenerational interplay. Structures rise and fall, and the play space is in a constant state of flux. While hazards are removed by community members, the approach is to encourage risk in play, believing that it leads to growth. These playgrounds are also the only place in urban Tokyo where you are allowed to make fires, which are an integral part of traditional Japanese social culture. Older adults are provided with a simple shelter for shade, seating, and a place to make tea and coffee, so the fires become places for gathering and exchange of knowledge.



Photo: Percussion Play

**ENDING PLAY SPACE INEQUITY**

According to Sarah Pinsky, Senior Director of Partnerships at **KaBOOM!**, a U.S. nonprofit that aims to end play space inequity, “In historically disinvested communities—mostly communities of color—we realized that if we focus on individual playgrounds, we will never be successful.” So, at its 25th anniversary, the organization moved from erecting one playground at a time toward a systems-based approach to addressing inequity.

Under the “**25 in 5**” program to end play space inequity, multiple stakeholders in 25 communities commit to using data to determine where and how to invest, and then KaBOOM! drives investments to these communities over a five-year period. Communities engaged thus far include Baltimore, Maryland; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Prince Georges County, Maryland; Akron, Ohio; Anaheim, California; St. Paul, Minnesota; and the City of Uvalde and Fort Worth school district in Texas.

KaBOOM! takes the lead in engaging diverse members of the community to solicit their input on what they want to see in their playground, and a variety of partner organizations offer on-the-ground expertise, provide outreach to different ethnic communities and through multiple languages, and work with communities on installation. The work with local organizations promotes an asset-based approach that focuses on what the community has that they can bring to the table, rather than on what is lacking. Inevitably, among the assets a community must bring are a desire to create a playground for all and sweat equity. Every playground is infused and designed with inspiration from kids together with older members of the local community, and installed by volunteers.

One indication of intergenerational playgrounds’ and parks’ value to health and wellbeing is that some U.S. health insurance companies are making substantial investments in them. Over the course of a few years, Humana partnered with KaBOOM! to build playgrounds that specifically focus on multigenerational design. Another example is the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Tennessee Foundation, which shifted its funding four years ago from television advertising toward spending approximately \$7.5 million a year to build what it dubs “**Healthy Places**”—parks for people of all ages and abilities—across the state, mostly in underserved communities.

**PLAY SPACES EVERYWHERE**

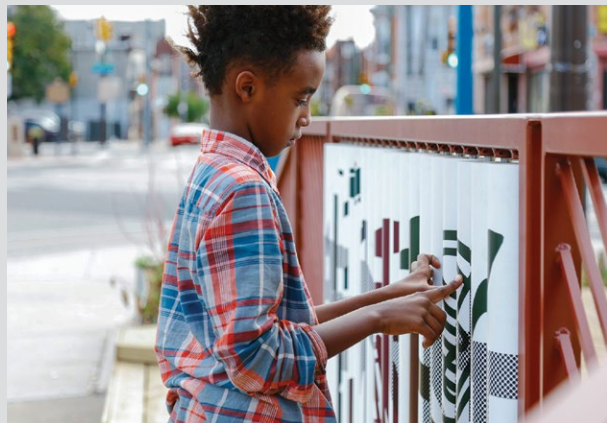
A few innovative efforts are focused on making play a critical part of public spaces outside of traditional parks and playgrounds. This “Play Everywhere” approach creates spontaneous play in everyday, unexpected places such as bus stops, laundromats, and grocery stores. The idea is to identify spaces that people of all ages naturally frequent and spend extended time without childcare, and where all are captive and have little to do. (Think: **laundromats and waiting for clothes to wash and dry.**) Anthropologist Jason Danely

writes, “By subverting the default attitude of ‘killing time’ with an activity that is both engrossing and spontaneous, different generations not only tolerate each other’s differences, but also thrive because of them.” Elements such as scavenger hunts in grocery stores or small swings at bus stops help make these places more playful.



*Photo: Planet Laundry*

A number of organizations facilitate caregivers and older people interacting with children in ways that advance critical skill development in areas such as literacy, math and spatial skills, executive function, logic, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Through its Urban Thinkscape Project, **Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL)** infuses cities with playful learning infrastructures and activities in everyday spaces. Installations include playful prompts that encourage caregivers to engage in language-rich talking, singing, and reading with children. Story trails along a sidewalk or park, where icons spur older people to tell young children stories, foster narrative skills important to literacy. Puzzle walls foster spatial skills important to later development of math skills. All the unexpected learning opportunities foster socio-emotional skills. PLL developed a playbook for creating playful learning landscapes around the world. It has been translated into Spanish and Portuguese and used—with partner Together for Play—to develop **playful learning spaces in Brazilian favelas.**



*Photo: Urban Thinkscape*



Photo: Playing Out

**LOCAL PLACE ATTACHMENT**

Through its **Play Streets** initiative, **Playing Out UK** promotes temporary street closures for the creation of safe play spaces right at people’s doorsteps. The nonprofit was borne from frustration that land use, traffic patterns, and other policy decisions have reduced children’s access to streets and public spaces for safe outdoor play. The resident-led street play the organization sparks also engages older people, who teach games they used to play in streets that are lost to the younger generations.

Street play sessions are usually held monthly, creating a regularity that enables people to form ties with neighbors and builds community spirit. These connections also help the community become more inclusive, support vulnerable neighbors, and reduce loneliness and isolation. By demonstrating the benefits of safer, more people-friendly streets, the initiative also promotes increased active travel such as walking and biking as a part of people’s everyday lives. Bristol was the first of nearly 100 UK cities to create specific street play policies, and the movement has spread **across the globe**. Playing Out UK also developed **guidance for local authorities** anywhere that communities are considering implementing play streets.



Photo: Playing Out



Photo: Playing Out

**Replicability**

As communities around the globe age, we are called upon to better understand the needs of people across extended lifespans and the substantial benefits of meaningful contact across generations. Play is among the most beneficial forms of intergenerational engagement, and public spaces are key to facilitating this engagement on a regular basis. **Intergenerational Contact Zones** suggests that nearly any space could “have an element of play that calls us out of our everyday age-segregated worlds and invites us to establish new relationships, unfolding in unexpected ways but without any genuine risk.” Every city can tap its formal and informal spaces to facilitate the need of people at all ages to play and the benefits of their playing together—and do so in surprising ways that elicit joy and generate wellbeing for all of its residents.