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CHILDREN GAMES AND PLAYS

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Abstract

The beginning of the 20th century brought discourse on the issue of a new “culture of recreation” and the phenomenon of a relatively new invention – the playground. Play – caring for the body and the spirit – interacted in the work of all the great modernists, and the pope of modernism himself, Le Corbusier. Non-existent now, brutalist playgrounds have become a subject for exhibitions: the play of the new creators-artists, and their game with their antecedents and the contemporary audience.

Keywords: playgrounds, modernism, brutalist architecture, concrete

Streszczenie

Początek wieku XX przyniósł dyskurs kwestii nowej „kultury rekreacji” i fenomenu stosunkowo nowego wynalazku, jakim był plac zabaw. Do zabawy – troski o ciało i ducha – nawiązywali w swojej twórczości wielu moderniści i sam papież modernizmu, Le Corbusier. Nieistniejące obecnie, brutalistyczne place zabaw stały się dziś obiektem wystawy: przedmiotem zabawy nowych twórców-artystów, ich gry z poprzednikami i widzem.

Słowa kluczowe: place zabaw, modernizm, brutalizm, beton

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1. Fairytale (instead of introduction)

Long, long ago, when the world had not yet invented safety standards and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents had not been established, playgrounds were created by architects and artists, not by officials. And those were unusual places: invented individually, with a flourish, and at the same time really completely designed...

Today, those playgrounds are gone.

2. Games and play

The world is full of landscapes, places, buildings and objects created in order to play. While in the mid-nineteenth century the game and fun had no dedicated locations – and therefore took place everywhere – so since that time a rapidly growing number of recreation spaces have been introduced. The first playground was built in 1849 at Queen's Park in Manchester, and was equipped with swings, space for team games, a cricket pitch, and spaces for bowling and football. Interestingly, most of the equipment was intended not for children but for adults, who used them in the same way as contemporary urban gyms.

The first half of the twentieth century brought discourse on both the concept of fun itself and spatial forms for it. In 1938, the cultural historian Johan Huizinga showed that *cultural forms are mainly due to a fun reflex* [6, p. 231]. In turn, at the end of 1950s, sociologist Roger Caillos formulated his six fundamental rules of games and play, focused among other things on the semantic dualism, which leads us to distinguish the game (*ludus* – which requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity) and the play fun (*paideia* – uncontrolled fantasy). While the first is based on the application of established rules, the second asks us to suspend belief in a temporary impossibility.

According to R. Perez [6, p. 231], the institutional provenance of *ludus* allows the games/play to be fixed in the form of a consistent typology of fields, while the spontaneity of *paideia* rejects attempts to unify the land for it, on the one hand, contenting itself with every space, on the other demanding abstract forms that are simultaneously aesthetically and conceptually unique.

3. Rationalization

Interest in the design of areas for games and activities was characteristic of the wave of rationalization of space and human activities which was typical of modernism. The division of the public space into certain zones was introduced then, which in turn led to the creation not only of general recreation spaces, but also their particular cases – areas for games and activities.

Until the Second World War the general approach to recreation areas was dominated by the conviction of the superiority of sports and athletics, a sort of Apollo's approach to the body, performing the ancient Greek principle of *kalos kagathos*. In turn, in 1945 pre-war rules and systems approach to recreation gave way to spontaneous play (in the manner of Dionysus) and global fascination with what existed (the *as found*). The horrors of war turned the common belief in the *ludus* into the fascination of *pandeia*.

Recreation culture and play were issues that interested Le Corbusier even before World War II. His texts frequently contained references to the game/play issue, and the architect

predicted very early the spatial and social consequences of leisure time, which in the post-war reality became widely available, thanks to new legislation and production criteria. In his conception of the city, Le Corbusier, allowed a special place for recreation – understood as care for the body and spirit.

In the interwar period the recreation space was a space for sports – invariably located under the open sky, in a park or on a roof terrace, never on the street. Therefore Le Corbusier's design (1925) occurred: residential blocks arranged in an area divided into zones of different purposes, where the recreational area playgrounds are interwoven with courts (wherein sport at this time was still the primary beneficiary) [7, p. 19–20]. This arrangement, with the aesthetics that reminds one of the seaside resorts, has also appeared in the famous concept of the Radiant City (Cité Radieuse), realizing the watchword of *the sun, space and greenery*. It received its fullness in the implementation of the Housing Unit.

In the Unité d'Habitation design, the playground proposed by Le Corbusier is not only a functional zoning issue (from which the architect undoubtedly began), but especially a poetic composition of space: apartment windows overlook the horizon (giving a view into the future?) and on the roof, invisible to passers-by and roommates, children are playing under the sky itself. Modelling space by what is visible and invisible, the architect distributes recreation areas on each of its forms: at ground level, in the park, he placed many pitches and courts; on the roof a nursery – with a shallow pool and decorations of shells and pebbles, solariums and places to play; further – a gymnasium and an amphitheatre, and all that surrounded by racing track, recalls to mind ancient times and the concept of *kalos kagathos*.

In proposing not only a housing estate or a block of flats, but an entire single microcosm, the designer realizes the consequences of *ludus*, at the same creating space for the spontaneity of *paideia*, and placing all of that in the rough and tough monolithic structure, contrasting with the soft texture of the park environment. Therefore, Le Corbusier not only designs a space in which intertwine Apollonian game and Dionysian play, but above all – he played the game with the viewer of his architecture, by introducing a kind of conceptual reversal of the natural city order: the Unité d'Habitation roof terraces retain their rough urbanity, while the public space becomes soft and naturalistic.

4. *Béton brut* playgrounds

A common opinion is that the Unité d'Habitation is the mother of all tower blocks, and the idea of Cité Radieuse is the root for residential complex, known today as the mass housing estate. The dominant colour is the grey of raw concrete, the texture – the imprint of rough-planed shoring boards. This effect, called from French *béton brut*, was discovered by accident and from economic necessity, but its aesthetic expression gave impetus to the birth of a new style of post-war architecture – brutalist.

During the ceremonial opening of the Unité d'Habitation Le Corbusier said that *Faults appear in all parts of the building! The uncovered concrete reveals the slightest inaccuracy in the connections between planks, wood fibres and swellings, knags etc. And can we not see in men and women the wrinkles and marks, the hooked noses, the countless distinguishing marks?* [4] In this way, the Pope of modernism rejected not only his previous purist, white box, but the whole pre-war way of thinking about the truth (also – the truth of art) dethroned the Apollonian aesthetic of order, giving place to Dionysian spontaneity, and the realism and rawness of the material.



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- III. 1. Playground in Churchill Gardens Estate, source: RIBA Library Photographs Collection, <http://www.we-heart.com/2015/06/16/the-brutalist-playground-riba-london/>
- III. 2. Balfour Tower Playground, source: Assemble and Simon Terrill, 2015, <http://www.we-heart.com/2015/06/16/the-brutalist-playground-riba-london/>
- III. 3. Cypress Hill Playground, source: <http://www.play-scapes.com/play-history/mid-century-modern/cypress-hills-playground-charles-forberg-brooklyn-ny-1967/>
- III. 4, 5. Exhibition at RIBA: *Brutalist Playgrounds*, source: <http://www.dezeen.com/2015/06/09/assemble-brutalist-playground-climbable-landscape-modernist-shapes-riba-london-simon-terrill-foam/>

The raw style of *béton brut* was taken up first by British architects, originally a married couple, Peter and Alison Smithson, and later – designers around the world, who created concrete housing estates with obligatory recreational, play and game spaces. On the same time

they were also playing with the viewers and the recipients of architecture, giving children abstract concrete and steel systems to play in.

The playground of the housing unit was perceived as a *preparatory space*: a place where children had to learn the basics of social interaction before joining society. Thus, in the course of learning it was necessary for them to assimilate some specific truths of the new era: the truth of the harsh post-war world, the truth of the new cities and the new social housing schemes. Therefore, the rough surfaces and surreal shapes emerging from 50s to 80s playgrounds integrated into the large concrete mass housing estates, represent an extremely complete picture of their times from this perspective.

Most of the concrete playgrounds designed and installed in the post-war housing estates no longer exist. Seen in old photos, these places are often frightening because of their strange, sculptural forms, and above all the threat which they indisputably posed to children.

Undoubtedly dominant in the modernist playground at the Churchill Gardens Estate [Ill.1], designed by architects Philip Powell and Hidalgo Moya and created from 1946 to 1962, was a huge concrete platform-ramp, looking like a flying saucer suspended above the square. Its sculptural form responded to the brutalist buildings surrounding the housing estate. The unconventional system of this structure was to encourage children to explore and take risks every day and independently – in accordance with the rule *no risk no fun*.

Equally inhospitable in contemporary photos are the remains of the playground at Balfron Tower in London – a building designed by Ernő Goldinger [Ill.2]. The designer himself (simultaneously an architect and furniture designer) was strongly interested in playing and children's games. He proposed a concrete playground, which is reminiscent of much scaled-up wooden toys: blocks scattered on the square. These concrete monuments, as one of few examples, still remain in place. However, destroyed, they no longer play their original role, but still they attract the eye as signs in space – huge sculptures in a landscape full of housing blocks.

Cypress Hills Playground [Ill.3], designed by Charles Forberg and installed in 1967 in Brooklyn, was a result of the involvement of the New York Museum of Modern Art in a discussion about the form of the playground and the promotion of art in public recreation spaces.

Forberg believed that he would be able to create a flexible and cost-effective space that was safe enough for children aged three to eight, so that they could play in it unattended. Unfortunately, this playground, besides its extremely interesting form, is known mainly due to the fact that it was a failure in its social ambitions: the fascinating, clean, and aesthetically coherent form finally turned from a playground into a meeting place for local gangs and dealers. Within a few years the statue was removed and replaced by typical catalogue playground equipment, and the same assumption has become a symbol of the failure of mid-twentieth century architecture.

5. Lesson (moral)

Most of the concrete brutalist playgrounds no longer exist. They have been preserved only in photographs and plans. This does not mean, however, that their game with the recipients has ended once and for all.

At the beginning of 2015 the architecture group Assemble, together with artist Simon Terril, prepared a unique exhibition for the Royal Institute of British Architects: *Brutalist Playgrounds* [Ill. 4 and 5]. The aim of the exhibition is not only to present the forgotten

achievements of designers – architects and artists – who created playgrounds for the large housing estates of the 50s, 60s and 70s. Its ambition, first and foremost, is a game with recipients. The Assemble Collective and Terrill created foam pastel-coloured replicas of the largest and most famous brutalist playgrounds in Great Britain. There are elements of the assumptions of Churchill Gardens (the characteristic ramp-shaped flying saucer with hexagonal steps leading to it), or the big concrete slide from the square in Balfron Tower.

Visitors to the exhibition – who in the vast majority are children – have the opportunity of climbing on the pastel (pink, green and blue) items, which form steps, slides, platforms, and ramps: all reproduced based on concrete assumptions that no longer exist.

The surrealism of that experience (unreadable for children) enhances the impression of play with the audience – or perhaps laughing at viewers. The artists, using a material which is a long way from concrete – foam in pastel shades – created a previously unimaginable marriage of abstract sculptural forms, with the child safety characteristics enforced today. In bringing replicas of these no longer extant places, the creators of the exhibition have set themselves the question about the role of the architect in the formation of play and recreation and the very essence of the game, along with inscribed in it after all, the risk (of losing – injury – rejection).

The exhibition prepared for RIBA allows children to use all the elements during unfettered, spontaneous fun (*paideia*). At the same time it leads the adult viewers into a kind of a game (*ludus*) according to the rules invented by themselves. The recipient expects sharp edges and weight of the individual elements – but in the meantime the children play with a completely different material. Foam imitations of concrete structures are not just an artistic joke – they are primarily a symbol of the change that came into the public space, transforming a landscape full of concrete sculptures to a world of safety standards and rubber surfaces.

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