City as Playground
by JULIA JACQUETTE and JAMES TRAINOR
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How does the design of your childhood environment affect you? For the better part of a decade, painter Julia Jacquette has been excavating memories of her childhood playground on the Upper West Side. Her family history dovetails with a chapter in New York’s built environment that has been largely forgotten: a “playground revolution” in the 1960s and ’70s. Designers like Paul Friedberg, Richard Dattner, and Jacquette’s own father created innovative adventure playgrounds, child-size cities for imaginative play.

Adventure playgrounds appeared all over New York City, from Central Park to residential buildings and vacant lots. They were part of larger changes in the design and use of the city’s public spaces during the Mayoral administration of John V. Lindsay (1966-1973) that responded to accelerating suburbanization, changing demographics, displeasure with the functionalist environments of urban renewal — in short, a sense of impending “urban crisis.” The playgrounds were meant to make the city more inclusive, more attractive, and more malleable: a place where everyone could thrive.

What happens to a playground when it’s torn down? Many of the playgrounds are now gone, others have been renovated beyond recognition. In her graphic memoir, Playground of My Mind, Julia Jacquette revisits and reconstructs the playgrounds that marked her childhood and have stayed with her ever since. We are pleased to
James Trainor: You and I experienced what we might call parallel childhoods. We grew up in exactly the same place, at the same time. We lived within a half block of each other, on a very particular patch of the Upper West Side in the upper 90s along the spine of Columbus Avenue. We’re the same age, and we share many of the same friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, and we have in our respective careers come to recognize the important role that the experimental playground designs of our youth had on our future selves. Yet it’s a very interesting and odd fact that we never knew each other. I feel like we’re the unwitting participants in and now the chroniclers of this perfect, double-blind, sociological experiment in the progressive play environments and new ideas about public space that impacted a whole generation of kids in New York City. In a way, we are playmates who never played together.

What were the playgrounds you grew up playing in, and what are some of the specific details of the playgrounds you remember noticing and being the most strongly influenced by?

Julia Jacquette: I was a very fortunate kid in that I grew up in a Mitchell-Lama building. This was a program that created affordable housing for middle-income families all throughout the city. The building I grew up in had its own private courtyard, and in that courtyard was a playground. And me and all the kids in the building — there were a lot of us, and we were roughly the same age, because we all moved in in the mid-60s — we played in it constantly.

It was very geometric. Even as a kid I found it totally visually delightful, because it was really a meditation on the cube. Everything had a nubbly, concrete aggregate surface and was a warm beige color. And strangely enough, as a kid I loved that, because it gave me an opportunity to write my own script of what these objects were. I know that seems like the kind of thing an adult would say looking back, but it’s absolutely true.
There was a giant cube with a smaller cube on it. This very simple-looking structure could hint at being an animal that we could ride or climb on, but it left open all these possible interpretations. There was a low wall that turned a corner and became a doorway, and then turned another corner and became a wall again and part of a structure, but in the section where it was a wall it had a cutout, which could be interpreted as a fireplace or a bridge. It included all these very nice details that a child would really notice, but they were not literal.

**JT:** That sounds pretty faithful to the reactions of a child, and not the confabulation of an adult looking back. They are precisely the types of things that Paul Friedberg, the designer of the playground, was trying to do. Friedberg used poured concrete to evoke a kind of design naturalness. It was this truth to material that I think children responded to. I know I responded to it similarly. It never entered my mind that you would need color in such an environment, because it was like climbing a mountain. It was like it received your projections.

**JJ:** Then I ventured out a little farther. My brother and I would take the bus down to the Adventure Playground.

**JT:** The one in Central Park at 67th Street and Central Park West, designed by Richard Dattner.
JJ: I remember entering that playground for the first time. The utter thrill of seeing this interconnected waterway; the amphitheater-like structure, with the sprinkler in the middle, which then fed into a channel, letting the water flow down to a geometric wading pool. It was so obviously built for us, kid-sized kids, to be able to walk in, and put stuff in. The canal had very low walls. And children were, as I noticed immediately, putting rubber duckies or sailboats at the top, watching them go down this thirty-foot long channel, and then retrieving them as they bobbed around in the wading pool. It’s a crystal clear memory.

Then in 1973 a very exciting thing happened: my own dad was commissioned to design a playground. With two friends of his, Ken Ross and Jim Ryan, they formed a partnership specifically for that project and designed and built the Discovery Play Park, right in Central Park on 100th Street.

Discovery Play Park had a volcano with an inner core that kids could climb up and then take a ride down a couple of different slides. The outside of the volcano had indentations, footholds with bright red ceramic tile. When the playground was renovated in 2009, those tiles were replaced. They had gotten so much use over many years, the color had worn away. Those are the playgrounds that I grew up playing in, and some of the details I remember as clearly as I remember details of the studio that’s right in front of me.
JT: When you started this project, so many of the spaces you documented were gone. How did you reconstruct this landscape? What’s the connection between playgrounds in space and in your mind?

JJ: The whole project of Playground of My Mind started as an effort to rekindle memory. It was me trying to reconstruct in some way the Friedberg playground that once existed in my childhood building and was destroyed in the mid-1990s. There was some structural repair that needed to be done underneath it. I scoured my family’s photo albums for photos, and came up with nothing. Then I posted a flyer in the building lobby asking if any of the other tenants had old photos. That resulted in just a few images. The lack of photographic source material forced me to do a lot of drawing from memory, which was key for me in really understanding the design of the playground in both literal and conceptual terms.

I had some very good 35mm slides that my father took of the playground he designed with Ken Ross and Jim Ryan, but no plans or blueprints. Same with Dattner’s Adventure Playground. So many of the images in Playground of My Mind are from my memory, or are constructed from bits and pieces of photos I could find, or are imagined views, often from above. The fact that I had to reconstruct the playgrounds in my brain really cemented — no pun intended — my decision of what to title the memoir.

JT: That process of reconstituting vanished spaces through creative triangulation — using scant photographic sources, cross-referenced with analogous and perhaps better documented spaces, and your own intense memories — I find truly fascinating. It is both archeological and imaginative. In conducting research for my own book about many of these playgrounds and public spaces that have been so effectively erased from the cityscape, I spent a lot of time trying to locate, meet and interview people who might remember them.
I spent one afternoon at the Jacob Riis Houses on the Lower East Side with a group of guys who had lived in those public housing projects their whole lives. These guys, were firmly in the present, checking their iPhones or minding little nieces or nephews riding their trikes around. But when they started to talk about the iconic playground at Friedberg’s Jacob Riis Plaza, demolished in the 1990s, they visibly lit up. You could sense that in their mind’s eye it was 1967 all over again. They could tell you in the most exacting detail every feature and design element, every pathway, watercourse, and sculptural nook and cranny, all from a kid’s perspective scanning the landscape for its “play potential.” Interwoven with that mental map was the indelible social landscape that the plaza created — who did what where, who fell and broke their arm or leg, where the girls would go to hide out, where the old men would play cards or gamble, the places where kids would test each other with dares and dangerous challenges. I realized that the landscape that was most real to these guys, the one that was lastingly imprinted on them, was the one that had been For me, the impetus for my own project and my book is to somehow “save” these sites that exist largely in the memory of those who experienced them, from complete oblivion.

JT: The title of your memoir, The Playground of My Mind, is a reference to the iconic Stevie Wonder album Music of My Mind, which came out in the summer of 1972. I really love that title, and the fact that it evokes so much from that moment. What is the linkage between that album, that artist, and the playgrounds?

JJ: Stevie Wonder’s music was almost the soundtrack to the early ’70s. There was so much music that you just heard in the air, coming out of windows, of people’s apartments, out of taxi cabs, out of cars, in stores where they would have the radio on. You heard certain songs over and over again.

JT: It was the moment when Stevie Wonder was entering his classic period — what’s known as his classic period. Where funk, soul, R&B, and rock meld into something brand new. And it was also precisely the apex of what’s been called New York’s playground revolution. It was Mayor John Lindsay’s
last year in office, and the year that your dad’s playground was built — a very personal moment for you, and a public one for everyone else. And it kind of prefaces the dark period New York was about to enter.

A few days ago I started a jag of watching old episodes of *Sesame Street* with my daughter. We watched Episode 514, which originally aired in February of 1973. It’s the amazing episode in which Stevie Wonder performed “Superstition” on the show, with his full band basically arranged around the front stoops of the tenement building that was 123 Sesame Street.

*Stevie Wonder performing “Superstition” live on Sesame Street in 1973.*

In that same episode, there were also film segments in which kids learn how uncool it is to litter on their streets. And there was another segment in which Muppets are talking about how to spell “poison,” by way of explaining, probably to kids who were alone at home, how they should not kill themselves by ingesting common household poisons. And all of this was prefaced by montages of kids running and playing in very urban environments: in playgrounds, on streets, on concrete wall abutments of public housing projects. One episode of *Sesame Street* gives voice to all the positive, negative, and confusing forces that were going on at that time.

*Sesame Street* was so close to my own lived experience of New York, and especially our particular section of New York, which was so polyglot and so multicultural. It’s a perfect framing device for this confluence of various social forces that were at play around us, and through us, as kids growing up in that urban environment.

**JJ:** I remember very clearly that very episode of *Sesame Street* being broadcast. It was a big deal in our community. I remember my mom sitting us down to watch it. *Sesame Street* seemed very familiar to me. And it also was a big part of my initially learning about the world. Maybe that’s another reason, I’m realizing now, that his music loomed large in my childhood.
JT: In *Playground of My Mind* you pose certain questions both literally and visually. Questions like “How does the design of your childhood environment affect you?” or “Does it help you shape how you think?” You convey this by depicting children hard at work, or, it could be argued, hard at play, drawing, creating, and collaborating together on actually forming the elements of those questions visually. Creating the building block typography that makes up those questions. And in many cases the fonts that you chose remind me of the progressive, educational, and futuristic typefaces that were so characteristic of the era.

JJ: They are all typefaces of that time period, and in the image the kids are turning these into three-dimensional playthings. Another visual influence was the popularity of supergraphics in the early ’70s. This was the use of oversized lettering as a two-dimensional form in interiors and exteriors, and even in three-dimensional form, like the large red “9” in front of Nine West 57th Street, which was created by Chermayeff & Geismar. A lot of people try to crawl into, or sit on (unsuccessfully) that number nine. That idea of wanting to jump through or be on top of this graphic element is something that ended up being a big part of *Playground of My Mind*.

JT: I love your description of wanting to enter into the graphics. And I think it’s important because it marks this shift in New York, when information changed. The conveyance of information changed from utilitarian and dull, the product of an industrial, commercial city, to being one that was increasingly an information city, and a city increasingly shaped by — to use an obnoxious term — a creative class. Under the Lindsay administration, which we’ll talk about more, the city was actually welcoming playfulness. It turned the entire city, or at least these elements we are talking about, into a giant playground.

JJ: I like that phrase, “the city as playground,” and I felt that too about New York in the ’70s. It was a very scruffy playground, but it did feel like a playground, where one was permitted to go into any area. I feel that the flavor has changed a bit, with such an influx of wealth in recent years. Although simultaneously, we’ve had some spaces that have been made public, like sections of Times Square being closed off, sections of Union Square being closed off, and tables and chairs being put in them. But it’s much more formal.

JT: That would be the result of things that happened under Mayor Bloomberg, in terms of making the city more user-friendly again, although in a very different way. Bloomberg used quality of life as a wedge to make the city more attractive to businesses and tourism. But I don’t think that would have happened if Lindsay and people like Thomas Hoving, who was his parks commissioner in 1966-67, hadn’t done the things that they did. Because many of those initiatives that happened under Bloomberg were inventions of Hoving: closing Central Park to cars, making it bicycle-friendly, bringing contemporary art into the public sphere. All those things were radical at the time.

JJ: In my family’s photo album, we had photos of Mayor Lindsay at the dedication ceremony of our building. Even the presence of that photo in our album put forth the idea that there were people that were key in making this building happen, and I later learned how Mayor Lindsay appointed Thomas Hoving as Parks Commissioner and how important that was in the adventure playgrounds in Central Park.
JT: Lindsay showed up to almost every ribbon cutting ceremony of even the smallest new experiment in parks and public space. He wanted to be seen putting these experiments into motion. It’s something you can’t quite imagine happening now — seeing playgrounds as instruments for political and social change, and it had the full backing of city government and its executive head. Which brings us to the idea of risky play and danger, because that’s a fundamental element in the adventure playground. Dattner and Friedberg intellectually and intuitively saw mastery of challenges by children and the inherent risks in play as being instrumental in childhood development. I’m wondering if you have memories of risky play, which I think a lot of kids today can’t even imagine.

JJ: Absolutely. Especially in Dattner’s Adventure Playground and Ross Ryan Jacquette’s Discovery Play Park. There was a lot of sand in both of those playgrounds when I was a kid. In the renovations most of that has been changed to a kind of spongy ground surface, but in the early ‘70s these playgrounds had play structures over or within these seas of sand. I distinctly remember how brave that made me feel, and both my brother and I would joyfully leap from what seemed like enormous heights into the sea, because we knew we weren’t going to get hurt hitting the ground. Even in the playground in the building where I grew up, we did a lot of jumping from element to element and created games specifically for that playground that had to do with hiding, tag, running after each other through the structures of the playground.

The benches for the adults were on the perimeter of the playground with a low wall that they could see over, but that low wall also contained this sea of sand. That meant a feeling — and I know that Dattner intended this, from interviews with him — that allowed kids to feel the safety of a parent nearby, but also that they were acting independently from their parents. They were engaging with each other in this thrilling but safe zone.

James, you’re a parent now. What are your thoughts on risky play and the current state of playgrounds? What it’s like to be on the other side of that?
JT: For the first time in my life, I’ve felt the need to protect someone and be responsible for them not dying. So I’ve very consciously had to put my ideals regarding the importance of risky, challenging play to the test. As Lady Allen of Hurtwood, the British social reformer and children’s welfare advocate who largely introduced the adventure playground concept to the U.S. from England, said, “It’s better a broken bone than a broken spirit.” Of course it’s easy to say that until your kid winds up in the emergency room. But I still believe in it. I see my four and a half year-old daughter taking risks and mastering things she was afraid to do just six months ago.

I think this leads to a larger point, which is the major cultural and societal shifts that have happened since our own childhoods, and the huge counterrevolution that happened against these types of playgrounds. The city stopped having the budget or political will to maintain and staff them, they got vandalized or fell into disrepair, and many parents and communities saw them as the most visible sign of urban collapse. They incorrectly singled them out as the cause of neighborhood troubles, rather than the symptom of broader systemic societal failures. So they were typically abandoned, remodeled beyond recognition or simply got ripped out. The neutered playgrounds that we all know today, the mind-numbingly dull and identical playgrounds bought out of play equipment catalogues, have seemingly eliminated all elements of danger, or excitement.

JJ: The spaces that are actually more related to the playgrounds of our youth are some contemporary park designs. For example, Hudson River Park has amphitheater-like seating in places, and coves that make the edge where the water meets the land a more undulating, irregular and exciting type of urban public space. It’s more permeable, open-ended, even playful, than a lot of current traditional playgrounds.

JT: The dominant contemporary societal goal for city kids seems to be just to corral them in some kind of impossible bubble of safety. So you have a generation of kids with pretty unrealistic ideas about the world. Imaginative play has suffered as a result, but is facilitated more through recent examples of landscape architecture, like Teardrop Park by Michael Van Valkenberg in Battery Park City, which is a small scale but successful jewel. There is the ability to take risks because you can actually climb on rocky boulders amidst complex water features.
JT: All these playgrounds constantly played on the idea of what can feel like inside, what can feel like outside. Friedberg talked about his designs as outdoor rooms.

JJ: Yes, and as a kid I felt that immediately. Maybe I wouldn’t have been able to articulate it, but I remember very clearly playing with the other kids in my building in the playground, and saying, this is our living room, and now let’s go into our dining room, using the cubes as chairs. And then in another bit of play they would be tree stumps. Cities in which the architecture seems very closed and unconnected to the outdoor space around it make me feel very, very sad.

I would say that those playgrounds, in their modernist aesthetics and in the kind of materials that were used to make them, the cast concrete or concrete aggregate, led me into appreciating and engaging non-playground works of architecture.

JT: I think what we learned through daily contact with the sophisticated vocabularies of Friedberg and Dattner and others allowed us to see other spaces in the city as friendly, as inviting, as dignified, as approachable — as made for us. I think they instilled certain values or encouraged an awareness of certain intrinsic values about space and living in a city that were not just purely abstract or intellectual — I was a kid! — but which was gained through pleasure and enjoyment and play. They seemed like deeply urban and deeply natural landscapes. They seemed to be things of nature that had erupted from the earth, but also that could only exist in a city.

It isn’t about nostalgia for a style or a period taste. It’s more about a moment in time when the city stopped saying “NO.” Don’t do this, don’t do that, you can’t, you shouldn’t. Instead the city started to say “YES.” Yes, come, take this, this is yours, use it, share it, make it something new just by being here and playing in it. I feel lucky to have lived through that moment.

JT: In the book you quote your brother, an architect, saying that he sees the orthogonal in everything. He boils it down to that backyard playground, and the hidden, underlying grid of those structures. Those voids and solids, and positive and negative spaces. Which you illustrate by extending imaginatively the grid outward, from things that are there to things that aren’t there, but that the child imagines in various permutations and configurations.
**JJ:** One thing that the playgrounds provided was this elegant, simple, visual vocabulary that was really easy to grasp. As a kid, and now as an adult, I play with these ideas of variation of form. An underlying system of organization that provides you, as a kid playing or an artist making, with a structure to adhere to sometimes, to ignore other times, but that keeps the entire project or artwork, or design, a unified whole. I feel like playgrounds provided me with a visual vocabulary in addition to that idea of an always-existing inner grid, inner structure.

**JT:** It gave you a syntax: to understand the world, examine the world, and then recreate it.

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*Julia Jacquette is an artist, born, raised, and still working and living in New York City. Playground of My Mind will be featured in the exhibition Julia Jacquette: Unrequited and Acts of Play at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY from February 18 – July 2, 2017. The graphic memoir will be produced as a book co-published by the Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College and DelMonico Books/Prestel, New York. This exhibition will travel to the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, where it will be on view from September 24, 2017 – January 14, 2018.*

James Trainor has written on a range of topics including: the ecological costs of publishing an art magazine, art tourism and the American West, the quixotic quest for the “Center of the World”, a forgotten Land Art site in the forests of Northern Maine, graphic novel journalism in zones of conflict, urban gardening and the anti-lawn movement, and the question of “relevance” in contemporary art. He was awarded an Arts Writers Grant from Creative Capital / The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in 2015, and a project grant from the Graham Foundation in 2016. His book, Steal This Playground: New York City and the Radical Playground Movement, 1961–1976, will be published by Metropolis Books/Artbook D.A.P. in 2017. He lives and works in New York, where he was born.

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