

Reinventing the public playground

Skelton's Lane Park in Leyton hit the headlines recently as winner of the Children's Play category in the LGN Street Design Awards 2009. This unique play area incorporates traditional adventure playground structures within an unsupervised public park. PlayToday's Sasha Sencier visited the site with the park's designers to find out more.

When you enter gates of Skeltons Lane Park you are struck by is how lush the surroundings are: it's almost like a little oasis tucked away within this densely populated part of Leyton. On the day of my visit, the play area was brimming with children, all deeply involved in their own adventures, with the worn-out ground giving clues to the popularity of this park since its opening in June.

The play space offers a mix of bespoke adventure playground structures, with wheelchair accessible walkways and extra wide slides exiting from tree houses; a tango swing and border swing; and a huge seesaw platform, which is also wheelchair-friendly. The play equipment merges into the park's natural surroundings that also features a dry riverbed spanned by a wobbly bridge, a woodland walk and a meadow.

The park dovetails nicely with the neighbouring Brooks Farm, a great family attraction that also shares the park, where goats, pigs and a llama called Merlin live. The farm is free to visitors who live within the borough and activities are laid on during school holidays, with messy play for under-fives every Wednesday.

An inclusive, natural play space

Waltham Forest Council was awarded funding from the government's Cleaner Safer Greener programme to transform the deteriorated park.

Officers of the council's Public Realm - Green Space Service lead the project and were keen to promote innovative play design concepts for the benefit of local children. A generous budget of £250,000 was allocated to improve the play experiences for children and young people.

Consultation workshops were conducted with the local community, including a workshop with a group of disabled young people from The Limes Centre in Walthamstow. The group looked at other play areas and found that access was a problem for wheelchair users and children with mobility problems, so the principle aim for the council was to make the play space inclusive to all children and young people. The council then commissioned landscape architect, Rachel Mooney from *moh_design* to begin the transformation.

Rachel's brief included linking Brooks Farm with the park. This gave way to the notion that when people stepped into the park they ventured into a rural idyll. Rachel explained that the big idea behind the park was to create a little bit of the countryside in the city; with a river running through it and tree houses, with children climbing in the trees. A band of poplar trees in the centre of the park was an obvious place to create the tree houses.

In wanting to make the play area more inclusive and providing exciting play opportunities, Rachel contacted John O'Driscoll, who had already done work at The Limes Centre, building an inclusive adventure play space for disabled and non-disabled children. John took the ideas and designed the timber play structures. Rachel believed that it was important to include genuinely meaningful features that wheelchair users could use: 'often, especially with off-the-peg equipment, you can get a wheelchair on it but there's nothing to do when you get there, so we included a meeting point with a table; its just as much about socialising as being active.' The tree house has lots of little sensory pieces to be discovered, including the inside workings of a piano underneath, which proved to be popular on the day I visited. The

Left: The treehouse structure and wobbly bridge



tree house is equipped with extra wide slides, comfortably accommodating every type of user. Rachel was particularly pleased to hear two blind boys commenting that it was ‘the best slide ever’ at the opening event. The rest of the park replicates this ethos: there are small artworks and tactile pieces to be explored, and resin inserts and castings from artist Sally Barker’s workshops with children from local special schools. These can be found along the riverbed, on the floor of the bat tower and on the timber structures.

A radical departure

The idea of having bespoke adventure playground structures in an unsupervised public play space is a fairly radical departure from park that uses traditional fixed play equipment. Rachel explained that the local authority was very supportive of the design concept and wanted to have a variety of play spaces in the area; Skeltons Lane provided a contrast to the traditional play equipment recently installed at the refurbished Abotts Park.

Rachel added that the only negative feedback initially came from the police at the design stage, who commented that the planned park would be a ‘crime attractor’ as it would encourage young people to come to the park. A Secured by Design report recommended providing toddler play in the park. Thankfully the local authority and the local community were clear that they wanted the park to cater for everyone, so with some minor alterations, work proceeded.

Design and maintenance issues

The design work predated the publication of Play England’s *Design for Play* guidance, but was working towards similar goals using a design-led approach. There were some hiccups: Rachel and John wanted to include loose-fill woodchip surfacing and a water pump at the end of the river bed to provide wet play, but the local authority were reluctant as they didn’t have the facilities to guarantee their maintenance. As an alternative, they installed



matting over grass surfacing, with woodchip underneath one of the swings.

Maintenance issues can cause problems on any site, but due to the natural products used these have been minimal. John explained that the play area is visually inspected on a daily basis to ensure health and safety standards are adhered to. Nuts and bolts occasionally need tightening, the rope on the swings replaced when they get knotted and the occasional broken piano wire needs to be fixed.

The play area was designed to have vantage points overlooking large parts of the play space and there is also informal surveillance from the farm and neighbouring houses. Far from being a ‘crime attractor’, the park has suffered minimal vandalism, bar the occasional incidence of graffiti. The police are enthusiastic about the new and improved space too. The council has also received funding to provide staff in the park at peak times through the year – summer and Easter school holidays and weekends from 10am to closing time.

The local community are impressed with the work that has been done on the park; one parent even said their children were having more fun in the park than they’d had when they visited the zoo the week before. Children and young people are reaping the benefits, with the park catering for a mix of age ranges throughout the day. For example, when local schools finish, older children often replace the younger children who have been playing throughout the day. I caught up with Bethany, age 10 and Laura, age 8 (pictured above) who travelled with their mum to the park. An excited Bethany said: ‘It’s really big and it’s got a lot of stuff in it which is really nice’, and Laura summed it all up by adding: ‘It’s got lots of stuff in it you wouldn’t find in a normal park.’

Left: Bespoke border swing

