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

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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.