PLAYGROUND OF MY MIND

Julia Jacquette
A newly, and abundantly, decorated Christmas.

My mom was no quitter. The renowned 20th-century modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was someone who was mentioned quite frequently in our household. The long path from minimalism to creative work has only one goal: to create order out of the disorder. The beauty is in each thing itself. No need to blame nature for its beauty.

The ultimate example of order was Mies’s elegant influential, minimalist office building designed for the Seagram Corporation which, at least as we called it, was located on Park Avenue just a couple of miles south of the building I grew up in.

The Seagram building had its own mythical presence in our household. My dad was especially fond of it in conversation, and we also had two small replicas from the famous restaurant on the ground floor, the Four Seasons.

Our building was located at 94th Street and Columbus Avenue. Three stretches of Columbus Avenue: a river running through a canyon. With its many high-rise apartment buildings lining the Avenue and its constant traffic flowing along. These buildings had popped up at the same time, many of them surplus housing like our building. Our building had just been completed when my family moved in around 1962.

And the New York City neighborhood where my brother and I grew up was certainly descriptive of an epoch. It came out of a time of industrial chic, streamlined, smooth concrete and its perversely performatively forceful. Upper Columbus Avenue had been torn down and rebuilt in the 1940s, with van der Rohe’s aesthetic deeply embedded in the design of the new apartment buildings being built there.

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Much of Columbus Avenue just south of us remained bible-strewn lots until the city’s boom time of the 1960s.

My mom continually emphasized to my brother, myself, and my friends, that girls were just as capable and intelligent as boys. She pointed out how the media often portrayed women as pitiful or objects. She also worked in the famous women's Strike for Equality march on Fifth Avenue in August of 1970.

Our local elementary school partnered with a teachers' college and implemented an "open classroom" system where kids of different ages learned in team-like groups.

Parents from the neighborhood worked together to renovate an abandoned building and turn it into a school for kids too young for kindergarten in the elementary school. In 1965, whether the kindergarten was for art (as I), my brother Lawrence is on the left.

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During my childhood New York was full of broken-down and broken-up buildings, and our neighborhood had its share of them. Although many families left the city in the 50s and 60s, it never occurred to my parents to visit New York City and reside to the suburbs.

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The building we moved into in 1966 was called Columbus Park Towers.

Many of the apartment buildings in our neighborhood, including ours, were part of the Mitchell-Lama program developed by the New York State Housing Authority. It created affordable housing for thousands of families and individuals.

The design of our building also called for the towers to be only one-tower high.

The land stayed the same.

Our building had some interesting features:

Each apartment had its own private balcony. Here's my aunt Germaine on our balcony, 1967.

The cashier counter & ticket machine.

Metal wheel by Paul Herbst-Helberg. Takes you onto an outdoor roof garden.

The roof garden is open to the sky, providing a connection to the outdoors.

We had our own miniature city within the larger city of New York.

The building's courtyard.
Although the Columbus Park Towers playground was situated within the grounds of the building, it was visible from the street through a grille-like fence next to a brick wall that also had red bricks. The membrane between (street) outside and (courtyard) inside was visually permeable.

In the Columbus Park Towers playground, all the play structures were made up of a polished concrete aggregate and had curved edges.

Columbus Park Towers and its playgrounds were completed around the same time Friedberg created his seminal work of landscape architecture Jacob Riis Plaza located in a public housing complex on the Lower East Side.

"Columbus Park Towers has a kind of liberal, social engineering in Mindian, Iowa, which accommodates ideas of diversity and community." Artist Neil Armstrong, who also grew up in Columbus Park Towers.

"I realize now how the design of the playground influenced me. Everything I drew is based on a grid of squares, orthogonal, and with lots of right angles." My brother Lawrence, now an architect.

The fact that the playground was made of the terraced concrete was inviting to some of the residents. "The aggregate would scratch your knees, but we were in the playground all the time." Susan Reinstein, who grew up with it in CPT.
Very close by to Columbus Park Towers was Central Park. Just one block away.

Until the mid-1960s, the design of NYC playgrounds was determined by Robert Moses. Parks Commissioner from 1934 to 1968, he believed in the idea of providing facilities for all to enjoy.

The Adventure Playground was designed to be a children’s paradise. It featured a variety of play structures and equipment, including a large water play area that incorporated a fountain and a pool. The playground was one of the first in the city to incorporate safety features and was a major innovation in urban design.

The Adventure Playground was a hit with children and parents alike. Families would come to play and spend time together. It was a place where children could be themselves and have fun.

The elements of the playgrounds referred to ancient architecture from all over the world.

The elements of the playgrounds were inspired by ancient architecture from all over the world. The design was intended to be a reflection of the diverse cultures and histories of the city.

"I found the canal incredibly exciting. Having a river or stream of clean water in the middle of the city was a great experience." - Lawrence Jacobs

"The Adventure Playground was totally compelling to me, not only as a child, but also as a young adult. Its most defining feature was a water feature that consisted of two different areas: a fountain and a small pool. It was designed to be a focal point of the park and a place where children could spend time playing and having fun." - Richard Dattner

The Adventure Playground was designed by architect Richard Dattner with the support of the new Mayor, John Lindsay.
"The next best thing to a playground that children designed themselves is a playground that an artist designed, but incorporating the possibility for children to create their own places within it." Richard Dattner

The structures in the playground resemble one of...

Saint Matarra, Egypt

I never knew we could use these structures to create our own streets.

This is a mountain, a volcano, a stream, a river...

Paricutin, Volcano, Mexico

All the elements of the Adventure Playground linked together in some way

Stone Hut, Greece

"The two main elements are sand and water. The rest is extra." Richard Dattner

Much of the Adventure Playground was made with poured concrete aggregate.

Concrete with pebbles in it.

The texture of the wooden molds the concrete was poured in became part of the surface.

In 1973 my father, William Jacquette, joined with two other architects to design a playground in Central Park. Ross Ryan Jacquette called their design "Discovery Play Park." The is a photo of the partners Ross Ryan Jacquette on the day their playground opened.
Like the Adventure Playground, Discovery Play Park featured a paved perimeter around a field of sand—this one an even more impressive expanse of sand. Over this giant play area was a wide bridge that selected the play area into a little kids’ section and a big kids section, connected to one another by simply walking under the bridge.

There were free-standing wooden poles that were also climbable.

You felt safe jumping from any structure because sand was abound, there to cushion your fall.

Along the edge of the bridge were ladders, slides, and also a Grandma’s pole to slide down.
A giant trampoline made up of recycled tires was next to swings also made of tires.

The big kids' section featured a multi-leveled tree house with a rope bridge and a net underneath it.
The little kids' side of the playground included swings, a maze of three-walled concrete elements, a tubular slide, and an hexagonal sandbox with a mushroom-like structure to pour sand through.

This was all within the giant sandbox that was the playground itself.

My father let me play with the miniature wooden models...

...that helped him plan the maze that was part of Delivert Baby Park.
Water played an important role in the Discovery Play Park.

The interconnectedness of everything fascinated me.

As it was the fact that my dad was one of the designers of this exciting place.

Kids could turn on and off and adjust the spray of water coming out of firehose nozzles onto a large amphitheater.

The smaller kids played in the spray of a sprinkler in a small wading pool.

The run off from the wading pool flowed into a canal which extended under the bridge and into the amphitheater.
One summer afternoon, while walking through Amsterdam...

I noticed some concrete discs of various sizes and heights, clustered together on the area of the sidewalk where it widened out into the street.

Walking past these same discs another day, I noticed neighborhood kids had colored them with colored chalk scribbles. The discs seemed utterly familiar, as if they had designated out of my childhood playgrounds in NYC.

I also noticed an unusual building on my daily bike ride through the southern part of the city. It was the polar opposite of the classic Amsterdam canal house - it was modern, made up of geometric modules and seemed to be made of the same kind of concrete as the NYC playgrounds. But it was difficult to get a full, clear view of the building - in front of the facade was a scramble of parked cars, bikes, and trees in need of pruning.
I noticed images of that same building in a book on Dutch Architecture. Calling the "intersections," it was judged as an example of the architect Hendrik Petrus⁠.

Walking around the building and peering through its windows, it appeared to be made up of a collection of modestly light-filled, square rooms with narrow courtyards of the same size between them.

The building expanded out onto a gently arched, with courtyards one meter deep, between glazed-in rooms of the same size.
Further research revealed that the Brussels was both a living space and a play space - permanent play structures were situated throughout the interior. The building itself was made up of interconnected spaces, a series of small interior boxes, one leading into another. The Brussels, thus, and everything in it, was made up of simple geometric volumes.

A disc shape appeared at both a 'positive' and a 'negative' volume in a Palladian sense throughout the building. Just as in a Palladian form, a node would not only be the center of the space but also its core. The disc shape becomes a seat, a void, a table top.

Low platforms and cutouts were meant to define communal areas, and also served as seating for kids.

Just as the disc form existed as both a solid and space, the Brussels seemed to be made up of both indoor and outdoor rooms. A hopscotch game of solus and voids it suggested the grid of a city.
The floor of the Bürgeleisehuis itself was like a geometric, abstract painting. It consisted of outdoor space intertwined with the same interlocking cubes of indoor space. The building seemed to be a meditation on the equality of indoor and outdoor space.

It seemed like the building was planned using the idea of kids' building blocks...
An intriguing form in Amsterdam's Vondel Park - was it a sculpture, a structure to play on? It turned out to be a Van Eyck design, a "climbing mountain."

These elements, in witty, different variations, were placed throughout the city, in the numerous public playgrounds. The park is one of the most popular playgrounds in Amsterdam from the late 1960s through the late 1970s. He created hundreds of designs for such key structures: lions, pits, spaces, and play-balancing bridges.

Thus, the playgrounds were meant to be a theme rather than simply copies of one another.

Above: Van Eyck's plans for sandpits and climbing structures.
The Dutch and New York City play experiments had many similarities:

- The playgrounds and buildings themselves formed the city around them.
- Always a sand element and almost always a water element.

Negative slope is important as positive volume.

They used modular systems of design.

Simple geometric forms are in repetitive units.

Children's centers support.
The flow of movement was important in all these structures. The activity lead you to another.

Energy flowed through them as if through circuitry.
**What was outside and what was inside was flexible and changeable—it was up to whoever was playing in it. There were many “intermediate” spaces that seemed to be inside and outside at the same time.**
All these play spaces contained amphitheaters, or some kind of area that acted as a "theater" and/or gathering place, a space that suggested something exciting is going to happen here.
How does the design of your childhood environment affect you?

Does it help to shape how you think?

Does beautiful design teach us?

Can it embody ideas that extend beyond aesthetics?
Unlike a closed system, a work of art or design can suggest endless possibilities and variations.
Although he worked as an associate at an architectural firm all through our childhood, my dad also had a desk set up at home in our living room where he worked most weekdays and weekends.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but his highly engaged way of working was also a kind of “deep play.” That example had an incredible effect on us—my brother and I both grew up this way (as an architect and artist respectively) to this day. Intuitively playing at a desk, aspiring to depict three-dimensional forms as inventively as possible in two dimensions.

The Playground, he and designed with Ken Ross and Jim Plumb, Discovery Park, was meant to be a space that children could truly interact with in an adventurous and creative way.

The intention was that Discovery Play Park would not dictate their play but instead suggest possibilities of ways of playing. Conversely, the inventive way the neighborhood kids used it helped to shape the playground.
The architect Denise Scott Brown collaborated on the box-like learning from Las Vegas, The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form, with her husband Robert Venturi and colleague Steven Izenour. Upon my very first readings of the book as a college student it permanently changed its influence on me. With such humor it poured ideas that became hugely important in the discussion of Modernist versus Post-Modernist design, and to this day is one of the texts I assign most often to my students.

Much of the clothing my mother wore was created by the Finnish company Marimekko whose fabrics featured bright, simple designs. Its strong-minded and visionary founder Aini Raita not only held ideas about how design should look toward the future, but how a company could better consider the lives of its employees.

Many of Marimekko's fabric designs have been in production for decades including those of Maija Isola, whose Unikko print has become iconic.

Hardly known to the general public (and to me only when I was an adult) was the architect Natalie deBlois. An associate partner in the renowned architecture firm Skidmore Owings & Merrill, she played an important role in the design of such SOM buildings as the Petco-Cola Building on Park Avenue. Highly beloved by my family, it is now a designated New York City landmark. One of the firm's founders said in the autobiography that de Blois deserved credit for projects that typically went to senior male partners.
The playground in Columbus Park Towers was demolished when city needed revenues proved to be too expensive for the cooperatively run building.

The Adventure Playground is currently being altered, many of its play structures having already been changed (some tunnels closed off, and areas reduced in size) in its first renovation.

Discovery Park Pack has undergone extensive changes, the sea of sand that created the base for much of the park structures' bases and areas have been added to the bridge and all the low walls, including the structures that make up the maze in the little kids' section. A wind arch and climbing wall has been added.

Many of the hundreds of Amsterdam playgrounds are gone. The playgrounds that do remain usually have had newer play structures plumbed into them. Right next to - often surrounded - the sand pits and climbing bars (as in this van Eyck playground in the Vondelpark, which has had a huge wooden structure with tubular slides added).

The Sibergewers is no longer an orphanage, and has spent many years vacant, in need of a tenant who could creatively utilize the space.
All the playgrounds still exist in their original form in my mind, not only how they looked, but what it felt like to play within them.

The playgrounds provided me with a template, a kind of structure within which you could then utilize a mix of shape and form.

Thus, they showed me how one can make many iterations of a visual idea with a very specific vocabulary, and that the most basic vocabulary can contain visual reference, allusion to history, and be deeply meaningful.

And witnessing an architect (my father) so deeply involved in his work spread out before him gave me a tangible form of my own artwork. My own architecture, the idea of parameters as a way to generate ideas rather than as an adherence to one's work and structure, rather than as a language line, the deeper meaning of the architect.

So I saw that work space, that place in which one creates and makes one's own work...
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