



DESIGNING  
FOR PLAY

# 20 WAYS TO CREATE PLAY ENVIRONMENTS FOR THE SOUL

## 1. BUILD HILLS

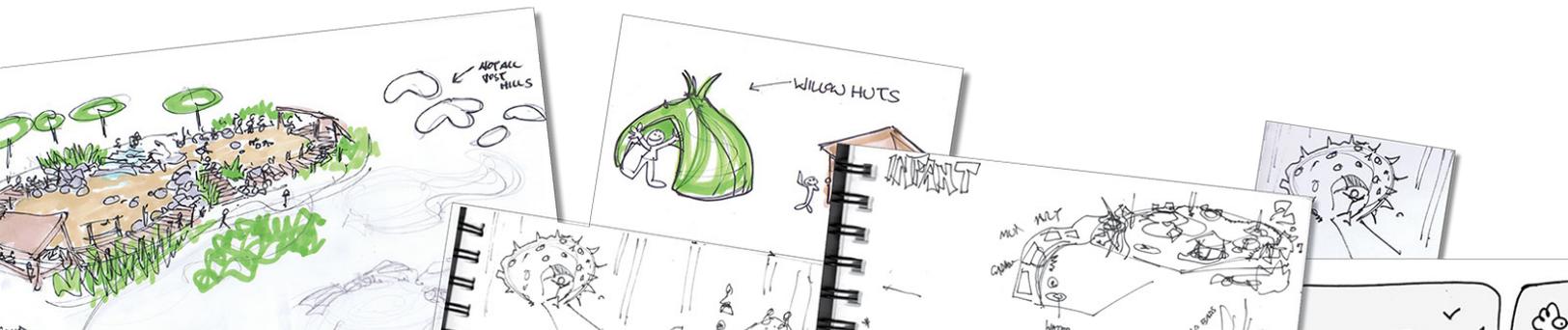
**By changing the topography of a play area you are changing the whole world.** Hills, bumps and berms all help to create spaces and plateaus to climb to, lookout from, roll down, build decks on top of, mount slides into and grow plants on. All sorts of different muscles are being used as children find a variety of ways to climb up or maneuver down. For young children a 3' to 5' hill is big enough to make a huge difference in a child's perspective.

## 2. PLANT TREES AND SHRUBS - IN CLUSTERS!

**Bring in as much nature as possible.** Plant Tall trees and low bushes. (and visa-versa) be sure to plant them strategically! Instead of plopping trees and shrubs formally in lines or neat rows, (the way adults like to see them planted) group your plantings to form small rooms, hidey nooks, hollows, secret spaces. These areas form perfect dramatic-social spots for children to gather in, alone or with friends. Well-arranged plants for children can become playhouses, hideouts, castles, other planets and far-off places. Your plantings also become wildlife habitats and say "welcome" to birds, chipmunks, butterflies and fuzzy caterpillars.

## 3. PLANTS HERBS - EVERYWHERE!

**Herb gardens are a good first step, but now it's time to start "smell-tuning" your playscape.** Make different spots on your playscape smell, look and even (gasp) taste differently. Break out of the herb garden raised planter mold and sneak herbs in the funniest



places. For example: put chocolate mint next to tunnels, chives seating areas, lavender by the trike track, rosemary by the sand area, lemon balm on a hillside, and creeping thyme between stepping stones. Help create a mood in each play area by adding multi-sensory fragrances!

## 4. PLANT FOR ALL SEASONS

**If your children will be out in the playscape all year long, the playscape should be interesting all year long!** Plants can help do this. Think about plants that burst into blossom in the spring (fruit trees, forsythia bushes, tulip bulbs). Think about vegetable and flower gardens in the summer. Think about the harvest in the fall (apple trees, squash, nuts, pumpkins). Think about plantings for autumn color (“burning bush” and trees whose leaves explode into color such as oak or aspen). Think about trees for winter that have: interesting bark, funky shapes of branches and trunks when the leaves fall off, evergreen needles (and piney smells) bright safe berries that last all winter.

## 5. KEEP EXISTING TREES AND TOPOGRAPHY

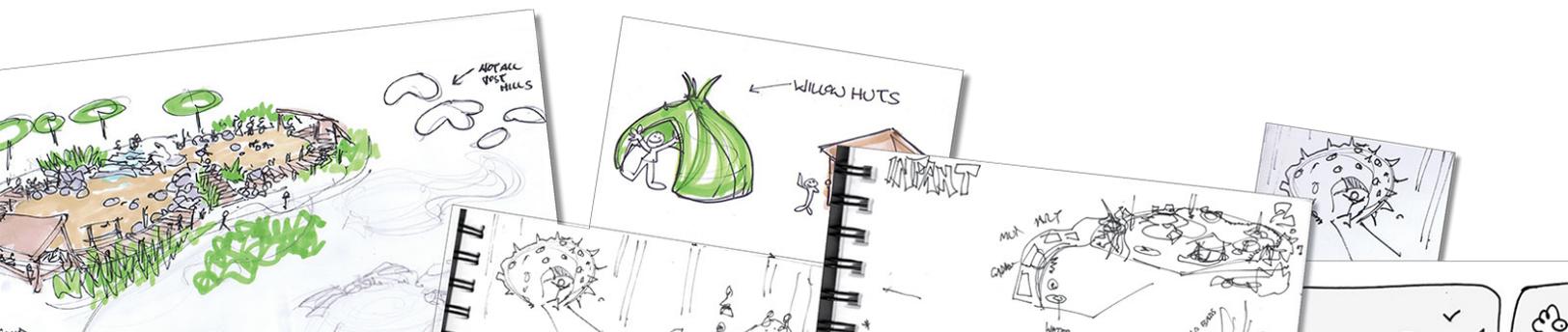
Too many times back yards are flattened and trees are removed during building constructions and even playground installations. **Protect the trees!** It takes extra care and creativity, but an existing mature tree, or a gentle hill can be your playscape’s best natural feature. Think about how to incorporate these items into new playscape designs. Enhance the hill with trails and bumps and seating. Build a low “treehouse” deck around the base of a big tree. Put down a soft surfacing and (gasp again) let children climb the trees. Protect the trees!

## 6. PURCHASE THE BOOK “PLANTS FOR PLAY”

Robin Moore’s book “Plants for Play” is a great resource for anyone thinking about incorporating nature into a children’s environment. He talks about what plants can be used in what ways and lists plants by their uses: fall color, spring interest, wind blocking, evergreens, sound features, plants that drop fun “play props” and much more. The book also gives a good list of toxic plants to think about staying away from.

## 7. CREATE SECRET PATH CIRCUITS

**Tricycle tracks are extremely important for young children, but also think about sneaking in “secret” paths that more quietly link different areas of the playscape.** Children can run or hop along narrow trails that wind through plantings and along fences, past playhouses and into sand areas. Try putting a path along the perimeter of the playscape - it could be at ground level or even raised up using non-toxically treated railroad ties as a “balance way.”



## 8. VARY THE TEXTURES AND MATERIALS

**Different textures create different moods and a different feel.** Children also use their bodies in different ways when traveling over different types of materials. Try creating a secret path could from stepping stones, wood chips, bricks, cobble stones, flagstones, log sections, colored gravel, concrete-molded pavers with fun items stuck into them (golfballs, mosaic tile, mirrors, matchbox cars, marbles, hand prints, dog prints) asphalt, cement, wood boardwalks. The list goes on!

## 9. BRING IN NATURAL ELEMENTS

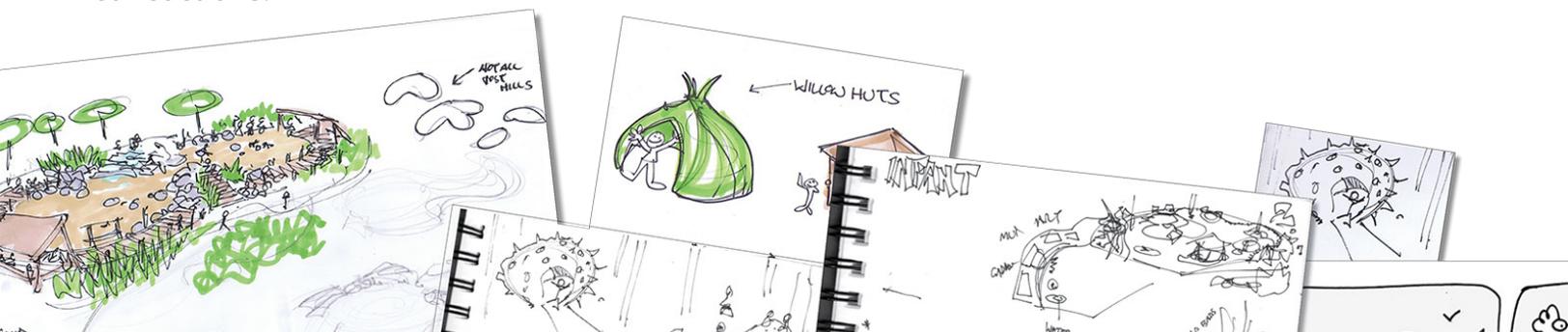
**Instead of a static old playground make your playscape feel more like a park, a secret garden, a wooded getaway or a mountain meadow.** Bring in the natural materials! Look for sources of logs and boulders in your local area. (Check with your city forester or town public works department) Large sections of an old tree could be used as a bench, a climber, a bug farm, or a balance beam. Smaller pieces could be used as “loose parts” such as building blocks or moveable furniture. (if they are big enough they become an upper body workout in themselves!)

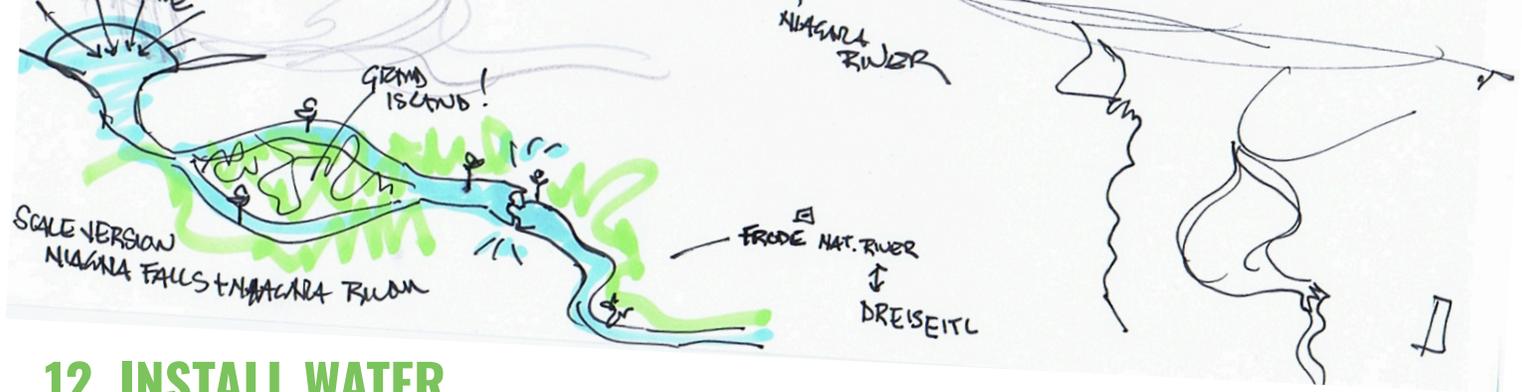
## 10. ADD BENCHES AND PICNIC TABLES

**Strategically place child-sized benches and tables throughout the play yard.** Some can be used as resting places, watching spots, art tables, a snack area, a “safe zone” for games, a stop-off point of a secret path, or a mud pie table in the sand area. Try to find natural wood or stone as a building material. The design could be rustic, formal or simply a smooth boulder or a carved log. When looking for garden benches and tables shop at a lawn and garden store or nursery owned by local people - you help the local economy and you even may get a special discount for the project.

## 11. BUILD A HUGE SAND AREA

**Create a gigantic sand pit that offers the wild play opportunities of the beach rather than the limited opportunities of a “sand box”.** Simply dig a whole and install clean washed sand, or line the pit with log sections, RR ties or boulders. Because of their small size, licensing often requires sand “boxes” to be covered. Because of the large quantity of sand in sand “areas” they can often be left free if your site allows. Be sure to rake the sand daily to keep it debris-free. If you must cover it think about using light fabric that lets air and water through and is easy for teachers to cover and recover. Add boulders, mud pie tables, small decks to your sand area for fun dramatic play and construction possibilities. With young children, sand often “travels” to fun places like playhouses with benches and counters just waiting for it. Here’s a hint: place the playhouse in the giant sand area! It’s the perfect place to build sand stews and other fun concoctions.





## 12. INSTALL WATER

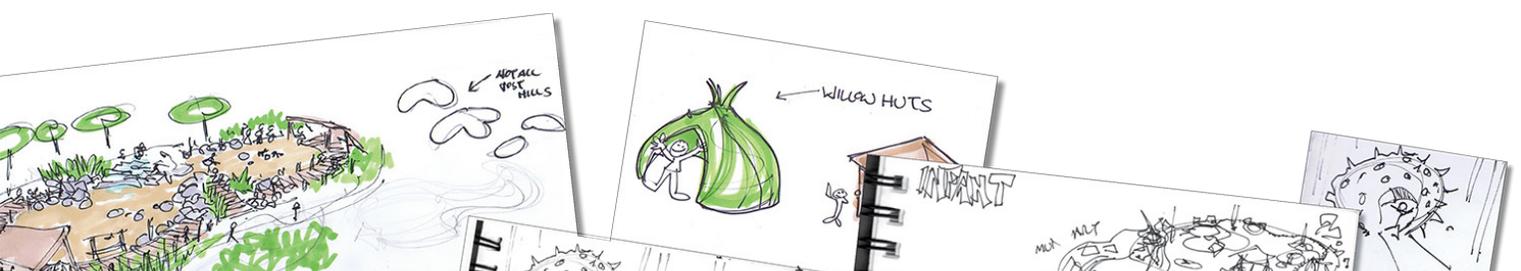
**Water is one of the greatest play and experimentation elements for young children.** Be sure to always create opportunities for water play and discovery. Yes it's true, standing water is not allowed on the play yard for health and licensing reasons. Well: don't let it "stand"! Recirculating fountains can safely be used and can act as a calming, dripping discovery point on the playscape. Connect a "diverter valve" to you allow the water to be emptied each day or each time a class leaves the playscape. Another way to use water is to introduce it to the sand area (some say it's like heaven on earth). It can as simple as adding a hose line out to the sand area. If you want to get more formal, have a plumber install a water line from your building and set up a push button pump that trickles water through a log into the sand for the ultimate in creative dam and river building projects. Simple drainage underneath the sand will help the water from pooling up.

## 13. ADD ART

Children's art, teacher's art, parents' art, local artists' art! **Children should be surrounded by touchable, huggable, changeable, creative contraptions for play.** Think about adding sculpture <benches, whirlygigs, concrete abstract animal forms, chain sawed logs, and sound elements. Add mosaics< murals, stepping stones, wall tiles, benches, tables. Paint a mural. Build a dance stage. Create a messy outdoor art space for daily creations! (with water nearby)

## 14. CREATE SOUNDSCAPES

**Sound can be an enchanting creator of moods and melodies.** Just as you will plant different smelly herbs in different spots, hide different sound elements in there as well! Create ambient sounds by hanging windchimes in trees< spice it up and add metal, wood AND bamboo chimes though out the playscape. Hide tiny bells in bushes and trees that children interact with. Install PVC talk tubes so children can throw their voices to other parts of the play yard. Build listening cones from traffic cones and mount them to fences to hear the world outside the playscape. Build giant "thunder drums" out of steel or plastic barrels. Make mallets from dowels with softballs on the end and attach them permanently to the drum. Most importantly: use REAL instruments and beautiful materials! Too many of children's music opportunities sound terrible. It's time to give children sound exploration opportunities that ring and resonate deeply in the body and sound harmonious to the ear. (You'll appreciate it too!)



## 15. BRING IN THE BIRDS

**Invite birds into the playscape by adding feeders, birdbaths and birdhouses.** The birds will thank you by setting up house, building nests, laying eggs and having babies. Imagine the questions, curiosities and learning opportunities! They even make bird feeders that can be suction-cupped to classroom windows to bring birds close to the children during inside time.

## 16. BUILD IT YOURSELF (AND ASK FOR HELP)

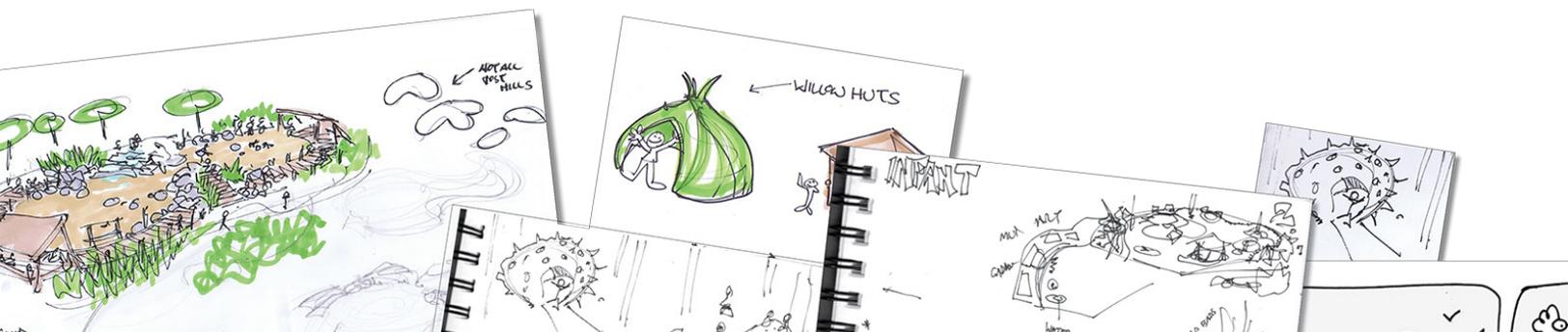
**A playscape should be a family and community affair.** It should be built with loving, tending hands. It should be created with local materials. It should be built and changed and re- changed on a regular basis. And guess what? YOU can do it yourself! Just like an Amish barn raising, the playscape can be done with volunteer labor and donations from the community. First you need a “master plan” of what you want to do. Then form a playscape planning committee to start organizing the community-built construction days. (a long weekend up to 5 days). Break the committee down with folks in charge of locating materials, labor, tools, material and (most importantly) food. Not only will you save money building it with volunteers, but it becomes a wonderful community-building and friend-making opportunity right in your own back yard.

## 17. CREATIVE MAINTENANCE

**OK. So you’ve built this beautiful outdoor fantasy garden. Who the heck is going to keep it up?** Well, you’re not done being creative yet. Maintenance does not have to fall on the shoulders of staff if you think about other ways to bring people in to help. First of all, allow the children to be part of taking care of the plants. It will be a wonderful learning opportunity. Invite retired folks to come in to help tend to the yard and spend time with the children. Schedule parent maintenance “party” weekends. Look into the community-service programs that many high school students are enrolled in. Often times they need a certain number of community service hours to fulfill class requirements. The same goes for college students. How about your local cooperative extension? Can you think of other possibilities?

## 18. LOCAL BUSINESS

**Tell businesses that you are creating a very special place for children and need their help.** More often than not local businesses will be happy to give you discounts or donations for such things as plants, lumber, topsoil, contracting work, plumbing and pizza. Make up a material and labor wish list and ask parents for contacts in the community that could help. When the project is successfully over, write a letter to the editor thanking all of the people and businesses that helped. Try all of this and you’ll see: Community is a good thing.



## 19. LOOSE PARTS

Your new playscape will be a beautiful, changing, dynamic place, but once you're done it's important to add the main ingredient: loose parts. Loose parts are what you use in the classroom all the time: blocks, dress up clothes, plastic animals, art supplies. They are what adds the pizzaz to the room and to play. Your outdoor storage unit should be loaded with outside versions of all these things, such as: balls, blocks, parachutes, tricycles, shovels, brooms, sand sifters, turkey basters, milk crates, PVC pipes, bells, wagons, paint brushes, traffic cones, magnifying glasses, hula hoops, cups, bowls, tubs, plastic vases, wood tools, washboards, butterfly nets. The list goes on and on and on and on.

## 20. INVOLVE THE CHILDREN IN THE DREAMING

The playscape planning and creation can be a big part of your curriculum and the children should be involved each step of the way. More than simply asking them "what do you want on your playground", immerse them in the idea of natural playscapes and the materials that are used to make them. First tell them you are building something special, something natural, something more like a children's garden or park than a typical playground. Take them on field trips to local parks for walks and talks. Look at creeks, fountains, trees, boulders. Have them draw what they experienced. Ask them what kinds of things they'd like to bring back to their own playscape to play on. Set up the sensory table with earth materials such as topsoil, sand, smooth rocks, twigs, branches, water, mud and leaves. Talk about the natural materials in a natural playscape. Build an indoor "natural playscape" by making cardboard trees and bushes, fabric waterfalls, and paper mache boulders to play in. Have the children draw the designs then build them together. Build models and do drawings of what the outside space could look like. Have fun with this. Let the children's curiosity lead you. Make it a long-term part of the curriculum. Let them be a part of the actual playscape construction.

## HAPPY DREAMING AND BUILDING!

Check out my in-person workshops, online classes and more at [Rustykeeler.com](http://Rustykeeler.com)

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