

SKRAMMELLEGEPLADSEN: DENMARK'S FIRST ADVENTURE PLAY AREA

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Abstract: This paper reviews the philosophy of the adventure playground movement and particularly the goals of the original adventure playground, Skrammellegepladsen in Copenhagen, Denmark. We then present a case study investigation of the ways that Skrammellegepladsen is used, the perceptions of the users, and the extent that the play area embodies its original philosophy. The findings provide insights into the degree to which they meet children's needs with respect to child development and play theories.

Introduction

The critical period when a child begins to learn and develop occurs at a very young age. Years ago, people recognized the importance of play in a child's development progress. Childhood is used to discover, imagine, and develop numerous sensibilities that will enable children to grow into healthy, well-adjusted members of society. Play areas are specialized environments where principles and morals are taught away from adults and peers in the classroom or home. It seems only right that with the increase in population and changes in living conditions, we must thoughtfully compensate for the lack of space by providing free and safe areas for play to support children's social, physical, emotional and intellectual development.

This study evaluates the ways that an adventure play area is used, the perceptions of the users, the extent that the play area embodies its respective philosophies and the degree to which they meet children's needs with respect to child development and play theories

Creating play environments for children. The evolution of playgrounds in the United States can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century when Henry Barnard's *School Architecture* conceived the notion of free play occurring in a play yard (Brett, et al. 1993:18). The materials incorporated into this playground included separate rotary swings for boys and girls, building blocks, and movable carts to tote the wooden blocks away.

In Boston, during the 1860s an outdoor children's playground was set up that integrated sand gardens. At about the same time, Jacob Riis, a playground designer, established a "school-park" where the park would serve the needs of the children attending school as well as the surrounding community (Brett, et al. 1993:20). Allowing the "school-park" to be built from a school budget solved a critical funding problem.

A national "play movement" developed with the increase in urban playground establishments. "The purpose of the movement was to structure the play experience of American youth on well-equipped municipal playgrounds" (Brett, et al. 1993: 22). In addition, the "National Recreation Association in the 1900s developed guidelines for certain equipment for playgrounds like providing a sand box, swings, a small slide and a climber." These types of playgrounds began to appear as common and expected elements in the urban landscape. This became known as the traditional playground (Arnold 1996:1).

In the 1920s, "the construction of apartment buildings outside of Copenhagen's historic gates accelerated after World War I. New quasi-public social housing associations formed to house the workers of trade unions and payees to pension funds, and these associations developed many city blocks of three to five-story, walk-up apartments" (Bosselmann 1998:63). A social consciousness developed where children that grew up in these city blocks needed to have areas for recreation that were specifically designed for them. Consequently, Carl Theodore Sørensen, a Danish landscape architect, designed heightened sensory environments, insisting that children be provided with three specific landscape features: beaches, meadows, and forests.

After the construction of city buildings unexpectedly attracted children to their sites, the adventure playground concept was conceived (Mitchell 1980:4). Sørensen, along with the Workers' Co-operative Association first observed children playing on bombed war sites learning how to use the construction tools and the surrounding materials to build their own playground (Eriksen 1985:20). As a result of this observation he commented: "Maybe we could try to design a kind of junk playground in suitable and fairly large areas, where the children would be allowed to use old cars, cardboard boxes, branches and such. It is possible that supervision would be necessary, both to prevent the worst cases of disputes among the children and to lessen the possibilities of children getting hurt. Quite possibly such supervision would not be needed" (Bosselmann 1998:62).

Just as World War II started, Sørensen designed the first adventure playground. It provided the needed exploration, discovery, and challenge for children to manipulate their surrounding environment (Eriksen 1985:20). In particular, children constructed their own play spaces. The main concept associated with adventure playgrounds brings the elements of rural play to urbanized children (Rudolph 1974:50). Children needed to come in direct contact with and manipulate the elements of fire, earth, wind, and water, in order to learn about them. John Bertelsen, who was the first director of the playground in Copenhagen, believed that it was essential to provide a child with an opportunity that would link a physical and psychological environment for growth (Brett, et al. 1993:27). In addition, this movement towards adventure playgrounds provided not only physical but social constructions (Brett, et al. 1993:26).



Figure 1. The first adventure playground.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the adventure playground is the play leader. This individual listens to the children, replies to their needs, and lends a helpful hand (Rudolph 1974:43). They also "coordinate the materials and maintenance of the playground" (Eriksen 1985:26). For the most part, children will want to be left alone to accomplish their own goals and tasks, so the play leader does not interfere with the children's play but offers guidance and assurance. They also provide a shield from interference by other adults, as well as lending an aura of assurance.

Traditional playground designs in the United States have been dominant over time, though attempts have been made to bring the spirit of adventure playgrounds to urban children. "It is important to point out that the adventure playground concept that took shape [in Denmark] is still arguably the most significant playground innovation" (Brett 1993:23). However, Americans think otherwise when presented with certain aspects of this specialized play area. We tend to think that play is frivolous (Brett 1993:3). Besides, there are three other reasons as to why there is no strong support for adventure playgrounds. First, some say that the funds and training are not available to provide a play leader for the playground (Rudolph 1974:43). Second, Americans also do not believe that children would be safe playing with tools and construction materials. This is particularly odd in a country that prides itself on its independent and do-it-yourself spirit. Finally, one has to admit that the adventure playground is very unsightly (Eriksen 1985:26).

Methods

To cover all of the information needed for completing the case study, a number of different methods were employed. The methods used for collection of the data included observation, interviews with the pædagogs and children, and research on the history of Skrammellegepladsen. Prior to the beginning of the study, permission was granted to take photographs of the play area and children during their normal everyday activity.

Findings

The findings are loosely organized to describe (1) first impressions, (2) history and evolution of Skrammellegepladsen, (3) the users and their daily schedule, (4) the patterns of programmed and unprogrammed activity, and (5) user perceptions.

First impressions. Skrammellegepladsen is the original adventure play area in Denmark and has been in existence since 1943. It is located in the district of Emdrup, north of Copenhagen. Surrounded by apartment complexes on both sides as well as a school nearby. Riding past it at first because of the visual protection given by the vegetated berms, I knew that this was a protected environment for the children that played here. After introducing myself and receiving a tour of the facilities, notes were taken of the numerous opportunities that were being offered to the children. There is a construction area with a tool shed, a fire pit for cooking, small built houses for pretend play, gardens for harvesting food and flowers, a court for kickball or soccer, a basketball hoop, a hill for rolling down and sledding in the winter, a slide, a large grass area, paved areas for skateboarding and roller blading, and a main building that can accommodate all of the children at once in case of inclement weather. The opportunities to study this play area are endless. As well as being the most famous adventure play area in Denmark, it has everything that my study needs to be completed. The pædagogs are helpful and easily approachable, and Skrammellegepladsen has welcomed me with open arms.

History and evolution of Skrammellegepladsen. Sørensen's original concept for Skrammellegepladsen allowed for 65 meters from west to east and 82 meters in length from north to south. Dirt from the building excavation was piled up on all four sides to make 2-meter high dikes, or protective berms with a wire fence on top. On the outside of the fence, wild roses and hawthorns were planted to keep the children protected from the outside. There was only one entrance, as there is still today, in the northwest corner by the main building. Sørensen wanted the children to shape and create. "They can dream and imagine and make dreams and imagination reality, any rate

a reality, which the child's mind is completely satisfied with... It is so obvious that the children thrive here and feel well, they unfold and they live. Of all the things, I have contributed to realize, the junk playgrounds the ugliest, for me, however, it is the most beautiful and best of my works" (Sørensen 2).

Digging out holes underground and building houses on stilts were originally the main activities. Over time, the play area began to change with the demands from the children. Alice, a pædagog at Skrammel, used to play here when she was a child in the late 1950s. Interviewing her felt like going back in time to a place when it seemed like children were allowed to do anything that they pleased. Their motto is: anything can be used for something and that nothing must go to waste. That motto rings true when looking at what the children used to play in and on. Old vehicles, trolley cars, boats and cement pipes were donated by surrounding residents and businesses.

On the play area, back in the 1960s, there were 35 individual 20 square meter building plots. Alongside each path was a ditch for the plant rubbish to be thrown, and every year the building would start on April 15th. When you were younger, you were only allowed to build a house down under the earth. You shoveled dirt and made a cubbyhole in the ground and covered it up with stones, dirt, and anything decorative that you wanted. As you got older, you were allowed to build a one-story house, and then you were able to build a two-story house. One year, Alice and a couple of her friends made a house on stilts! The children asked their parents for paint and furnishings, and when you did not want anything in your house anymore, you placed it outside to become someone's newfound treasure. Everyone used their imagination to design and personalize their home.

It seems unfortunate now that over time, that large construction area has dwindled down to a small area underneath some chestnut trees towards the south end of the playground. There is no longer a large sample of the boys that would like to build; the girls do not build any houses at all.

Back then, even as now, the children do not want to clean up their gardens and built houses. They are sort of sad to see it go, but they gain useful experiences that help their houses improve year after year.

Children are now offered programmed activities, such as participating in the production of a play. Alice's motivation for teaching theater to the children started when she was a child coming here. Agnete Vessereg, or Nitte, was a play leader who has become a legend at Skrammellegepladsen. Nitte could see that Alice was interested in gardening and theater so she helped to encourage her in those activities. Today, Alice is doing that same task for the children of Skrammel. You can say that she followed in Nitte's footsteps.

Users and their daily schedule. The daily use of Skrammel is very unlike an American playground. A

Danish school day typically starts at 8 a.m. and ends between noon and one o'clock, depending on the class level. The younger children, ages 6 to 9, are walked from the school to Skrammel the first couple of weeks of school and from then on they are allowed to go independently. The older children, ages 10 to 14, can come and go as they please. Most of the children arrive at the play area close to one o'clock. They take off their coats or any outer clothing and hang them up in their own cubbyhole. Then they are free to do what they please, and there are so many activities to choose. When it gets close to closing time, the younger child's parent has to pick him up from inside the building and they are checked off as gone for the day. The older children have their own sheet to check in and to sign out when they leave. Skrammel's hours are from 7 a.m. when the parents can drop their children off for the pædagog to walk them to school, to 5 p.m. when every child must be picked up, Monday through Friday.

The length of stay was regularly the same from day to day. Between the hours of 8 a.m. and noon the pædags clean up the yard, have meetings, do individual errands, and take a chance to relax before the children arrive. It was usually very quiet until around one o'clock and then the play area would be full of running, screaming children everywhere. Towards four o'clock the noise would start to die down and you would have a couple of stragglers dragging their feet around the playground wasting time until their parent came to pick them up.

There are around 120 children total enrolled at Skrammellegepladsen, but not all of the children show up at one time. The children pay a modest monthly fee for being enrolled at the play area. On average, the number of users everyday at Skrammel comes close to 80 children who are distributed fairly evenly among age and gender groups. No children over the age of 14 are allowed to use the facilities. Once a teenager's birthday comes around, they know they must find another place to recreate, usually the local youth club. Some parents spend a little amount of time playing with their child on the playground, but this is discouraged since this is a child's environment to learn independence and self-confidence.

Pædagog's role. The role of the play leader, or pædagog, is very important to the children. They are there to supervise, encourage the act of play, and to provide motivation where it is needed. Out of the eleven play leaders, seven are educated as pædags. The schooling for becoming a pædagog includes three and a half to four years of specialized training. The first two years are devoted to studies in school and a period of 15 months is spent in apprenticeship at a playground. The other play leaders are assistants, or medhjælpers. There are also five students that are in the process or will be attending Pædagogical School.

Pædags also facilitate meetings between the Parental Board as well as their own meetings to discuss any problems that are occurring or any improvements that can be made. Each pædagog is in charge of a certain area of the playground. These areas range from the Clubhouse

where the older children play pool and listen to music, the construction area outside where the younger boys build their castles, to inside the main building where young girls do arts and crafts. There is a comfortable relationship between the children and the play leaders. It is almost as if they are part of an extended family or a close adult friends.

Characteristics of users. The most important difference distinguishing users is their age. The younger children have their activities to tend to while the older children have different priorities and separate themselves from the younger ones. In fact, the younger children are not allowed in the Clubhouse unless they are invited. If they cause trouble, they are asked to leave.

The majority of the children come from similar family backgrounds and live in apartment complexes surrounding the play area. These children either walk or use bicycles, scooters, skateboards and roller blades as their means of transportation to the play area. The children that live farther away usually have a parent drive them.

Unprogrammed activities. The pattern of use was dependent upon the weather. In times of good weather the majority of the children were outside. The younger boys were constructing their castles or working in the shop. The older boys sometimes helped the younger ones building, or they played basketball, soccer, or PlayStation in the Clubhouse. The younger girls played in the built houses while the older girls tended to their gardens or just lay in the sun and hung out with their friends. Overall, it depended on the age group as to where the most intensity existed on a certain part of the playground. Towards the end of the study when it was getting to be colder, the majority of the activities moved inside. On October 3rd, the built houses were boarded up, the gardens were cleaned, and the castles made out of wood were torn down. The children will have the opportunity to start anew when the spring comes again, but the colder weather chases them inside where they sit in front of computer games, watch movies, or work on coloring books.

Over near the construction area, the younger boys hammer boards upright to make a wall, or add more layers of wood to a roof that was not quite sturdy enough. Rules are associated with building the castles. No child is allowed to use power tools. If the job called for that kind of power, then a pædagog will be called over to help. The four support posts must be in the ground at least half a meter. The roofs must be two boards thick, and if a play leader climbs up on top and it feels too unstable, the children are to keep building until it is safe enough. A group of boys usually get together and decide to build a house. However, if one house is stagnant for too long and takes up valuable wood planks that can be used on someone else's house,

then that house is torn down. All of the built houses are taken apart for the winter, where they will be able to start all over in the spring. Tomas, one of the more talented builders, commented that he was not sad about tearing his house down, because in the spring he gets to build something completely different. The average time spent here was when the hobby shop opened around two in the afternoon until it closed around four in the afternoon.

The garden was where you would find children watering, weeding, eating their vegetables, and hiding out in the overgrown vegetation. Each individual gardener had the freedom to plant whatever their heart desired. Some grew vegetables such as corn, lettuce, radishes, tomatoes, beans, carrots, etc. Other gardens only grew edible flowers. The average time spent here was only the short amount of time that it took to do the gardening tasks. The rows of the garden are divided up into individual boxes so that each child has the same amount of harvesting space. The rows are even named after herbs: Rosemarinvej, Timianstien, Oreganoalle, Salvistræde, and Løvstikkevej.

The majority of the young girls used the built houses for fantasy play. The average time spent inside of a house was an hour or two. They would tend to the small gardens in front of their house, talk to their neighbors, and visit other girls down the "street". The soccer court and the basketball hoop near the entrance were very popular among the older boys where they spent an average of a couple of hours dribbling or trying to score a winning goal.

The hilltop is not really connected to the rest of the areas that I have mentioned above. Mainly, it was a place to hide from others, but also to spy and see what was happening down below. The vegetated burns were very useful for this advantage. There also existed a running trail through the overgrown vegetation along the top of the berm where children could exercise and run through the weeds.

Preprogrammed events. There exists a question whether or not Skrammellegepladsen is programmed or unprogrammed space. Through my observations, Skrammellegepladsen has many regularly scheduled programmed activities. Some occurred weekly while others only once a year. However, the ordinary daily activities that occupy the children appeared to be unprogrammed.

The Skrammel Olympics took place during the second week of September where interested children previously registered for events like the long jump, basketball throw, and relay. The Olympic celebration was held from Monday through Friday, one in the afternoon until three, and medals were awarded on Friday to everyone that participated. Special medals were handed out to the record holders.



Figure 2. A built house and garden with their "caretaker".



Figure 3. Baking day, then and now.

Cake and Bread Baking Day were held on Fridays. It was a special treat that the children looked forward to every week. The play leaders made cake and would provide it for the children. Fresh dough was wrapped around long wooden poles to hold over the hot coals waiting in the fire pit. When the dough was baked, the children had a play leader pull off the bread so they could squirt jam or chocolate down inside for a treat. On Friday's you could find as many as thirty children sitting around the fire pit, staying warm from the cold, socializing with each other, singing, or just baking bread for their friends.

Numerous activities are sponsored for the older children, such as dances and socialization events. They are provided with snacks and they usually play games such as pool or PlayStation, and dance to their music. Towards Christmas time, they begin to make gifts for family members out of recycled materials.

Sommerfest is by far the biggest event of the year. In early August, hundreds of family members and relatives are invited to celebrate the warm weather by coming together to socialize, spend time with their children in the play area, and partake in the activities such as selling candy, which raises money for Skrammel.

When it's too cold and rainy to play outside, Alice, a pædagog starts to organize the theater. Every year, scripts are handed out, costumes and scenery are handmade, and families join together once again to watch their children perform an original theatrical production.

Types of play. Skrammel provides opportunities for very diverse types of play (Rubin 1982). When the young girls play "house," it is socio-dramatic play. Building the castles and later tearing them down is an example of constructive play. Running through the grass and on the trail, sliding, rolling down the hill, and climbing in the trees are examples of functional play. Numerous games with rules were observed such as soccer, kickball, basketball, badminton, sword fighting and tag. Witnessing all of the different types of play in a single designed children's environment proved successful to me that children were being stimulated to heighten their development.

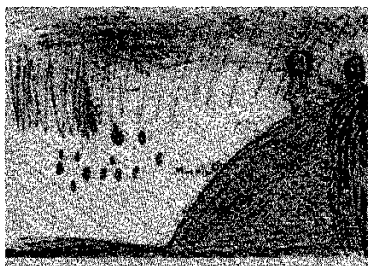
Perceptions of users. When the children were asked what their favorite activity was at Skrammel, I received a variety of answers associated with different age groups and genders. The younger boys, ages 6 to 9 enjoy sword fighting, building the wooden castles, and playing

computer games. When asked what their least favorite thing was about the playground, they had no answer. When asked if they would change anything, I received a no. The older boys, aged 10 to 14 enjoy playing in the Clubhouse, using the PlayStation, and hanging out with friends. Sports like soccer, basketball, and skateboarding also topped their list. They would not want to change anything at Skrammel. The younger girls, ages 6 to 9, enjoy being loud, sewing, playing in their houses, cooking and coloring. The younger girls had opinions about what they did not like and what they would change. Some girls did not like cleaning up the gardens once the colder weather set in. Another did not like the feeling of being trapped in Skrammel. Since she's younger, she has to stay until her parents pick her up. The older girls, aged 10 to 14, mostly like to hang out with friends, talk, and chase the boys around. What would they

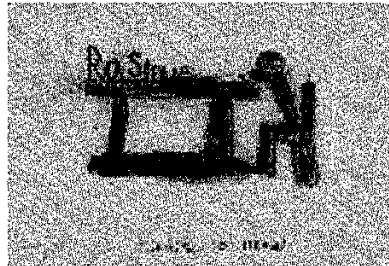
change? One girl, Christel said the play area was very disorganized, "You just can't find things when you need them."

The children said that Skrammel was fun because their friends were here. After asking each child some preliminary questions, safety concerns were introduced into the conversation. Every child responded that they felt safe in the playground because the pædagogs are comforting towards the children and they were their friends as well. The children feel comfortable in this environment or else they would not keep coming here to play.

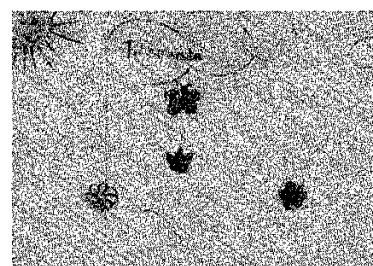
Several children drew me pictures of their favorite activities at Skrammellegepladsen and some of them are reproduced in figure 4.



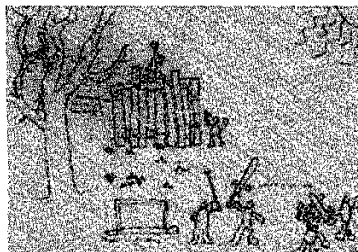
Stedding down the hill



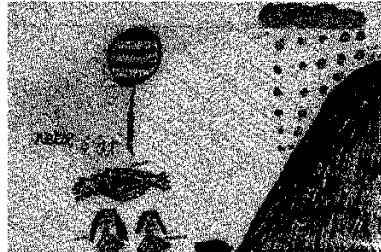
Drawing



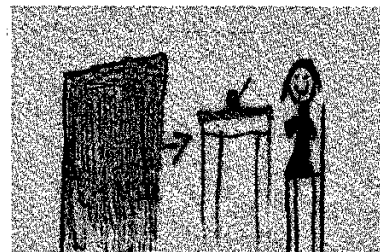
Planting flowers



My castle and the bridge



Candy, snow, and the hill



Sewing

Figure 4. Illustrations of six children's favorite activities at Skrammellegepladsen.

Conclusions

Summary of findings. The main objective of this case study was to understand the concept and philosophy of an adventure play area. By understanding who the users are, their activity patterns and perceptions, the success of the design and whether Skrammellegepladsen is still representative of this theory that originated more than sixty years ago can be assessed. The users are 120 children divided almost equally by gender and age that come together every day to socialize in a free play, safe environment and successfully develop into respectable citizens of society. Their patterns of activity range from their personal preferences to the programmed activities sponsored by Skrammel. The users' awareness is that of pride and happiness over spending their time at their play area. It is a small community that has turned into a family.

In evaluating the success of the design in terms of meeting the children's needs, Skrammel accurately understands what children need to develop and grow. For over sixty years, the original concept and philosophical application of bringing rural play to urbanized children has brought joy to hundreds of children that are now grown up that bring their own children to play here as they did years ago.

Future Research. Some possible suggestions for future research related to this topic include why the adventure playground concept has still not taken hold in America's schoolyards and after school programs. Are we not a nation that preaches independence and self-sufficient behavior? Why then do we protect our children with rubberized and coated playground equipment that limits every ability that they possess?

Another topic whether the adventure playground concept could be adapted successfully to our standards of appropriate play areas. Is it even possible to make adventure play areas a mainstream option for American children?

Acknowledgements

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