

API

Association of Play Industries

In an article published in *Design Week* on the '£200m Lottery funding for playgrounds' Julia Thrift, director of CABA Space, discusses the opportunities for designers and their clients to get creative about play provision. The stance leans towards the idea that with this funding no longer being 'ring-fenced for play' greater opportunities are possible for imaginative, innovative projects, benefiting designers.

CABA Space's manifesto states that public space should be "for everyone; well designed; well maintained; fun; healthy; sociable; natural; safe; a source of pride for all; and high on the political agenda." And the API would strongly agree with this position. As an industry body it is our responsibility to work with organisations such as CABA Space to see through the practicalities of creating these spaces, drawing together designers, funders, clients and ultimately the end users.

However, one comment in this article quoted "there are more creative things that can be done than buying equipment straight from a catalogue... product designers might look at designing play equipment". While we perhaps understand the sentiment in which this comment was made we cannot agree that choosing equipment from a catalogue is either a restraint to designers or that this practice will change in reality. Perhaps the playground industry must do something about its image? Play equipment and play space design is no longer stuck in a rut and much is already being done to ensure that excitement, adventure, style and fun are part of today's play spaces.

Working together

But there are certain practical issues that must be addressed: in reality most public spaces for play and recreation are managed by local authorities and understandably issues of ongoing maintenance, sustainability, vandalism and the threat of litigation through not meeting stringent regulations



Liz Bright looks at balancing creative play structures with safety requirements.

can halt some creative schemes and designs. The issues are complex, but as an industry we have been striving to offer creative solutions for play environments for many years and will continue to do so.

The process of designing and creating every play space, however small or large must engage discussion between the children and adults who will use it, the local authority or group who will fund and maintain the space and the nominated designers.

Perhaps the increase in consultation over recent years is the most important development, it demands that suitable and specific design solutions are delivered. Undeniably one of the most effective ways of addressing issues of vandalism and sustainability is to ask users what they want, how, where and when they want to use it. In fact each point in CABA Space's manifesto and its report that followed ("Parks and squares: who cares?") must be addressed at a local level, for every scheme in every community is different in some way.

Comments from children such as 'it's only for the little kids' or 'it's just boring' are not unfamiliar especially when consulting on existing provision to be upgraded. Most reputable play companies bring children and independent advisors into the stages of their design process to consult on a variety of topics. These often include physical and mental ability, scale and perception, style and current influences, activities and safety controls.

Designworks of Windsor are a product design firm with many big brands to their client list. Jez Gardner, creative director says "Designworks have worked with SMP Playgrounds on a number of play equipment projects. It is our job to bring to the table the flair and the style of what's current in design, to challenge the kids and the engineers and to make sure that key elements of style and excitement stay with the product through the design process to the end result.

"But working within the strict safety regulations is often challenging and introducing a sense of risk without danger can be hard."

Tony Deakin, head landscape architect at Sandwell Council in the Midlands suggests that their main constraint is the rising number of claims received. He estimates that Sandwell alone receives 50 to 60 claims each year relating to children's play equipment and it is imperative that the designers cover their backs. "EN1176 certification is absolutely key" explains Deakin. "There is some more interesting, fun equipment on the market, but it doesn't always have the independent certification to back it up. We had a custom made piece of kit especially adapted to suit the topography of the site and the kids loved it but it failed [a safety inspection] so it had to come out. We are always the first to be criticised but we're under pressure to have a solid defence against any clients claim."

As the designers and builders of most public play spaces the API members are a vital link between the ideals of CABA Space's campaign and the practicalities presented to us by our clients. We are committed to offering creative products and design solutions for each project and sometimes we must have the courage to challenge our clients' perception of what is believed to be required. Lets hope that that £200m is spent imaginatively, but also wisely. ■

Liz Bright is the marketing manager and designer for SMP (Playgrounds) Ltd.

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