Designing Undetermined Spaces for Play

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An Empty Field (Harappa) and An Amusement Park | Contradictions in planning a space for play

There is a famous essay known among contemporary architects in Japan written by an elder Japanese architect Jun Aoki. He expresses discomfort in spaces that determine human activities too specifically. His essay, titled An Empty Field and An Amusement Park, shows his design preference for an empty field to an amusement park. Amusement parks are designed to make people behave according to the designer's expectations. On the other hand, empty fields are not designed to mold people to behave in a certain way, but rather allow people to think about how they want to behave spontaneously.

Aoki explains that empty fields commonly appear in popular Japanese comic books (manga) such as Doraemon and Osomatsu-kun. Although kids who read manga may not realize that there is any significance of empty fields being used in the story, he suggests that these types of spaces are significant because they are "the best space for kids to play in. Kids instinctively love it. It is not a designated place to play baseball or dodgeball. It was not somewhere they had to go with a specific purpose; rather it is a special place where they can discuss what/how to play after gathering there". [1]

Aoki's ideas about how certain designs can free or limit people's behaviors are very important especially when we think about designing spaces for play and playful learning spaces. Some educators and school designers also seem to prefer the empty field approach, just like Aoki.

For instance, the Reggio Emilia philosophy identifies the environment as the "third teacher" in addition to the teacher and parent wherein the best situation is one that allows the child to be in control of their own learning and have endless opportunities to express themselves. [2] One idea of what this could look like in practice is children exploring their local town to create a town guidebook based on knowledge and experiences gained from their trip. In this case, the town becomes a kind of empty field through which children create meaning. [3]

If adults want kids to learn creatively through play, how can places be prepared for play? The more deeply we designers think about "what is play", the harder it is to design a learning space for play. How can we establish such spaces as an empty field, by design? This article introduces a designer's several attempts to realize spatial quality through design by wrestling with this dilemma with various methods/thoughts.

Design approaches to realize genuinely playful spaces

The following three cases I describe in this article discuss the design of space for play or a school. While the approaches are slightly different from each other, they all try to avoid imposing behavioral limitations that can be caused by design (like in the case of amusement parks) and instead proactively design spaces for undetermined or unexpected activities. The key is not to regard the surroundings as something we can control as an 'object', but as a 'subject' - like a person who has his or her own characteristics.

## Play with Architectural/Landscape Elements with Different Characters

Designers often manipulate the most basic architectural elements, such as roofs and windows when creating playful spaces. For example, a simple pitched roof or niche can provide various scales of spaces in design. Architects specify the positions of the beginning and the finishing point of straight lines in the drawing, but the gradual change between the two points in height can inspire kids. Architects don't further determine kids' activities. Kids will decide how they play in the space. Such basic architectural elements open our imagination while playing because they were not initially made for play itself, but rather created for functional reasons such as allowing sunlight to flow into interior spaces (windows), and protect the interior spaces from rainfalls (roofs).

In a way, each architectural element has its own character and identity, which affects that way we interact with it. This is similar to how people's characteristics influence the way we interact with them. For example, you might be more inclined to ask a tall friend, as opposed to a short friend, to help you reach the fruits from a tall tree. If you were deciding who should be the goalkeeper in a soccer
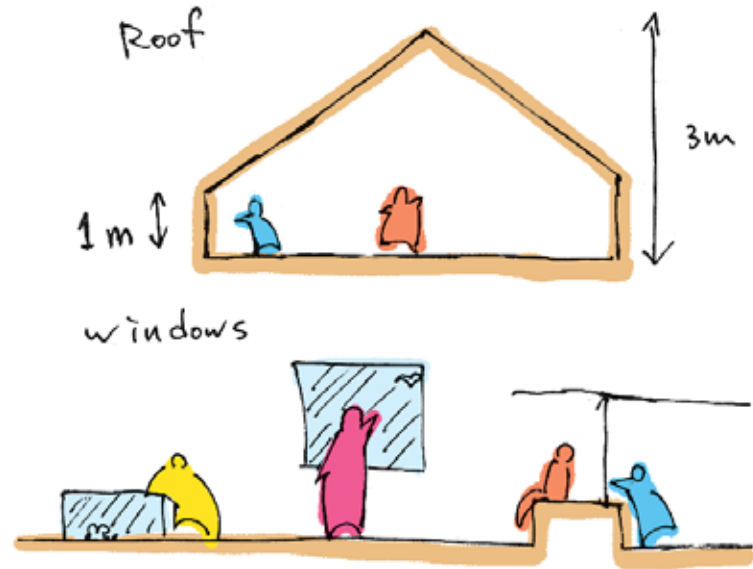
An integrated playscape, overlaying four elements

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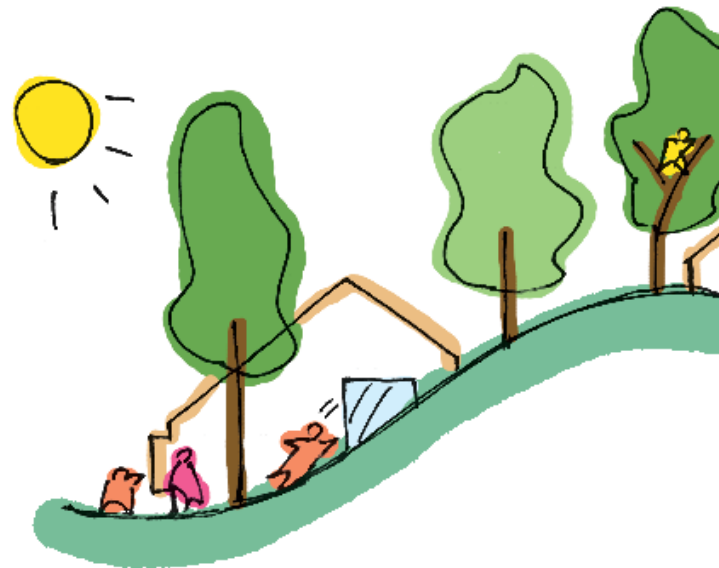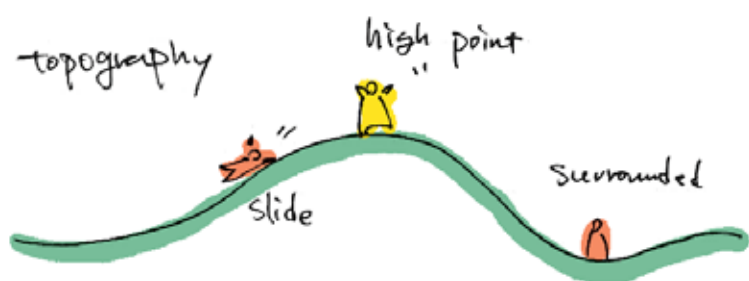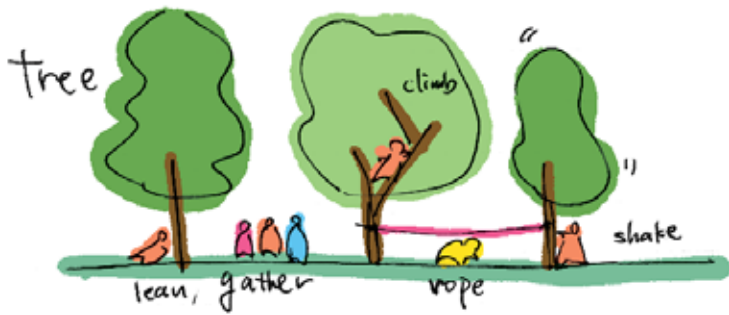
game, you might also think that a person who is tall and has long arms might be better able to block incoming goals.

Similarly, when designing a playground, designers think about how the unique qualities of trees and mounds affect how people interact in the space. Tall trees can provide shade, can be shaken, and can be climbed. While we don't change the property or character of trees, we reflect on the tree's characteristics and make design decisions such as how many trees will be planted to open possibilities of play or how to design with trees that are already planted in the space.

I often use comic-like hand drawings in the design process of some projects, including in client presentations. The rough and unfinished look of the sketches allow users, kids, and educators to use their imagination to make improvements to the design. We have very productive design discussions, and our clients get involved by drawing on top of our drawings. Such collaborative design sessions could not have happened if I had presented them with computer-generated photorealistic images seen in many "sophisticated" architectural projects.

The "overlaying method" [4]allows each element in the space to exist with its own purpose. Each element is not bounded by a designer's expectation for specific activities to happen with it. In the figure below, I did not design specific activities for each element. Instead, the entire landscape gives kids various possibilities to explore so as not to limit their imagination.

Play with Incomplete Objects like abstract toys, with multiple scenarios in the future

We can also imagine another approach to design objects and spaces. Rather than trying to avoid the direct association of design and specific activities, we can design objects for multiple usage
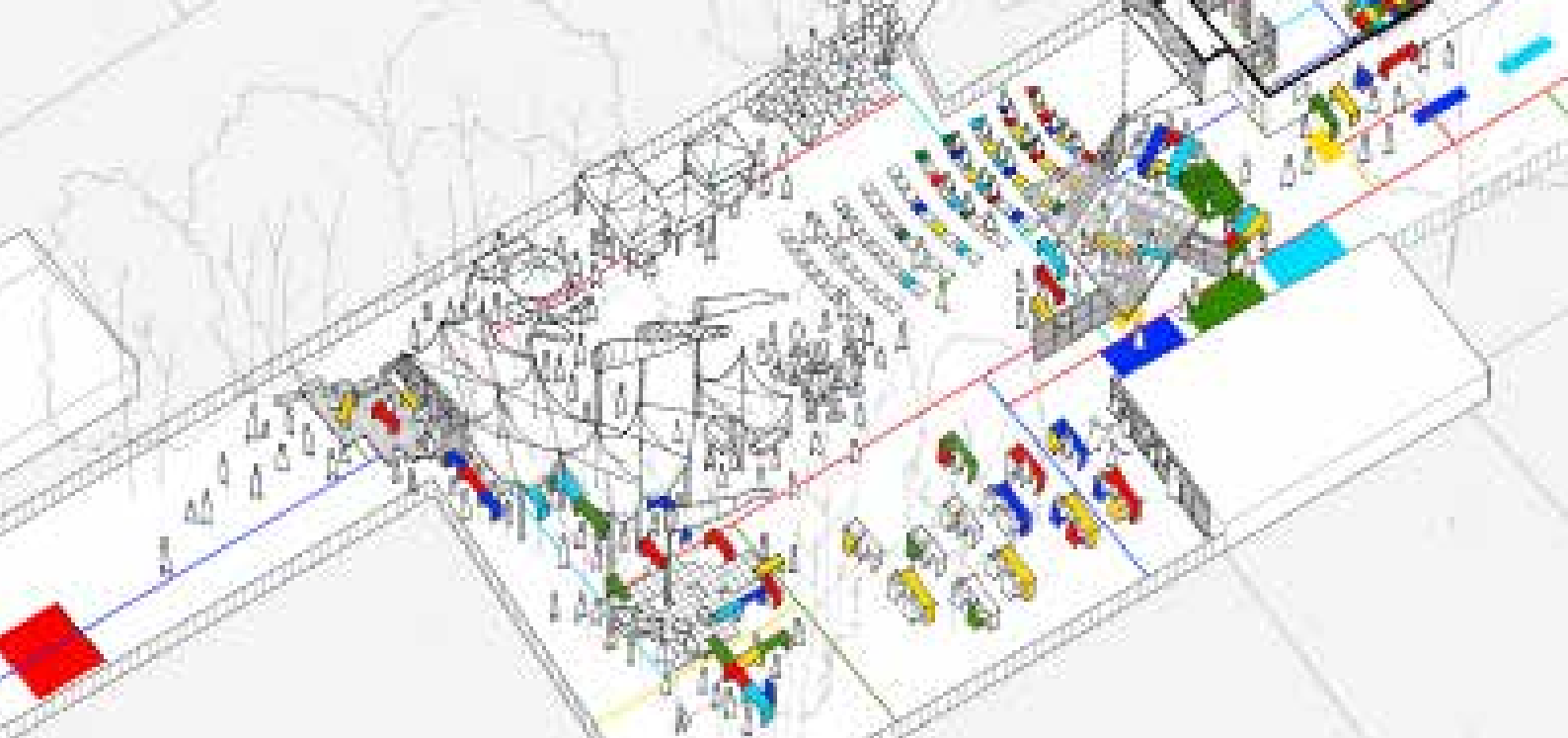
scenarios. These objects and spaces may not have specific functions by themselves, but inspire people to use it in different ways. My friend and I designed a community garden (as a community play space) for a suburban town in Long Island, NY. We proposed the idea after designing and co-creating moduled plywood furniture with that community.

The goal of the project was to envision a sustainable image of future community engagement. Rather than providing specific functions, we created four "incomplete" pavilions and called them: Screen, Table, Mountain and Room. Each pavilion is designed with

the same modular system as the furniture we designed, which allows people to experiment and use it for different community activities.

Through a survey, we asked the community several questions regarding activities they would like to do in the community garden. We then drew four drawings depicting activities happening simultaneously in the garden. We illustrated the four pavilions and activities around them in different ways so that the community could discuss and further develop their ideas for activities. Each drawing showed specific scenes and activities, but these sets of

Four different scenarios, using the same pavilions in different ways

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drawings also provided them both the freedom to think on their own and hints to begin discussing ideas. Considering that it would be difficult to explore with too much freedom, we intentionally provided objects that were not useful on its own instead provided and four 'imaginary' scenarios of how people could use the objects.

Our intention was not to dictate how people should use them, but for the community to come up with their own ways of using the objects. This design approach reminds of the image of abstract educational toys (like wooden 3D puzzles).

Play with an Entire Architecture – dialogues through the physical models / the entire spaces

In addition to making use of their drawing skills, architects can make physical models to engage with clients to complete architectural projects. My previous architect office Coelacanth K&H Architects tries to make their school projects more imaginative (but not to make it restricted) by engaging people in the design process with big physical model workshop sessions. We not only teach kids, parents, and educators how to use the space we designed, but also to redefine the potential of the space together with them.
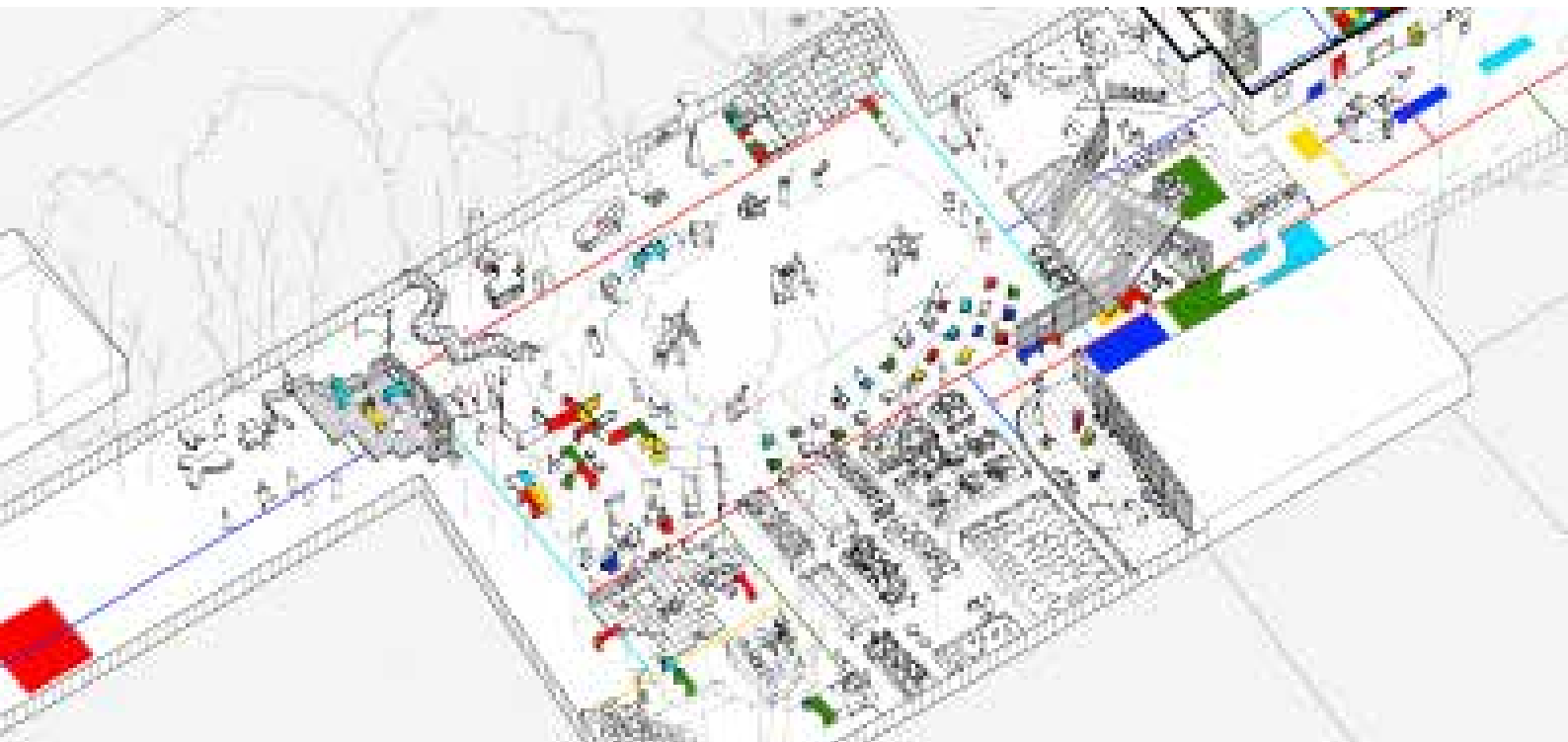
Coelacanth K&H Architects often involve teachers and kids in such workshops during the construction phase. Sometimes inviting researcher/professors of architectural planning to document and to give feedback as well. K&H bring 1:50 scale models of the intended design so that everyone can imagine how the space can be used. It is a heuristic working session to rediscover the usage of space together with the creative imagination of kids and teachers. K&H care deeply about the details of the planning such as niches and alcoves so that these small spaces can inspire kids. In the design phase, there are more things to consider (building code, circulation, and safety etc.), resulting in one architecture with distinct character built from the details.

K&H's latest school project also engaged kids in a different way, using the entire school compound and timber structure as a vast empty field for small dwarfs. During the construction process, kids made their own toy figures out of a piece of wood in collaboration with architecture school students.

Then, designers placed them all over the school, imagining them as dwarfs living in a forest formed by a wooden structure. On the first day, the school children searched for their toys, subconsciously engaging with the school environment, looking through their favorite spaces while searching for their dwarfs. Through the process, kids can discover new ways to use the space by looking at the space in a new way, in the eyes of the small dwarfs.

Conclusion – important attitudes both in education and in design

Overall, the three case studies I explored in the article are designers' attempts to go beyond their own imagination by adopting various methodologies (such as sketching, overlaying, interacting with physical models, and playing with missing objects) that bring others into the design process. I believe many educators and parents similarly attempt to create such room for children's imagination, although the methods may differ from that of designers.

These design approaches transform natural and design elements from 'objects' into 'subjects' with specific characters and identities and relate to why designers should aim for an empty field, rather than an amusement park, to design a space for play. The quality of an empty field allows people to use their imagination to play because people need to come up with ideas about how to play.

People need to use their imagination and think about the characteristics of everything in the empty field (such as trees, fences, grass, and wood plunks), and the their (human) friends to play with. Looking at everything around them (including human and non-human) as a 'playmate' is truly a creative way to play where everything and everyone can be an integrated part of a good play. Meanwhile, in an amusement park, people don't have to think about how to play--they can just enjoy it based on how

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they are instructed to do so. But at the same time, they don't have a chance to imagine what others are thinking, and also, their own thoughts or imagination don't change the play itself.

By walking through thoughts and ideas behind designing play spaces, I would like readers to rethink what are important attitudes not only in designing a space but also for education in general-- rather than telling children every single thing to do; it is better to leave room for them to imagine.