

Theses

Small Battlegrounds of Big Ideas: Playground Projects of the Cold War Period and Their Cultural and Ideological Context

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Playgrounds, as the strange stepchildren of urban design, carry many meanings and unexplored possibilities. They are a spatial imprint of the concept of the child and the current pedagogical, architectural, and artistic discourse. Yet, at the same time, they are not obviously educational spaces, not clearly public spaces, and indeed not overtly political spaces, but they are related to all of these qualities in their ‘non-significant’ nature. However, I argue that precisely because of their ‘non-significant’ and ‘in-between’ character, playgrounds can become sites of experimentation intertwined with other segments of culture, such as abstract public art or anarchist pedagogy. Lastly, I believe playgrounds, as places designed for recreation, contain the possibility of experiencing freedom – they embody a certain notion of freedom.

Research on playgrounds has become a highly fashionable topic in the last decade. Many comprehensive publications and exhibitions have been made on the subject. However, the representation of playgrounds and progressive ideas from the former Eastern bloc have yet to be part of any. Through historical examples from the four decades following the Second World War, firstly, I aim to question the often reductive logic underlying the thinking about children’s spaces of Eastern Europe and, secondly, to integrate the progressive examples from the former socialist bloc countries into international trends. Nothing emphasizes the necessity of accomplishing this more than the general mindset – moving along the axis of nostalgia and safety (or lack thereof) – that reduces the playgrounds of the socialist countries to mass-produced concrete and iron tube elements: rocket, globe, and cat climbers. This kind of simplification – combined with the asymmetry in the existence and availability of archives in Eastern and Western Europe – needs to be revised, as it leads to distortion and, ultimately, to the reproduction of the Cold War narratives.

On the one hand, it is a fact that large numbers of mass-produced playgrounds made of concrete and iron elements were also produced in Western Europe and the United States during the period under study. On the other hand, it is known that experimental playgrounds, stimulating children’s environments, and play sculptures were likewise created in socialist countries. Studying various literature and journals of the era makes it clear that sociologists, educators, psychologists, artists, architects, and landscape architects were deeply concerned with the play possibilities of urban children and were working to reform these conditions in practice. The documents also show that many designers were up to date with international trends, and some even helped shape them.

My dissertation follows the chronological order, dividing the decades under study into three phases.

In each chapter, I will attempt to present these periods' political and cultural realities. I touch upon the question of indoctrination and examine the role of *children* in the culture war and biopolitics. With brief forays into the broader architectural context, I describe the main drivers of thinking about children's spaces and present internationally significant examples of playground architecture of the time. In each of the three chapters, I analyze, through short case studies, the specificities of the actual period and the geopolitical contexts. Furthermore, by examining the links between playgrounds, pedagogy, and urban design, I also seek to explore potential differences between the Eastern Bloc countries. I aim to bring closer the understanding of how the broader political context may have hindered or helped to implement progressive ideas. What were the years that allowed more space for free thinking, and what local and global processes played a role in this?

In the *Children of Year Zero* chapter, I explore the possibilities of the last few years before the stabilization of the bipolar world order. I take as my starting point the image of the 'child playing among ruins.' I review the cultural-historical implications of this image and ask what practical developments it triggered in the post-war years. I address the challenges of post-war reconstruction and the organic nature of the emergence of playgrounds. I describe Carl Theodor Sørensen's *junk playground* idea, its institutionalization, and its development into a movement. As an example of post-war humanist tendencies in Eastern Europe, I present the Budapest Children's Republic Gaudiopolis, led by the Lutheran pastor Gábor Sztehlo. Through the work of Aldo van Eyck, the architect and theorist who designed hundreds of public playgrounds during the rebuilding of Amsterdam, I analyze how the idea of *children* and *play* became the driving force behind the efforts to reform modernism.

The next chapter, *The First and the Last Sputnik*, focuses on the period of de-Stalinisation. After a brief overview of the Stalinist period, I examine the architecture, the cultural, and educational policies of the Khrushchev meltdown, the reform efforts that permeated the sciences, and the changed foreign policies. I analyze how the launch of Sputnik made education also a field of Cold War competition and how this changed the educational policies on either side of the Iron Curtain. I discuss the leisure, play, and playground aspects of expos and large-scale international exhibitions to show how these events served as arenas for confrontation, interaction, and mutual inspiration between East and West. I will study the phenomenon of play sculptures and their complex role in public space, and by focusing on Hungarian and Czechoslovak play sculptures, I will highlight the different attitudes in cultural politics in the Eastern Bloc countries.

In the final chapter, *The Generation Betrayed*, I deal with the 'playground' aspect of the political and social processes that culminated in 1968; I examine the interconnections between counterculture, anarchist pedagogy, activist and DIY culture, and playground design, and the active public presence of children in the period. Through the writings of Colin Ward and Palle Nielsen's project *Modellen: En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle* (The Model - A Model for a Qualitative Society, 1968), I will address the idea of the adventure playground as a social model. Concerning Eastern Europe, I will describe the general thaw in planning attitudes at the end of the 1960s, the progressive projects that emerged in the context of the International Children's Year 1979, and the phenomenon of spontaneously formed adventure playgrounds in construction sites.

I conclude my thesis with a brief contemporary overview. Against the backdrop of the standardization and commercialization that has dominated playground design since the 1980s, and in the light of promising recent people-centered urban development trends, I raise the possibility of 'reclaiming' public spaces and play.