PLAYING WITH LANDSCAPE: Making Art in the Open

In keeping with this issue's theme, Ground "played" with our Round Table format, holding it as a public forum, part of the *Grow Op: Exploring Landscape + Place* exhibition at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto in April, 2013. The four panellists delighted the audience with presentations that roamed far and wide across a playful landscape.

MODERATED BY NETAMI STUART, OALA

Netami Stuart: I work for the City of Toronto's Parks, Recreation and Forestry Division, so my job is making fun places to be! For this panel discussion, I'd like to talk about how we can use play as a design tool. How can we design playfully? And how does that turn into great places to be?

Marc Hallé: One reason adults don't play as much as they could is because of the fear of being judged and criticized. I'll give you an example that has to do with play. Consider the glass floor at the CN Tower. You often see children going crazy on the glass floor, with their parents staying very cautiously away from it. Adults have been exposed to reality long enough that they have a sense of probability, knowing for example that glass is fragile, and stepping on it can be dangerous. Adults might be cautious about abandoning themselves to play because there is a learned sense that too much fun can bring about catastophe.

In thinking about landscape and play, I'd like to talk about a photo taken at Hanlan's Point, a clothing optional beach in Toronto. I have never seen such a positive experience of landscape before in my entire life. There was a sense that everybody felt welcome; you didn't have to be nude, maybe 30 percent of the people were that day. But you had all kinds of people: families, swingers, transsexuals, straight people, gay people, and people smoking marijuana. And the amazing thing was that a boat came in, in the afternoon, with a live Latin band, and everybody on the beach got very excited, went into the lake, started splashing like mad. The thing that made it so astonishing was not only how inclusive it was—you could go there, feel safe, and nobody was judging you—but also how people's personal space was so much reduced. How could so many people co-exist on one piece of sand without feeling uncomfortable being so close to one another?

This phenomenon is part of the inspiration that was the starting point behind the urban beaches in Toronto. It is very important to find a device that can encompass everybody—all these different people of different classes, different incomes, different ethnicities, all co-existing—again, with personal space quite reduced—within one space, so people will be enraptured and too preoccupied with their own pleasure to bother judging or criticizing each other. This frees people to pursue their own happiness without interference.

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One of the universal aspects that can trigger this playful distraction is water. Others are sunlight, food, trees, and triangulation, in which two separate individuals are linked by their gaze towards a third object. Another phenomenal aspect is a change of texture. Colour is another. One example is a project in San Paulo, where local favela residents were invited to participate in saturating spaces with paint, as well as specific words that became legible from specific site lines. These types of experiences create a moment of de-familiarization that can allow you to realize how special these places are, bringing a collective zest that allows every-

BIOS/ **DIANE BORSATO,** AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF STUDIO ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH, IS AN ARTIST WHO HAS BEEN WORKING WITH AMATEUR NATURALISTS IN SITE-RESPONSIVE PROJECTS FOR MANY YEARS.

FOR MORE THAN TEN YEARS, **HEIDI CAMPBELL,** OF THE NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION EVERGREEN, HAS WORKED WITH COMMUNITIES TO PLAN AND DESIGN NATURAL PLAY-LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ON SCHOOLGROUNDS AND IN CHILDCARE CENTRES THROUGHOUT THE GREATER TORONTO AREA AND BEYOND. SHE ALSO PROVIDES SUPPORT TO EVERGREEN'S 18 NATIONAL ASSOCIATES, WHO ARE IMPROVING CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR PLAY ENVIRONMENTS IN SEVERAL CITIES ACROSS CANADA. HEIDI IS THE AUTHOR OF *LANDSCAPE AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT: A DESIGN GUIDE FOR EARLY YEARS—KINDERGARTEN PLAY—LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS,* PUBLISHED BY EVERGREEN.

MARC HALLÉ, OALA, STUDIED CIVIL ENGINEERING AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, AND HIS CREATIVE AND TECHNICAL BACKGROUND BRINGS AN EXPERTISE THAT TRANSFORMS CONCEPT INTO BUILT FORM. WORKING AND STUDYING INTERNATIONALLY, MARC IS INTERESTED IN CROSS-CULTURAL SENSIBILITIES ABOUT MEANING AND INTENTION AND THEIR IMPACT ON DESIGNING FOR THE DIVERSITY IMPLIED IN PUBLIC SPACE.

CHRISTIE PEARSON IS AN ARCHITECT WHO WORKS FOR LEVITT GOODMAN ARCHITECTS IN TORONTO. HER INSTALLATIONS AND EVENTS IN PUBLIC PLACES DRAW ON WORLD CULTURES OF PUBLIC BATHING. SHE IS A FOUNDING MEMBER OF PERFORMANCE AND INSTALLATION GROUPS SUCH AS *THEWAVES*, URBANVESSEL, THE WADE COLLECTIVE, AND OF THE JOURNAL *SCAPEGOAT: LANDSCAPE, ARCHITECTURE, POLITICAL ECONOMY.*

ELISE SHELLEY, OALA, IS THE PRINCIPAL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT OF ELISE SHELLEY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT (ESLA). ESLA DESIGNS ARE SPATIAL AND FUNCTIONAL WITH ATTENTION TO CRAFT AND TECHNICAL DETAILS. STRATEGIC USE OF MATERIALS, BOTH HARD AND SOFT, AND CREATE TRANSITIONS AND THRESHOLDS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE, FORM EXTERIOR ROOMS THAT ARE SEASONAL AND FLEXIBLE, AND FRAME THE DYNAMIC ELEMENTS THAT DEFINE THE LANDSCAPE: WIND, LIGHT, WATER, AND VEGETATION THAT VISIBLY MARK THE PASSAGE OF TIME. SHELLEY'S WORK WITH CHILDREN'S LANDSCAPES AND PUBLIC SPACES ENGAGES COMMON MATERIALS IN INNOVATIVE WAYS, INTRODUCING CREATIVE CONCEPTS OF PLAY AND INTERACTION WITHIN THE PLAYGROUND CONTEXT

NETAMI STUART, OALA, IS A MEMBER OF THE *GROUND* EDITORIAL BOARD AND WORKS FOR THE CITY OF TORONTO'S PARKS, RECREATION AND FORESTRY DIVISION.

01/	Venice Biennale installation by Norma Jeane, 2011.
IMAGE/	Marc Hallé
02/	Adults give themselves over to pleasure at Hanlan's Point, Toronto.
IMAGE/	Marc Hallé
03/	From *Rolling on the Lawn at the Canadian Centre for Architecture*, by Diane Borsato, 2000.
IMAGE/	Diane Borsato

body to be "in the moment," out of their self-consciousness, and able to perceive something that is unique to that location. For anyone who wants to make a public space, as long as you can maintain these key ingredients, your place will probably be very successful.

In Montreal, every spring, in the Quartier des Spectacles, there is an installation by a group of artists called Daily Tous Les Jours. They are fantastic. One installation is called "Les Balançoires," which translates as "The Swings." When everybody swings, their individual movements produce harmonic tones; so, when all of the swings are in action, a melodic ambiance is created, resulting from this collective abandon to playfulness. A good art piece can distil the genius of a moment which, when installed on a site, can endow that place with a certain genius as well.

Another example of how you can engage "play" at an adult level is to give people the freedom to express their views and inject their own meaning. The artists Daily Tous Les Jours collaborated with us last year for the installation of "Pink Balls" in the gay village of Montreal; people were encouraged to position themselves in certain locations, push a button, and have their photo taken, which was automatically uploaded to the Internet. Visitors could then search to find their moment and download their photo. If you look through the website, you go through tens of thousands of photos—an amazing archive!—which brings about the phenomenon of *seeing* yourself in public space.

Another example is an art installation by the artist Norma Jeane that was exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2011. The installation started as a huge block of plasticine, composed in three layers of red, white, and black. People were invited to express themselves, and impose whatever they wanted on the surrounding walls. It was open-ended, it was chaotic, and it established a common denominator to unite a diverse group of individuals by allowing them to be free and carry out their heart's wishes. This kind of experience of diversity liberates people to reveal that they are united by their differences.

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Diane Borsato: I considered various meanings for the word "play" in preparation for this event. I tried to think of how it was relevant to my way of working, and some of the ways in which play is described is that it is spontaneous and unstructured—a free thing that you would do. I made a piece when I was in Montreal as a student, where I had been studying sculpture mostly, and my practice was very focused on materials and the bodily experience of materials. I used to walk past the Canadian Centre for Architecture every day. It has the most famous lawn in Montreal—immaculate and green and irresistible in some ways, like you just want to spoil it because it is so perfect. It has a barrier as well; it is "framed" and separated from the world with a strict boundary. This was a perfect place to "play" in. I walked by it every single day—vertically—and I decided to experience it horizontally. So, spontaneously, I just rolled along the length of the lawn. To some extent, I wrapped the whole city block around my body and had a different way of traversing that space. It was a kind of research exercise that produced a new perspective, quite literally, on the city. I couldn't resist in the winter doing it again, and then I thought I might as well do it in the spring and in the summer. It was about a new relationship of my body with the landscape of the city, and it was certainly "playful."

Another definition of play is that it is about attunement with your body, with other people, with objects, with things, and with a place; and so making it an artwork, to some extent, gives it that structure that helps you to do such shameless, embarrassing things like this in the landscape.

Another project of mine was called *Moving the Weeds Around*. I was invited to do a piece of public community art in Halifax. If you think about "play," there is no material goal or useful, tangible, practical outcome. I

took the notion of community gardening and I made it as useless and ineffective as humanly possible. What we did was we dug up weeds, I had about twenty volunteers who were game to travel around the city all day digging up weeds from random places, trading them at the gallery, and then travelling around the city replanting them in random places. We literally just moved the weeds around for an entire day. The project was beyond a minimalist activity; I wanted to accomplish nothing—as hard as I possibly could. And all that is left is meaning. There was a particular moment when I was making it when I was thinking a lot about gentrification in cities and how we address problems simply by moving them around.

If you want to create a playful scenario, an easy trick is to invite snakes. The Art Gallery of York University has a fantastic initiative where, to get people to the gallery, they have performance artists do projects on a bus that takes people up to York. I was invited to do a performance on the bus. I hired a reptile educator to do a live reptile display and everyone was encouraged to touch, and handle, and get up close and personal with a skink, an anteater, and various snakes and other reptiles. It was a somewhat familiar situation, but also a really surprising scenario. You could experience the tiny, narrow, enclosed space of a moving bus in a uniquely intense way. Adults became like children, asking questions, squealing, etc.

In the past couple of years especially, I have been working a lot with naturalists, naturalist organizations, mushroomers, beekeepers, and astronomers. I did a project in both Toronto and New York City in which I worked with the local mycological society. I've been part of it for many years, and every weekend in the fall, you go out to collect fungi in the woods and you lay them out on the table and someone helps identify them all. I proposed to the mycological society that we do a foray in stores in Chinatown. Many of the members are Chinese and so we had a big Sunday morning foray in Markham in medicinal shops, grocery stores. The whole group went to a section of canned food, and we identified all these species with our field guides and our magnifying glasses in the produce section.

In another piece, I coordinated an exchange between mushroomers and astronomers. What we did was exchange terrestrial knowledge for celestial knowledge. So the mushroomers in the morning—this was just outside of Vancouver—hosted the astronomers, and we did a foray in the forest. Then, in the evening, we got out all the telescopes and the astronomers hosted the mushroomers. It was about those two really different ways of knowing. Mushrooming is sensorial in a visceral, intimate way, with smelly, slimy fungi that decompose in hours, affected by seasons and weather. Astronomy is much more conceptual. You have to imagine you are seeing back in time, making intellectual leaps. So it was these two dramatically different ways of knowing in one day, as well as this gesture of looking down all morning and then looking up all night, and ideally learning everything in one day.

I think that what's important about "play" in terms of artworks is that it's never just play, it's not just fun. Many of these pieces have a critical dimension and a symbolic possibility. More than just for fun—I would hope—they are provocations and raise questions.

Christie Pearson: I'd like to talk about a few projects that I've done that relate to play and landscape, starting with two projects by *thewaves*, a collective including myself and my partner, Marcus Boon. We are interested in the vibrations of water and sound, and space. The first project we did was for the inaugural Nuit Blanche, held in Toronto. The idea was to do something inside of the Trinity Bellwoods swimming pool. I am very interested in expanding possible uses of public spaces that are heavily underused. For example, a swimming pool. How many hours of the week is a public swimming pool in use? What could we do in a swimming pool at night, for example? Nobody is swimming at night. So our idea was to transform the Trinity Bellwoods pool into a Roman bath situation. We expected maybe twenty of our friends to show up to this. On the mural at the pool's end, we had a projection of the changing phases of the moon. We brought in a lot of swimming toys and lounging equipment, and hung a mylar ceiling so you could see yourself reflected while swimming. We had some fantastic sound artists and DJs performing, with a new set every hour for twelve hours. We turned up the heat of the water in the children's pool, and we tried to make it like a Roman *caldarium*; we switched all the lights to red bulbs. Then things got really out of hand...basically, ten thousand people showed up. The five lifeguards who came to work for the evening freaked out; people started busting in all of the doors around the swimming pool to get in.... People on the bleachers started taking their clothes off and jumping into the pool. It was truly mayhem, and we were all overwhelmed—it was great.

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Sunnyside: Fire on the Water is a project *thewaves* did at Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion in Toronto this past August. As a public bathing freak, I have wanted to do something at Sunnyside for a long time. What really upsets me when I am at Sunnyside is that the big logia on the second floor, built for people to watch people swimming, is now an expensive rental venue for weddings rather than a public space. The courtyard doors are often locked. Many people have never even been up in this beautiful logia built by the city.

04/ *Sunnyside: Fire on the Water*, a project by *thewaves*.
IMAGE/ Giulio Muratori

05/ Inhabiting the Sunnyside logia through art and performance.
IMAGE/ Christie Pearson

So the project was, for one day, to take over that building and make it what it used to be, and what it could be: just opening up all the spaces to the public. The whole Toronto waterfront wasn't always cut off from the city by the Gardiner Expressway. How could we make those connections again? Why can't we make Toronto like a beach city? We have beaches; we have Sugar Beach. I think that trying to re-imagine ourselves creatively could transform how the environment actually is.

So that is what we tried to do. A number of different events were going on all through the day by different artists. There was a live music and dance performance (created by Aimee Dawn Robinson and Juliet Palmer), with singers out on a canoe and performers that led the audience through the pavilion, down to the lake, and back again. This kind of occupation of a space in a playful way is really exciting. We tried to create different little spaces that you could explore, and make up your own possible games.

You can just bring things into a place and suddenly people start using it differently. And, of course, music changes everything. The Afro-Brazilian dance troupe Marcatu Mar Aberto brought everybody out as part of a participatory ritual that brought people down to the beach with the dancers, around the building, and then back up into the building with this glowing canoe as a fire remnant from out of the lake. It was supposed to be a fire offering to the lake to say that we are sorry for treating it so badly, and that we are going to do better.

Space-making, landscape-making, and play are so important. Through events, we create the temporal memory of the city. I think events and celebrations can encourage the kind of affection and imagination of the city that we need more of...more affection for our public spaces.

Heidi Campbell: Take a minute to reflect back on when you were a child. Think about where you played, how that affected you, what you did when you played. Current research is saying that the way we play and learn and interact with the world around us as young children has a profound and formative effect on our health and our thinking and behaviour throughout our lives. In their childhood, a lot of people built and played in forts, looked for bugs, roamed through backyards, ate fruit from people's trees, got dirty, explored ravines and climbed trees, made boats or played in the creek, climbed up and down hills, and grew things in the garden. But childhood today is changing. Children no longer freely explore the world around them, or they do so in extremely limited ranges. Fear over child safety, overstructured routines, and time spent on electronic media are some of the main inhibitors of outdoor discovery. What will the impact of these changes be for future generations?

Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* has stimulated an international conversation about the relationship between children and nature. Louv links the lack of nature in children's lives today to some of the most concerning childhood trends, such as the rise in obesity, attention deficit disorder, and depression. Louv's research, along with other health practitioners and social scientists and educators, compels us to take action in our cities and in our schools to bring the outdoor experience back into children's lives. The challenge for us is to negotiate space for young people in the larger urban fabric of parks and streetscapes, and neighbourhoods, and begin to create networks of vibrant safe places for children to do what comes naturally, to play.

Play helps promote healthy brain development. Play allows children to explore the world, conquer their fears, and practise adult roles. Play helps children to develop their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. We are learning all the time from the built environment. Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights. It is a right for every child to have play in his or her daily life. Children love the natural world and from a very early age, they are curious about nature. By closely exploring their own outdoor spaces, they begin to develop a broader sense of connection to the world beyond their playgrounds.

In the document that Evergreen has just published [see Notes item on page 31], we came up with a design framework based on children's developmental needs: emotional, physical, cognitive, social. We worked with people from school boards, parents and teachers, educators and administrators, who all came to the table to look at how to reshape children's landscapes in their schoolyards or childcare centres. People just need a few ideas to get them going and so we gave them in the book, things that relate to child development, both fixed components and moveable components, and we built on these ideas.

When Evergreen works on schoolyards, we speak with all the community members, including children. Children are very involved in the design process, very participatory, and they create these drawings. We do interviews with them and they have an incredible knack for coming up with a really creative vision. Then we try to manifest that in some of the design results.

Topography is a compelling feature for children. And, of course, shade is one of our guiding principles. At a school in Durham, which basically had just an asphalt area with a large mature tree, we removed a lot of tarmac, and then created lots of soft surfacing using a palette of natural materials. We were trying to get some graduated risk in there, and this is very challenging for school boards to accept. It's less of a challenge for them to choose a play structure out of a catalogue. We are trying to get away from the catalogue play structure idea, although we still retrofit lots of playgrounds with natural features around those structures.

Kids like to use stumps as little pathways. Sand is huge, and if you can mix sand and water, that is just like magic! Kids sweep sand off the walkway and create these imaginary worlds where they work things out, so it's an enhanced social environment.

The YMCA has got a new vision for their childcare centres and they recently revamped two of them. They've started bringing in trees, and soft surfacing, and lots of pathways, and interesting little nooks and places for children to play. And they planted the very first bush I think in any childcare

space in Canada. I don't see these kinds of things in childcare centres, but this one passed CSA. We had to put a maintenance schedule with this, because it's natural materials and things deteriorate, but we were very excited and the children were really excited about this piece. When we ask children what they'd like in their play areas, they draw huts and forts, those kinds of things.

Children can shape their environments; that's really the most important thing. They want to have an effect on their environment. So designing right to the edges of a play space is not always successful with children. At Evergreen's children's garden in Chimney Court at Evergreen Brick Works, we've created an anarchy space basically; the kids shape it, they move stuff around, working with dimensional wood, building shelters, and having large activity walls. It's a place for them to just express themselves.

Elise Shelley: Landscapes should foster imagination. They should be focused on creating spaces for play, places that engage the special aspects of the outdoor environment. We know that when we think about the places where we played as children, usually they are connected with being outside or being in nature, in the woods, or at a creek, or rolling on a dirt mound; something that didn't necessarily involve a piece of equipment that had a lot of metal and plastic parts.

So why don't we see that in our parks and playgrounds? It unfortunately has a lot to do with the role of the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) in our ideas about playgrounds, in our images of playgrounds. They have only been involved in the oversight of playgrounds over the past thirty years, but they have completely transformed the ideas about what a playground is.

Anyone who has spent time with children knows that they will figure out how to make a game out of anything. We need to design places that allow kids to play, that aren't prescriptive, that don't say you have to play this way. Unfortunately, that is not what we see in most of our public parks and playgrounds. Again, it has a lot to do with the standards that are in place. Anytime you want to do something atypical, anytime you want to use non-traditional elements, or do something that might be considered natural, you still have to comply with all the standards. So, we can have boulders in the landscape, but they have to be spaced either close together or two metres apart, because at least if somebody falls off the boulder, they won't hit their head. So there is this kind of funny dilemma where we want to design like nature would allow us to in spaces that we perceive as natural, but we have to do it aligned with these regulations and rules that don't always seem to facilitate that way of working.

I recently had the opportunity to work on a project at Evergreen Brick Works, where we were able to use a variety of recycled materials to abstract these ideas about the landscape. One of the critical things here is that this isn't a playground. So even though it is completely compliant with all codes that apply in this particular scenario, it is not going to be inspected on an annual basis by the CSA inspectors. So it doesn't have the same level of scrutiny. That label of a "playground" is a really important thing to consider when one is designing a space for play. Obviously there is still lots of opportunity for play even though we do not call it such a thing; and there are lots of ways to spark the imagination if we can be smart about it.

The CSA actually defines "play space." In their terminology, it's "an area containing equipment, a play structure, or structures, protective surfacing etc., that is intended for the use of children between 18 months and 12 years." Eighteen months and 12 years is a pretty broad range in terms of abilities, interests, and yet that is the framework that the CSA sets up. It talks about technical and structural integrity, and issues of ongoing maintenance, but it really is not at all concerned with children's needs or desires.

With CSA standards, we've really started to see the image of playgrounds being predominated and defined—at least in a public context—by equipment that is out-of-the-box and often quite prescriptive. And it is not just the equipment; it is also the area around the equipment that is a huge factor and a challenge, especially when you are

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dealing with smaller spaces. One of the real temptations to use this stuff out of the equipment catalogues is because it comes with the certification—the paperwork that says, "yes, this is compliant."

Some incredible companies are doing really interesting things—of course, many of them from Europe. But, still, a lot of what we see and a lot of what is expected is the stuff that looks like a pirate ship, or that has all the plastic parts, because that is what, unfortunately, we have come to think of as the norm and the standard. We really need to educate the client to the fact that you can think of it as a pirate ship even though it does not look like one, so then it can also be a spaceship, or it can be whatever the child's imagination takes them to that day.

It's important to acknowledge that children's playspaces are not just places for creativity and imagination, but also places for learning.

WITH THANKS TO DALIA TODARY-MICHAEL FOR TRANSCRIBING THIS DISCUSSION.

06/ Recycled materials are often very stimulating for kids.

IMAGE/ Elise Shelley Landscape Architect