

TODAY'S PLAYGROUNDS: IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS TO INSPIRE IMAGINATIONS

By: Judy Kenninger



The NFL Play 60 environment at Freedom Park in Charlotte, NC, can be enjoyed by many different ages. (Photo courtesy Carolina Panthers)

If you're of a certain age, the playground at your school or park probably featured a slide, a merry-go-round, swings, a see-saw and maybe an overhead ladder, all made of steel and resting on an asphalt pad or grass. Today's playgrounds still have many of the same elements, but combine color with new materials to create safer, themed environments that encourage visitors of all ages to unleash their imaginations.

Sensory Sensations

Instead of equipment to merely "play on," playgrounds should be designed to be worlds to "play in," says Todd Lehman, the owner and Design Guy at Minneapolis, Minn.-based Cre8Play, which designs and builds custom play environments. "It's not just about physical activity; we can add features with opportunities for visual and audio interaction."

At Freedom Park in Charlotte, N.C., Cre8Play added interactive electronic elements, visual displays and custom sounds to the NFL Play 60 Kidzone, including the voices of Carolina Panthers players, to engage visitors. For example, a 40-yard dash includes a timing device so when children cross the start line, a sensor times the runners and times appear on a digital display board,

This approach has several advantages, says Greg Clemmer, superintendent of park operations at Mecklenburg County Parks and Recreation, which operates Freedom Park. "The custom elements designed and built by Cre8Play helped us achieve our goal: to engage kids at all ages," he says. "Kids from 5 to adult can be physically challenged. It has allowed the kids in the area to use their imagination in play, while requiring them to keep moving. It has fostered an environment for active play rather than forcing them into the same old typical "cookie-cutter" playground play. It has brought different age groups together to play as one."

Other playgrounds allow visitors to bang on drums along with a Rastafarian frog or feature interactive pianos like the one from the movie "Big." "You're never too old to bang on a drum," Lehman says. "A lot of adults want to do that too."

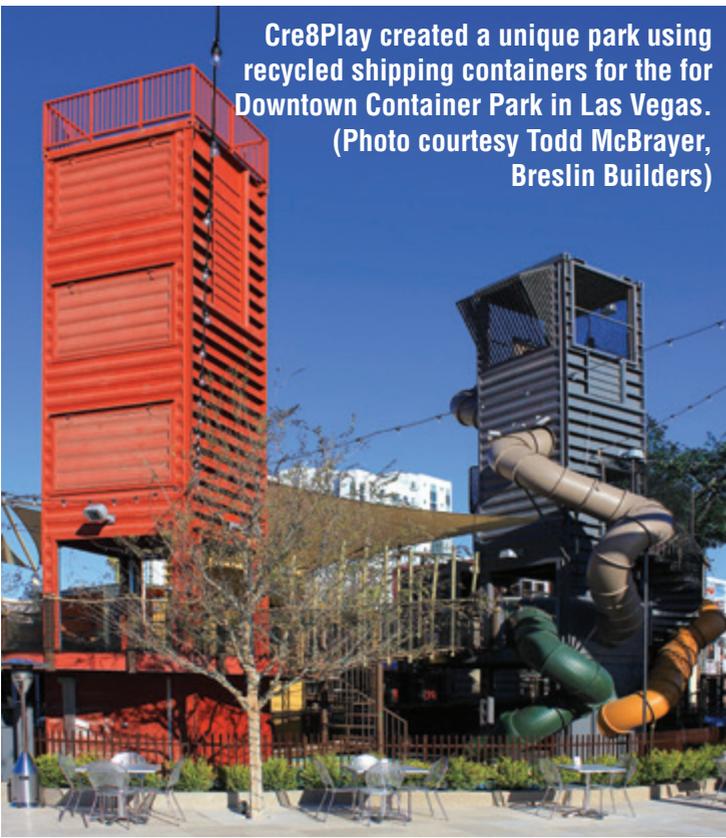
Begin With a Vision

Achieving this type of success begins with understanding what the customer wants, says Brett Kidd, director of global sales at Charlotte, N.C.-based Little Tikes Commercial. "We sit down and determine what the customer's vision is," he says. "Do they want a sensory experience, do they want to build social skills, and do they want to be all-inclusive? We offer all different types of playground equipment, and it was all developed to meet the wants and needs of our clients."



(Photo courtesy Carolina Panthers)

Cre8Play created a unique park using recycled shipping containers for the Downtown Container Park in Las Vegas. (Photo courtesy Todd McBrayer, Breslin Builders)



Poured-in-place surfaces can look like water, sand and grass. (Photo courtesy Little Tikes)

Little Tikes Commercial's NU-edge™ line features nature-inspired themes. (Photo courtesy Little Tikes)



At Olympus Park in Roseville, Calif., Little Tikes Commercial created a one-of-a-kind dinosaur-themed play space, complete with a soaring Pterodactyl and lifelike mammoth fossils. The design is intended to inspire dramatic play opportunities with a custom-painted four wheeler and Ricochet Spheres, which resemble an authentic Safari Jeep and larger-than-life dinosaur eggs. A thatch roof, dinosaur head, and palm trees complete the design. Multiple climbing elements, including the Infinity Hi-Climb, Medium Fun Rock, and Swoop Connection, provide essential physical and cognitive growth opportunities for children. A double wide slide, Talk Tube, and Telescope Panel introduce additional sensory stimulation to the playground, making this play space both fun and developmentally beneficial.

"A big trend right now is nature-inspired playgrounds, which may feature tin roofs or leaf motifs," Kidd says. "We're also seeing fitness trails and other activities that allow all ages and abilities to play together."

Newer playground equipment, such as the Rock'N Ship Glider by Little Tikes, allow kids in wheelchairs to interact naturally with their peers. "They can wheel right in and the deck accommodates several children," Kidd says. "No one is thinking that their playmate is in a wheelchair."

Material Worlds

Today's fanciful environments also feature big advances in materials for both the equipment and the surfaces below them. Perhaps the biggest advance is poured in place surfacing. "It allows you to design play events within that surfacing, such as hopscotch," Kidd says. "We did a boat theme and had tan surfaces to represent the beach and blue for the water."

Although the initial investment is higher, long-term costs are lower because of the maintenance required for wood and rubber nuggets, and there are no worries that a rainstorm will wash mulch away and create an unsafe environment.

At Cre8Play, Lehman says Glass Fiber Reinforced Concrete is one of the most durable materials on the market. "They're baseball-bat, happy college kid-proof."

Healthy Investments

According to the Center for Disease Control, obesity prevalence among children and adolescents has

almost tripled since 1980 and more than one-third of U.S. adults are obese. With initiatives such as Michelle Obama's signature Let's Move campaign taking hold, both Lehman and Kidd report that budgets are improving for parks and recreation departments. For example, Chicago, Ill., has made a goal of having every child living in the city to be within a seven-minute walk of a new park or playground.

"We are at war with inactivity," Lehman says. "It's time to design and build playgrounds that will get kids outside; something that's worthy of spending those extra dollars on. An immersive play environment encourages interaction and demands physical play between kids. These healthy worlds of physical interaction as young children will set the stage for physical activity later in life and ensure we raise well-adjusted active adolescents and adults."

"Communities are recognizing that playgrounds are such an important part of development for a child," Kidd says. "Budgets are coming back because parents want to see more emphasis on outdoor play."

For parks and recreation staff, there's never been a better time to create a new playground. The only limit is their imaginations.

(Photo courtesy Carolina Panthers)



Judy Kenninger is a Brownsburg, Ind.-based freelance writer who has been covering leisure and recreation for nearly two decades.