

Little thrills ^[1]

Author: Landscape Architecture Magazine

Source: Landscape Architecture Magazine

Format: Article

Publication Date: 12 Oct 2023

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

...

A teacup is fragile, particularly in the hands of a toddler. A plastic cup, however, is resilient when thrown on the floor. But antifragile is entirely different: a system that grows stronger under stress. Children are antifragile in that their muscles, bones, and minds need appropriate stress in a supportive context to grow strong. Without it, they fail to thrive.

Today “safetyism” drives American cultural attitudes, which leads to an increase in well-intentioned limitations that ultimately block children’s development. Coined by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in an essay that they cowrote for *The Atlantic* in 2015 (and expanded into a book in 2018), their premise was that an overabundance of caution pulls safety out of balance with appropriate risk and potential benefits and elevates it into a sacred, unquestioned value. As a result, childhood play has reduced in quality and quantity. What’s lost is undirected play with enough of a thrill to require full awareness and decision-making.

Lolly Tai, FASLA, is a professor emerita at Temple University, with decades of research on landscape architects crafting high-quality play environments. While her previous books, such as *The Magic of Children’s Gardens* (which I had the opportunity to endorse in 2017), capture the charm of play spaces crafted with great care, *Letting Play Bloom* offers her most important observations yet around the particularly necessary and increasingly rare type known as risky play.

...

Although great work and research about nature play have increased, the practice of designing for risk is only occasionally central to the discussion.

Elegant to the point of austerity, Tai’s book consists of five carefully chosen case studies with a notable afterword about risk management.

...

Ample photographs accompany the case studies and capture the sense of excitement that comes from great heights; fast speed; dangerous tools, such as hammers and nails; hazardous elements, such as fire or deep water; rough-and-tumble play; or a chance to get lost.

Illustrating the experience of great heights and fast speed, a case study on Slide Hill features a quadruplet of megaslides nestled within one of the four artificially constructed hills on Governors Island in New York City.

...

Tai’s case studies emphasize that these designs are collective efforts involving experts and a range of other groups. For example, in Rotterdam, Netherlands, in the early 2000s, parents were already aware of the impact that diminishing play quality was having on their children and organized to do something. A stimulus package to replace unsafe playground equipment gave them an opportunity to lobby within their community for a nature-based play area called De Speeldernis, and Tai interviews Sigrun Lobst, the project’s landscape architect. Lobst has stated that she believes in the capacity for nature and landscape to offer “inexhaustible play.” Accordingly, she created a dense play space filled with ponds, rocks, tree forts, and adventure.

...

In the WildWoods at Fernbank Museum of Natural History case study from Atlanta, Tai’s subtle power of observation illuminates how simple design decisions amplify the instinctive thrill of risk. The design team at Sylvatica Studio opened 10 acres of ecologically rich, topographically complex forest for visitors, with boardwalks up to 35 feet high threading through the forest canopy. Tai writes, “The deck guardrails are stainless steel mesh, a material that gives an open and slightly ‘risky’ but exciting sensation.”

...

Another aspect of risky play is immersion so complete that there is a chance of being lost. Tai explores this characteristic in the Ian Potter

Children's WILD PLAY Garden. Tucked within the larger, beloved Centennial Parklands in Sydney, WILD PLAY Garden's enveloping design uses its one and a half acres of dense planting and water features to create immersive zones that feel set apart from everyday life. Children can experience the excitement of being nearly lost in and around the Banksia Tunnels, which evoke the native Australian bush.

...

Risk sometimes means working with dangerous tools, an impossible idea for some parents. Tai presents Berkeley, California's well-known Adventure Playground in a new light. As an avid proponent of children's outdoor environments, I have read about this adventure playground as the forebearer in the United States year after year. Tai includes a rarely seen site plan, which is keyed to contemporary photographs from which designers can better comprehend the dynamics of the space.

...

Even as each case study emphasizes a different kind of risky play, they share similar characteristics. With the exception of Slide Hill, they are all fenced and provide some level of trained supervision. Most charge a nominal admission fee, which suggests planned outings to visit as opposed to everyday, neighborhood play spaces that are free and readily available.

...

Overall, the book is a solid resource for any landscape architect practicing in this area. Yet Letting Play Bloom doesn't address certain questions raised about how children can access developmentally appropriate risky play more frequently, nor does it delve deeply into the societal impacts of failing to do so.

...

There is still a gap in the conversation for landscape architects to link policy and cultural conversation with academic research and built work, but that is beyond Tai's intent. My hope is for more innovation going forward as landscape architects and the broader public put aside controlling fears of safetyism and embrace the value of risky play.

Related link: Canadian Government initiative supports innovative practices in ECEC centres [3]

Region: International [4]

Tags: play [5]

outdoor play [6]

risky play [7]

Source URL (modified on 16 Oct 2023): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/23/10/little-thrills>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/23/10/little-thrills> [2] <https://landscapearchitecturemagazine.org/2023/10/12/little-thrills/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/08/canadian-government-initiative-supports-innovative-practices-ecec> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/international> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/play> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9186> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9352>