



FIG 1 Jekerstraat, Amsterdam. Aldo Van Eyck, 1949. © Nicolás Stutzin, 2013

POLITICS OF THE PLAYGROUND:

THE SPACES OF PLAY OF ROBERT MOSES AND ALDO VAN EYCK

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As a machine for the production of common experiences, the playground was one of the most promoted urban spaces in the mid-twentieth century. Through the surprising parallel between Aldo van Eyck's plan in Amsterdam and Robert Moses's plan for New York, this article proves that such a politically correct program can be grounded on completely opposing world views; that is, that a common space can also be a place to experiment divergent political visions.

Keywords · New York, Amsterdam, ideology, public space, city

Some months after taking the position as Commissioner of the New York City Parks Department in 1934, Robert Moses inaugurated a series of nine playgrounds, the first of a massive initiative which would lead to the creation of nearly 700 new infant playgrounds in the course of 26 years during which he was in charge of the greatest public infrastructure developments of the city. Under Moses's responsibility, between 1934 and 1960, the city achieved to add an average of one new playground every two weeks.

In 1947, Aldo van Eyck, the then debutant architect of Amsterdam's Public Infrastructure Department, was able to see the first of the over 700 small playgrounds he would design in residual spaces and parks throughout the city in the following 31 years and that would become a central part of his career. Between 1947 and 1978 he would open, in average, one new playground every two weeks.

But beyond the coincidences and apparent symmetries, these series of playgrounds have very little in common. The truth is that, as we shall see later on, they answer to very different ways of conceiving play, public space and its social function. The playground is, without doubt, a significant space for the conformation of society and its transformative potential is unique.

The playground is a modern invention; it arises as a safe and adjusted answer to keep children away from the streets –maybe the most sincere space of urban play–. Despite being understood as the place for children in the city of adults, it functions as a complex political device: besides its playful role, it's a formational, normative and didactic space, a place to rehearse civic rules and the regulation of behavior, helping to discover the negotiation between peers, the need to follow rules and fantasy. It encloses the promise of a better future for upcoming generations and it is seen as an unequivocally positive agent for the city. Who could argue against the construction of children's play areas? The playground is, at the same time, a politically correct place and a space for utopia. But it's also, unavoidably, an active part of the political and ideological project of a city and society.

The playgrounds lived two of the most relevant moments in their political history in the dissimilar hands of Moses and van Eyck. Almost forty years later, the ambition of their urban transformation projects

through the massive (and almost demential) inclusion of small spaces for play can awake not only nostalgia but suspicion as well.

MOSES'S PLAYGROUNDS

Parks are the outward visible symbol of democracy.
(Robert Moses, 1956)¹

In 1907 Theodore Roosevelt, the President of the United States of America, declared in a letter to a member of the Washington Playground Association that “city streets are unsatisfactory playgrounds for children because of the danger, because most good games are against the law, because they are too hot in summer”. To this he added that “since play is a fundamental need, playgrounds should be provided for every child as much as schools (...) they must be distributed over the cities in such a way as to be within walking distance of every boy and girl”². Declarations such as this set the basis of a series of public policies in favor of play spaces, which led to deploy large scale projects such as the one led by Robert Moses. In 1934 when Moses rose up to the challenge of assuming complete responsibility of New York’s parks, in the midst of the Great Depression (1929-1939), but with the economic safeguard given to him by The New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933) to execute large scale public works and create jobs, the playgrounds turned into a practically permanent execution project. Most part of the playgrounds during the Moses era were in charge of the architect Aymar Embury, who was also responsible for the design of monumental roadworks (such as the Triborough Bridge), several parks (Bryant Park was one of them), zoos (like the one in Central Park, Manhattan and the one in Prospect Park, Brooklyn) and many public swimming pools (like the one in Astoria Park, Queens). The impetus with which Moses developed remarkable public works for New York and his eagerness to resolve traffic issues and automotive connectivity on a metropolitan level, earned him a controversial place in American urban history, usually caricatured in relation to his nemesis, the journalist and urban activist Jane Jacobs.³

The first of Moses’s playgrounds carried a unique political burden; they were built using contributions of the War Memorial Fund and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia baptized each one of the nine spaces with the name of a soldier killed in action during the First World War (FIG. 2). The playgrounds, whose sizes ranged between 1,200 m² and 12,000 m², were equipped with outdoor playing areas, shallow pools with chlorination systems, indoor heated playing areas, large exclusive spaces for mothers with young children, flagpoles adorned with bronze rings and surrounded by stone seats. They also installed commemorative bronze plaques with the names of the soldiers to whom they were dedicated. They were, without question, places for social gathering and play, but they also had a civic and historical load of equal importance.

A review of the press releases of the New York City Parks Department issued for the opening of each one of their projects allows us to infer that the 649 playgrounds that followed, maintained similar infrastructure standards and were marked, generically, by a series of elements that define its ideological condition: mobile playing devices (such as swings and seesaws), various types of sports fields, perimeter security fences and spotlights. While the description of this infrastructure can seem very common, Moses’s playgrounds responded to a very distinctive view of play and child space. On the one hand, they promoted the safety of the play space and its withdrawal from street life, creating segregated areas (of exclusion and exception) within the city. On the other, they were focused

¹ <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/robert-moses-playground/history>

² Letter to Cuno H. Rudolph, Washington Playground Association, February 16th, 1907, Presidential Addresses and State Papers VI, 1163.

³ During the sixties, Moses and Jacobs represented opposing visions over the destiny of Washington Square Park and Lower Manhattan. While Moses advocated for radical transformation and progress through urban highways and social housing towers, Jacobs defended the interests of historic New York residents and the traditional urban relations of small historic streets.

FIG 2 El Departamento de Parques de la ciudad de Nueva York abrió este *playground* en Manhattan, en 1934. Fue el *playground* modelo que el Alcalde Fiorello La Guardia presentó dentro del grupo de *playgrounds* propuestos para la ciudad. La propuesta original incluía un edificio de recreo, una piscina infantil que fuera de temporada podía ser utilizada como dos canchas de basketball, y una cancha de handball. *The New York City Parks Department opened this playground in Manhattan 1934. It was the Model Playground from which Mayor Fiorello La Guardia presented the first group of new playground for the city. The facilities originally included were a recreation building, a wading pool that could be used out of season for two basketball courts, and one handball court.*

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on normative forms of play: the sports courts and mobile apparatuses suggest predefined play forms, determined by rules which are external to dynamics inherent to children (the rules of each game and the irrefutable laws of physics), perhaps celebrating athletic challenges over those of imagination.

Although unsuccessful, there were also some attempts to develop different versions of the New York’s model of the playground, following more playful architectural and urban ambitions. For example, in the late fifties, after several attempts that ended in rejection, the artist Isamu Noguchi invited Louis Kahn to collaborate in the design of an experimental play space in Riverside Park, work that had been commissioned by the city given his interest in the development of landscape projects. Their projects (known as ‘playscapes’) were conjunctions of large abstract pieces and continuous surfaces that could be traveled three dimensionally – suggestive and daring mixture of landscape, architecture and sculpture–. After five years of collaboration, the project was finally dismissed in 1962 for its formal complexity and cost of construction.

However, this changes considerably in the late sixties, several years after Moses had left his place in charge of the city’s infrastructure. Only then specific experiments on vest-pocket playgrounds (open spaces of play built on small interstitial sites and filled with sculptural abstract structures) and adventure playgrounds (complex recreational systems designed through site-specificity), strongly influenced by the postwar



FIG 3 Este playground se abre en 1941 en Manhattan y desde 1982 es conocido como Robert Moses Playground. El terreno del parque fue adquirido en 1937 como parte de la construcción del túnel Queens-Midtown y se localiza a un costado de un gran edificio de ventilación del túnel.

This playground opened in Manhattan in 1941 and has been called Robert Moses Playground since 1982. The land for the park was acquired in 1937 as part of the Queens-Midtown Tunnel construction process and is adjacent to a large ventilation building for the tunnel.

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European playgrounds promoted by Aldo van Eyck in the Netherlands, Carl Theodor Sørensen in Denmark and Lady Allen of Hurtwood in England were developed.⁴

It is almost ironic that one of the controversies that may have contributed to the final departure of Moses from public office was a citizen campaign raised in 1956 to salvage a playground located in Central Park. Moses sought to demolish it to build a parking lot.⁵

It's been almost seventy years and is still common to find anonymous playgrounds of the Moses era in parks, squares and corners throughout New York. Always properly fenced, they typically include new playing devices and often some traces of its original infrastructure. A sad caged court located in a Manhattan residual block, crushed by the access infrastructure and ventilation of the Queens-Midtown Tunnel –of which Moses was a big detractor in favor of a bridge–, is named the Robert Moses Playground (FIG. 3).

VAN EYCK'S PLAYGROUNDS

To consider the city is to encounter ourselves.
 To encounter the city is to rediscover the child.
 If the child rediscovers the city,
 the city will rediscover the child –ourselves.
 (Van Eyck, 2008 [1962]:25).

In a conference lecture titled “On the design of play equipment and playground organization” (Van Eyck, 2008 [1962]:112-119), Aldo van Eyck exposes the most ambitious vision of the project he developed between 1947 and 1978 working in Amsterdam: to see the whole city turned into a play space.

In 1947, the Public Works Department of the city decided to turn the small square of Bertelmanplein in Amsterdam-Zuid neighborhood into a playground (FIG. 4). The commission was developed by van Eyck, who in conversation with his direct superior, Cornelis van Eesteren, had expressed concerns about the quality of public spaces (open and indistinct) that

⁴ The most “daring” examples of adventure playgrounds developed in New York were designed by the firm M. Paul Friedberg and Associates.

⁵ The original playground was replaced in the late sixties by an adventure playground designed by the architect Richard Dattner.

FIG 4 Bertelmanplein fue el primer *playground* diseñado por Aldo van Eyck y, a pesar de algunas modificaciones, el diseño original de 1947 aún es reconocible. Una señal instalada en la calle recuerda su importancia como *playground* diseñado originalmente por Van Eyck. *Bertelmanplein was the first playground designed by Aldo van Eyck and despite few modifications, the original design of 1947 is still recognizable. A sign installed across the street celebrates its importance as the original Van Eyck playground.*
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“According to van Eyck, urban playing equipment should be part of the city to the point of disappearing into everyday life and becoming ubiquitous, as it happens with telephone cabins, benches or posts.”

resulted from the models of high-rise collective housing the Department was currently developing in the modern outskirts of the city, following the plan that the same van Eesteren had drawn in the late thirties. The discussion on the loss of urban life associated with the simplification of the street as an object of design and planning (point that marked the break from the traditional CIAM urbanism in Europe in the late fifties with the appearance of criticism from the Team 10) experienced one of its earliest battles with the disagreements between van Eyck and van Eesteren. Van Eyck’s project must hence be understood as an act of revitalizing the street.

While originally the Bertelmanplein project was an isolated case, its success as a public space experiment caught the attention of residents who began to demand similar interventions in other sites which were abandoned or poorly utilized. The organic growth of van Eyck’s playgrounds –which according to Francis Strauven came to be 736 (Strauven: 1998)– owes its origin to citizen demands and the basis of welfare society. Seeing what these new public places offered them, located in underutilized corners of the city’s different neighborhoods, people began to recognize the potential that these changes might have on other sites and requested the authorities that they should also be turned into playgrounds. The project scaled in such a way that, when there were no more potential sites to be converted in the city’s traditional center, it was the turn for the new public spaces intertwined in new residential



FIG 5 Aldo van Eyck diseñó este *playground* en 1961 en Vondelpark, uno de los parques urbanos más grandes de Ámsterdam. La plaza fue completamente restaurada en 2009 con el aporte de la Junior Chamber International JCI, una organización internacional sin fines de lucro que se dedica a dar oportunidades de desarrollo a la juventud, potenciando cambios positivos. *Aldo van Eyck designed this playground in 1961 in Vondelpark, one of Amsterdam's largest urban parks. The playground was completely restored in 2009 with the support of Junior Chamber International (JCI), a non-profit international organization that focuses on providing development opportunities for young citizens to create positive change.*
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neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods, where van Eyck's vision finally overlapped that of van Eesteren, mass housing and urban playgrounds formed a highly complex system that persists to this day.

The ideology behind this series is very different from the one previously discussed. Each plan was carefully designed for a specific site, creating variations that made them recognizable and unique. Also, every element installed in them was specially designed by van Eyck. If the organization of Moses's playgrounds responded to the logic of the general order of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the *parti*, and its games to the preset rules of sports, van Eyck's playgrounds were a rigorous review of the compositional logics of De Stijl using play apparatuses that were geometric and abstract, avoiding any possible association with other known objects or rules of use.

According to van Eyck, urban playing equipment should be part of the city to the point of disappearing into everyday life and becoming ubiquitous, as it happens with telephone cabins, benches or posts. Therefore, it should be inert and static allowing from its mute abstraction, for imagination and chance to give them life in games without fixed rules. In these places there were no swings or seesaws (FIG. 5). Thus, the ludic and abstract equipment became an integral part of the city and could be used by everyone. On the one hand, the equipment had to possess the ability of being used in many ways; for example, at night it could become something different from what it was during the day. Therefore, van Eyck sought to stir imagination through the use of simple devices such as sand pits and climbing apparatuses with elementary and abstract forms, building spaces open to fantasy. The arrangement of these objects in each playground was carefully designed to minimize the need for fences or additional security. The play equipment was distributed in such a way that helped shape interiors and edges, creating contained and controllable places, yet open and integrated into the rest of the public space, allowing the child to be reintroduced as an essential part of the city of adults. This enabled, in turn, the playground to become a place for the entire community.

In many of his writings regarding game, van Eyck stresses the value of the playground as a place full of potential for social integration not only for children but also for adults and the elderly who supervise and accompany them. As his fellow countryman, the historian Johan Huizinga, van Eyck strongly believed in the playing as a cultural force and

also attributed a healing capacity to it in the context of postwar. Huizinga, achieved notoriety in raising the image of man as *homo ludens*, proposing play as the basis for the formation of societies and culture. Already in 1938, Huizinga described how “children’s play has in itself the ludic form in its purest aspect” (Huizinga, 1972:32) and how the transformative power of play is based on the “special abstraction of action in the course of ordinary life” (Huizinga, 1972:35).

It is surprising that, in many of the places where a van Eyck playground used to exist, recognizable remains can still be found, mixed between catalogue playground equipment and generic urban furniture. Only counted play spaces maintain their organization and their parts in full; this happens especially in the cases where the playground is located within parks or larger squares. The remaining playgrounds celebrate the history, ambition and the project’s impact on the city. Some have been identified with plaques and posters, being partially or fully restored. The most romantic and exciting playgrounds, those designed in direct relation to the street, are harder to find and recognize; perhaps they became so common that eventually they became invisible or disappeared altogether. For example, the Zeedijk Playground (1955), one of the most symbolic playgrounds due to its relatively large size, location in the city’s center and its colorful geometric mural (painted by artist Joost van Roojen), now falls within Chinatown and a Buddhist temple was built on it. The playground in Gordijnsteeg (1954), which was once an alley transformed into a public square, has been transformed into an alley again, now in the middle of the Red Light District.

Despite the tremendous amount of play spaces that both Moses and van Eyck’s projects produced, the very ubiquity of playgrounds in the cities of New York and Amsterdam has transformed them into commonplace. However, these places which easily disappear to the overlooking eye, contain a number of complexities and promises regarding social models, forms of appropriation and use of the streets and public spaces, visions of childhood and play, and integration of communities in urban spaces. This serves to remind us that even the smallest actions in the city can be charged with ideology and political meaning. We face fundamental constructions where the child learns to interact with the city and the rest of society and thus, despite its obvious good intentions, we can’t ignore the value and meaning in where and how these spaces are designed. They may be common, but they are not just any place. **ARQ**

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