
Book Reviews

Letting Play Bloom: Designing Nature-Based Risky Play

Lolly Tai

Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2022. Foreword, acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, afterword, references, illustration credits, and index. 226 pp. \$50.00, hardcover. ISBN: 9781439921791

With *Letting Play Bloom: Designing Nature-Based Risky Play*, author Lolly Tai, a professor of landscape architecture at Temple University, brings to the forefront her love of play and the outdoors and her scholarship about designing spaces for the intersection of these two. Interweaving images, architectural drawings, and text, Lolly has organized her work through case studies highlighting the great diversity and detail of park designs focused on outdoor risky play. Although written by an academic and published by an academic press, this book's first impressions suggest it could sit nicely on a home coffee table, on the desk of an urban planner or designer, or in the collection of a scholar. Tai has curated an engaging tome that

shares its deep research without burdening the reader with excessive scholarly justifications. The author surreptitiously showcases years of the experiences of parents, children, and practitioners concerning works in outdoor play spaces. *Letting Play Bloom* is short, easy to read, and a pleasure to look at.

As an outdoor educator and therapist, my overall impression of *Letting Play Bloom* is positive, and my critiques regarding definitions should not undermine the aims and impact of this book. My comments come as a reviewer outside the discipline of architecture—Tai's area of expertise—and reflect the larger systemic challenges facing all who support outdoor risky play and nature connections for child development.

"Nature based," as it is used in the subtitle of Tai's book, requires a bit of unpacking. Nature as a place—as opposed to the nature of things or wild nature—is often thought of as untouched, or at least unaltered, by humans. Natural spaces grow and develop in relationship to environmental conditions: temperatures, seasons, other species (including flora and fauna), and

nonliving things. Natural play spaces afford endless opportunities for children to explore adventure and risk and to create play in harmony with the natural play scape. Tai defines nature-based play in her first paragraph as occurring in these unmanufactured places, and she even shares a few images in her reference section of children exploring in mountainous, off-trail settings that are risky by nature.

What she presents in this book, and what lies at the heart of my one minor critique, holds that these featured play areas are facsimiles of nature-based play spaces seen in the photos tucked away in the back of the book. How can we re-create or reimagine wilder spaces in urban or less wild places? Although nature provides challenging and developmental opportunities for children through locomotion, manipulation, and psychological and creative exploration, the park or playground planner must produce a facsimile that can provide similar prospects, but also—and maybe unfortunately—meets building codes and safety standards, one that can withstand the foot traffic it will see over time, especially in an urban or densely populated area. It is in meeting these standards that Tai's work provides guidance and examples to achieve the benefits of risky play. In short, my problem is that the term "nature based" may be partially misleading. Again though, this comes from understanding what intact and naturally occurring ecosystems can offer versus those we need to build as replicants. A couple of examples from *Letting Play Bloom* may illustrate this.

Example 1: The necessity to meet building codes may require pruning tree branches up to six feet, as Tai outlines on

page 39, which, in effect, removes children's opportunities for climbing and thereby removes one of the affordances of trees in nature. Tai points to Ellen Beate Sandseter's work out of Norway. Sandseter has identified experiencing risk, such as climbing to heights at which a child senses competence and challenge coming together, and she articulates this as a developmental need. In this case, the designer and planner must re-create height through manufactured obstacles such as slides, ladders, and walkways ideally to achieve, as Tai shows, the same child developmental goals. The result is a space that can be insured and that an architect and engineer's firm can sign off on as meeting predetermined safety standards. The tree itself, if climbed before pruning, could offer nature-based risky play in which the perception of risk at height could be experienced by a child climbing a tree, which could also be vicariously experienced by other children watching.

Example 2: Hard or durable surfaces provide access, ease of maintenance, aesthetics, and direction (as in where to go), thereby also possibly reducing the explorations in which a child might engage in the space. But natural spaces change over time, and the way is not always clear. I may be getting into the weeds on definitions here, but I question whether this is nature-based risky play, or more accurately, risky play outdoors in manufactured nature-like settings. The parks featured throughout the book are all aimed at keeping kids close to nature, in ways dictated by physical, political, economic, and social variables. This is the burden of trying to allow kids today the opportunity to experience exploration in wild nature, perhaps like

that in which many of the adults reading this book engaged as children. It is not easy to re-create. I listened and laughed when a playground developer, years ago, in Canada, explained the expensive engineering and certification process his company completed to have logs, rocks, and streams certified to meet national safety standards. On this front, Tai's book has set a path for those who have not yet seen the way through the policy and standards forest. Follow along, learn from the case studies, and get excited about the learning and growth opportunities for children.

Most impressive for the reader are the book's layout and the easy-to-follow narratives of the development and management of five adventurous playgrounds across three nations. The selection of playgrounds featured help demonstrate the range of opportunities for designers and developers to build for idealized outcomes: physical challenges, risky play, creative and constructive elements, exploration, and the levels of supervision and parent involvement that may be needed. Is there a tree fort already built, or would your city by-laws allow for moving parts that kids may use to build their own structure? Will water be involved and interacting with other materials (think streams, mud, and messiness), or are there shrubs along walkways to keep everyone on the durable surfaces and out of the natural spaces? This book sets up readers well to begin answering many questions that will arise and helps in decision making. As these case studies show, some areas will allow freedom for nature-based play and some will replicate natural elements to represent nature. Tai also provides key references throughout the text for those

research areas readers may be most interested in exploring.

Ultimately, *Letting Play Bloom* provides a refreshing spin on the intersection of child development and outdoor play and should serve to inspire, instruct, and stimulate readers to bring nature and risk into child play spaces.

—Nevin J. Harper, *University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada*

Doll

Maria Teresa Hart

New York: Bloomsbury, 2022.

Introduction, conclusion, acknowledgments, and index. 176 pp.

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In summer 2023, in response to the *Barbie* movie, the American cultural zeitgeist took a sudden interest in the deeper meaning of our unofficial national doll. The world was buzzing with curiosity about who designs and sells the iconic doll, what kinds of play it invites, the gender identities encoded in its molded body, and its impact on the socialization of children. Maria Teresa Hart's *Doll*, a 2022 addition to Bloomsbury's Object Lessons series, also begins with Barbie and then takes the reader on a journey to explore these same questions about other dolls of the past, present, and future. Each chapter examines the history and sociocultural implications of a type of doll: porcelain bisque, American Girl, celebrity look-a-likes, and virtual avatars. Peppered with personal anecdotes and punctuated by a critical feminist lens, Hart provides a highly accessible introduction