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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.**