

THE HIDDEN HERITAGE OF THE SCHOOLYARD

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Introduction

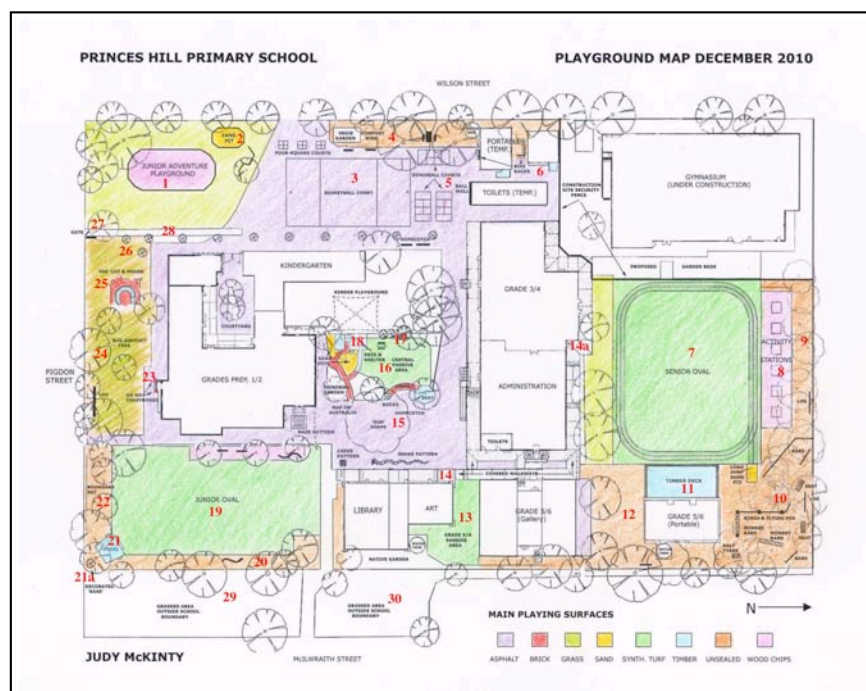
In December 2010, a playground survey was carried out at Princes Hill Primary School in Carlton¹. The school had previously undertaken some major building works and the aim of the survey was to document the children's play activities and make recommendations to assist in the development of a school landscape plan. Talking with the children uncovered a rich culture of play with its own traditions, some of which had become fragmented because of the positioning of the new buildings and others that were invisible to anyone but the children. As a result of the survey, the school began a truly innovative project involving children in the design of their own adventure playground.

The purpose of the playground survey was to

- document what the children were doing in the schoolyard
- explore their play traditions, and
- discover the relationship between play and place at the school.

The last point is particularly significant, because there is always a close relationship between play and place to be found in school playgrounds. It is important to take this into account when planning new buildings or landscaping works, because changes to the school grounds can greatly affect the children's play and potentially unsettle the playground, leading to unexpected activity and behaviour.

The survey generated a detailed report about play at the school. It included a list of games documented during the survey period and a cultural map of the playground showing the location of the games, features important to play at the school and the different kinds of playing surfaces found in the schoolyard.



Cultural map of playground

It is important to take notice of the different kinds of ground covering at a school, because the playing surface often determines which kinds of games can be played there. For instance, Downball or Four-square needs a really hard, flat, smooth surface and a lined court. Asphalt is ideal for this game, although I have seen it played successfully on artificial turf, but only because the school had chosen the right kind of material with a very close-cropped, smooth pile on a sand base which was similar in quality to an asphalt surface. I have also seen another school where a number of Downball courts had been purpose-built into the ground covering of a large ball games area. At this school, long-tufted artificial turf had been used, and this proved to be a mistake as the children wouldn't use the Downball courts because the ball wouldn't bounce true. Downball is a game of great skill, and it depends on the players being able to control the bounce of the ball when making their special shots like 'Cannonballs', 'Snakeys' and trick serves.

The message from the Downball experience is that if you are going to make changes to the playground – any playground – it would be wise to involve the children who play there in the planning process. This message will be further strengthened by the examples explored in this paper.



Playing Downball

The 'cat and mouse'

There are many hidden traditions in a schoolyard. At Princes Hill Primary School school there was a very plain, unusual and utilitarian-looking structure made of metal and wood. None of the staff knew anything about it except that the younger children used it in their play. Talking with the children revealed that they called the structure the 'cat and mouse' after the game they played there. 'Cat and Mouse' is a game of tiggy, where the 'cat' chases the 'mice' and puts them in the corner 'dungeon'. It has a number of rules like any chasing game, but the really interesting thing is that the game, and its relationship to the structure, was completely unknown to the adults at the school because of the way it

has been passed down from child to child over the years. At the beginning of each year, the new Prep children are given a 'buddy' from Grade 5. The buddies orientate the new children to the school – show them where the taps and toilets are, explain the school rules, show them where their playing areas are and so on. As part of this orientation, the buddies have taken it upon themselves to teach the new Preps the rules of 'Cat and Mouse'.



Playing 'Cat and Mouse'

Through talking with former pupils of the school, we traced the 'cat and mouse' back as far as the 1980s. This means it is possible that children have maintained this unique play tradition by oral transmission, without any adult involvement, for at least 30 years. Now that the cultural heritage of this structure is known the school is keen to preserve it, rather than have it removed and replaced with something more contemporary and decorative.

The 'bug airport'

In another part of the school, a very large gymnasium occupies around one-third of the total senior playing area. Before the gymnasium was built there was a garden area with bushy shrubs and trees – a favourite place for children to go to make huts, cubbies and stick villages over the years. They were not creating huge structures – it was about place-making and the enjoyment of playing with natural materials. When the gymnasium was built, the trees and shrubs disappeared, along with that play tradition.

Across on the other side of the school, I discovered a remnant of the stick-building activity. Two boys from Grade One were constructing a 'bug airport' from sticks which had been carefully gathered from around the schoolyard. The roof of the 'bug airport' was made from pieces of bark and leaves. As

there are no bushes growing in the area I looked around for the source of the materials and discovered that the boys had stripped the outer bark from a tree in another part of the yard. This is an indication

that the urge to play with natural materials is so strong that if a place to play these types of games, and the loose materials required, are not provided, children will use their own initiative and obtain the resources wherever they can, sometimes with unwanted consequences.

In order to play, children will find a way around the 'bannings' and the lack of materials. This often leads to conflict with the teachers and the children get into trouble. Many of the problems that occur in school playgrounds can be avoided if the environment is there to support the type of play that the children need – the type of play that is fundamental to being a child.



First and second versions of the 'bug airport' and the tree with stripped bark

The adventure playground

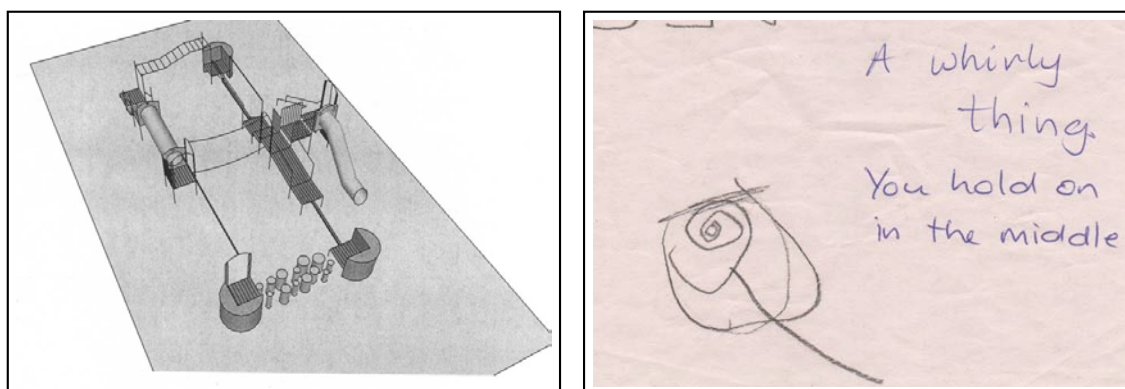
The last example of hidden play traditions involves a very large and much-loved senior adventure playground. This was a typical wooden, multi-level construction with bridges, decks, a sliding pole, a climbing net, large rocks and other elements to encourage many types of physical, social and creative play. This playground had been removed and a portable classroom established on the site.

Although there were still a couple of monkey bars, a small flying fox and other playing equipment left over from the old adventure playground, there was a great sense of loss among the senior children, particularly as replacement equipment, installed beside the sports oval, consisted of individual pieces designed in a linear formation – more suitable for physical fitness activities than for encouraging the kind of free, multiform play that occurred on the wooden structure. While the remnant playing equipment was constantly in use, the new structures were mostly not popular with the children for their free play. When the adventure playground was removed a whole layer of rich play experiences and interaction between children of different ages was lost – social interaction as well as physical activity. The play traditions of the adventure playground had been removed along with the pieces of wood.

The playground redevelopment project

The playground survey identified a number of issues occurring in the schoolyard because of the removal of the adventure playground, including inadvertent damage to property, and a recommendation was made for the construction of a new senior adventure playground. The school could see that this was really important for the children's wellbeing, so a playground redevelopment group was formed, consisting of six children from Year Six (aged 11-12 years) with two teachers as facilitators and collaborators. Another student joined the group halfway through the project. The task of this group was to design a new senior adventure playground for the school, in consultation with the landscape designers who were responsible for producing a master plan.

The long process of designing a new adventure playground involved a number of steps, including preliminary research by the group and consultation with the other students through a whole-school survey. This required teachers' support, particularly in the younger classes where they had to set aside class time to listen to each of the children individually and write the descriptions carefully beside their drawings. This process gave every child in the school a voice and a part in the planning process.



Two visual responses to the whole school survey – from a senior and a Prep student

The children in the playground redevelopment group decided to position the new adventure playground amongst the trees, beside the location of the old playground, using the height of the trees to give the structure different levels and challenging experiences. This decision was based on their analysis of the responses to their whole-school survey, where one of the most frequently-occurring requests was for different levels. The outcome of the project was the construction of a detailed scale model of the new adventure playground and a successful presentation to the school council. The children's design has been incorporated into the landscape master plan for the school.

The project was documented in detail by Shana Upiter, one of the teachers involved. Particularly interesting and revealing are the children's comments and discussions, which reveal the thinking and creative problem-solving that took place during the different stages of the project. As an example, in a discussion about safety, rules and fairness, one of the children makes this comment about the banning of card games:

Not allowed to use Pokemon or other trading games because we can't settle arguments.

How can we learn to??

This is also from another discussion where they are planning the strategy for their presentation to the school council:

Rafi: *We want a replacement, not a substitute for the old playground. That's what they've given us...a substitute.*

Patrick: *We've got to not base it around criticism. Criticism is not going to persuade them...We need to talk more about what we have to offer.*

Aidan: *We have to criticise them nicely.*



The playground redevelopment group with their scale model

Anyone interested in reading about the playground redevelopment project can find it in *Play and Folklore* No. 58, October 2012, published online by Museum Victoria:

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/about/books-and-journals/journals/play-and-folklore/2010-2019/>

An article entitled the 'The "Cat and Mouse" game' was published in *Teacher* no 221, August 2011, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell, pp 30-31 (author Judy McKinty)

An earlier version of the 'Cat and Mouse' article was published in *Play and Folklore* No. 55, April 2011, which can be found through the URL above.

¹ McKinty, Judy. *Tradition & Change: a playground survey of Princes Hill Primary School*, unpublished report, December 2010