

Healy Playground Design Report

Introduction

This report was made in preparation for our meeting with the Copley Wolff Design Group and Cathy Baker-Eclipse of Boston Parks and Recreation, aiming to provide our opinion on the inclusivity of the current design. We broke it down into aspects of the designs that we liked, those that are small improvements that we felt could be easily main, as well as larger changes that might be more extreme or cost intensive.



What we loved

The Copley Wolff Design team had already put thought into making a playground that would be inclusive to all abilities, so we were happy and excited to see this type of design. Not only is much of the playground wheelchair accessible, but it also included cognitive play elements such as the marble maze balance chairs and the interactive water pump/table that challenge kids intellectually as well as physically. The playground surface is visually stimulating, with a good variety of colors and shapes. Made from recycled tires, it absorbs water easily and is eco-friendly. The musical elements were great to see, as auditory stimulation is another important inclusive design feature. We particularly loved the cause and effect of dance chimes, which allow the children to learn through play by creating different patterns of sound based on their movement, to the point where they could create a song. Lastly, we liked the playhouse that could offer an enclosed space that is great for children with disabilities such as autism as well as a space for imaginative play.

Our suggestions

While there were many inclusive aspects in the design, we also see space for improvement in some areas. The current design of the obstacle course would make it very difficult for children with physical disabilities to participate with their peers. Although it would be impossible for children with disabilities to use this equipment in the same way as their peers without radical redesign, there are small changes that could make this a space in which they could still participate in group play. One parent at the community meeting mentioned adding additional features to facilitate imaginative play. Especially given that much of the obstacle course is already made of rope, adding play ship wheels, binoculars or telescopes, and other imaginative play features could create a ship theme that would greatly improve the design of the obstacle course. This would ensure that the space has something for children with physical disabilities to do, which is important given that the current design is likely to make the obstacle course a main point of play, and it would be wildly non-inclusive to make it a space in which children with disabilities cannot do anything. Furthermore, this will add another dimension of play for all children which will create additional ways in which to use the space and ensure that returning families' children continue to stay engaged with the playground.

In terms of features that could be added or modified for improvement, we believe the following elements will facilitate play between children with and without physical disabilities. Adding a set of voice boxes with one end on the ground and the other end at the top of the obstacle course will ensure that children who cannot get onto the structure can still interact with their friends. This is extremely important because a rich body of research has uncovered that children with physical disabilities interact less with their peers and that restricted opportunities for play can inhibit the development of children with disabilities, so it is important to ensure that they are able to play and develop alongside their peers (Ripat and Becker 2012.) The hammock at the end of the obstacle course could be made more inclusive by simply being lowered in order to facilitate access.

The current design has no shade built into any of the equipment, and the only shaded areas are created by the trees off to the edge of the playground. Although extensive sun exposure is a health hazard for all people, which can lead to heat stroke, sunburns, dehydration, and more, sun exposure is especially dangerous for many people with disabilities. Many disabilities, such as Multiple Sclerosis, inhibit people's ability to regulate their body temperatures, which can increase their risk of heat stroke. Many other disabilities and the medications that they must take due to them can also increase individuals' skin's sensitivity to sunlight, which can cause serious health problems such as inflammation when they face overexposure (Lee 2015.) The current design at Healy would force children and parents with disabilities to choose between risking serious health hazards if they choose to use the equipment on a hot, sunny day or being relegated to the sidelines and separated from the rest of the playground inhabitants if they choose to stay safe under the shade. Putting in a shade structure over at least some of the play elements could help remove this double-bind and create a playground that is actually usable and inclusive and not just accessible on face. Another possible concern could be the placement of the "river" which runs through the middle of the entire playground.

This has the potential to create a major tripping hazard for children as well as their parents.

Some minor tweaks to the design would ensure greater inclusivity. We like the idea of a merry-go-round, so long as it is flush to the ground in order to allow wheelchair access. In terms of the musical equipment, we have noticed from other playgrounds the problem of missing or broken mallets of musical play elements such as the xylophone. If this element was replaced by drums that do not require mallets, it would immediately solve this problem while preserving the musical feature. In addition, adding a tic-tac-toe to the playhouse will ensure there are more cognitive play elements that will allow for intellectual stimulation in addition to the imaginative play. A final simple addition would be the painting of hopscotch, four square, or a map to the blacktop portion of the surface which would cost relatively little and could be a great way to encourage interaction between kids.

Adding new elements that were not included in the original design would definitely help to increase overall inclusivity. Some of these could be a bucket swing, a tunnel/small space for older kids as an alternative to the playhouse, a roller slide, or an inclusive see-saw. The bucket swing could be used by almost any ability and by small groups at once. The roller slide requires less core strength than classic slides and would be a great option. The inclusive see-saw has bucket seats at each end to prevent children from falling off.

Conclusion

The overall design seemed to take into account the importance of accessibility and inclusivity, and we were happy to see that the designer community is actively involved in creating inclusive spaces for children of all abilities. We believe that with the help of designers and community involvement, our efforts to advocate for inclusive play can create a bigger impact, and we are already seeing the results of some of those partnerships. [To read more about our meeting with Copley Wolff Designer Group check out our blog.](#)

Sources

Lee, Jake. "How Warm Weather Is Dangerous for People with Disabilities." Utah Social Security Disability Law Firm. N.p., 21 Apr. 2015. Web. Feb. 2016. <<https://www.summitdisabilitylawgroup.com/2015/04/warm-weather-dangerous-people-disabilities-6-tips-stay-safe/>>.