

Berlin School Playgrounds: Reflections

Playing and learning in natural outdoor environments is good for children – they’ve been doing it for thousands of years. It stimulates physical activity, promotes creativity and helps develop social skills. It can create an appreciation of the natural world, relieve stress, develop resilience and bring learning to life. And it’s a lot of fun. While many Scottish children grow up with uninspiring asphalt school playgrounds and limited opportunities for natural play, some of our European neighbours have a different emphasis. Alastair Seaman, Programme Manager at Grounds for Learning the Scottish charity supporting outdoor learning and play for children, was fortunate to be able to spend 4 days in Berlin in June 2010 on an organised tour of primary and nursery school gardens. There were 18 participants from the US, Australia, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, France and the UK. Each of the schools were very different but they all shared similar design features focusing on some common themes and ideas. Here are some useful and inspiring observations from Alastair’s visit.

1. Untidy - the strong emphasis on nature and play means that there’s not a great deal of concern or effort expended on making spaces look tidy. Grass gets worn or grows long and unkempt and weeds are everywhere. Most sites had nettles, brambles and thistles. In Scotland we’d want to keep it looking tidy and worry about thorns. In one school we heard of tension with the architect who thought that the ‘untidy’ grounds would detract from the appearance of the building. However, the school was clear that play value for children was more important than showing off the new building. This reflects a prevailing pattern in Berlin - central reservations are left un-mown, verges are weedy and there are few manicured flower beds. I sensed that is that this is more because of a natural ethic and a reticence to use weed killers than a lack of money.



Weeds grow happily along the edges



A typical area of natural planting – lots of thistles and weeds



Grass left unmown



Nettles and young children in happy co-existence



Brambles in a kindergarten



Thistles in the flowerbeds and weeds in the yard



It's not grass, it's not sand, it's not surfaced – its just natural!

2. Places to hide - a Scottish primary school recently ripped out its only bushes because playground supervisors couldn't see all the children. A key theme of playgrounds in Berlin is space to hide and a philosophy that children need to be away from the active supervision of teachers for part of the day. Planting has been designed to create lots of hidden paths, dens and cover. In some of the grounds up to 70% of the children are out of view of a supervisor during break time. Supervisors don't generally circulate and police - they locate themselves at fairly fixed points so that any vulnerable children can stay close, and if there's any trouble, children know where to find an adult. In answer to the obvious behaviour question, teachers claim that break time behaviour is BETTER than it was in the old tarmac playgrounds where playground violence was a problem.



Places to hide



.... and be found



A path leading to 'round the back and out of sight'



Willow, weeds and footpaths

3. Sand - is everywhere. 'Sandpits' are huge and found in every primary school playground. They don't look anything like the sandpits we see in the UK - they are large, they're not covered over and they're not excessively raked or cleaned - so are often full of leaves and twigs. The general rule is that the sand is removed for cleaning and re-use and replaced about every 2 years. Sand is the usual safety surface around play equipment and features, and these areas are always bespoke and built on site rather than bought from a catalogue. They are often surrounded by low walls - which can be used as seating - and many had small areas of raised decking for seating around the edge or in the middle.





4. Water play – all natural playgrounds had an element of water play. The usual pattern was to have a hand pump which fed water into a channel with the water finally draining into a sand pit or pond. The channels often had a mix of fixed and loose rocks to allow children to change the course of the water and construct small dams and pools. Some even had slots for sluice gates to allow damming. Sometimes the source was a playful fountain such as a snake or a sculpture, rather than a hand pump. Using rainwater for play was a common theme. One school collected rainwater from the roof, stored it in underground tanks and then pumped it to the surface using solar power. In this school, rain added an extra dimension to play rather than restricting it. In another, rainwater from the main surfaced area of the playground drained into a splash pool – a natural drainage feature that had value for play and nature. Water play was almost always co-operative with groups of pupils working together on building dams, collecting water and operating pumps.



Hand pump and water channel



Dam builders and dam busters



Rainwater from the higher part of the playground drains into this play splash pool



Rainwater drains along this channel



And down the steps



And into the pond





Water channel



...with sluice gates



Snake fountain

5. Rocks and sculpture - Large rocks up to 6 feet high were used in various ways. They were often sculpted by pupils with the support of a local artist and frequently located in or around sandpits for climbing and jumping. A couple of schools had a tradition of the top year group working together to design and carve a rock sculpture – which was left as their legacy to the school. There was a great variety of artistic themes – and one had been carved as a marble run.



Hand carved by pupils



Marble run rock







6. Risk - A very different attitude to risk was evident. Playgrounds were designed to create multiple opportunities for 'good risk' i.e. risks that could be clearly recognised and assessed. Children were jumping off rocks into sand with no adult supervision. Play equipment fall heights were commonly 4 – 6 feet high. Children clambered onto play hut roofs without being rebuked. Surfaces were sometimes designed to be uneven and there seemed to be a general assumption in favour of risk. Two examples of this – a large boulder pile with a climbing net was a new idea. The insurance company agreed to allow the school to build it and monitor any accidents. After a month of intensive play and no serious accidents, approval was given to keep the new feature. In another school they were just finishing a large climbing structure that included a trampoline at the top. Officials had approved the concept, the structure had been built and the school was waiting final inspection before opening it. In a school that had some children in wheelchairs they had constructed gentle slopes for climbing and rolling down – as well as some wheelchair bumps on the paths. Teachers told us that the new natural playgrounds created a greater number of minor accidents than the old tarmac spaces – but that there were fewer serious accidents.



A 6' jump into sand. No adults present.



Insurance company wasn't sure about this new feature – so they monitored for a month and two years later – still no accidents.



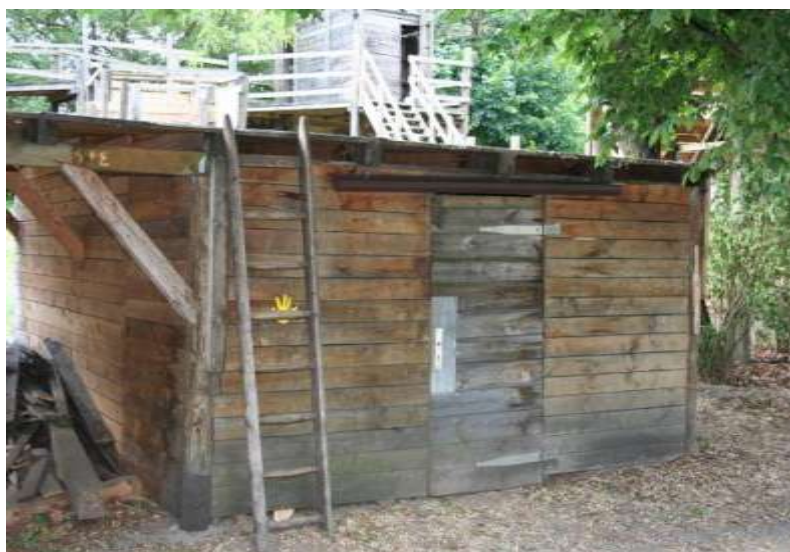
Intentional trip hazards



Of course you're allowed



A trampoline on a platform!



Please climb on the roof



Wheelchair users need risk, challenge and adrenaline too -



A boy was seen tipping himself into the sandpit, crawling to the hammock and then hauled himself up the slide structure behind with great satisfaction

7. Play equipment - Almost all fixed play equipment had a rustic feel – and much of it used round wiggly sections of *Robinia* timber. The most common type was a small hut on stilts with a surrounding structure to climb on - often with ropes and a slide. Most playgrounds had slides, commonly wide slides on embankments rather than free standing structures. Balance beams of various kinds were common. All schools had outdoor table tennis tables made from concrete- and there was even a kind of ‘hand ball table tennis’ played with footballs in a ‘round the clock’ manner. Many schools had good stores of loose play equipment for children to use in break times. Although this is common in Scotland, the range of equipment was greater and included ‘riskier’ equipment such as uni-cycles, trikes and scooters.





Made from a checkout belt



Round the clock football table tennis
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Concrete croc – for sitting, balancing, jumping





8. Sports - Some UK playgrounds are dominated by formal sports facilities, most commonly football pitches, with play features being fitted in around the periphery. The playgrounds in Berlin had done the reverse, designing sports facilities into a backdrop of natural play. Examples of this included: a long jump track leading to a large play sandpit, a sprint track along the school boundary, a blaze football pitch with trees as goal posts and small areas of rubberised surface with a basketball hoop. Some schools, not all, had dedicated football spaces but these tended to be multi use game areas or similar fenced areas rather than full-size pitches.



Tree goals



Sprint track along the boundary



Long jump into the sandpit



Football and basket ball – but not dominating

9. Wide spread play – During playtime in Berlin the play is very well distributed. There are smaller groups engaged in a much wider range of play and making more use of the whole outdoor space. There are also opportunities for more children to lead and achieve in their play space and play time.



‘is that a school?’

10. Stimulating landscapes - All playgrounds had been re-profiled to introduce slopes and dips, creating spaces that stimulated running around and running up and down. Slopes are enhanced with slides, boulder fields, water pumps and channels – and almost all schools had a tunnel through a man-made hill. Some had boulder ‘cliffs’, creating opportunities to climb as well as jump. Often these slopes helped to enclose a seating area.



Nice example of the ‘not very neat principle’



Wide slides in the slopes with a boulder scramble up



Water play on mound.



Bridge across the valley

11. Drainage and surfaces - Berlin has a drier climate than Scotland and so watering grass and plants in dry weather was more of an issue than preventing mud. Grass was often pretty patchy and sometimes parts of the playgrounds were fenced off temporarily to allow the grass and plants to recover from wear and tear. However, designers had clearly given thought to drainage and avoiding problems with mud. Design approaches included: lots of use of sand around areas of fixed play equipment, 'hollow brick' type paving, with sandy earth in the brick holes supporting grass and weeds and surfacing made up of a mix of gravel, sand and bark. The main type of surface was small cobbles.



Common surface type. Sandy soil in holes - with weeds growing in areas of lower use



Bark / sand / gravel mix – smelled like being in the forest



12. Community. Some schools gave access to the grounds for play out of school time. One had a lovely bespoke sheltered area where a number of parents sit chatting after school while their children played. The same school had two old trams and built a platform to put them beside. Their plan was to rig a canopy to the trams and create a cafe to encourage parents to hang around and socialise after dropping off or collecting their children. Most schools had stories of parents being involved in maintaining the sites. One paid a parent 5,000 Euro a year to organise regular community work days on weekends – when up to 100 parents and children would turn up for a day to do some maintenance work and enjoy a barbeque or picnic together.

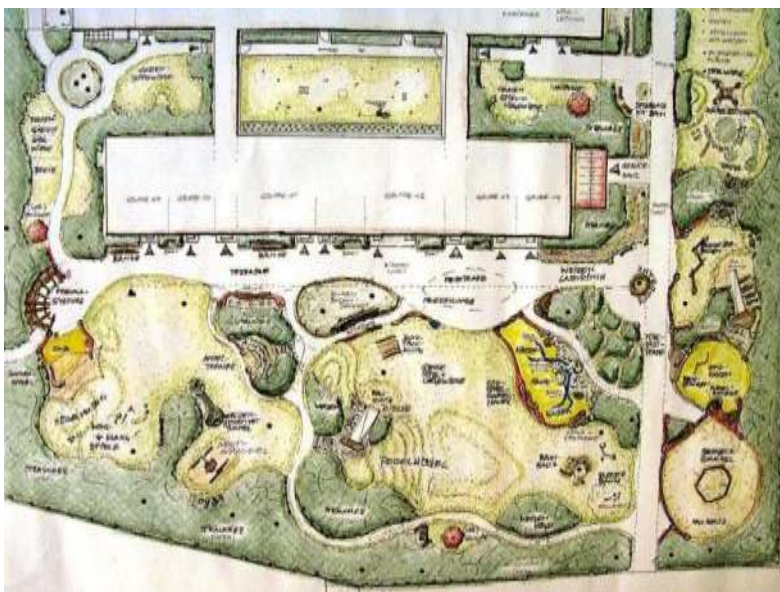


Parents sharing coffee and cake after school while children play



Plans for a canopy and cafe for parents in these re-cycled trams.

13. Design - All of these playgrounds had a comprehensive planning and design process with extensive consultation with pupils and staff. This was then developed by a landscape designer into a comprehensive, holistic and detailed design, usually Gruen Macht Schule's own in-house designer but sometimes a freelance], before being built by contractors. Mostly the development money had come from EU sources but in one school it came from a development company who had paid a levy to be allowed to develop a nearby site. In most cases pupils and parents were involved in some aspects of the original work - as well as ongoing smaller projects such as planting, wall building, sculptures etc.





Can we do it in the UK?

Is it too big a leap to imagine this kind of playground in the UK? We believe it can happen - and with support from Scottish Natural Heritage and funding from Inspiring Scotland, we are helping 8 Scottish primary schools to develop natural play features and spaces. If you're interested in joining a study tour of these sites in autumn 2011 then contact gfl@ltl.org.uk. The Berlin approach is as much about culture as design - and a recent survey of parent attitudes reveals strong parental support for 'risky' adventurous play in school, more opportunities for wet weather and snow play, tolerance for wet and muddy clothes and support for shrubby spaces for children to hide. Contact us if you'd like to discuss how we can support you to develop more ambitious playgrounds in your school or Local Authority.