

# The enduring legacy of playground designer Aldo van Eyck

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From 1947 to 1978, van Eyck built a network of over 800 public playgrounds across Amsterdam. The first was for the neighbourhood of Bertelmanplein (above). Photo • Amsterdam City Archives

**Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck designed over 800 playgrounds in Amsterdam between 1947 and 1978. This article identifies the three elements of his success and shows how organisations are using each of those ideas to create play spaces for today’s urban children.**

In the years following World War II, Amsterdam went through a big transformation in its approach to urban planning and design. The then-unknown ‘rebel’ architect Aldo van Eyck began changing policy and planning from a traditional top-down methodology to one that was ground-up – and the youngest Dutch residents were the beneficiaries.

From 1947 to 1978, with the help of city planners, policymakers and residents, van Eyck built a network of over 800 public playgrounds across Amsterdam. This

constellation of play spaces – deemed ‘one of the best-kept secrets of the twentieth century’ by architectural historian Liane Lefaivre – incorporated the youngest residents into the city’s plan in a way never seen before in the Netherlands.

It is now nearly 60 years since van Eyck, aged 28, designed his first playground, for the neighbourhood of Bertelmanplein, Amsterdam. The playground remains unchanged to this day, giving people who first played on it as children a chance to sit on the same wooden benches and watch their grandchildren and great-grandchildren play on the same equipment.

The popularity and longevity of van Eyck’s work is attributable to three main tactics: he designed each space with simple, replicable geometric components; he involved policymakers; and he utilised any and

all sites, no matter how challenging. As we will see, architects, designers and play space champions continue to use these tactics to create places for children to be part of urban environments in safety, around the world.

### **Simple geometrical components**

Set in a block straddled by two main avenues and a canal, the playground in Bertelmanplein contains three simple elements: a sandpit at the centre, metal tube somersault frames circling it, and curved wooden benches for parents and passers-by to sit on. Another essential element, although often unnoticed, was a generous amount of open space. Rather than filling up the play area with endless equipment for children to play on, van Eyck provided open space for children to run, jump and skip.

As van Eyck designed more playgrounds, he added more geometric play elements to the kit of parts, such as hexagonal and cylindrical concrete stepping-stones and more complex climbing-frames in the shape of an arch or dome. In *Aldo van Eyck: The playgrounds and the city* (Lefaivre et al., 2002), author and architectural historian Francis Strauven wrote:

*Van Eyck paid special attention to the distances between the spokes to enable the children to clamber about in safety to their heart's content. He even tried out the possibilities and risks with the assistance of his own children.*

These additional elements remained based in elementary components of visual language – geometric shapes – whose power lies in the simplicity that evoked different associations for each child. Van Eyck objected to play elements designed to resemble animal or mythological creatures. He argued, in a lecture in 1962:

*They are not real enough. A play object has to be real in the way that a telephone box is real because you can make calls from it ... An aluminum elephant is not real.*

The simple geometric play objects he preferred provide children with an experimental playground to move with acrobaticism and suppleness. Together with benches, hedges, shrubs and trees, van Eyck arranged the play

objects together in constantly changing compositions for children throughout Amsterdam.

Today, the non-profit organisation Playground Ideas is using a similar methodology to create playgrounds in under-resourced communities in Africa, South-East Asia and South America. Founded by Australian Marcus Veerman, who built his first playground in 2010 in Chiang Dao, Thailand, Playground Ideas' team members have since helped build over 500 playgrounds using simple elements made with locally sourced materials including discarded tyres, timber, rope and metal tubing. Playground Ideas' online design library<sup>1</sup> has over 180 play objects that communities around the world have used to create their own play spaces.

Although this library is far larger than van Eyck's, the variety of elements allows for more communities to develop their own play spaces based on the resources available. Playground Ideas has an online five-step manual on designing playgrounds, which is being turned into a 'drag-and-drop' playground designer tool, to be released soon. This accessible set of resources will enable more communities to create their own play spaces even if they do not have access to an architect, designer or planner.

### **Ground-up popular support**

Back in 20th-century Amsterdam, van Eyck did not achieve the tremendous feat of building 800 playgrounds on his own. After returning from university in Zurich, he joined Amsterdam's Department of Public Works, which gave him access to policymakers. At the time, the ground-up approach to planning was avant-garde and van Eyck was in the minority, but he was able to use the small scale of the playgrounds to make incremental changes to city planning more generally. In time, he converted even his fiercest opponents into ground-up policymakers.

Van Eyck leveraged post-war attention to the importance of childhood and won the support of the city's residents to expand his playgrounds programme. Buried in the thick piles of the Department's drawings and

correspondence are letters from residents, recording years of positive and negative reactions to the playgrounds: 8 letters in 1953 (by which time van Eyck had built 27 playgrounds), 30 letters in 1954 (about 41 playgrounds), 52 letters in 1956 (about 103 playgrounds), and so on. Among these letters the requests for new playgrounds far outweigh the small number of objections. With the support of residents pouring in and policymakers being won over, Amsterdam became peppered with play spaces that were easily accessible, safe and loved by the new generations.

Today in America, the non-profit organisation KaBOOM! is using a similar ground-up approach to transform neighbourhoods in all 50 states. In 1995, 24-year-old Darell Hammond read a story in the newspaper about two local children who suffocated while playing in an abandoned car because they didn't have anywhere else to play. Hammond realised this tragedy could have been prevented and decided to do something about it. Using his experience in volunteer leadership, Hammond built his first playground in October 1995 in south-east Washington DC, and hasn't stopped building playgrounds since. Officially founded in 1996, KaBOOM! has raised more than 200 million US dollars, rallied over a million volunteers, led hands-on construction of over 2000 playgrounds, and sparked a movement across America for children's right to play.

KaBOOM! offers an online project planner similar to that of Playground Ideas, and has developed the 'Map of Play'<sup>2</sup>, a play space finder and a way to identify where play spaces are needed. Similar to van Eyck, Hammond has learned to involve people and leverage relationships with them – from local authorities to residents and children, and even the First Lady, Michelle Obama.

#### **Envisioning transformation**

Aldo van Eyck did not seek out cleaned-up, empty sites to build playgrounds. From junkyards to dumps along Amsterdam's famous canals to bland plazas, van Eyck used any and all sites to host the new play spaces. This is where an architect's skill in envisioning transformation and designing each play space to fit a unique site helped

make the network of playgrounds possible. An exhibit at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam showcased a remarkable series of before-and-after photos displaying how previously derelict lots were reshaped into dynamic places filled with children. By bringing the children out from their homes, the streets and squares in Amsterdam were injected with exuberance and life, essential energy for recovering from the stressful, dark period of war.

Today, a rising population of architects and designers are working in under-resourced communities around the world, where their skill in envisioning transformation is essential. The architectural practice TYIN tegnestue, led by Norwegians Yashar Hanstad and Andreas Grøntvedt Gjertsen, has worked in Thailand, Burma, Haiti, Uganda, Norway, and Brazil. Having witnessed a variety of living conditions and developments, TYIN partners with communities to design appropriate structures that respond to the needs of local people and utilise resources and skills found near each project location.

One recent project success is located in the neighbourhood of Klong Toey – Bangkok's largest and oldest informal settlement – where TYIN worked with a group of students and local residents to build a public playground and football court in a narrow lot. Given the dimensions of the site, the architects decided to maximise the vertical space by building an airy two-storey structure enclosed by an array of iron latticework and wood slats. They outfitted the structure with elements to sit, swing, and climb on, while leaving an open space for football, basketball and other games. Using locally sourced and reclaimed materials, the structure was built by the local inhabitants and has become a beloved part of the community.

With the accelerating pace of urbanisation putting more strain on space for people to work, live and traverse, van Eyck's imaginative approach to providing infrastructure for children in urban environments is more crucial than ever: keep plans simple and replicable; involve civilians and policymakers; and use any and all sites. Van Eyck did not see high-density living as detrimental, but rather as an opportunity to reduce distances from

everyday facilities. The fast-growing cities of Africa and Asia in particular may appear to pose more difficult challenges than van Eyck faced in 1947 Amsterdam, but organisations like Playground Ideas, KaBOOM! and TYIN tegnestue show how his ideas can continue to help children to thrive in modern urban environments.

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**Reference**

Lefaivre, L., Roode, I and Fuchs, R. (2002). *Aldo van Eyck: The playgrounds and the city*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum.

**Notes**

- 1 The Design Library can be accessed on the Playground Ideas website at: <http://www.playgroundideas.org/DesignLibrary>
- 2 The Map of Play is available at: <http://mapofplay.kaboom.org/>