

Design

What's worse than a broken bone? A playground that plays it too safe

A new exhibition ditches the bubble wrap to explore shifting ideas about child's play.

By Ray Edgar

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James Bond creator Ian Fleming famously named one of his most notorious villains after the modernist architect Erno Goldfinger. For critics disdainful of Brutalist social housing, this was convenient casting. They saw the creators of

these pared-back, concrete structures as criminally responsible for the social ills – and shredded elbows – that befell residents in housing projects such as Goldfinger’s Balfron Tower in London and Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith’s Park Hill Estate in Sheffield.

“Surrounding the Balfron Tower was this series of windswept concrete walkways and this quite weird concrete playground,” says Australian artist Simon Terrill, who had a residency in Balfron Tower. “If you fall over you lose the skin off your knee or your elbow.”

Yet, like many defenders of Brutalist architecture, Terrill recognised “a distinction between the exterior, which was quite bleak, and the interior, which was completely amazing”. Working with British architecture collective Assemble, Terrill created the Brutalist Playground, an interactive installation series that recast three rough-textured concrete playgrounds in pastel-coloured foam.



Simon Terrill & Assemble, The Brutalist Playground (Park Hill, install view at S1 Artspace, Sheffield, 2016). COURTESY ARTIST AND DESIGNER

“Remaking those objects at one-to-one scale in foam gives an opportunity to revisit those utopian ideas and reflect on our changing relationship with ideas of risk and agency and what play means,” says Terrill.

Their foam version of Park Hill Estate's playground features in the latest incarnation of the international touring exhibition *The Playground Project*. Since 2013, the exhibition has travelled to eight countries, from the US to Russia and Ireland to Switzerland, adding regional examples with each incarnation.

Travelling to the Southern Hemisphere for the first time, it is showing at Incinerator Gallery in Aberfeldie, which is housed in a disused incinerator designed by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony in 1929.

Curated by Swiss urban planner Gabriela Burkhalter, the exhibition is a fascinating social history incorporating early childhood development, psychology, architecture, urban planning, landscape design and art.

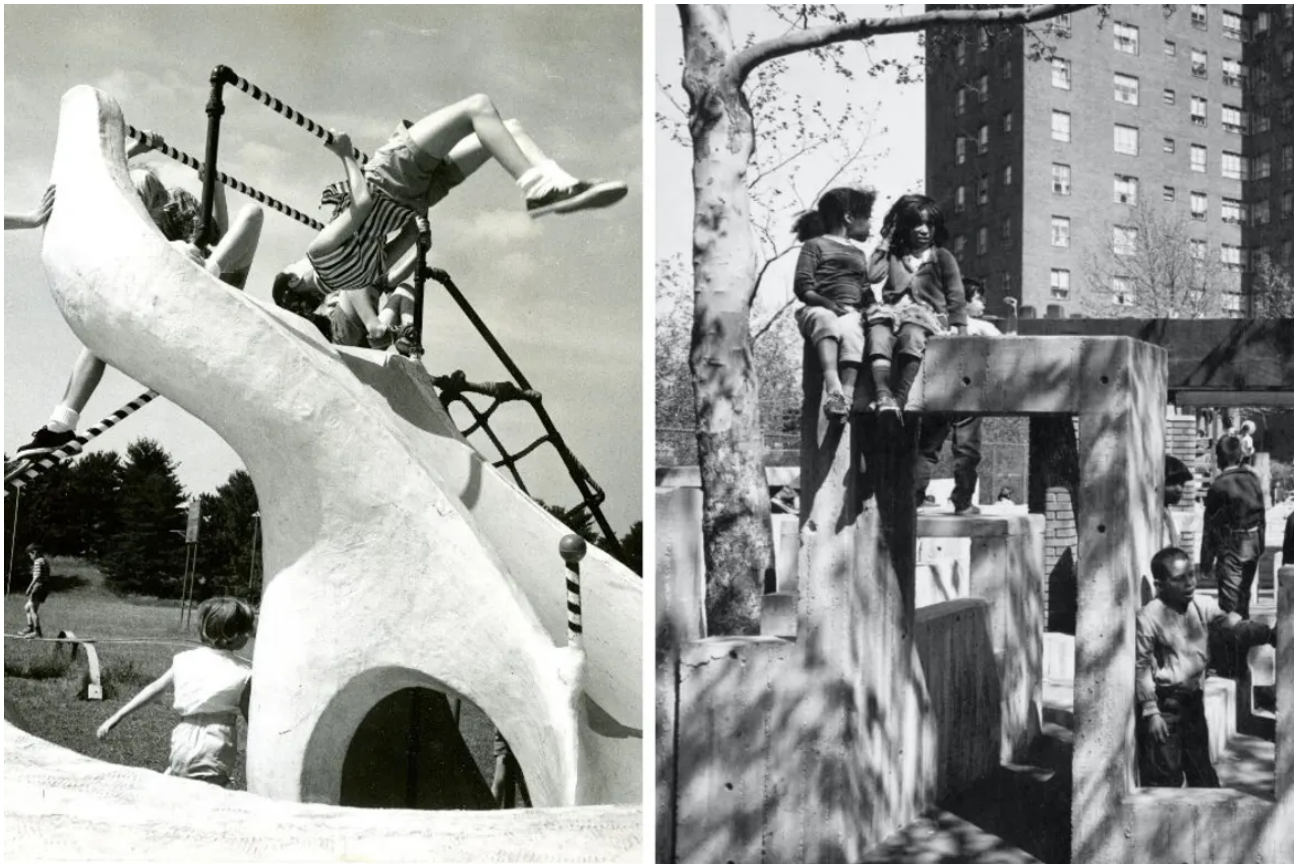


Curator Gabriela Burkhalter with the Lozziwurm at Incinerator Gallery. EDDIE JIM

The Incinerator's Jade Niklai commissioned local content including BoardGrove Architects for the exhibition design and a new exterior playground called Ringtales. Visitors wend in and out of the various colourful floors and stairwells of the building, which itself feels like a playground writ large.

Burkhalter's playground story is essentially a response to industrialisation, urban

migration and density pressures. Equally it pulses with an adrenaline rush of risk. The show peels back the layers of protective bubble wrap, revealing 19th-century qualms about potentially contaminated sand gardens – ironic given children worked in dangerous factories – to legitimate safety concerns over the so-called “junk” or adventure playgrounds pioneered in Europe in the 1940s.



From left: The Whale playground in 1955; a concrete playground in New York in 1965. THE PLAYGROUND PROJECT

Junk playgrounds contained loose elements – building and scrap materials, natural elements and tools – that kids controlled themselves, sharing and negotiating with each other. English landscape architect Marjory Allen, who imported them to Britain, the US and Japan, declared: “Better a broken bone than a broken spirit.” This plucky ethos suited a postwar generation that grew up scampering over London bomb sites. The Blitz spirit transferred nicely to the relatively safe terrain of the junk/adventure playground.

The adventure playground movement spawned regional examples worldwide. Well-loved local versions sprang up in St Kilda, Fitzroy and The Venny in Kensington. As The Venny’s honorary principal, David Kutcher, explained in the first of a series of accompanying talks for the exhibition: “The risk of any loss through physical injury is actually low. Children require exposure to setbacks, failures, shocks and stumbles

in order to develop strength and self-reliance and resilience. The road to resilience is paved with risk.”

As modernism took hold in the 1950s and '60s, industrialisation infiltrated the playground. Concrete was one response. Steel and plastics were another. For Burkhalter, the Swiss-designed modular play sculpture the Lozziwurm from 1972 is emblematic of the new industrial materials. It also prompts one of the key forms of socialisation – negotiating with others. There is no one way to travel through the worm. The idea is that kids sort it out.



Yvan Pestalozzi, Lozziwurm Playground, 1972 (original design). Adliswil, Switzerland, 1975.
PHOTO HEIDI-GANTNER. COURTESY THE PLAYGROUND PROJECT

Risk aversion reached its apotheosis in the 1970s in the US. “It made sense at the beginning because playgrounds were so badly maintained that there were a lot of accidents,” says Burkhalter. Today, while all manner of regulations govern community facilities, there is also recognition that safety needn’t hamper creative play and risk-taking.

Risk is built into artist Mike Hewson’s controversial Southbank playground Rocks on Wheels. Its ad hoc charm – part Heath Robinson, part Wile E. Coyote – looks set to detonate at any time. Its teetery quality encourages risk and creativity as the

playground itself looks like it's been built by a child.



Young visitors to The Playground Project at Incinerator Gallery.

Artists feature prominently in the exhibition. Burkhalter's initial interest in playgrounds was inspired by the heroic dedication of Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi. For more than 30 years, from 1933 to 1966, Noguchi planned a range of playgrounds, from landscapes to sculptural equipment. Most went unrealised. He once recalled pitching his Play Mountain to Robert Moses, New York's imperious city planner, who "just laughed his head off and more or less threw us out".

Among Burkhalter's own urban planning colleagues, the reaction to the playground project was almost as dismissive as Moses. "Playgrounds were considered small and not very prestigious," she says. And this despite the outsized influence of Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, who said that "play is the work of childhood".

Burkhalter remained undaunted: "I understood that the people who were active in these fields had visions about design, society, childhood. That fascinated me."

Terrill is one of three Australian artists who feature in the Melbourne show.

Trawlwoolway multidisciplinary artist Edwina Green won the competition to design a First Nations playable public art sculpture. Her abstracted oyster honours the cultural significance of the Maribyrnong River and “invites children to play, imagine, and connect with Country”, she says.

Artist Emily Floyd and designer Mary Featherston literally bring the politics of play and community cooperation to the table. The pair’s Round Table includes a child-height table and chairs; each of its elements – day care, infant health, kindergarten – is a seat at the table.

Indeed the exhibition highlights that playgrounds aren’t just about children. Professor Mel Dodd, dean of art, design and architecture at Monash University, says: “The health and wellbeing of families in smaller, increasingly denser environments relies on public places that you not only can safely bring your child to play, but also socialise yourself. Amenity of that nature is absolutely critical.”

Playgrounds also offer citywide lessons. “The design of the public realm can be playful for adults as well as children,” says Dodd. “It’s definitely the case that playfulness aids health and wellbeing. We need our public environments to look fantastic, to look exciting.”

Burkhalter agrees: “Playgrounds are like a laboratory for how public space can work.”

***The Playground Project* is at Incinerator Gallery, 180 Holmes Road, Aberfeldie, until October 12. Gabriela Burkhalter discusses play and learning alongside Mary Featherston, Emily Floyd and Mel Dodd on July 4, from 4pm to 7pm. To register <http://playgroundproject.com>.**



The Lozziwurm lures young Melburnians at Incinerator Gallery.