

Coming up with a concept

For this playground assignment, we were asked to focus on space and context, materials and props and pace and flow. Because of the abstract nature of these terms, I decided that I would need to formulate a specific concept, that would allow me to structure my thinking about them.

I began by doing some research, and looked at videos from the Harry Potter theme park to see how that storyworld was translated into a designed interactive space that in some way was pleasurable. From viewing these videos it became apparent to me that a playground's pleasurability is first and foremost grounded in the ways people can interact with the materiality of the 'culture' that the playground is supposed to represent. People visit the Harry Potter theme park because of the sudden proximity to something they've only read in a book or seen on a screen. Another clever design choice they made was to have a dragon-statue on top of a building to periodically breathe a giant flame into the sky. This fireball serves a twofold purpose. The sudden noise and visuals grounds the visitor in the context of the theme park and it has a material reference to events from the storyworld. Based on the observations made, I decided to try and design a playground based on early hip-hop culture, called *Hip Hop Wonderland*, that would allow children aged 5-12 to explore that particular culture. This presented an interesting design problem, because how do you present a culture that sprung from desperation and poverty to children without scaring them? The answer was, instead of focussing on historical accuracy, to utilize the materiality of the culture. Broadly speaking, hip-hop was created through the playful appropriation of the surrounding culture by musicians, dancers, artists and oral performers. By toy-playing with objects that already had a defined function, fx vinyl records, new means of expression emerged. This materiality seemed to be a good starting point for the design of a playground.

Space and Context

An important part of play is its contextual nature. That is, the act of play needs to be properly framed so that it can't be confused with something else. This ambiguity of play might be interesting to explore in other design spaces, but a playground shouldn't be bothered by this. Playgrounds frame play through their spatial structure and the materials within it. But for my playground, I needed another type of frame that cues the children towards hip-hop culture. I chose to do this by placing my theoretical hip-hop playground inside a theoretical hip-hop museum. After having spent time watching the exhibitions, they will arrive at a large indoor space, where the playground is situated. By doing this, I hope the sudden emergence of a playground will motivate the children to let loose and play after the 'boring' exhibition. But

more importantly, they have an inkling of what they are interacting with. This could potentially also create a pleasurable experience for the parents, who can talk with the child about the objects they are playing with and put it in a wider context, using the knowledge they just gained from visiting the museum.

The playground is designed with a hub-and-spoke structure to allow the children to visit the different play-areas in any way they want (see image-file for visualisation of playground). As was noted during the lectures, a playground should be a panopticon, that is, parents should be able to see their children from anywhere on the playground. Because of this, all play areas are surrounded by wire fences. This allows for visibility while also materially referencing the wire fences seen in basketball courts in New York.

Materials and Props

As noted earlier, this playground is all about allowing children to explore the materiality of hip-hop culture. In this part I will dive deeper into some of the different play areas that are outlined in the 'playground presentation' document. But before I do that, I will briefly write about a play area that has been omitted from the final design, namely the **rap play area**.

The point with the playgrounds hub-and-spoke structure was to clearly split the different parts of hip-hop culture into their own space. What is now the large exit, used to be another play area, focussed on rapping. For many, including myself, rap is synonymous with hip-hop culture and to not have it would seem like a shocking oversight. Yet it turned out to be very hard to design a type of play that was *paidia* and not *ludus*, to use Caillois terms. One of the most important parts of rapping is rhyming, so I imagined that the play area would be filled with small stages where children could get up and grab a microphone. But this seemed counterintuitive to the social aspect of playing, since children would be on their own little island of a stage, playing more with themselves than with each other. Another, even worse idea, was to have a karaoke-type game where children would have to rap along with well-known lyrics (like the console game Def Jam Rapstar). This steered it even more into a *ludus*-activity. In the end, I found that to allow children to get acquainted with rap in a playful way, an actual guide/instructor person from the museum would need to be present to guide the children's performance. But who has ever heard of guides on a playground? I ended up deciding that there would be a rap workshop as part of the museum, not the playground. In the end it turned out to be for the best, since it allowed me to make room for a large exit. Originally the exits were located in the northeast and northwest corners of the hub and were much smaller. This might be annoying for visitors without children who want to quickly leave

the playground. The large exit is more visible and can accommodate a large amount of people at the same time without becoming a bottleneck.

The **graffiti play area** went through different iterations before the final design was decided upon. Originally, it was meant to be populated by small touch-sensitive computer screens. Here, children could use stylus' made to look like old-school markers to draw on the screen. Afterwards they would be able to choose a background for their tag, fx. a train carriage or a wall. After presenting this idea to an expert on hip-hop culture, she fiercely rejected it. What this play area is missing is the actual materiality of tagging a surface with a marker, this mediation of it was too easy. One of the most important aspects of hip-hop, according to her, is competition. Instead of shielding children from the potential uneasiness of having one's tags overwritten by another person, I should make them embrace that competitive mindset. (This revelation on the nature of hip-hop culture lead to the design of the hi-strikers in the turntable play area). This lead to the development of the new graffiti play area, which is designed as a big white wall with markers lying on the floor. The children are then allowed to draw what they want, how they want. A few pre-made tags will be visible on the wall, to nudge children into the context of hip-hop and tempt them to emulate the style.

The design of the **beats play area** was an instance where I needed to expand the concept of the playground beyond the constraints of late-70's hip-hop culture. The creation of the earliest hip-hop beats were made by a DJ playing two copies of the same record. With perfect timing, they would cross-fade between the two records, lengthening a much-loved drum beat indefinitely. The manual complexity of this interaction is not well-suited for children ages 5-12. What's more, it was too difficult to design a simplified turntable that would allow kids to feel like they were emulating the looping of the beat. Instead I looked to later technology used for beatmaking, namely the Roland 808 drum machine. While this is still a complex piece of technology, this could more easily be appropriated to a simpler interface that children could find enjoyable. In this way, one could also design for emulating the tactility of the original 808. The simplicity of this theoretical device made me realize that there needed to be another part of the beats play area, that could allow children to play with more aspects of the music than just the beats. I decided therefore to include Exponat: Reactable technology, which, through its cube-based interface allows children to play with the different elements of a track in an intuitive way.

This concludes the part about materials and props, since the turntable- and breakdance play area are described satisfactorily in the presentation document.

Pace and Flow

To talk about the thoughts behind the pace and flow of the playground, I will need to reflect on an idea that isn't present in the formal presentation document. In the time I had to design the playground, I never managed to decide whether it should be part of the playground.

What I am talking about, is the **miniature block party** idea. At one point, I wanted there to be an hourly block party that would erupt from the middle of the hub, where the basketball court is currently situated. A block party would be a 10-15 minute show which would, on the one hand, be exciting for children and parents to watch, as well as being a natural way to show the visitors what activities they can engage with in the different play areas. While a DJ would use the 808 or Exponat to make a beat, break dancers would show off their moves, while artists would tag a prepared surface in the background. But the removal of the rap play area meant that it would be out of place to have a person rapping, which some might see as the focal point of a block party. The block party would work to control pace and flow. It would create an event that would ground the visitors in the cultural context of the playground. It could be a thing that would make visitors stay longer on the playground, instead of leaving after having visited the play areas, they stuck around to watch the show. On the subject of flow, it could potentially create greater diversity among the children visiting the different play areas. A child who only wants to play with beats might suddenly be impressed by the possibilities of tagging and might want to give that play area a try anyway.

At the moment, the design of the block party would need to meet the constraints set up by the different play areas, and the lack of a rapper seems like a grueling omission.