

STUDIES IN PHYSICAL CULTURE AND TOURISM  
Vol. 15, No. 2, 2008

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## SCANDINAVIAN PLAYGROUNDS FOR CHILDREN – SPACE, COLOR, FUNCTIONALITY

**Key words:** Scandinavia, playground, new foundations.

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the new concept of arranging playgrounds for children in contemporary Scandinavia. Three features constitute the new space of these facilities: proximity, accessibility, and integration. Each of these components plays an important role in the development of an individual and society as a whole. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a series of socio-economic and political transformations in Scandinavian countries. One of the many visible results of those changes was development of a different approach to children based on their perception and treatment as partners. A child is regarded as a person, who has its own dignity, rights, and is entitled to parental, guardian and state care. Proper childhood development, which has a significant impact on the future adult life, is, therefore, of primary concern to the state authorities, NGOs, private institutions and ordinary people. The new arrangement of playgrounds in Scandinavia serves this purpose very well.

It is not only the geographical location, climate and nature that determine the uniqueness of Scandinavian countries; it is also – or maybe above of all – the way of arranging the social public sphere, both literally and figuratively. It is reflected in various types and forms of human activity, ranging from the means of spatial arrangement (architecture and urban planning) to interpersonal relations of members of society. In Scandinavia, which belongs to the protestant cultural spectrum, individuality constitutes an important feature, deeply rooted in the psycho-sociological structure of each person. At the same time, individuality is uniquely linked to the collective actions focused on accomplishing the idea of a welfare state, where individuals and their safe and uninhibited development is the priority.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a series of socio-economic and political changes took place in Scandinavian countries. All of them had a great impact on shaping of the new perception and interpretation of reality. One of many visible results of those changes were perceiving and treating children as partners and not as subordinates. A child is treated as a person, who has his or her own dignity, rights, and is entitled to – due to its young age and lack of experience – being cared for by parents, guardians, and the state. Proper childhood development, which plays such an important role in adult life, is the responsibility of the entire society, authorities, institutions and non-profit organizations, e.g. Hjälpmedelsinstitutet, RBU Riksförbundet för rörelsehindrade barn och ungdomar, UNR Ungdomens Nordiska Råd.

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The recent decade has witnessed numerous discussions on the subject of playgrounds for children, concerning their proper location, facilities and spatial arrangement. Playgrounds have been recognized as a special space which provides many opportunities for playing, learning, and integrating. Especially, integration is the key feature to be considered while setting up new playgrounds. A number of projects of new playgrounds have been developed according to the rules of proximity, accessibility and integration [7, 9].

**Proximity** is understood in the context of playgrounds in its most literal sense, i.e. distance of the place to the child's home and school. The principle of proximity derives from the results of public opinion surveys, which indicate that the frequency of going to parks, playgrounds or other recreational sites is inversely proportional to the proximity of these locations. In other words, if a recreational site is located 50 meters away from school or home, the number of visitors to this place will range between three to four times a week. If, however, the distance increases to 300 meters, it will be visited only twice a week approximately, whereas a site 1000 meters away will be statistically visited only once per week [1, pp. 1-8; 2, pp. 4-5].

The need to build a greater number of playgrounds or parks is therefore one of the main priorities of local councils, supported by the government institutions. The assumption is that each neighborhood, depending on its size, should have at least one playground. Additionally, each school should have an adjacent recreational site, next to the school gymnasium.

Proper amount of physical activity, interconnected with play, seems to be of higher importance due to the increasing health problems of children and teenagers. The results of a research study carried out by the European Commission reveal that the physical fitness of European minors is far from satisfactory. It turns out that the quarter of children in the EU is obese to an extent that it might be difficult for them to lose weight in their adult life. The tendency to gain weight is not decreasing, because, according to the same report, each year some 400,000 children become obese. In such cases, the chances of returning to proper weight decline with each year of obesity. This observation concerns about one million cases of children with the serious problem of excess

overweight – a factor being a direct health and life hazard to an obese person [8, p. 28; 4, p. 1].

Considering the above, solutions to these problems should combine at least two ideas: firstly, the growing awareness of a healthy diet among children and teenagers; secondly, propagating, encouraging and developing physically active leisure habits. It is particularly important because childhood habits are carried over into adult life. Having reached the adulthood age one finds it extremely hard to change her/his lifestyle, especially one's health and fitness habits.

From the economic standpoint, we can not ignore the fact that children have a substantial "purchasing power" in the form of pocket money. It is large capital which makes children (mostly in rich countries) a respectable group of consumers, who often purchase not only "healthy" and valuable sports and leisure products. The results of a survey carried out among British children aged 8-14 show that this group of consumers possesses capital of 2.7 billion U.S. dollars. These funds are primarily spent on computer games, mobile phones, music, sweets and clothes [5, 10]. It is clearly visible that items such as an entry ticket to a swimming pool, or an ice-rink rarely appear on the these children's shopping list. It may seem that sports are either offered for free (which is not very likely) or are outside the scope of interests of the purchasers. A solution to the increasing health problems and, first of all, a means of their prevention, is a new way of arranging the space in which people live – especially children and adolescents, who are developing their physical and psychosocial needs to response to environmental stimulation. Playgrounds are meant to serve their proper development.

**Availability** of recreational sports sites in the Scandinavian model consists of combining various forms of play for all ages. Children aged 1-3, 4-6, 7-12, 13-16, and even older teenagers are encouraged to play in the same space divided for the particular age categories. The question is whether these arrangements really work. Surprisingly or not, they are effective. Younger children eagerly engage in play, sharing the space with their older friends; the latter also find it attractive and interesting, and the presence of the younger ones does not bother them. Also, in such an arranged space there is a place for parents and minders (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** “We are in the same boat” – the concept of a playground for children of all age groups, Vasastan, Stockholm [3, p. 20]

The aim of combining places for outdoor play for all age groups is the integration of people, and, thus, gaining social, cognitive, emotional and creative skills. Learning through observation and imitation is a typical form of development of social skills, sensitivity and empathic perception of the needs of other people. Also, it creates favorable conditions for development of the child’s sense of cooperation and collaboration (Fig. 2).

**Integration** is the third pillar of the new concept of playgrounds. Its meaning is very broad: integrating of able bodied and disabled persons of all ages, from different social and cultural backgrounds. Children, by being together in the same space, and utilizing the same equipment, learn to perceive others in a liberal, open, and friendly way. It is vital that children do not develop prejudice and hostility against those who look, speak, or move in a different way.



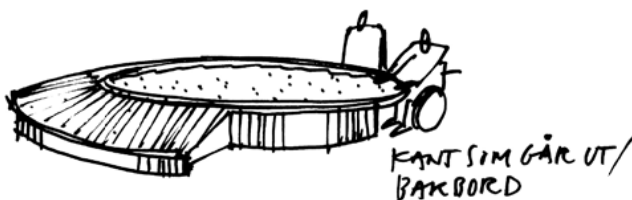
**Figure 2.** “For the little ones and the big ones” – installation which serves as a playground and a decorative element. Vallingby C [3, p. 32]

A playground which is adapted to the needs of children with disabilities is not only a place for play, but also becomes a place of understanding, empathy, and solidarity with those whose physical abilities are limited. Sensitivity of a child is fragile and easily influenced by the environment – if the environment is gentle, based on equality, respect, and understanding, it is highly probable that the future adult will become sensitive to those values.

The figures below (Figs. 3 and 4) exemplify the process of learning to perceive different means of fulfilling one's needs – in this case physical movement. Able bodied children can use the equipment to the same extent as the disabled ones. Here the boundaries may disappear between those who can move freely and those who are limited by their physical or mental dysfunctions.



**Figure 3.** Wheelchair ramp for disabled children [7, p. 15]



**Figure 4.** Project of a sandbox with a wheelchair ramp [7, p. 23]

Figure 5 presents another possible use of the sandbox by children with limited motor abilities. It is imperative that such facilities are properly

equipped and maintained, by way of keeping the sand clean and within the box, trimming the nearby hedges and offering access to restroom services.

An interesting assumption when designing a playground is confronting the spatial arrangement model with the users of the space. Children, as presented in Figure 6, can test the design of the play site made by adults. If such a model gains interest and acceptance of the youngest, the construction of the place begins. Such an approach shows a visible partnership between adults and children. A child, inexperienced due to its young age, but possessing intuition and a sense of recognition of a friendly space for play is treated seriously as a valued consultant.



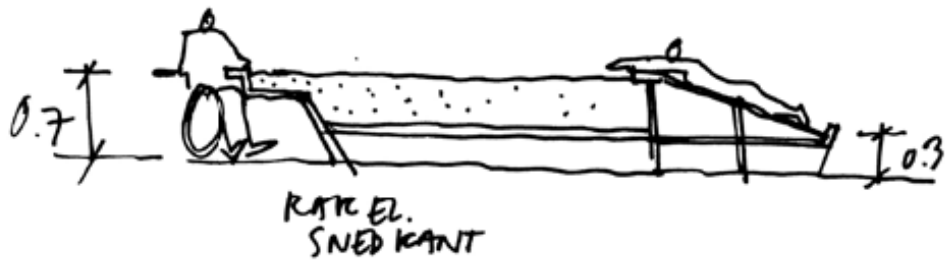


Figure 5. Sandbox with access for disabled children [7, p. 23].



Figure 6. City of play Solvandan and Vasastan, Stockholm [3, p. 27].

Another example of active involvement and participation of children and teenagers in arranging space for play, parks or recreation sites is a project presented below. The teenagers from local second-

ary schools designed a site for play and rest. Its shape is the young people's favorite sweet – a car shaped jelly (Fig. 7).

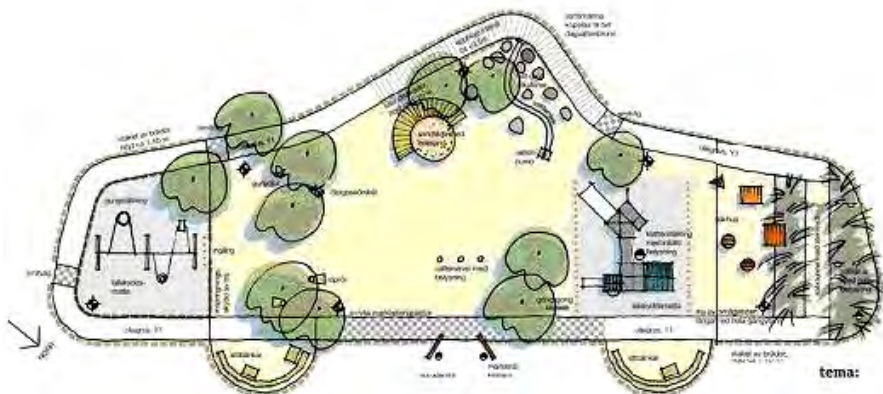


Figure 7. Playground in the park in Skumbil in Gavle [7, pp. 34-35].

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the idea of an integrated, colorful playground, designed and created according to the contemporary trends and assumptions, showing the direction in which the development and arrangement of Scandinavian public spaces should proceed.

“All different and all equal” could be applied to the following picture, which is a visualization of children of various ethnic backgrounds playing together. Experiencing differences at the early age facilitates the understanding of the world complexity in adult life. By playing together children can learn much better cooperation with and respect for one another.



**Figure 8.** Gallery installation [6, p. 15]



**Figure 9.** ‘Multiculturalism integrated’ [10]

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