

# Chapter 6

## Play Safe?

### Co-Designing Play Space for, With, and by Children

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#### ABSTRACT

*Playgrounds in Hong Kong have been boring to children, as elements of risk and fun have been removed for parents' concern for safety. The government resorted to homogenous plastic play facilities to extinguish any liability and complaints. While adults wanted to play safe, children's opportunities for balanced physical, sensory, and social development diminished. A play consultant organization, Playright, came forward with social design initiatives that brought all the stakeholders—government departments, professionals, schools, and families—together to reach a common goal—better playgrounds. The Children's Playground Design Workshops and Junior Playground Commissioner Incubation Programme, in which children participated as the designer, allowed their ideas to inform the actual design of the pilot project at Tuen Mun Park Playground, which is due to complete by the end of 2017 by the Architectural Services Department. The aim of this chapter is to document and discuss how the co-designing of all the stakeholders, especially children, could make social change together.*

#### INTRODUCTION

In the playground, the slide could be a tongue from a lion's mouth and the swing a catapult to the moon. Besides exercising muscles, a playground is where children explore senses and stretch imagination. It is a 'social hub' where children build bridges to other people. For years, children have remained *users* of products, services or facilities while adults made most of the design decisions. In a project that valued developmental needs in children and harmony in the community, children and teenagers were invited to voice out their concerns, wishes and wants. From wild imagination to actual implementation, young people contributed to changing a boring playground into a play space that included everyone. It was the concerted efforts of non-profit organizations, government departments, a public school, a special need school, a private children art and design studio and parents that turned children's ideas into reality.

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## **BACKGROUND**

The Children's Playground Design Workshops (CPDW) and Junior Playground Commissioner (JPC) Incubation Programme, which consisted of a series of workshops, grew out of the belief that adults and children could co-design together, and that children could participate actively in different roles as users, testers, informants and design partners (Druin, 2002; UNICEF, 2013b).

Engaging children and youth in experiential learning enhances their sense of community, place, and belonging, as well as enhancing their lives. They learn that they have something to contribute and that they have the opportunity to participate in making a qualitative difference in shaping the places where they live. (Mullahey, 1999, p. 6; Sutton & Kemp, 2002, p. 173)

The concept of inclusive design was introduced to the participants. The workshops were designed to cater to diverse age groups, from 4 to 17 and a range of abilities and disabilities. Participants, young and old, teamed up as equal stakeholders during the design process (Guha, 2004; Druin, 2002). They visited and played in an actual playground site, captured field observations and designed their own play spaces with simple models.

This chapter aims at documenting and discussing why and how co-designing among stakeholders brought about a much-desired social change – better playgrounds. The discussion was from the point of view of a collaborating art and design studio, CreativeKids, and its art facilitators. Gleaning clues from the design process and visual data, the adult-led professional teams (architects and landscape architects) gained a genuine understanding of the users' needs, voiced out by children themselves. The visual data displayed some of the children's thinking and making processes, which could be valuable for future research.

## **MAIN THRUST OF CHAPTER**

There are two parts in this chapter: The Purpose and The Project.

### **The Purpose**

This part discusses why there is a need for reconsidering playground design in Hong Kong and the purpose for involving children and parents in the design process.

### **Play Is Frivolous**

Family values influence the use of playgrounds. The teachings in ancient Chinese literature *Three-Character Classic* (三字經)(Zhang, 2015), which are deeply ingrained in Chinese mentality, praise diligence and discourage play (勤有功 戲無益). To many families, playtime is a luxury. Academic achievement is of paramount concern to most parents in Hong Kong. Good results in examinations and admissions to prestigious schools are the 'ultimate mission' for children and the pathway to upward social mobility. Most children's waking hours are consumed in schoolwork and extra-curricular activities. Even when parents do allow children to play, recreational facilities are not readily accessible to many families, especially for children with disabilities.

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