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# **The Evolution of Inclusion: A Playground's Journey Through Time**

***Mara Kaplan***

## **Abstract**

Hessel Park serves as a powerful lens through which we can trace the evolution of inclusive play over the past fifty years. Once a space designed exclusively for non-disabled individuals, the park has gradually transformed—mirroring broader societal shifts in disability rights and accessibility. From my childhood memories of a playground devoid of accommodations to my son's experiences navigating early yet incomplete accessibility efforts, Hessel Park has played a pivotal role in shaping my advocacy for inclusive play. Today, while still not perfect, the park stands as a testament to progress, reflecting advancements such as the ADA and the push for universal design. This article explores the journey of Hessel Park, highlighting its role in the disability rights movement and the ongoing need to challenge communities to go beyond compliance and create truly inclusive spaces. As we continue this work, we look toward the next generation of inclusive design, ensuring that play belongs to everyone.

## **Keywords:**

**Inclusive Play, Inclusive Playground, Champaign IL Park District, Hessel Park, History of Disability Rights**

## **The Early Years – Watching from the Sidelines**

**I grew up in the 1970s in Champaign-Urbana, a small Midwest college town in downstate Illinois. Both the Champaign and Urbana Park Districts provided beautiful parkland, great programming, and fun recreation. We knew if we wanted to take a beautiful walk, we would go to the University of Illinois Arboretum. If we wanted to go swimming, we would head to Centennial Park. And if we wanted a great playground, we went to Hessel Park.**

**Hessel Park was my favorite. Right near the University of Illinois, it was surrounded by both graduate student housing and beautiful old neighborhoods. It was just blocks from where the Fighting Illini played football and basketball, placing it at the heart of the two towns.**

**Hessel Park was obtained by the city in 1918 and is 22.2 acres. Initially donated by local real estate developer J.F. Hessel and formally dedicated that same year, the park had evolved from a pastoral swath of farmland into a beloved green space by the time I was a young girl.**

**I spent countless hours there, watching my siblings play tennis, running barefoot from the gazebo through the grassy areas, chasing friends, and challenging myself on the monkey bars. Year after year, I struggled to make it across the entire structure. I still remember the triumph I felt when I finally succeeded.**





**FIRETRUCK IN HESSEL PARK, 1970S.  
PHOTO BY MARTY MILTON**

**The best thing to play on at Hessel Park was the Fire Truck. Built in 1938 and known as “Old Number One,” it was donated to the park district by one of the local fire departments after it was no longer in service. Kids from all over came to Hessel just to climb, pretend, and imagine**

**grand adventures on the Fire Truck.**

**There were no children’s safety regulations in the 1970s. The first playground safety handbook published by the Consumer Product Safety Commission did not come out until 1981, so anything went. We jumped off the swings, flew off the merry-go-round, and spent hours climbing and playing on equipment that would now be considered dangerous and a huge liability. Nevertheless, we loved every minute of it.**

**My other favorite part of this park was the annual community Fourth of July picnic. All of my friends would be there with their families, sprawled on blankets, sharing picnic dinners. We would run from blanket to blanket, sampling food from other families. My own family always brought Kentucky Fried Chicken and a decadent brownie dessert we called the “Fourth of July Cake.” I remember this meal so fondly, though I doubt I would eat it today. As the sun set, we would settle in to watch the fireworks that were launched from the nearby stadium, illuminating the sky in bursts of color.**

**Hessel Park was everything a park should be—an inviting place to exercise, play, and build community. However, looking back, I realized something was missing. I do not remember ever seeing a child with a disability playing there. In fact, I rarely saw people**

with disabilities anywhere except for one blind girl at my elementary school.

This absence is not surprising when considering the broader history of disability rights. The first major anti-discrimination law, the Rehabilitation Act, was not passed until 1973. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guaranteed children with disabilities the right to attend school, would not be passed for another two years. Without legal protections or a cultural shift toward inclusion, children with disabilities were often left out of public life—including play.

Hessel Park had no accessible routes. While I believe there were sidewalks around the edges of the park, I do not remember any pathways leading through the middle. None of the playground equipment was designed to be accessible, and, of course, there was no concept of inclusive play.

## **The Shift – Becoming an Advocate**

By the 1990s, I had grown up, moved away, and had two children of my own. My son was born in 1993 with Cerebral Palsy and uses a wheelchair for mobility. On a visit to my parents, they excitedly told me that Hessel Park had built an accessible playground.



PHOTO BY MARA KAPLAN

We must remember how unusual this was at the time. The ADA had just passed in 1990, and the Parks and Recreation component of the law would not go into effect until 2012. Boundless Playgrounds and Shane's Inspiration, two leading nonprofit organizations helping



people create accessible playgrounds, did not open until 1997 and 2000. So, the fact that my small hometown had built a place where my family could play together was astonishing and exciting to me.

We loaded the wheelchair and the car seat into the car. We headed over to my favorite childhood playground to introduce my kids to a fantastic community park.

There was a play structure designed with a berm and ramps, allowing children to roll up to the top. There was also a ground-level water play area. My son, about five years old at the time, and my two-year-old daughter had a fantastic time playing in the water. There were hoops we could roll the wheelchair under, and both of them enthusiastically laughed as they got soaked.

The ground was sand and wood mulch—far from ideal—but at that point, my son was still light enough for us to help him get where he needed to go. We rolled him up to one of the tables, gathered play sand, and put it on the table so he could have a tactile experience. Meanwhile, his sister had found a friend and was having a great time on a rocking seesaw.



RAMP TO NO WHERE. PHOTO BY MARA KAPLAN

However, when we reached the play structure, my excitement turned to disappointment. We rolled up the ramp, only to find ourselves stuck. To the left was a moving bridge that was not even with the deck.

In front of us, as far as I can remember, there was nothing—nothing

**my son could play on, nothing to engage with. It was what I would later call “a ramp to nowhere.”**

**Ramps to nowhere were common in the first iterations of accessible playgrounds, and inclusive play advocates fought for years to move beyond them.**

**Hessel Park once again taught me what a community park could do. It could bring the entire community together, or it could limit its space to able-bodied people. For the rest of my career as an inclusive play advocate, I never forgot that trip to Hessel Park. It shaped my philosophy of inclusive design and bolstered my determination to continue fighting for great playgrounds, even in times when progress felt slow.**

**While that trip to the playground was not everything I had hoped it would be, I was still incredibly proud of my hometown for being at the forefront of accessibility. They had taken an early step—an imperfect but important one—toward inclusion. Moreover, that step inspired me to keep pushing forward to ensure that future playgrounds would not only be accessible but genuinely inclusive for all children.**

## **Today – A Playground for All**

**By 2018, Samuel was 21 years old, and traveling with him had become more challenging. I continued to visit my parents without him and was thrilled to see the next generation of play at Hessel Park. In preparation for the park’s centennial celebration, the city upgraded the restrooms, playground, and splash pad.**



#### **SPLASH PAD AT HESSEL PARK**

**While the playground was still not as inclusive as I would have liked, it was a vast improvement from the older version. At the very least, it now meets ADA standards—something that should be the bare minimum for any public space. Nevertheless, the Champaign Park District did go beyond the law, just not quite far enough. It is missing the ability of a person in a wheelchair to play without leaving their chair.**

**The main play structure towers 12 feet high, offering plenty of climbing and sliding challenges. Beautiful kaleidoscopes cast colorful light onto the poured-in-place safety surfacing. The swings include accessible swing seats and tandem seats where a toddler and parent can swing together. A merry-go-round now provides easy access for children using wheelchairs.**

**The upgraded splash pad is double the size of the old one. It has a**

concrete surface, making it much easier for wheelchair users to engage in water play. Beyond the play areas, accessibility improvements stretched throughout the park. A new six-foot-wide, 650-foot-long ADA-compliant trail now connects the gazebo, restrooms, and play area, ensuring that all visitors can experience the park's main attractions with ease.

The community park continues to evolve. The tennis courts my siblings played on are now pickleball courts. A section of the ADA trail has become a permanent StoryTrail with rotating books. Public art installations have been added, along with a walking companion booklet to help visitors identify the 36 tree species throughout the park. My parents tell me that Hessel Park remains a vibrant gathering place—one that now, more than ever, truly belongs to everyone.

## **Conclusion – Looking Forward**

While we continue to push communities like Champaign to improve their accessibility and inclusiveness, Hessel Park stands as a testament to how far we have come in half a century. When I was born, there were no legal protections for people with disabilities. In my lifetime, we have seen the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, IDEA, The Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act of 1980, The Fair Housing Act, and the Americans with Disability Act. These laws helped ensure that Samuel could go to school, take walks around his community, and live an enriched life that many people born just a few decades earlier could only dream about.

Hessel Park has followed a similar trajectory. It transformed from a space accessible only to able-bodied people into a park that experimented with accessibility and, finally, into a place that welcomes the entire community. I look forward to seeing how the

**next evolution of this playground will continue to push the boundaries of inclusion.**

**Truly inclusive playgrounds require the expertise and dedication of many designers. In this edition of *Design for All*, we highlight an industrial designer creating inclusive playground equipment, a parent and a business owner championing inclusive environment; and landscape architects who consistently push the envelope in designing inclusive playscapes. In keeping with *Design for All's* 2024 theme of celebrating women, all of these incredible designers are women.**



***Gabriela Diego is an Industrial Designer and Design Strategy Leader with over 25 years of experience. She co-led the outdoor play innovation team at PlayPower Inc. (a global leader in the playground industry), developed award-winning products, successfully worked to implement a new product development process, and led the conversation to champion Industrial Design as a catalyst for brand differentiation.***

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# **Industrial Design as Agent for Good Change**

***Gabriela Diego***

## **Abstract**

**Industrial designers shape the world around us, carrying the responsibility to create products that are both functional and meaningful. When it comes to playground design, this responsibility extends to ensuring that play spaces are inclusive and welcoming to all children and their caregivers. Over the past decade, the playground industry has seen a shift toward more intentional, user-centered design, incorporating research and empathy-driven solutions to serve diverse needs better.**

**This article explores the evolving role of industrial designers in inclusive playground development, highlighting the growing awareness of accessibility and the importance of designing for all abilities. It also examines the challenges women face in the design industry and the need for greater diversity in design teams to improve outcomes. Looking ahead, the author calls on manufacturers and design leaders to remain committed to curiosity, innovation, and inclusivity, recognizing that the work of playground designers has the power to create lasting positive change in communities.**

## **Keywords:**

**Industrial Design, Inclusive Playground**

**Industrial designers are trained to be accountable for the form and function of a product. When it comes to form, we are taught to pay attention to details and successfully employ basic product design principles, such as the use of materials, balance, proportion, color, and texture. When users engage with the physical products we design, the function is fulfilled. It is in this interaction that we successfully meet a user need or not.**

**As designers, we carry immense responsibility for the creation of the world we live in. The products, environments, gadgets, buildings, and systems that surround us and make our lives better are born from our imagination. We are wired to always look for possible solutions to problems. We are constantly training to observe closely, keep a curious mindset, and ask: what if we did things differently?**

**When it comes to inclusive playgrounds, designers must go beyond the play solutions that were designed in the past and only considered typically developing children. We must follow the words of the illustrious writer Maya Angelou when she said, *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better"*.**

**We now live in a world that knows more about diverse needs. Designers have the responsibility to stay engaged and constantly learn about the needs and preferences of ALL children and their caregivers. We must stay curious, conduct research, and consult with experts like therapists, accessibility consultants, parents of children with disabilities, and children themselves. All these techniques will increase our level of empathy for the challenges that users encounter daily. As a result, we will create spaces that are welcoming and enjoyable for everyone.**

## THE LAST DECADE



**PLAYHOUSE BY PLAYWORLD.**

**For 21 years, I had the privilege of designing products for children, including outdoor playgrounds, to be specific. During this time, visiting playgrounds for me was more than just taking my children outside to play. I became keenly aware of everything families do when they play outside. Seeing children having fun on the equipment my team designed was an absolute joy. Observing how, time and time again, families would interact and make new friendships while using this “outdoor stage for positive connections” made me confident that I was contributing to something worthy.**

**Over the last decade, I have seen playground designers in the Outdoor Playground Industry take the time to learn and do better. They are reading the latest research, conducting interviews, and asking questions such as: Will a child with low fine motor skills be able to spin this play element? Is a grandparent who uses a walking**

**device able to play with their grandchild? Is a child with low vision able to find their way about the play area?**

**Collectively, I have seen an intentional shift from designing a set of 'standard' parts that go into a typical post-and-platform structure to trying to re-imagine the structures and focus on the user experience. Designers question every detail of the products they expect to bring to market and intentionally work to build empathy and imagine healthier solutions for the future.**



**HOME DOME BY PLAYWORLD. USED WITH PERMISSION FROM PLAYWORLD**

**Designers are paying attention to new materials, technologies, health, medical research, economic and cultural influences, etc., and deliberately trying to incorporate the learnings into their product sketches with the intention of providing a more meaningful play experience not only for the child but for their caregivers and their communities.**

**Having said this, I do recognize that change in this industry is slow compared to the pace we see around us in other industries. A decade ago, inclusive playground solutions were rare. I believe the market is becoming increasingly aware and more demanding of inclusive solutions. I am optimistic that manufacturers will continue to move towards offering more standard inclusive playground options where ALL abilities are included in play.**

## **ROLE OF WOMEN IN DESIGN**

**My career in Industrial Design started in the mid-1990s in Guadalajara, Mexico. The profession was not well known then, and there were not a lot of Industrial Design jobs open. Males usually**

took the positions available with more experience. For the first few years of my career, I held jobs where I was the only woman on the product development teams I was a part of.

In the past 25 years, I have seen a few more women enter the design arena, but it is still a career in which positions are held primarily by men. During the 2024 Women in Design Deep Dive conference, held by the Industrial Designers Society of America, we learned that women make up about half of the population receiving industrial design degrees. However, only an average of 28% of them are actively practicing industrial designers. What is worse, this percentage drops by a third between the ages of 30-44, and approximately 55% leave the industry entirely as they transition from junior to executive roles.<sup>1</sup>

Institutions like IDSA are working to increase the visibility of women designers, and industry leaders must continue to work to address systemic inequities that will allow for these voices to join and stay in the practice.

It is clear to me that when we have diverse design teams that include all genders and abilities, we ALWAYS improve the outcome of the products and services we bring to market.

## Conclusion

Designing inclusive playgrounds has been a delight for me. I have had the honor to experience firsthand the meaningful connections and memories that occur when children interact with the products I once imagined could be possible.

This career allowed me to change people's lives for the better.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://linktr.ee/stateofwomenindesign>

**When you have a good time at the playground, you have the chance to reinforce positive relationships with yourself and with others. When this happens, the feeling of happiness and the positive memory stays with you long after you have left the play space. It is then that you are, in fact, changing the future of each user.**

**I have seen the outcome of my contributions inside an organization. Building processes and nurturing teams that stay committed to constant learning and innovative thinking can give any business the opportunity to become an industry leader.**

**I invite every manufacturer and every design leader to continue the work towards building diverse and curious teams that design beautiful, functional, meaningful, and responsible inclusive play spaces for future generations.**

**But most importantly, I invite you to remember that this work does change the future of the people who play on what you once imagined.**





***Sandra Burtzos is a licensed landscape architect with 38 years of experience designing and managing parks and recreation, as well as commercial and residential, projects in both private and public sector practice throughout the western US. In her role as Capital Project Manager III at Portland Parks & Recreation for the past 18 years, Sandra has managed a wide variety of park projects. In addition to her landscape architecture background, Sandra also is a certified Montessori teacher and holds a Master of Education degree. Combining both career fields, she has taken a special interest in inclusive play and nature play projects, in addition to downtown park projects that serve large numbers of users in the urban environment. They bring some green open space, create a place for respite, and often provide very popular large interactive water features into the downtown core.***

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# **A Park Project Manager's Inclusion Lens**

***Sandra Burtzos***

## **Abstract:**

**Playground design has undergone significant transformation, evolving from simple standalone structures to adventure playgrounds, ADA-compliant designs, and now more holistic and inclusive playscapes. This article reflects on the author's 38-year career as a landscape architect and project manager. It details how their perspective on playground accessibility expanded from a compliance-driven approach under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to a broader, more intentional focus on inclusive play.**

**Through firsthand experiences with projects such as Harper's Playground and Westmoreland Nature Play Area, the article explores how inclusive design goes beyond meeting technical accessibility standards to create environments where children of all abilities can play side by side. It highlights the role of public park agencies in shaping playground trends, advocating for inclusive features, and fostering collaboration between communities and design professionals.**

**The discussion also traces the shift from "catbox" playground designs—prefabricated play structures set within standard safety surfacing—to more dynamic and engaging playscapes that integrate nature, varied levels of challenge, and inclusive principles. Real-world observations reinforce how these innovative spaces encourage not only physical play but also social interaction, community-building, and even unexpected uses by individuals of all ages.**

Ultimately, *A Park Project Manager's Inclusion Lens* underscores the importance of embedding inclusion into every stage of playground planning and design, ensuring that play spaces evolve to be more welcoming, engaging, and meaningful for all.

**Keyword:**

**Inclusive playground design, Portland Parks & Recreation, Americans with Disability Act, Harper's Playground, Westmoreland Nature Play Area**

## **Introduction**

**Playground design has evolved over time, from the days of individual standalone play components to adventure playgrounds to the influences and outcomes of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and large play structures to more current trends in creative playscape design, some focusing on inclusivity and some focusing on nature-based play. Some incorporate both. With over 38 years of experience as a landscape architect, I have both observed and contributed to this evolution. Now, as I approach retirement and reflect on my career, I marvel at how far my community has come in providing inclusive playspaces for everyone. While there is always room for improvement, the playspaces championed by Portland Parks & Recreation in 2025 are light years ahead of the playgrounds we installed in 2000.**

## **The Role of a Public Park Agency**

**A landscape architect or project manager for a public park agency has a unique opportunity to influence the focuses and trends in playground design. Through both and listening to our communities when we start our outreach process for a new project on the trends and needs to be addressed through the playground and park design, we gain partners, advocates, and key community connections.**

**We either design the park and playground ourselves for our agency or, more often, we hire and manage a team of design professionals led by a landscape architecture firm who will do the design work. We often find ourselves educating our design teams, or, conversely, we get to learn from them and any specialty sub-consultants who they may have included on their team to add depth of expertise in**

a particular focus area.

One such area is inclusive play. Having worked on my agency's first inclusive playground project, followed by one in which an inclusive play consultant was part of the design team, and attending numerous continuing education opportunities helped me gain insights into inclusive design, both for playgrounds and parks and outdoor spaces in general. As we advance through our careers, our experiences with different projects and people build upon each other. We develop lenses through which we view design and projects, and we use those lenses to bring our depth of expertise to the work. One of my lenses transformed throughout my career from a strong knowledge of how to meet ADA requirements to the broader lens of inclusion.

## **The ADA**

In 1990, when the Americans with Disabilities Act first passed, I was selected by the landscape architecture firm I worked for at the time to be the staff member to attend a brand-new training series to learn about it and the anticipated impacts that would be coming at the design professions as a result. I closely followed along over the years as design standards and building codes were modified to incorporate the new standards and guideline documents were developed to help implement them. I was often called upon to do quality assurance reviews of others' designs for 'meeting ADA' and other technical requirements.

## **Beyond the ADA**

Fast forward 20 years to 2010, when Portland Parks & Recreation was approached by a dad of a little girl with a disability who wanted to raise funds and community support to replace their local

neighborhood park playground with one that his daughter could access and play alongside others.



#### OVERVIEW OF HARPER'S PLAYGROUND, PORTLAND PARKS & RECREATION

I was selected as the Portland Parks project manager to manage the Harper's Playground project at Arbor Lodge Park and work with the enthusiastic family who was working on starting their nonprofit, [Harper's Playground](#). It was a new endeavor for everyone involved, and many lessons were learned in the process. I learned during that project about what it means to go beyond 'meeting' the minimal ADA requirements that I had been so well trained to follow and instead learned how to provide a much more inclusive play environment.

After my work with Harper's Playground, I contributed to other inclusive playground projects, including [Couch Park](#). Through my collaboration with Let Kids Play, an inclusive play expert on the design team, I gained a much broader perspective on inclusion. I learned to consider a wider range of disabilities and the challenges children and their caregivers face in accessing and meaningfully engaging with our playgrounds.

I went on to work on another playscape project about 12 years ago - a unique pilot project for a sizeable nature-based play area that, even though its focus was natural play, is also inclusive. While most



of the play surfacing is not the more accessible rubberized or synthetic turf, it has a large sand and water play area. It has constructed play features made of natural materials designed to be inclusive, incorporating easy, medium, and more challenging ways. The same feature can be used by children of varying abilities to play together. An environment integrated into a natural setting, albeit a designed natural setting, and children interacting with natural materials, as opposed to manufactured synthetic materials, helps meet the needs of the skyrocketing number of children with neurodevelopmental disorders.



**WATER AND SAND PLAY AT WESTMORELAND NATURE PLAYGROUND FROM PORTLAND PARKS AND RECREATION**

For various park and playground projects, I started finding myself advocating to incorporate as many of the inclusive play principles and features into our way of thinking and projects as possible, even

those we were not explicitly designating or focusing on as 'Inclusive Playgrounds.' Inclusive play started becoming more a part of our vocabulary and way of thinking. Project budgets grew to be able to try out and include various types of accessible synthetic play safety surfacing on new and replacement playground projects. In addition to the much higher initial installation cost, this recognition of the need for greater accessibility to create opportunities for greater inclusivity also came with the need to budget for the future increased repair and replacement costs of this type of play safety surfacing. It was a landmark turning point in our park system and many park systems when these more accessible types of surfacing became more commonplace. They started taking the place of the engineered wood fiber that had been typically used throughout our system and barely met ASTM testing for accessibility under the very best circumstances when it was new and had been properly installed. It became less accessible over time and challenging to maintain as fully accessible.

### **Evolution: Catbox to Playscape**

The focus of many of our newer playspaces at Portland Parks & Recreation over the past 10-15 years became developing what I refer to as playscapes. Playscapes, rather than the typical playgrounds that have evolved over the past few decades, are what I call a 'catbox design style.' Catbox design arose as the play equipment industry went from the individual pieces of equipment that many of us grew up with in our gravel or asphalt schoolyards and parks to the 'adventure playgrounds' of the 1970s to the larger all-in-one, lower liability, play structures that are selected for their

components and assembled into a structure by play equipment manufacturer reps, then plopped into the middle of a square, rectangle or circle filled with play surfacing (i.e., the catbox).

We landscape architects during those catbox design years would contact a play equipment manufacturer's rep, let them know the size and shape of the area we



**EXAMPLE OF CATBOX PLAYGROUND FROM PORTLAND PARKS AND RECREATION**

designated for the playground, the age ranges we were trying to serve, the budget, and ask which of their play structures would fit into the space. Sometimes, play components from a standard model would be added or subtracted to make it fit well within the space we had. Often, we would also include some swings or a few additional pieces of standalone equipment that would all fit within that one geometric shape with proper safety fall zones and clearances. The play equipment reps would try to incorporate a variety of different elements and activities into the play structure, as well as check off the boxes for meeting the minimum required percentage of play components deemed as ADA compatible, even though, in reality, many of those play components were far from meeting the needs of many children with various disabilities. Getting children up on top of a large, impressive, expensive metal and plastic structure became the focus, and that in itself can be a deterrent to many children with varying disabilities, as opposed to more approachable play features. Our job was to do the site or park design, the accessible pathways leading to the playground, benches, seat walls, shade, drinking fountains, select the play structure's colors, etc. The play equipment reps were, for the most

**part designing the catboxes, I mean playgrounds, for us.**

**When we started moving into the realm of playscapes over the past 10-15 years, that opened up a whole new creative realm of play area design for landscape architects. It was somewhat familiar to the generation who came before us in the profession, that is, before the catbox design era began.**

**So what do I mean by 'playscapes'? I broadly define 'playscapes' as landscapes designed for play. They are play environments composed of natural and/or manufactured play features interwoven into a designed landscape setting. They include a sense of place, a sense of entry, movement, and discovery that can be experienced and interacted with as one moves through the space, as well as a multitude of play, exploration, landscape, and oftentimes art and interpretive elements. That designed landscape setting may evoke the feeling of having been designed with nature or by nature itself at one end of the spectrum, or it may seem more urban and equipment-heavy at the other end of the spectrum. No matter what the style or setting, a playscape feels unique, approachable, inclusive, and engaging, and it is nothing like the catbox with some manufactured play elements plopped in.**

**When we are designing playscapes, when we have larger spaces and budgets in which to work, we often can find ways to provide a long curving ramping path up to the top of a taller play feature by integrating it into the playscape or landscape. We can design more engaging play and landscape features and use materials that intrigue the children beyond just being able to get on top of the very tallest thing they can climb or interact with manufactured metal and plastic play equipment.**



## Inclusion Lens

The role of a public park agency project manager in the evolution and development of inclusive playspaces varies depending on their specific responsibilities within a project. Suppose staff members are directly designing the project. In that case, they incorporate community input—sometimes through focus groups—and can shape the design to be inclusive. However, in larger projects, my colleagues and I typically serve as project managers, hiring and overseeing a team of design professionals from various disciplines.



**GABRIEL PARK FROM PORTLAND PARKS AND RECREATION**

As the City's project manager, my influence begins with gathering community input on the types of experiences they want in their new park or playground. This often involves educating the community about inclusion and other

emerging trends in playground design. If I am working with a landscape architecture firm that has limited experience with inclusive play, I may need to provide a condensed version of a presentation I developed for professional conferences on the topic. Sharing the essential elements of inclusive play helps open designers' minds—some quickly embrace the concepts and run with them, while others require more guidance.

As concept designs take shape, my role is to review them through an inclusive lens, providing feedback on ways to enhance

accessibility and ensure that children of all abilities can play together side by side.

The pushback I often hear either from the community or from the designers is that they want to ensure that typically developing children are also challenged and drawn to the playground. That is the goal. Inclusive design is for everyone, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, to not only feel included but also to be challenged at their level and able to play side by side doing similar activities with their friends who may have differing abilities. It is usually a matter of showing them some example playscapes that are inclusive, fun, and challenging for a wide variety of abilities. I have learned and shared with my design teams that we as designers, or we as adults, or we who may not experience disabilities should not presume what children will do on a playground nor how they will interact with a play feature and other children. No matter how much thought, design, and intention we put into playground or playscape design, we are constantly surprised by how children (and sometimes adults) actually use the space and features.

## **Examples**

One surprising observation at Harper's Playground involved a steep mound covered in synthetic grass play surfacing, featuring a spiraling ADA-accessible pathway leading to a sitting area at the top and an entry point for a slide built into the hillside. When designing, we all envision how a space will be used—people of all abilities would take the pathway to the top, perhaps pause to enjoy the artwork and engraved quotes, take in the view, and then slide down the extra-wide slide, designed so a caregiver could accompany a child.



However, what quickly became apparent—especially with the playground opening in the fall, the rainy season in the Pacific Northwest—was that children discovered a more thrilling way to play. The synthetic turf, slightly slick when wet, became an impromptu sliding surface. Kids used pieces of cardboard, much like makeshift sleds in the snow, or slid down on their bottoms. I should have anticipated this after seeing the play surfacing installer sliding down the same way one rainy day in his rain pants. However, it still surprised me how quickly children gravitated toward this unexpected play opportunity. Interestingly, they found this far more exciting than the stainless-steel slide. This unplanned use, however, created some maintenance challenges, particularly as the high-traffic area experienced significant wear and tear along a turf seam.

Another unexpected use of Harper's Playground came from adults. One weekday, I visited the park to take care of something and found no children playing. Instead, I discovered a group of young adults moving with remarkable speed and agility, defying gravity in ways I had never seen before. They were practicing parkour.<sup>2</sup>

For those unfamiliar, parkour is an athletic training discipline or sport in which practitioners (called traceurs) attempt to get from one point to another in the fastest and most efficient way possible, without assisting equipment and often while performing feats of acrobatics. With roots in military obstacle course training and martial arts, parkour includes flipping, running, climbing, swinging, vaulting, jumping, rolling, and quadrupedal movement—whatever best suits the terrain. It is typically practiced in urban spaces but

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkour>

can be done anywhere, encouraging participants to see their environment in a new way and creatively navigate its features.

Seeing Harper's Playground unexpectedly double as a parkour training ground reinforced an important lesson: genuinely inclusive and engaging play spaces invite creativity and use beyond what designers originally envisioned."

[Westmoreland Nature Play Area](#) also led to some unexpected and heart-warming observations. A few weeks after its grand opening, I was walking through the playscape when a group of parents, sitting on a picnic blanket and watching their children play, recognized me as the park's project manager. They were eager to share an unexpected outcome of the project that had delighted them—it had created a true sense of community. They explained that families were spending much more time at the playground, getting to know one another in ways they had not before. Though they had crossed paths for years—at school pickup lines and PTO meetings—this was the first time they had the time and space to form real friendships.

Another fond memory was observing a young child crafting a 'mud pie' out of the wet sand in the large sand and water play area. When he noticed me observing, he proudly offered me a 'blueberry muffin,' which I gladly accepted. Nearby, I saw an older couple sitting along the sand play area, hands buried in the sand, playing with one of the many plastic sand toys that neighborhood children had brought and left for others to use. Curious, I asked if they often came to play with their grandchildren, glancing around to see if any of the nearby children might belong to them. They looked up, squinting in the sun, laughed, and told me they did not have grandchildren nearby—they came to play on their own. They had

been enjoying the space, joining in the play, and getting to know the children and families who visited.

This experience reinforced an important aspect of playscape design: it naturally draws caregivers into play alongside children, fostering shared experiences and intergenerational engagement. Unlike traditional 'catbox' playgrounds, where parents often sit on the perimeter scrolling on their phones, these spaces invite people of all ages to connect, play, and build community together."

## **Conclusion**

Playground design has evolved over time to now be much more engaging, inclusive, accessible, and fun than ever. Leaping beyond the simple 'catbox' design style and thinking more comprehensively about weaving a playscape, regardless of size, into the overall park design has opened up the floodgates as to what is possible to provide play experiences for children of all abilities and really the whole family. I am continually impressed by the creative design work as it evolves and how play equipment manufacturers are stepping up to meet the demand for more engaging experiences and equipment that fit seamlessly into playscapes. I thoroughly enjoy observing how new and existing playspaces and play features are used by the children and their families, as it provides an array of lessons learned and ideas for the next playspace on the project list.



***Lauren Knight is the founder of Pelican Playgrounds, a family-owned recreation construction company based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Growing up with a father who owned a playground sales organization and a mother who was an early elementary school teacher—and an advocate for inclusive classrooms and co-teaching—Lauren was immersed in the world of playground design and inclusive education from an early age. Before founding Pelican Playgrounds, she worked as a one-on-one camp counselor for children with disabilities. This experience paved the way for her initial career as a special education teacher specializing in autism, ADHD, trauma, and other challenges. These formative experiences laid the foundation for her passion for designing play spaces that prioritize inclusivity, regardless of budget, and for building a team at Pelican Playgrounds that shares her mission.***

**Website: <https://pelicanplaygrounds.com/>**

# **The Role of Sales Organizations in Advancing Inclusive Playgrounds**

*Lauren Knight*

## **Abstract**

**Sales organizations play a critical role in advancing inclusive playground design by bridging the gap between innovative concepts and real-world implementation. As accessibility and universal design standards evolve, companies like Pelican Playgrounds are leading the way in ensuring that play spaces go beyond compliance to foster true inclusivity. By integrating adaptive play structures, promoting multi-generational engagement, and advocating for equitable access in underserved communities, sales organizations shape playgrounds that serve diverse needs.**

**This article explores the growing influence of sales organizations in advocating for climate-responsive play spaces, sourcing sustainable materials, and driving industry-wide conversations on inclusivity. It also highlights the increasing leadership of women in playground design and sales, emphasizing the value of diverse perspectives in creating human-centered play environments. As playgrounds transform into dynamic community hubs, sales organizations remain key players in ensuring these spaces are welcoming, engaging, and accessible to all.**

**Keywords:**

**Inclusive Playgrounds, Playground Sales**

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## Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving world, playground design has transcended traditional play areas to become vibrant, inclusive community hubs. Advances in accessibility and universal design are not only meeting established standards like the ADA. Still, they are also redefining what it means to create spaces where children, families, and community members of all abilities can play together. Below, we explore how innovative sales organizations and forward-thinking designers are leading the charge—from integrating adaptive play structures and multi-generational features to championing sustainability and equity in underserved communities. Through these transformative approaches, we are witnessing a paradigm shift in how playgrounds foster connection, inclusivity, and resilience for generations to come.

## Driving ADA Accessibility and Universal Design



**THE LAPPSET SONA INTERACTIVE  
DANCE AND PLAY ARCH**

Sales organizations act as advocates for accessibility by ensuring that playground equipment and layouts meet or exceed standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and universal design principles. Through my own company, I work closely with manufacturers to integrate ramps, sensory-rich experiences, and adaptive play structures that

accommodate children of all abilities. Over the past decade, design priorities have shifted from merely meeting compliance standards to creating spaces that actively engage children with varying

physical, sensory, and cognitive needs. The goal is no longer just accessibility but fostering true inclusivity where all children can play together seamlessly.

## Addressing Multi-Generational Play

Modern playgrounds are no longer just for children; they are designed as community hubs that accommodate people of all ages. Over the last decade, the way adults parent and interact with their children has changed significantly. There is a greater emphasis on shared experiences, active participation, and intentional play between parents, caregivers, and children. Many parents are looking for opportunities to bond with their



EXAMPLE OF MULTIGENERATIONAL PLAYGROUND WITH EQUIPMENT BY PLAYWORLD FROM PELICAN PLAYGROUNDS

kids in meaningful ways rather than simply supervising from a distance.

At Pelican Playgrounds, we advocate for multi-generational play equipment that allows parents, caregivers, and even seniors to participate in play actively. Features such as shaded seating areas, exercise stations, and accessible pathways create environments where families can engage together, fostering stronger intergenerational connections. As parenting styles shift toward more engaged and experience-driven interactions, designing for intergenerational play has become increasingly important in promoting family bonding, social development, and lifelong healthy activity.



## Climate-Responsive Play Spaces

With climate change affecting urban and suburban landscapes, sales organizations like mine have championed the development of play spaces that prioritize weather resilience and environmental sustainability. Over the past decade, design priorities have increasingly emphasized long-term durability and climate adaptability. From promoting heat-resistant surfacing and shaded structures to ensuring proper drainage systems for flood-prone areas, we advocate for playgrounds that provide comfort and safety year-round. By aligning with manufacturers that use sustainable materials, we contribute to the long-term environmental viability of these spaces, ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy them.

## Promoting Play Space Equity

As someone who has worked closely with children of all abilities, I



**CHILDREN PLAYING ON THE INCLUSIVE UNITY DOME BY PLAYWORLD.**

am acutely aware of the disparities in playground access. At Pelican Playgrounds, we work with municipalities, schools, and nonprofits to bring inclusive play to underserved communities. Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition of the need for equitable distribution of high-quality play spaces, ensuring that no child is left

behind due to economic or geographical limitations. We help identify funding opportunities, advocate for grant programs, and guide stakeholders in selecting cost-effective yet high-quality inclusive solutions. Our goal is to ensure that all children,

regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to safe and enriching play environments.

## **The Evolving Role of Women in Design**

The past decade has also witnessed a notable shift in the role of women in design, particularly in the inclusive playground sector. More women are now leading design firms, sales organizations, and advocacy initiatives, shaping the future of play with a focus on empathy, user experience, and holistic community engagement. As a woman who has built a business centered around inclusivity, I have seen firsthand the importance of diverse perspectives in playground design. My team and I prioritize working with women designers and industry leaders who bring fresh, thoughtful approaches to the field. The rise of women in leadership positions has led to more human-centered designs that prioritize emotional, social, and cognitive inclusivity alongside physical accessibility.

## **Conclusion**

Sales organizations are not merely intermediaries; they are key drivers of innovation in inclusive playground design. My journey—from a childhood immersed in the industry to teaching special education and now running Pelican Playgrounds—has given me a deep understanding of the impact that well-designed play spaces can have on children and communities. Over the past decade, design priorities have evolved to place a stronger emphasis on true inclusivity, intergenerational engagement, environmental sustainability, and equity in access. By advocating for accessibility, fostering multi-generational play, addressing climate considerations, and championing equity, sales organizations like mine help shape play environments that serve all members of a

**community. As the field continues to evolve, our role in pushing for design excellence and inclusivity will remain indispensable.**



***Fiona Robbé founded Fiona Robbé Landscape Architects in 1993 in Arcadia, NSW, Australia. A Landscape Architect and Horticulturist with over 30 years of experience, she specializes in designing outdoor environments for children, spanning public parks, schools, preschools, zoos, churches, and museums. Committed to advocating for children's right to play, Fiona actively promotes safe, imaginative outdoor experiences for all ages and abilities. She speaks at national and international conferences, provides peer support and pro-bono research, and serves on the Australian Standards Committee for Playgrounds.***

***Robbé views play as an essential part of learning and self-discovery, emphasizing its instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous nature. Her team's designs celebrate childhood joy, affirm children's value in society, and create welcoming, inclusive environments for families and caregivers. Grounded in Universal Design principles, they ensure that playspaces cater to diverse ages, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. By embracing the unique character of each site, their playgrounds foster exhilaration, challenge, and wonder while prioritizing children's needs and experiences.***

**Website: <https://www.architectsofarcadia.com.au/>**

# **Designing for Everyone: The Vital Role of Landscape Architects in Inclusive Playgrounds**

***Fiona Robbe'***

## **Abstract**

Landscape architects play a crucial role in the development of inclusive playgrounds, utilizing their expertise to design spaces that are both accessible and enriching for all users. Their holistic approach ensures that playgrounds are not just collections of play equipment but dynamic, engaging environments that harmonize with their surroundings, reflect cultural narratives, and foster social inclusion.

Over the past three decades, inclusive playgrounds in Australia have evolved significantly, transitioning from basic accessible routes to fully integrated play spaces. The introduction of the *Everyone Can Play* guideline has further accelerated this progress, inspiring local governments to embed inclusivity into all playground designs. Public demand has led to more extensive, better-funded facilities that incorporate intergenerational play, diverse sensory experiences, and universally designed equipment that encourages interaction among all children.

Sustainability is also a key consideration in modern playground design. Thoughtful material selection, integration with natural landscapes, and play experiences that foster a love of nature contribute to environmentally responsible and enduring public spaces.

**As inclusive playground design continues to evolve, landscape architects must balance community needs, advocate for accessibility, and innovate in response to emerging trends. Their work ensures that playgrounds remain welcoming, engaging, and sustainable spaces where all individuals—regardless of ability, age, or background—can experience the joy of play.**

**Key words:**

**Landscape Architects, Inclusive Design, Inclusive Playgrounds, Sustainability, Jo Wheatly All-Abilities Playground, Inclusive Playgrounds in New South Wales, Everyone Can Play**

### **1.1.1. The Role of Landscape Architects**

**Landscape architects are uniquely trained to think holistically about the design of spaces, moving beyond the mere placement of equipment on a site. They are attuned to the needs of people within their environments, continuously striving for solutions that enhance human comfort, enjoyment, and even delight. Additionally, landscape architects are deeply concerned with the sustainability of the natural environment, ensuring that spaces contribute to a more sustainable future. These skills are invaluable in the evolution of inclusive playgrounds in Australia, helping to create playgrounds that serve the entire community—places where people gather, have fun and build lasting memories.**

### **1.1.2. The Playground as an Overall Space**

**Inclusive playgrounds are designed as comprehensive, all-encompassing environments—microcosms of outdoor play experiences that integrate nature and thoughtful spatial arrangements. Over the past 20 to 30 years, these spaces have evolved into complex landscapes featuring an intricate blend of elements, including car parks, public transport hubs, accessible pathways, toilet facilities, picnic shelters, and diverse play pods.**

**Landscape architects play a crucial role in ensuring that playgrounds harmonize with their surroundings. For example, a playground located on Sydney Harbour will be designed to enhance and frame its stunning views. Cultural narratives, such as Aboriginal heritage, can also be interwoven into the design, creating a space that reflects and celebrates its unique context.**

**In practice, inclusive playgrounds are carefully structured into outdoor “rooms,” guiding visitors through a journey of discovery**



along well-planned paths that connect different play areas. Play pods are arranged to facilitate logical sequences of activities, with mobility-friendly equipment grouped together and more challenging structures positioned along the playground's perimeter.

Creating a well-designed, inclusive playground requires skill, persistence, and an unwavering commitment to detail. Landscape architects must advocate for both the overarching vision and the minute details that ensure accessibility and usability for all.

### **1.1.3. People in Their Environment**

Inclusive playgrounds aim to meet the needs of diverse groups across age, ability, culture, and gender. Landscape architects must carefully extract and synthesize community needs through targeted consultations. They must balance competing interests, knowing when to compromise and when to stand firm in advocating for inclusivity. Ultimately, their role is to listen, interpret, and champion designs that provide meaningful play experiences for all.

### **1.1.4. The Sustainable Playground**

A well-designed playground can contribute to a higher level of sustainability in 3 thoughtful ways:

#### **a) Choices of Materials**

Materials can be selected for their proven track record in terms of sustainability. These are typically either recycled materials (e.g., mulches or timber logs from felled trees in urban areas) or natural materials with low embodied energy, such as timber or mulch. The use of readily available local, natural materials, e.g., sand rocks, encourages reduced use of

manufactured products, which in turn reflects responsible use of resources.

## **b) Natural Setting**

Playgrounds are intrinsically suited to a natural setting and can be consciously designed to mimic a natural environment. Children are naturally drawn to nature-rich settings for play, contributing to the motivation for this design approach. The addition of trees, plants, rocks, mulches, pebbles, sand, and water not only provides a more natural setting but also contributes to a cool, shady, more comfortable play setting.

## **c) Fostering the love of Nature**

A natural setting for a playground invites children to interact closely with nature, which in turn fosters a love of nature. This contributes to a lifelong positive attitude towards the natural environment, a critical foundation for committing to taking action as regards a more sustainable future.

### **1.1.5. The Changing Landscape of Inclusive Play**

Inclusive playground design has been a focus in Australia for over 30 years. Initially, these designs centered on accessible paths leading to traditional playground equipment, with only a few designated inclusive playgrounds across each city. This evolved into a model where local governments established one inclusive regional playground per Local Government Area (LGA). For a city like Sydney, which has 33 LGAs, this marked significant progress.

The 2017 introduction of the “[Everyone Can Play](#)” [Guideline](#) in New South Wales, later updated in 2023, has been a turning point. Supported by government funding, this guideline established principles for inclusive play, prompting many LGAs to expand beyond a single inclusive regional playground. Some councils now aim to integrate inclusivity into all their more extensive playgrounds, and a select few are applying inclusive principles across every playground they develop. This shift acknowledges that all playgrounds should offer inclusive play experiences to the broader community.



COVER OF EVERYONE CAN PLAY

Public enthusiasm for inclusive playgrounds has driven the trend toward more extensive and better-funded facilities. Increased budgets and space allocations have allowed for greater diversity in play activities and more naturalistic designs, including intergenerational play elements.

Another notable advancement is the expanded variety of inclusive play equipment. Sensory-rich play structures now come in diverse formats, offering choices in materials, colors, and experiences. This diversification has increased the sophistication of inclusive playgrounds, moving beyond basic accessibility to provide more profound, more engaging play opportunities.

The incorporation of natural spaces into playgrounds is another growing trend. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the value of accessible outdoor environments, leading to a greater emphasis on integrating nature into playground designs.

A significant shift has also occurred in equipment selection. Earlier designs often included specialized pieces exclusively for wheelchair

**users, such as wheelchair swings. However, these items sometimes reinforced segregation rather than inclusion. The current preference is for universally designed equipment that accommodates a broader range of users, fostering a more integrated play environment.**

**Amenities have also improved over the past 15 years. Inclusive playgrounds now feature well-placed facilities with diverse toilet cubicles, including ambulant stalls, family cubicles, and changing rooms equipped with hoists. These enhancements reflect a more comprehensive approach to accessibility, ensuring that families with varied needs can comfortably enjoy the playground experience.**

**The rapid evolution of inclusive playgrounds in Australia reflects an engaged and forward-thinking design community. Experimentation continues to yield valuable insights, reinforcing Australia's commitment to providing public spaces that embrace diversity, encourage social interaction, and ensure that play is accessible to all.**

## **Case Study: Jo Wheatley All Abilities Play Space, designed by Fiona Robbe' Landscape Architects**



**OVERHEAD IMAGE OF THE JO WHEATLEY ALL ABILITIES PLAY SPACE**

**The Jo Wheatley All Abilities Play Space, located in Dalkeith, Western Australia, is a pioneering inclusive playground designed to cater to individuals of all ages, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Spanning 10,000 square meters along the Swan River foreshore, this thoughtfully crafted environment exemplifies Fiona Robbe's principles of universal design, ensuring accessibility and engagement for everyone.**

**The entire play space is fully fenced and wheelchair-friendly, featuring wide pathways and equipment designed for pram and**



wheelchair access. It is structured into outdoor “rooms,” guiding visitors through a journey of discovery along well-planned paths that connect different play areas. Play pods are arranged to facilitate logical sequences of activities.

The playground includes

- A nature playground and wooden fort suitable for younger children.
- A flying fox and rope climbing structure for older or more adventurous users.
- A range of swings, such as a double toddler swing set, parent-and-child swing, bird’s nest swing, and boat swings, designed for children requiring additional support.
- Activities for people of all ages include a Senior Park, table tennis tables, picnic tables, BBQ facilities, and much green space.



GAME POD

- **Sensory and Water Play:** A dedicated water and sand play area encourages sensory exploration, enhancing the play experience for children with sensory processing needs

- The park is equipped with accessible toilets, including a changing places room that features a height-adjustable adult-sized changing bench, a ceiling track hoist system, and a shower, ensuring comfort for all visitors.

The Jo Wheatley All Abilities Play Space has received several accolades for its exceptional design and commitment to inclusivity:

- **2019 National Landscape Architecture Award** On their website, they stated, *"At the heart of the project's inception was a desire to provide a nature-based play space that fostered inclusive relationships between people of all ages, genders, cultures, and abilities. The jury applauds the efforts of every collaborator in achieving an exceptionally high standard in universal and inclusive design principles."*
- **2018 Kidsafe National Playspace Design Award**, acknowledging excellence and innovation in creating safe, creative play environments.

Through its comprehensive and thoughtful design, the Jo Wheatley All Abilities Play Space stands as a testament to the power of inclusive design. It offers a welcoming and engaging environment where all community members can come together to play, relax, and connect.

More images of the playground can be found on the following websites:

- [Architects of Arcadia](#)
- [Out and About \(FNC\)](#)
- [Play in WA](#)
- [Landscape Architecture Projects](#)



## **Conclusion**

**The evolution of inclusive playgrounds in Australia highlights the essential role of landscape architects in creating public spaces that are accessible, engaging, and sustainable. Their ability to integrate cultural narratives, environmental considerations, and user needs ensures that playgrounds are not just places to play but vibrant community hubs that foster connection and inclusivity. As public awareness and policy support for inclusive play continue to grow, landscape architects must remain at the forefront of innovation, advocating for universal design principles and ensuring that every playground provides meaningful experiences for all. Through thoughtful planning, collaboration, and a commitment to sustainability, they can continue shaping playgrounds that reflect the diversity and richness of the communities they serve.**



## **Melissa Grassmick**

***As the mother of two children with disabilities—Julia, 10, a manual wheelchair user, and Tanner, 5, who has autism spectrum disorder—Melissa Grassmick understands firsthand the challenges and rewards of navigating life with a child with a disability. While spearheading the development of Julia’s Junction Play Space, Melissa combined her expertise in project management with her passion for health and wellness to raise the funds needed. Melissa played an active role in the design of the space and advocated for equipment that offered fun and challenging play to children with disabilities while at the same time was fun and exciting for typically developing children. Following the successful opening of Julia’s Junction, Melissa’s commitment to helping other communities create accessible play spaces grew stronger. As an inclusive play consultant, she partners with communities across North America, offering her expertise and guidance on creating play environments that embrace the unique diversity of each community and its members. Melissa supports projects from inception to opening, assisting with all of the details in between, including fundraising, building partnerships, raising awareness, hosting events, thoughtful, inclusive design, coordination with all parties involved, and execution of construction and installation, ensuring no detail is forgotten.***

**Website: [www.melissagrassmick.com](http://www.melissagrassmick.com)**

# **Inclusive Play Case Study: Julia's Junction-Not just the "Accessible" Park, but the "AWESOME" Park**

***Melissa Grassmick***

## **Abstract**

**Julia's Junction in West Kelowna, BC, is more than just an accessible playground—it is a truly inclusive and engaging space designed for children of all abilities. Inspired by the author's experience as a parent to a child who uses a wheelchair and another with autism, the project transformed from an idea into a \$900,000 community-driven initiative. Through strategic partnerships, advocacy, and thoughtful design, the playground prioritizes safety, sensory-friendly features, and universal accessibility, ensuring that all children can play together. Now a thriving community hub, Julia's Junction serves as a model for inclusive play, demonstrating how dedication and collaboration can create spaces that welcome everyone.**

## **Keywords:**

**Inclusive Playground, Julia's Junction, West Kelowna, BC**

## Introduction

Playgrounds should be places where all children can play, explore, and connect, yet too often, they are not designed with inclusivity in mind. As a parent of two children with vastly different abilities—one who uses a wheelchair and another with autism—I experienced firsthand the challenges of finding a genuinely accessible and engaging play space. Determined to change this, I embarked on a journey to create Julia's Junction, a fully inclusive playground in West Kelowna, BC. What began as a simple idea grew into a \$900,000 community-driven project, proving that with passion, collaboration, and advocacy, we can build play spaces that welcome everyone.

## The Creation of Julia's Junction

In late 2021, I was at a local neighbourhood playground with my



**MELISSA, JULIA AND MELISSA'S HUSBAND.**

husband and our son Tanner while our daughter was at school.

Julia, our eldest child, is 10 years old and uses a manual wheelchair to get around due to a spinal cord injury as a toddler. Julia is unable to move her body from the waist down.

That day at the playground, Tanner was 2 years old. While at the time we were unaware, we later found out that Tanner has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as speech delay, global development delay (GDD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Tanner prefers repetitive movements, predictable

spaces, and independent play. Tanner loves playgrounds. While he tends to play independently, beside other children, rather than engaging in social play activities, Tanner likes to be a part of the action on his own terms. He likes a variety of equipment, and he runs between play pieces quickly but wants to know what is coming next.

This particular playground featured a “circuit” where the angled rope ladder cut through a pathway to the stairs from the bottom of the slide - a circuit that Tanner was enjoying or trying to enjoy. Every time he slid down and made the turn to run to the stairs to head back up to the top of the slide, he tripped and fell face-first over the rope ladder.

As my husband and I were discussing how this particular “circuit” design was not ideal, a City Parks staff member overheard us and joined our conversation. We then were able to connect with a supervisor and delve into the issue of playground accessibility and inclusive design, or in our community’s case, the lack thereof. I started thinking about how Julia would immensely enjoy the opportunity to play at a playground. Julia loves swings and slides and imaginative role-play games with friends. Wide open spaces where she could play tag and hide and seek were something we knew our community needed. What a fantastic possibility not only for her but for so many children and caregivers.

At that moment, I had made up my mind that I was going to create an inclusive playspace in our community so that the almost 45,000 residents of West Kelowna and an even more significant number of annual visitors could enjoy a safe, accessible, and fun park.

My professional background is in hospitality, specifically and most

recently in Hotel Catering and Conference Services. Prior to Julia's spinal cord injury in 2015, as a Senior Conference Services Manager, I was dedicated, organized, and passionate about excellent customer service. I realized very quickly that these skills would be a benefit to my initiative to create our inclusive play space, and I am grateful to have had those experiences.

The first order of business was to research and connect with individuals and organizations that have successfully created inclusive playgrounds of their own. Upon discussing my impending project, later named Julia's Junction, with another parent of a child with a disability who had also built a playground, I was connected with PlayWorld and our local representatives. Their guidance, support, and expertise proved invaluable as I went through the process. One particular person who was by my side in support from start to finish was Lorraine Friesen of PlayWorld. Lorraine was instrumental in the way she connected me to key individuals, attended and supported all of our events, and was always available when I needed her.

With blessings from the city, I approached a local charitable foundation that focuses on children and youth to partner with me on the project, specifically the fundraising campaign. April Martin of PURKIDS Foundation was someone that I knew from previous interactions, and together, we had a common goal of creating a space for ALL kids to play in.

We set out to raise \$900,000 as quickly as possible to make Julia's Junction a reality. Going through the process of gaining official City Council approval before we started fundraising was imperative. Once we had secured that approval and encouragement, we hit the ground running (or wheeling, depending on who was helping!).



Over the next 16 months, we had successfully raised, through community education, advocacy, collaboration, and connection, the funds we needed to begin construction. During this time, I hosted many events and opportunities for the community to engage with us and learn about Julia's Junction. These events were a fantastic way for us to build on the excitement that our community was about to (finally) have a fantastic place for EVERYONE to play.

The act of fundraising is not for the faint of heart; I knew this from the annual fundraiser our family hosts to raise money for Julia's spinal cord rehabilitation. Our Julia's Junction campaign, however, was on a much larger scale. Through our partnership with PURKIDS, whose values were so closely aligned with our project, we were able to apply for a diverse array of funding opportunities. Our fundraising strategies included a variety of charitable foundation grants (accounting for approximately 17% of total funds raised), government contributions - municipal and federal (36%), corporate and individual cash donations (37%), and fundraising/community events such as bottle drives (10%).

Throughout the fundraising campaign, a great deal of time was spent on the playground design. A key element in our design process was collaborating with Teri Cantin, Landscape Architect. Teri was kind enough to provide an in-kind donation towards Julia's Junction by offering her services, which turned out to be a crucial step in the overall design and final construction. I also worked alongside the inclusive play space designer from our supplier, PlayEnvy, to create the ideal design for Julia's Junction.



**JULIA'S JUNCTION. PHOTO BY PLAYWORLD.**

**Details such as overall square footage, selection and layout of equipment, pathways, access to parking and washrooms, bench and table amenities, surfacing, and perimeter fencing were crucial as I went through the design process.**

**We chose to fully fence the perimeter of Julia's Junction, complete with self-closing gate hardware, to create a safe space for those children who may be on the Autism spectrum. Fencing is also vital for families with more than one child and for those with a tendency to run when over-stimulated. With ASD affecting 1 in 36 kids<sup>3</sup>, we believed a space that would be safe and comfortable for children with ASD and their caregivers was very important.**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/index.html>

**Julia's Junction features 11 benches and five picnic tables within the fenced area. We wanted to build plenty of comfortable seating for caregivers and park-goers alike so that play time at Julia's Junction would be maximized. Our benches and tables were all sponsored by local businesses and individuals with custom plaques, which is a great way to raise funds, by the way. Many of the tables are situated in the centre of the play space so that caregivers have sightlines to their kids while they are playing, an essential detail for any family.**

**There are so many fun pieces of equipment at Julia's Junction, offering hours of safe, accessible fun for kids of any age and ability. Our design focused on a variety of ground-based pieces of equipment, which allows children to access no matter how they get around. Whether using a wheelchair, walker, crutches, or their own legs, we created a playground layout that welcomed everyone to try out almost everything. Avoiding ramps in our design was one of the best decisions we made.**



**With swings being the most popular feature of any playground (we knew we needed LOTS of swinging**

**SWINGS AT JULIA'S JUNCTION. RENDERING BY PLAYWORLD.**

opportunities. We created a whopping five swing bays as well as a separate zip line feature (8 swings altogether). In addition, we designed a custom structure that would, for example, allow a child who can transfer in and out of their wheelchair the opportunity to complete the slide circuit totally independently. We also added multiple play pieces that could be enjoyed without having to get out of one's wheelchair, a reality for many children and caregivers.

With a combination of community engagement that included parents of children with a variety of disabilities, physical therapists, inclusive sports professionals, and teachers, expertise from our supplier's designer, and my personal experience with my children at playgrounds, we came up with a rock-solid design. To this day, 18 months after Julia's Junction's grand opening, all of the equipment is used frequently, with smiling faces and enthusiasm every single day. The community has validated that Julia's Junction was the missing piece in our local City, and it brings me great joy to watch it all unfold.

I cherish the experience of bringing Julia's Junction to fruition, giving not only my children but children all over our region a safe and genuinely inclusive place to play. We are grateful to the City of West Kelowna and the PURKIDS Foundation for the treasured partnerships formed in order to bring Julia's Junction to life.

As an inclusive play consultant, now working in partnership with PlayWorld, I am excited to support other communities in building truly special play spaces that are fully inclusive to all.

## **Conclusion**

Julia's Junction has become more than just a playground—it is a testament to the power of community, advocacy, and genuinely

**inclusive design. Seeing children of all abilities playing side by side reaffirms the importance of creating spaces that go beyond accessibility to foster meaningful engagement for everyone. This project has not only changed our local community. It has also inspired me to support others in building inclusive play spaces. By prioritizing inclusion in playground design, we can ensure that every child, regardless of ability, has the opportunity to experience the joy of play.**



## **Letter from the Chairman's Desk By Sunil Bhatia PhD**

**The concept of a park has come into existence in the minds of people with the flourishing of urban life who miss the living of rural life that is the experience of open space. In a real sense, the idea of urban life started with the introduction of industrialization. One that supports agriculture is declared with rural style and where tools for supporting the life for the betterment not merely eating, drinking, and dancing but beyond that life exists is considered urban. I do not know what we call the Indus or other ancient civilizations where only ruins indicate their lifestyle but the majority of the things are still a mystery. It does not exhibit the playground or park-like space in their townships. Their political or religious life remains are present and recreation was limited to music or dance or both or any kind of performing arts. Was it an urban or rural lifestyle?**

**The rural area has large open spaces and no need to design the park for recreation. In urban areas, congestion is a way of life and habitants look for breathing space so they design parks with their imaginations. The element of the design of the park shows that humans feel that God has created beauty by placing living beings randomly. It is the human mind that guides that God did not do justice and I will place the plants trees and fountains or anything where it should be placed. It is a requirement for urban life. In urban life, poverty concept is an inbuilt character so some people do not find enough earnings to sustain their urban life so they**

spend nights sleeping over placed sitting benches. This is not appreciated by local people and authorities of the park are forced to design benches with hostile design to prevent person sleeping and allow to sit that far it is designed.

The movement of life progresses as industrialization rapidly grows. The need for manpower and for making the rising demand for workforce and above all wish for low expenditure and more profits makes them utilize the land in optimum so they build high-rise buildings. In rural life, such pressure is missing and land is available in abundance so people prefer to design houses horizontally for houses. Just opposite to rural, urban people preferred to design houses in vertical growth. It accommodates more people in low spaces.

In primitive or ancient times, people lived mostly in the open and lived in fear that they could be prey to animals. Hunting for food was a completely physical power so most of the time he housed for safe living in trees or caves. He gets down when he feels hungry. This open space forced them to devise such a strategy for survival and protection from the vagaries of weather. The idea of designing the control of characters of open spaces into the design for closed spaces wags the real dynamo of the progress of humans. Park design progress was in the same direction that people wanted to be safe.

Later with the introduction of classes of rich or poor or elite or ordinary people created new lifestyles. Rich people lost the art of hunting but they converted this into a game of hunting. The forest is natural and open where a high risk of life by the attack of other animals. To minimise the risk they created an artificial close system for the game of hunting. It was a garden. It was a little close environment compared to the natural forest but designed with keeping in mind the beauty of randomness. Later in urban people thought that there should be closed environments and designed



landscapes and recreational activities for health benefits called parks. In park design uncertainty factor is eliminated as we witness in forests where it attracts with its beauty of randomness but side by side generates fear. The other side park also attracts but the element of fear is missing.

Parks, historically, evolved from exclusive royal hunting grounds and public meeting places to become recreational spaces in cities and national parks. Early examples include the Persian kings' hunting reserves and open-air gatherings in ancient Athens. Later, parks became linked to the Industrial Revolution, serving as breathing spaces in crowded urban areas and later as sites for recreation and nature preservation.

If we look at the history of parks first one is ancient roots where the game was a central idea and preserves for royalty, later evolving into landscaped areas around country houses and estates. Public parks emerged as cities grew, and private hunting grounds transitioned into public spaces.

The Industrial Revolution spurred the creation of urban parks to counteract the effects of urbanization and industrialization, providing green spaces for recreation and respite. National Parks and Conservation areas of outstanding natural beauty were set aside as national parks to protect them from development, with the US leading the way in establishing these protected areas.

I am thankful to Mara Kaplan for covering such important areas of human life and inviting authors to contribute their articles. I hope our readers will enjoy reading such wonderful areas of design of park that will designers.

With Regards

***Dr. Sunil Bhatia***

***Design for All Institute of India***

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## Forthcoming Issues

### Year 2025 declared as Women's Designer May 2025 Vol-20 No-5



**Debra Ruh:**

***Advocate for Inclusion and Technology for Good***  
***Debra Ruh is a globally recognized market influencer and advocate for the inclusion of people with disabilities. With over 500,000 followers on social media, she is among the top 2% of voices on LinkedIn, making her a powerful voice in the spheres of technology for all (Tech4All), technology for good (Tech4Good), and AI for good (AI4Good).***

***Debra has spoken at numerous multinational corporations, the United Nations, and the World Bank, emphasizing the importance of accessible technology and inclusive practices. She has authored three impactful books on disability inclusion and the role of technology in creating a more equitable world. She also a speaker for US State Department.***

***As the founder of Ruh Global IMPACT, a think tank focused on disability inclusion, Debra has driven forward-thinking initiatives and fostered global dialogues on these critical issues. Additionally, she co-founded Billion Strong, the world's first grassroots identity organization for people with disabilities. Billion Strong aims to unite the global disability community, enhancing their visibility and support network.***

***Debra's efforts are rooted in her belief that technology can and should be a force for good, creating opportunities and breaking down barriers for all. Her work continues to inspire and lead the way toward a more inclusive and accessible world.***

## **June 2025 Vol-20 No-6**



***Valerie Fletcher has been executive director since 1998 of the Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD). Fletcher writes, lectures, and works internationally. She generates opportunities for IHCD and has broad oversight of all consulting and design services. She created the IHCD User/Expert Lab which has over 400 people engaged in the evaluation of places, products, and services. Her current research focus is generating data to inform inclusive designing for the Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPoC) and for people with a spectrum of brain-based conditions. Fletcher's career has been divided between design and public mental health and she is the former deputy commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health where she oversaw***

***the largest participatory planning process ever undertaken in a state mental health system. She was Principal of Fletcher Studio Design from 1978-1985.***

***She is councilor for the International Association for Universal Design (IAUD) in Japan. She has created an international universal design benchmarking project for the government of Singapore. She serves as Trustee of the Boston Architectural College. Fletcher has a master's degree in ethics and public policy from Harvard University. The Boston Society of Architects awarded her the Women in Design award in 2005. The Helen Hamlyn Research Centre at the Royal College of Art in London named her Inclusive Design Champion 2022.***

**July 2024 Vol-20 No-7**



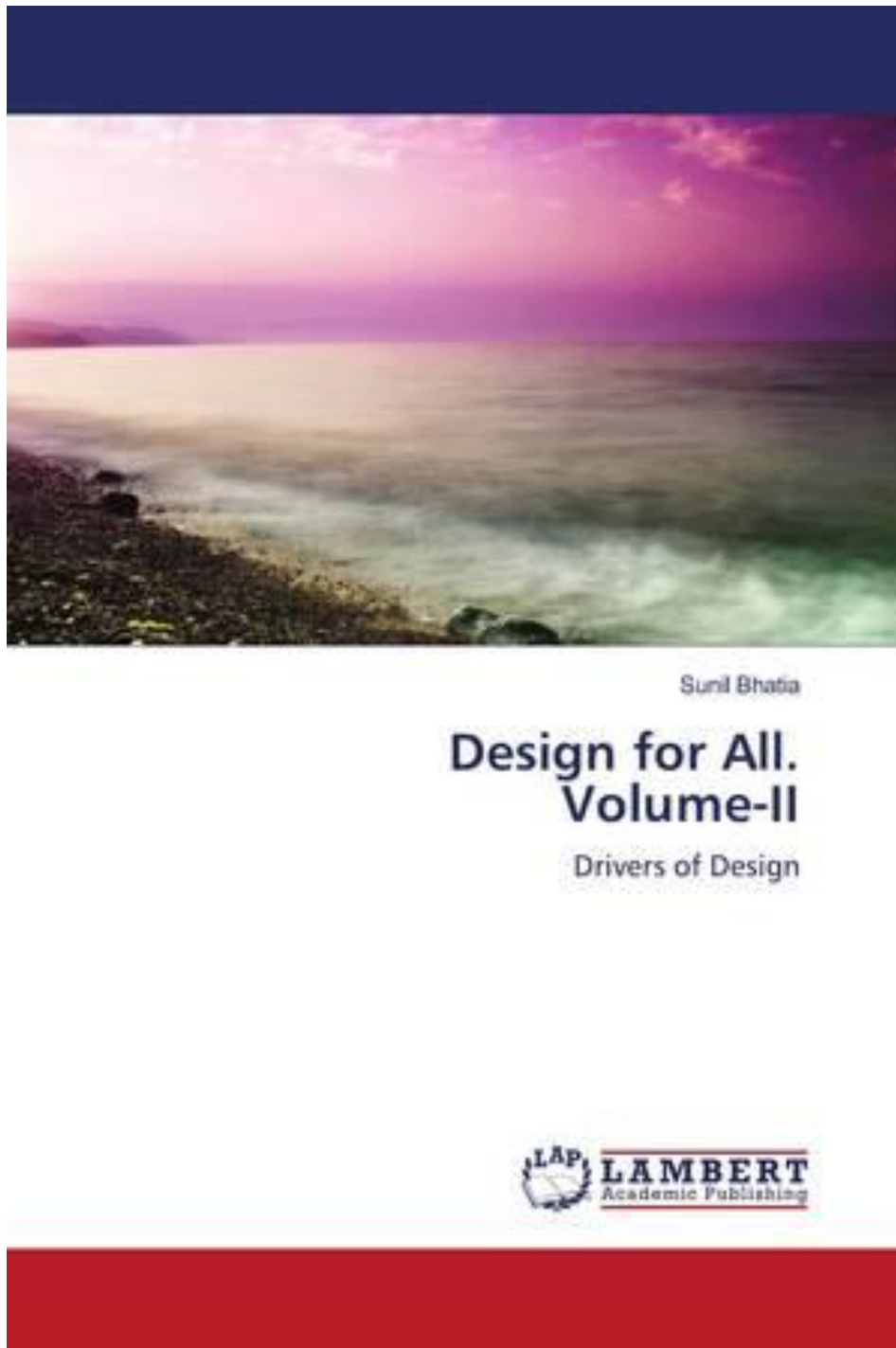
### **Prof Brigett Wolf**

***Brigitte Wolf is a retired professor of strategic design and design theory focussing on sustainability. Her background is in industrial design and psychology. She held a chair at KISD (Cologne International School of Design), Wuppertal University and the German University Cairo, Egypt. In addition, she was guest lecturer at universities in Cuba, Brazil, Argentina and Iran. Recently she has been conducting seminars at ecosign/Academy in Cologne and supervising PhD students at Wuppertal University and the University of Teheran.***

**August 2025 Vol-20 No-8**

***Shannon Iacino is a Professor of Industrial Design and Design for Sustainability at Savannah College of Art and Design. Her work specializes in leveraging technology to advance the principles of the circular economy and design for social good. With a background in sustainable design and emerging technologies, Shannon integrates innovation and ecological responsibility into her teaching and research. Her work emphasizes creating systems and products that minimize waste, promote resource efficiency, and address societal challenges. Through interdisciplinary design projects, Shannon collaborates with students and communities to develop impactful solutions that balance technological advancement with sustainable practices.***

## New Books



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Sunil Bhatia

# Design for All

Drivers of Design

Expression of gratitude to unknown, unsung, unacknowledged, unnamed and selfless millions of heroes who have contributed immensely in making our society worth living, their design of comb, kite, fireworks, glass, mirror even thread concept have revolutionized the thought process of human minds and prepared blueprint of future. Modern people may take for granted but its beyond imagination the hardships and how these innovative ideas could strike their minds. Discovery of fire was possible because of its presence in nature but management of fire through man made designs was a significant attempt of thinking beyond survival and not

doubt this contributed in establishing our supremacy over other living beings. Somewhere in journey of progress we lost the legacy of ancestors in shaping minds of future generations and completely ignored their philosophy and established a society that was beyond their imagination. I picked up such drivers that have contributed in our progress and continue guiding but we failed to recognize its role and functions. Even tears, confusion in designing products was marvelous attempt and design of ladder and many more helped in sustainable, inclusive growth.

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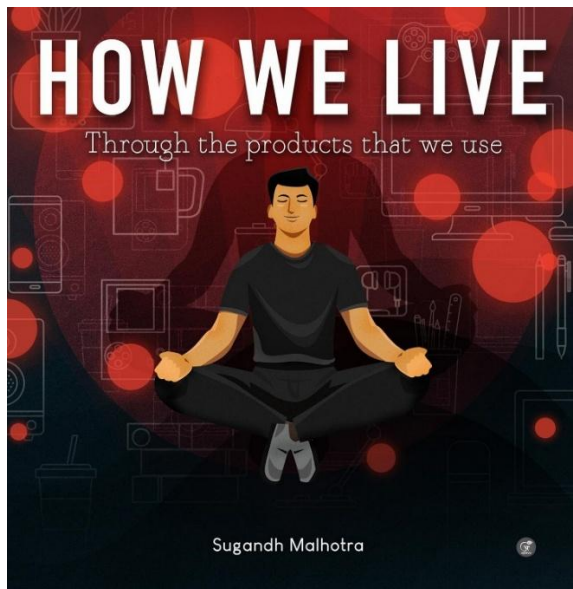
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<https://www.morebooks.de/store/gb/book/design-for-all/isbn/978-613-9-83306-1>

# HOW WE LIVE: Through the Products that We Use

Authored by : Sugandh Malhotra,

Professor, IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay (INDIA)

Sugandh(at)iitb.ac.in



Products tell stories about their users, their likes, tastes and journeys. 'How We Live' book aims to outlay, document and study the used products and create a persona of the users through a brief narrative. This visual documentation book is an excellent resource to observe and acknowledge the subtle differences in choices that are driven by nuances other than personal preferences.



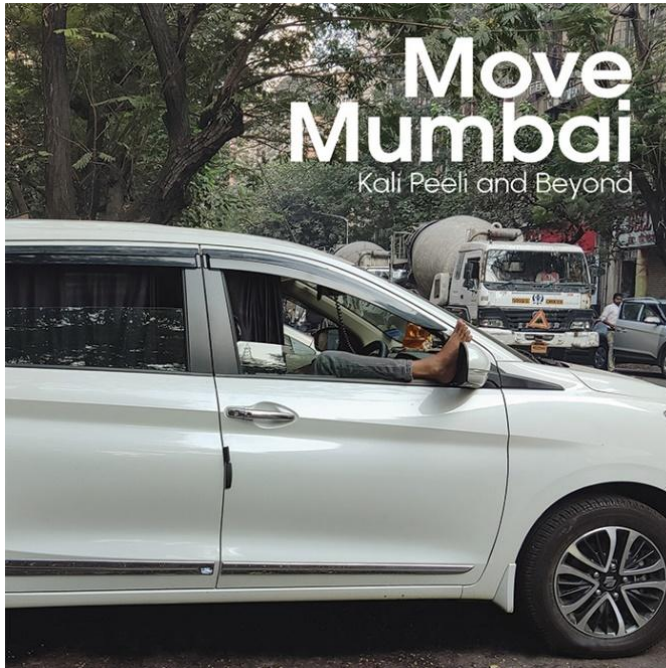
Available at: [Amazon.in](https://www.amazon.in), [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Astitva Prakashan](https://www.astitva.com)

# MOVE MUMBAI: Kaali Peeli and Beyond

Authored by : Vivek Kant, Sugandh Malhotra, Angshuman Das, Tekhenutso Theriah

IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay (INDIA)

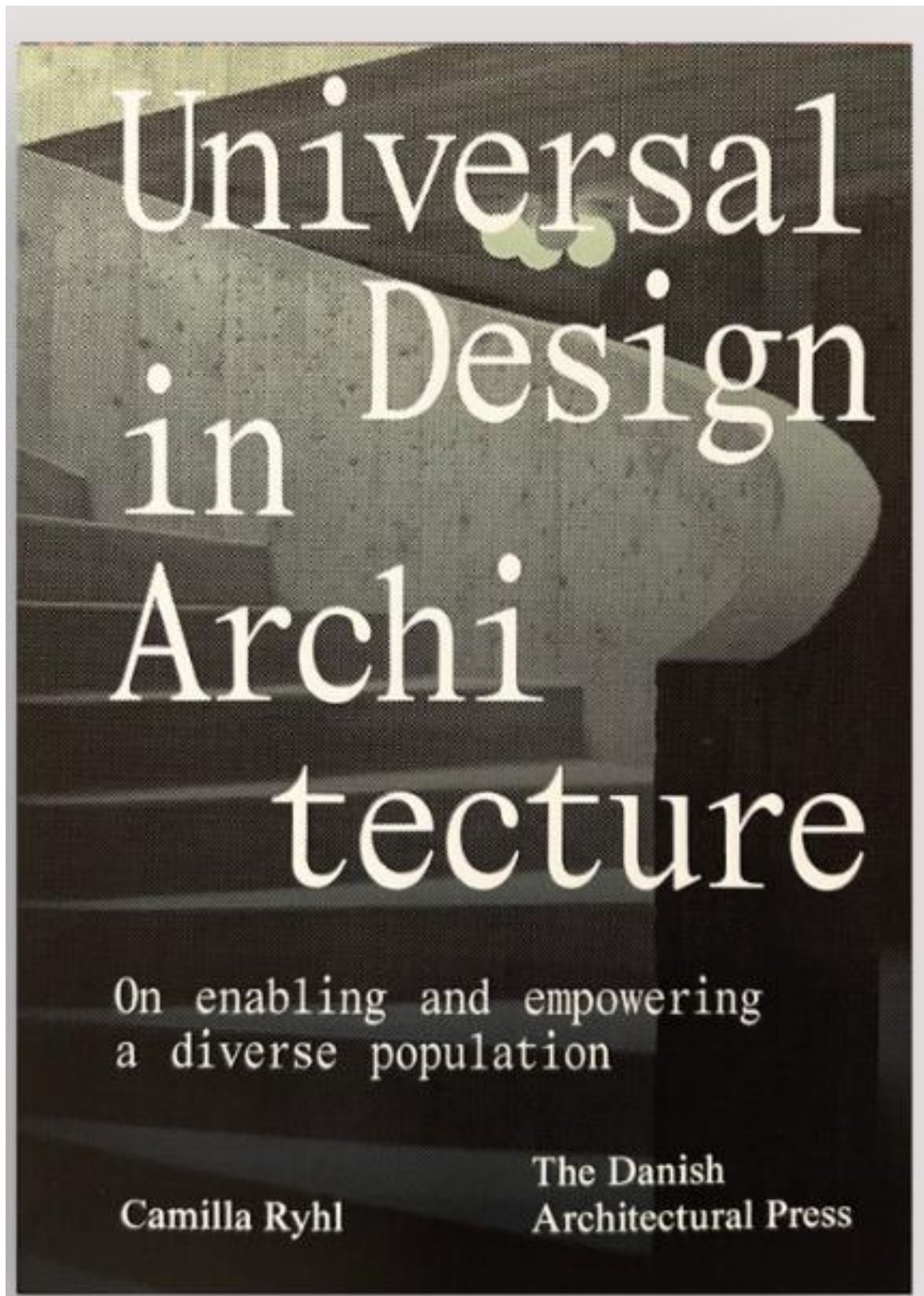
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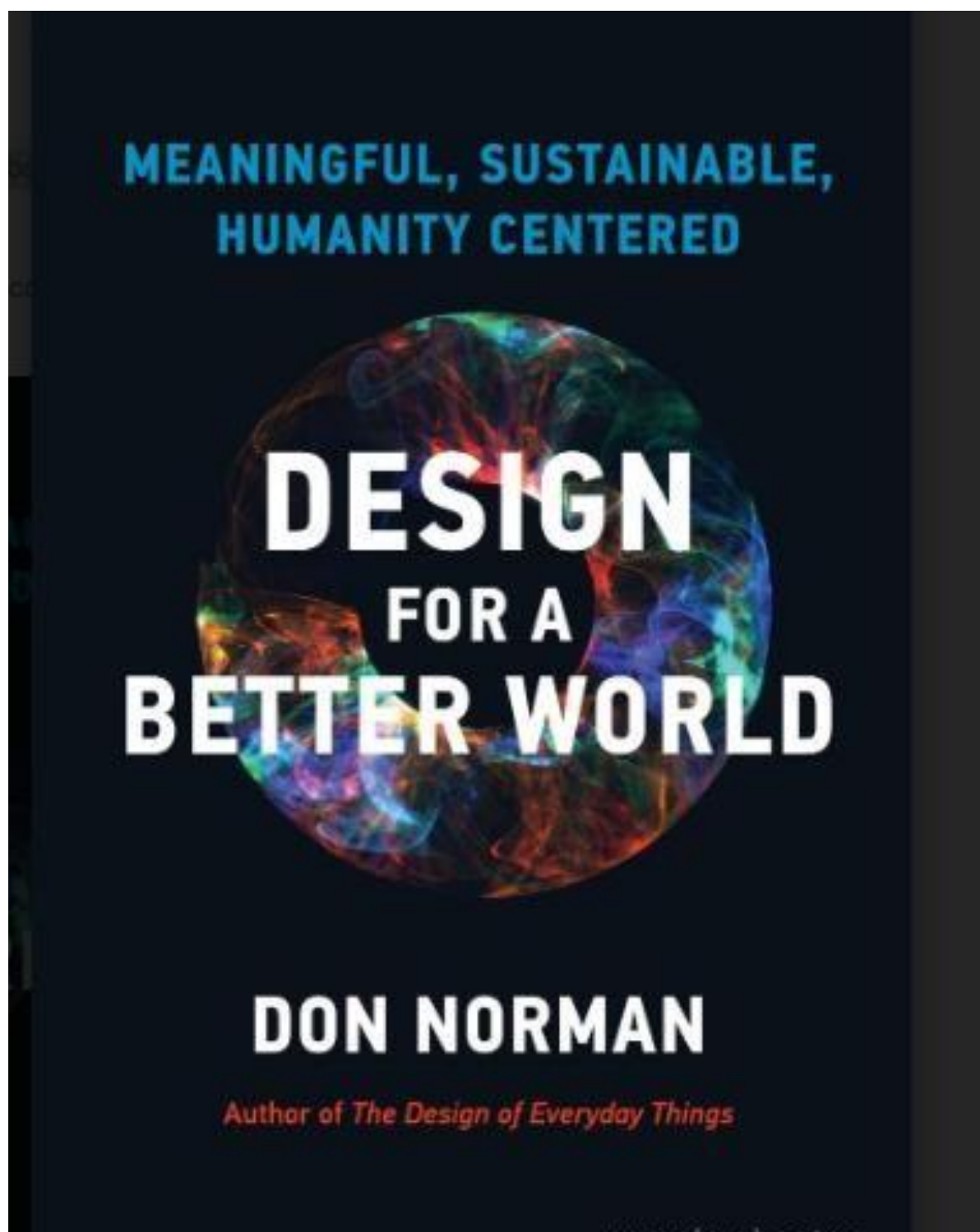


“Move Mumbai” is an incredulous yet everyday traffic story from the streets of Mumbai captured through a series of photographs. We closely observe how Mumbaikars use their vehicles, and live with and around them. From cab drivers to bus passengers, from goods carriers to bikers, to children, and pedestrians, Mumbaikars encounter hundreds of vehicles daily while commuting between any two places whether they may or may not be in one themselves. While a two-wheeler motorbike is designed to carry two people, Mumbaikars still manage to fit multiple, especially younger children, in ways that a designer would typically not envision. This reflects in certain ways the economic constraints faced by many Indian families, the cultural value placed on integrated family living, and their resourcefulness. This is one of the many ways in which the city dwellers have appropriated vehicles. We hope that the readers relook at these everyday images with a new pair of eyes to understand the seemingly mundane yet incredulous images of the mobility of Mumbaikars.

**Available at:** [Amazon.in](https://www.amazon.in), [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Astitva Prakashan](https://www.astitva.com)









**Emilio Rossi** (Editor)

# Innovation Design for Social Inclusion and Sustainability

Design Cultures and Creative Practices for Urban Natural Heritage





# News

## **1. Residents can help design Long Beach's first universal playground through survey and workshop**



Vanessa Perez and Eddie Quizar take a picture of a goose as they walk along a path at the El Dorado Duck Pond on April 11, 2022. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)

**Long Beach is requesting community feedback for the City's inaugural universal playground through a needs assessment workshop or online survey.**

**El Dorado Park West's new universal playground will be created to serve children with disabilities and neurodivergent children, along with their caregivers. Universal design principles equip features that support independence, social interaction and a sense of community.**

**Universal playgrounds consider a range of play experiences, such as sensory, cognitive and physical activities, while also integrating design elements that emphasize physical coordination, imaginative play, social inclusion and access to nature-based play.**





Babies and bigger kids alike enjoy the interactive displays and games at the newly renovated Hillbrook Park on Feb. 4, 2025. (Samantha Diaz | Signal Tribune)

The in-person needs assessment workshop will be held on Thursday, April 24 from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. in the Bridge Room at the Dr. Thomas J. Clark Community Center at El Dorado Park West (2800 N. Studebaker Road). During this event, attendees will hear a presentation on universal design principles and project details, such as budget and site constraints, then will be able to ask questions and voice feedback.

There will also be an interactive activity allowing participants to further assist with the development of the playground's design. Interpretation services in Spanish, Khmer and Tagalog will be available, along with American Sign Language and live captioning.

Those who are unable to attend the workshop are invited to complete the City's online survey by Monday June 30. The survey is available in English, Spanish, Khmer and Tagalog.



*The adult computer lab at the Michelle Obama Neighborhood library on January 4, 2022. (Richard H. Grant | Signal Tribune)*

**Input received from the survey will inform the proposed universal playground's design. Community members with limited access to a computer or smartphone may visit any Long Beach Public Library location during business hours to use a public computer in completing the survey.**

**The City's objective to incorporate more inclusive park elements under the Elevate '28 Infrastructure Investment Plan is influenced by the principles of universal design, which center on inclusivity and accessibility for users of varying abilities. Elevate '28 is a five-year initiative to revitalize Long Beach's parks, community facilities and multimodal transportation options.**

**The proposed playground at El Dorado Park West would be the city's first universal playground, but universal design elements are present in the Silverado and Ramona Park Signature Playground Projects, both of which broke ground last month.**

**The El Dorado Universal Playground Project is aiming to enhance the park's aging infrastructure, alongside other Elevate '28 projects focusing on paving, wayfinding and parking lot improvements that are in progress, along with upcoming improvements at the sports fields.**

***There will be more opportunities for community input on the project once a concept design is developed. To find project updates and complete the survey, visit [longbeach.gov/eldoprojects](https://longbeach.gov/eldoprojects).***

**(Courtesy: Signal Tribune)**

## **2. Universal to build first European theme park**



***Universal*** has chosen the homeland of Harry Potter to build its first **theme park** and resort in Europe, the entertainment company and U.K. officials announced on April 9.

The studio and theme park operator that has drawn millions to its Potter-themed wizarding worlds and other attractions said it would begin construction next year just beyond the outskirts of London.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the park would create 28,000 jobs and would bring opportunity, growth, and "of course, joy to Britain."

"People said to me, 'Government will be a roller-coaster,' and I can testify to that," Starmer said. "I don't think this is quite what they meant."

Construction on the park planned on 1.93 square kilometers in a former brickyard in Bedford is expected to be completed by 2031. The town is about 80 kilometers north of London.

Universal did not say what attractions it would offer at the park, but it has built rides around many of its movie franchises, including "Minions," "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial," "Jurassic Park," "Kung Fu Panda" and "Fast & Furious."

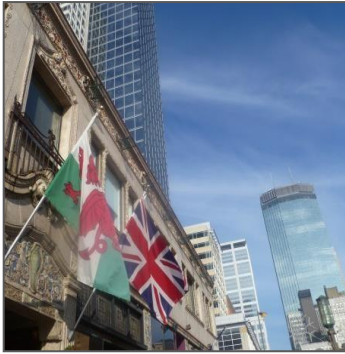
**Universal has had a deal with Warner Bros. to create its attractions around the Harry Potter franchise that is based on the books set in Scotland.**

**The setting is about 50 kilometers north of where Warner Bros. has a studio tour in Watford.**

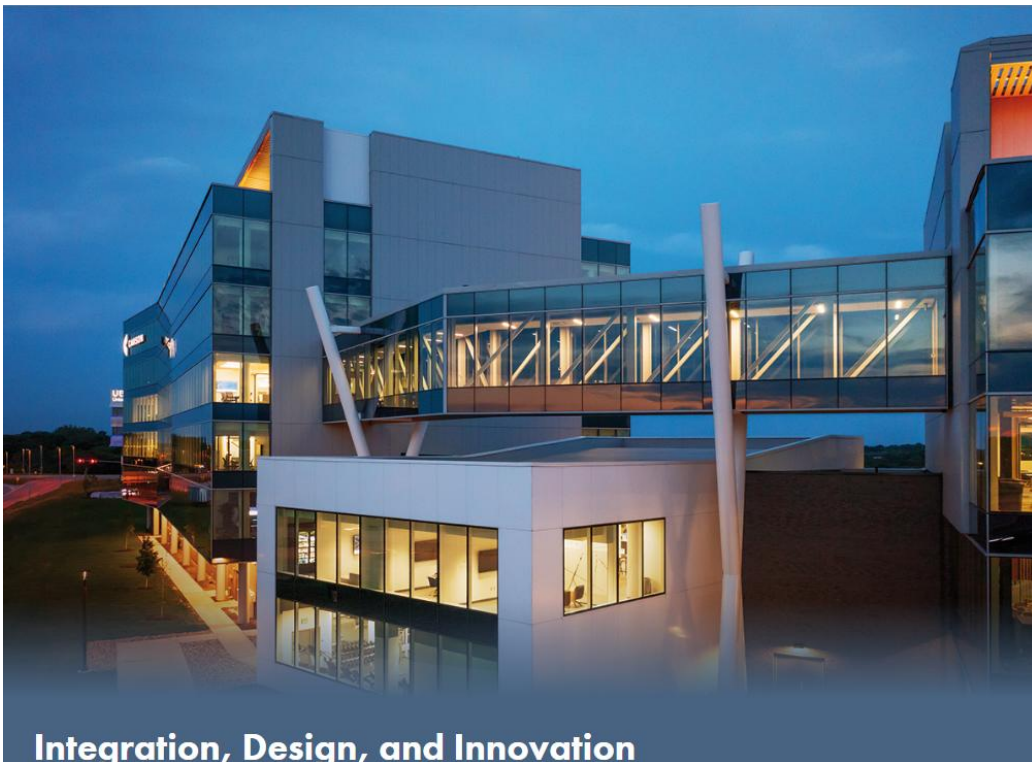
**The Universal resort, initially expected to include a 500-room hotel, will be near a major rail line and Luton Airport, which officials recently said would be expanded.**

**Universal, a division of Comcast Corp., has five entertainment and resort complexes around the world — in Orlando, Florida; Los Angeles; Osaka, Japan; China; and Singapore.**

**( Courtesy: Daily News)**



## Programme and Events



**Integration, Design, and Innovation**



**9-11 September 2025**







# STUDENT SERVICE DESIGN COMPETITION!

## OBJECTIVE:

The competition aims to leverage students' creativity and service design skills to address real-world challenges faced by India's social sector. Solutions must be innovative, actionable, and culturally sensitive, motivating NGOs to implement them effectively.

## ELIGIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION:

Open to undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral students enrolled in academic institutions during 2025.

## KEY DATES:

Registration Deadline: **Feb 15, 2025**

Submission Deadline: **Jun 15, 2025**

Announcement of  
finalist teams: **Aug 15, 2025**

Final Presentations: **Oct 6-8, 2025**,  
at the ServDes25 Conference

Announcement of Winners: **Oct 8, 2025**,  
at the ServDes25 Conference

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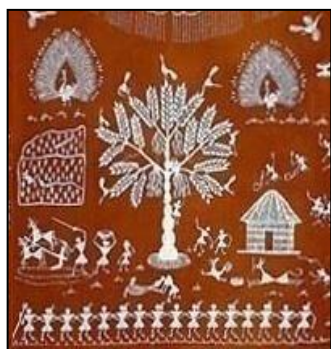


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## Job Openings



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name Dr. Sunil Kumar Bhatia, address A/2/70 Sector-18  
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**ISSN: 2582-8304**