



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.

Email: Sandra.Burtzos@PortlandOregon.gov

Website: [Parks & Recreation | Portland.gov](https://parksandrec.portland.gov)

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.²

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

² <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.