



***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.***

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# 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.**