When is a slide not a slide? (Or what happens when we think differently about and beyond design)

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I remember reading some time ago about a research project in the USA that used video footage to examine the causes of accidents or near accidents in a school playground.[1] The researchers reported that the most frequently viewed cause of accidents was improper use of equipment. As someone who has spent almost 40 years working with, or studying, children at play, this struck me as a revealing statement and it has stayed with me ever since. So I have returned to it here in order to explore some of the assumptions that lie beneath this concept, not to dismiss it, but to look differently at our common sense understandings, habits and practices to see what more can be said about children, play, space and design.

The chapter opens with a look at the power of language and our fondness for using words to do with trees to describe how the world works, and in particular how it might be applied to how we understand the nature and value of playspaces for children. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, an alternative of the rhizome is offered that can help shift our focus from narrow cause and effect for specific future benefit towards an appreciation of how spaces are always in the process of becoming through the entanglements of material objects, bodies, feelings, histories and so on, in fluid and continually changing ways that mean space is never 'finished'. The chapter closes with the proposal that alongside design's focus on specifics, appreciating space as relational and never 'finished' - and by implication accepting the future as uncertain - might be useful principles that can help leave space open for children's own play productions.

Calling a slide a slide

When we design spaces, we give names to the elements 'within' them. Play equipment manufacturers have to call the items they sell something. Landscape architects also have a technical language that describes particular landscape features. This naming is useful, since it means we can communicate to others in a way that is largely (although never uniformly) understood. Yet it also has a power to affect how we understand and act in the world.

When playground designers design something called a slide, the focus is on its 'slideness'. They enhance its features for sliding, perhaps making it steeper, longer, twistier for older children (to be age appropriate), or wider (to be inclusive), or making it in the shape of an animal (to encourage imaginative play). They consider safety and maintenance issues. These design features all rest in a particular understanding of the nature and value of childhood and of play, as well as assumptions about how the equipment will be used. The function of a slide is to be slid down; this is 'using the equipment properly'. And much of the time, this is what children do.

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[1] Coppens NM, Gentry LK. Video analysis of playground injury-risk situations. *Research in Nursing & Health* 1991;14: 129-136, cited in Ball, DJ. *Playgrounds: risks, benefits and choices,* Health and Safety Executive Report Number 426/2002. 2002.

Yet anyone who has watched children at play will know that once they have used the slide in this way and have a feel for it, they will often then explore its potential beyond just sliding. Coming down in different positions, maybe, or climbing up the chute, coming down on roller blades, sending different objects down the slide, sitting on the end chatting, or building a den underneath. Not limited as much as adults to predetermined ideas of what constitutes a slide, children seek to actualise whatever the space affords at that time.[2] From an adult perspective, because the purpose of a slide is to be slid down, these alternative uses could constitute 'not using equipment properly'. It may be that calling a slide a slide closes down possibilities for it being something other than a slide.

Figure 1: Slide in a public playground in Tower Hamlets, London, UK. Photo: Marc Armitage

Language is often understood as an accurate representation of a pre-existing world in order to communicate it; however, what this slide story shows is that language also frames the way we make sense of the world and how we act. Nouns turn much of life's ongoing and emergent experiences into *things* (play, fun, risk, for example), fixing them as something to be known and therefore predictable and controllable. Verbs mean that independently existing subjects act on objects, in a cause-and-effect manner. What's more, we can never capture the whole of human experience in language, there is always something that escapes, an excess of the senses that cannot be captured through representation in words.

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[2] Reference other contributions that discuss the concept of affordances here?

The sense we make of the world is about the reciprocal relationship between meaning and doing. Merely using the word 'slide' to represent the material object does not *on its own* fix its meaning or potential. Meaning, for adults and children, arises not only from language but from the whole entanglement of what can be done with *that* slide in *that* place at *that* time and all 'that' entails. In another time and place, those meanings may shift - and so may we - to become something different. How we make sense of 'slide' emerges in different ways depending on each situation and what combines to make each situation. And how we make sense of 'slide' matters because it affects what we think can or should be done with it.[3]

A powerful metaphor for how we understand the world is that of trees, what Deleuze and Guattari call 'arborescent thinking'.[4] Indeed it informs the overall framework for this book on growing a playspace. What follows here is a critique of this conceptualisation, again, not to dismiss it, but to explore its influence and limitations and to see what a different conceptualisation might offer. Arborescent thinking goes something like this. From the acorn of an idea grow roots, sinking themselves into the soil to fix a position, producing a trunk and branches with leaves and finally, with maturity, fruit (more acorns). This mode of thinking is widespread and pervasive; think branches of knowledge, seeds of hope, roots of a problem, fruits of labour. It represents a logical, linear, fixed and predictable progression through time. Although the branches may go in different directions, they emanate from one tree anchored by one tap root.

This mode of thinking can exclude other ways of understanding the world. Deleuze and Guattari offer an alternative, that of a rhizome, and this has great promise for the idea of growing a playspace. Rhizomes are underground stems; ginger and iris are examples, as are bulbs and tubers. They have no fixed beginnings (so everything starts in the middle of everything else, a lovely way of looking at history, development or activity), they can spread in any direction; new plants can grow from broken pieces. It is about movement, connections, diversity, multiplicity and rupture, with the capacity to disrupt, start again in a different way, go off in unpredictable directions.

All this may sound rather abstract, so I asked playworkers for stories of children using slides. Many came back, all stories of children using slides in ways that adults could not have predicted. The simple story below illustrates how children are not restricted by categories of toys and make use of whatever is to hand in whatever ways come to mind:

'The slide in my garden got used for a marrow racing track. The kids took marrows that were over-produce from the allotment - added KNEX, cocktail sticks, flowers and wheels - and then raced them down the slide.'[5]

What's a playspace for anyway?

What is a playspace? Well, it's a space where children play, isn't it? Or perhaps where they *can*, or *should,* play. Does this mean children don't play anywhere else? Of course not. Experience tells us

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[3] These ideas are drawn from the work of philosopher and theoretical physicist Karen Barad, mainly from Barad K. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning.* London: Duke University Press; 2007.
[4] Deleuze G. and Guattari F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia.* Trans Massumi B. London: Continuum. 2004 edition.
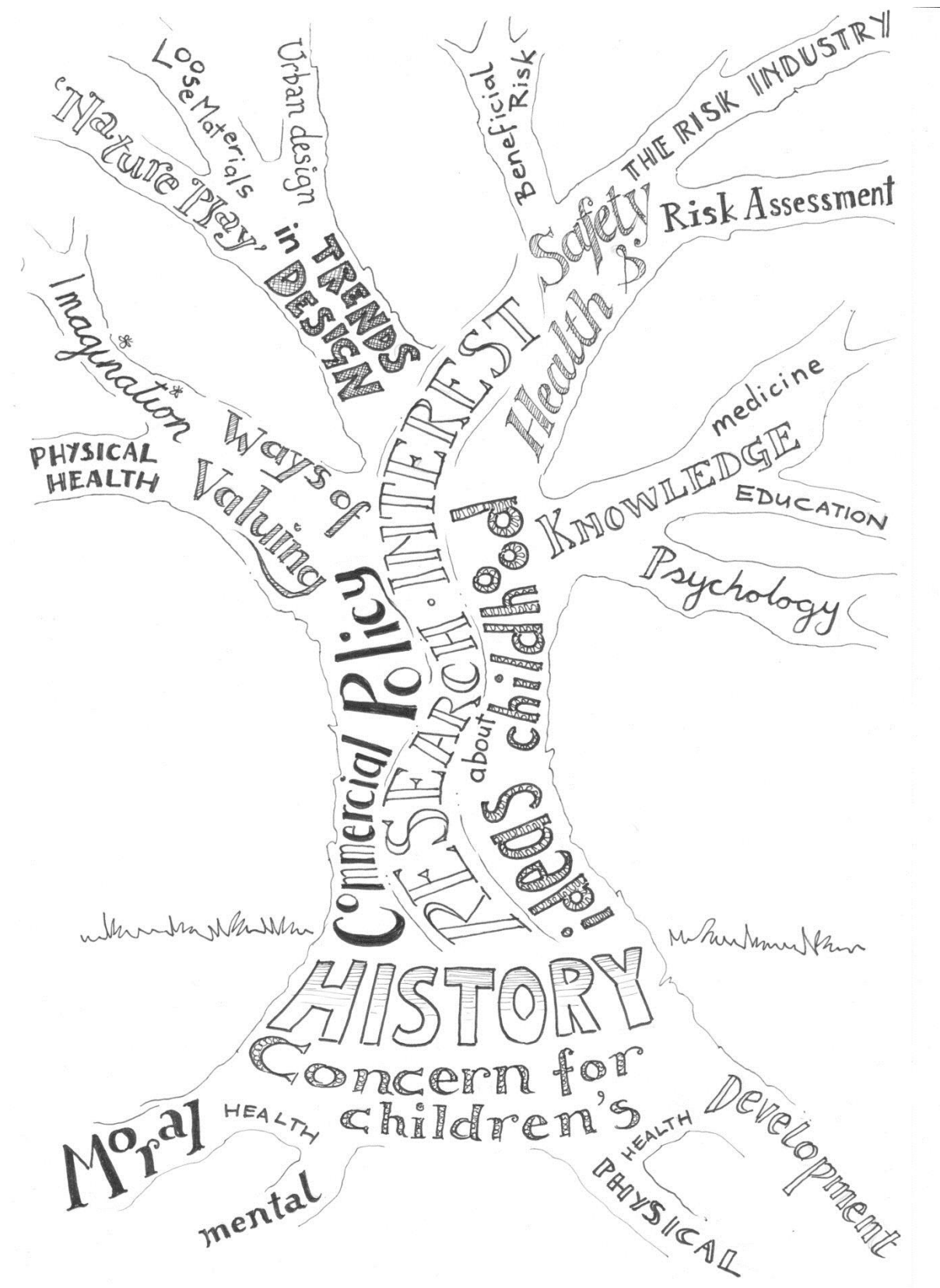[5] Thanks to Rachel Murray for this story

Figure 2: Arborescent thinking – linear cause and affect
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SLIDE 'slide' 'SLIDE' 'slide' SLIDE

Human tunnel (HOW MANY? Let's go through) Sticks stones Catch berries Roll Roof top shop MARROW RACE fill sand with TRICKLE DOWN can I... HIDDEN DEN CUBBY HANGING monkeys UNDER

"THINGS JUST HAPPEN WITH THE SLIDE AS ONE PART OF EVERYTHING." "GOING ON."
"I can't list all the games because the children haven't decided what they are yet."

Let's try what now? what happens if? MY IDEA . YOUR IDEA . OURS friends ROLLING drawing on ENCLOSE let's move... COULD I? THIS IS LIKE... UNDER where can I hide out?

Figure 3: Rhizomatic thinking – starting from the middle
© Katherine Masiulanis and Wendy Russell

that children play anywhere, with anything and everything, sometimes to the annoyance of adults, often in ways that adults may not even notice. Play is not only a separate time and space bound activity, it is also a disposition to the world (playfulness) that can arise whenever conditions allow.[6] Designated spaces offer the potential for encounters children may not easily be able to experience elsewhere, or space and time to be relatively free from constraints and demands of their everyday lives, and this is highly significant; but they are not the sum total of children's play experiences. Sometimes, because we have developed a habit of thinking in particular ways about the concepts of 'play' (as a thing) and 'playspace' (and all that entails), we conflate play and play provision; yet 'play is not a public service, much less a commodity'.[7 (p 19)]

Since industrialisation, separate spaces for childhood, together with their associated material objects, have come into being, including nurseries, schools, clubs and playgrounds. These spaces 'became the means by which adults set out and put into effect their objectives for modern children and their childhoods'.[8 (p 249)] The history of designated spaces for children's play, whether in parks,

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[6] Lester S, Russell W. *Children's Right to Play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide,* The Hague: Bernard Van Leer Foundation; 2010.
[7] Shier H. IPA Global Consultations on Children's Right to Play Summary Report. IPA. 2010.
[8] Gutman M. The Physical Spaces of Childhood. In Paula S Fass (ed.) *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World.* Abingdon: Routledge; 2013. P249-266.

schools or dedicated play projects, is wrapped up in the history of adult desires and of social policy, where the provision of special places to play was a response to whatever social problems were identified at the time.[9,10,11] Often focusing on working class and poorer children, these have included concerns about socialisation and citizenship;[12] physical fitness as a route to moral fitness;[13] encouraging school attendance[11] and attention in class;[14] keeping children off streets that were deemed morally dangerous[15] and dangerous because of traffic;[16] physical activity and combatting obesity;[17] lack of contact with nature.[18] These desires have spawned industries of playground design, manufacture and research, often branches of the same 'tree' of knowledge about the nature and value of childhood and play.

From this perspective, playspaces are designed to encourage the forms of playing that will address social concerns and support the development of desirable and promoted cognitive, physical, emotional and social skills. Returning to the opening discussion about slides and arborescent thinking, the assumption is that the space, its features and material objects, will be used in particular ways that yield the desired outcomes. Within the current framework of evidence-based policy and practice, research is commissioned to gather evidence of what works. It is a technical, universal, linear, cause-and-effect way of understanding the world that obscures issues of complexity, justice and power.[19] These approaches are so pervasive, so powerful, that it is often difficult to think differently about them; they appear to be common sense. What might a rhizomatic approach offer to this conundrum? Again, it needs to be stressed that this is not a complete dismissal of current policy and practice, more an exercise in stepping aside from dominant and habitual mindsets to see what more might be possible.

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[9] See Carla Pascoe's chapter for more details on the history of play and playspaces

[10] Woolley H. Watch This Space! Designing for children's play in public open spaces. *Geography Compass* 2008; 2(2): 495-512.

[11] Cranwell K. Towards Playwork: An historical introduction to children's out-of-school play organisations in London (1860-1940). In Fraser Brown (ed.) *Playwork Theory and Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press; 2003. p32-47.

[12] Gutman M, de Conick-Smith N. Introduction: Good to Think with – History, Space and Modern Childhood. In Marta Gutman and Ning de Conick-Smith (eds.) *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; 2008. p1-19.

[13] Anderson LM. "The playground of today is the republic of tomorrow": Social reform and organized recreation in the USA, 1890-1930s. *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education* 2006. http://infed.org/mobi/social-reform-and-organized-recreation-in-the-usa (accessed 11 April 2015).

[14] Pellegrini AD, Bohn CM. The Role of Recess in Children's Cognitive Performance and School Adjustment. *Educational Researcher* 2005; January/February: 13-19.

[15] Brehony K. A "Socially Civilizing Influence"? Play and the Urban "Degenerate". *Paedagogica Historia* 2003; 39(1): 87-106.

[16] Stallibrass A. *The Self-Respecting Child: A study of children's play and development.* Harmondsworth: Penguin; 1974.

[17] Dotterweich AR, Greene A, Blosser D. Using Innovative Playgrounds and Cross-Curricular Design to Increase Physical Activity. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 2012; 83(5): 47-55.

[18] Louv R. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin; 2005.

[19] Edwards R, Gillies, V Horsley, N. Early Intervention and Evidence-Based Policy and Practice: Framing and taming. *Social Policy and Society* 2015; firstview article DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000081 (accessed 11 April 2014).

Design, stuff, and growing a play space

If we move from thinking about trees to thinking about rhizomes, the straight line from design to outcome disappears, as does the separation of playspaces and all other elements of children's everyday lives, since playspaces do not operate in isolation. There is no beginning or end, only a middle. Attention shifts from universal and predictable progress through time to idiosyncratic and spontaneous patterns, flows and movements in the here and now. Rhizomatic thinking intentionally disturbs habitual understandings and linear cause-effect thinking in favour of emergence and entanglements.[20]

Space, from this position, is no longer a neutral container to be filled with stuff and *in* which things happen. A playspace is not a pre-existing and fixed entity but is constantly in the process of becoming through the ongoing and shifting entanglements of material and symbolic objects and features, bodies, senses, feelings, desires, movements, histories and so on. Although there may be similarities, no one moment in a playspace will be repeated in exactly the same way. Design matters, *and* it cannot be isolated from everything else.

The rhizome contains aspects of planning, organisation, control and so on - the design of and adult intentions for playspaces - and these are necessary. It also contains lines of flight from this 'plane of organisation',[4] moments when children disturb these intentions and appropriate time and space for their own play fabulations. The great play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith said that in their play, children take aspects of their own everyday lives and turn them upside down in ways that make them either less scary or less boring.[21] Playing has also been described as the deliberate creation of uncertainty,[22] in order to experience the thrill of raw emotions (like fear, joy, surprise, disgust) and of overcoming that uncertainty within the relative safety of something 'as if', an alternative version of 'reality'. Playfulness becomes a state of vitality; more than just fun, it is what makes life worth living for the time of playing.

Children's experiences of space are radically different from adults', and it is difficult for adults to perceive what a space has to offer children.[23] Special spaces emerge through use over time, sometimes in places and ways not apparent to adults, and often named by the children. This is what June Factor calls the 'play lines' of a playground.[24] Marc Armitage's research in apparently barren school playgrounds reveals a rich cultural history of such special places, passed down through

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[20] Lester, S. (2013) Playing in a Deleuzian Playground. In E. Ryall, W. Russell and M. MacLean (eds) *The Philosophy of Play.* London: Routledge.

[21] Sutton-Smith B. *The Ambiguity of Play.* Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press; 1997.

[22] Spinka M, Newberry R, Bekoff M. Mammalian Play: Training for the Unexpected. *The Quarterly Review of Biology.* 2001; 76(2): 141-168.

[23] Pascoe C. Spaces Imagined, Places Remembered: Childhood in 1950s Australia. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars; 2011.

[24] Factor J. Tree Stumps, Manhole Covers and Rubbish Tins: The invisible play-lines of a primary school Playground. *Childhood,* 2004; 11(2): 142-154.

generations of children.[25] One example is the 'long black pole', a drainpipe used in hiding and hunting games as a counting pole and home base.[26]

If a playspace is to support the spontaneous eruption of playfulness, what might this mean both for design and for growing a playspace beyond the design process? Stuff matters: physical features and material objects play their part in the ongoing production of playspaces, they are part of the assemblage. And so does everything else: people, movements, flows, affect, emotions, atmosphere, relationships, histories, power relations and so on. No one element of a playspace pre-exists independently of any other; all are in a constant state of flux, of becoming, in each unique entanglement.

The paradox is that if playing represents a line of flight from adult organisation of time and space, then an adult designed and organised playspace becomes a plane of organisation from which children will at times seek lines of flight. We cannot design and plan lines of flight. However, design is not fixed only in a plane of organisation.

Figure 4: When is a slide not a slide? Reappropriation of slides by Bellemo and Cat at Wombat Bend, Yarra Valley Parklands, Manningham, Victoria, Australia. Photo: Wendy Russell

In Deleuze and Guattari's practical philosophy, the plane of organisation is necessary, and interwoven into this is the plane of immanence, of open-ended, uncertain possibilities. Thinking of both allows for the practicalities of design and the openness of playfulness, of possibility, of what

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[25] Armitage M. The Ins and Outs of School Playground Play: Children's use of 'play places'. In J.C. Bishop and M. Curtis (eds.) *Play Today in the Primary SchoolPlayground: Life, learning and creativity.* Buckingham: Open University; 2001. p35-37,
[26] Armitage M. The Influence of School Architecture and Design on the Outdoor Play Experience within the Primary School. *Paedagogica Historica*, 2005; 41(4&5): 535-553.

might be. We can shift our end-goal, future-oriented focus on the straight line from purpose to design to 'proper use' to outcome, and look instead at the way the space works in the here and now, the everythingness of everything, the flows and movements of bodies that both affect and are affected by everything else. Attention is paid not only to the properties of materials but also to relational qualities. We might perhaps still call a slide a slide (because it has to be called something). What might be different about rhizomatic thinking is that the thing called slide is but one phenomenon amongst everything that contributes to the always ongoing production of a playspace, including adult expectations and children's lines of flight. As one playworker said, when talking about the many different ways the slide was used at his playground: 'I can't list all the games, because the children haven't decided what they are yet.'[27]

Bio:

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Abstract:

This piece explores some of the assumptions about designing and growing playspaces, not to dismiss them, but to look differently at our common sense understandings, habits and practices to see what more can be said about children, play, space and design. It opens with a look at the power of language and our fondness for using the language of trees to describe how the world works. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, an alternative mode of thinking using the rhizome is offered that can help shift our focus from narrow cause and effect for specific future benefit of playspaces towards an appreciation of how spaces are always in the process of becoming through the entanglements of material objects, bodies, feelings, histories and so on, in fluid and continually changing ways that mean space is never 'finished'. The chapter closes with the proposal that alongside design's focus on specifics, appreciating space as relational and never 'finished' - and by implication accepting the future as uncertain - might be useful principles that can help leave space open for children's own play productions.

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[27] Playworker John Hale, Somerstown Adventure Playground, Portsmouth, UK