

2009 ASLA Annual Meeting and Expo

# Case Studies in Placemaking & Play Spaces

*Using Custom Design to Create a Sense of Place*



*Session date/time: 9/21/2009, 8:00 a.m.*

Steve King, FASLA, Landscape Structures

Jeffrey Velasquez, LA, J2 Engineering and Environmental Design

Stephen Shurson, LA, Three Rivers Park District

## Session Description

People come to parks for a variety of reasons. One reoccurring reason is to play with their kids, to watch their kids play, and even to enjoy a rare moment of peace. Kids and adults often spend hours at these special places, and parents will schedule trips to come back because it feels good to relax, observe and meet others. They will come back because the park and its experiences are relevant for their kids' well-being, and because this public space offers something that can be found nowhere else.

These play spaces are educational. They're interpretive and creative. They offer interactive opportunities to learn about local ecology, stories, ethnicity and traditions. They're designed to help people of all ages connect their experiences with the history of the region. This is the idea behind creating a "sense of place" that geographers have discussed for years -- the direct awareness of how our hometowns and regions are unique and meaningful.

By helping people reconnect with nature and learn about the local significance of "place," a new generation of playgrounds can help fill a void in modern life where people are often cut off from nature, unaware of an area's history and its relationship to overall development, and often cut off from interacting with one another. Many Americans move from one suburb to another with very little sense of how the areas differ. Their kids grow up in over-structured settings where they have very little chance to explore on their own. Adults are cut off from other adults, and the significance of experiencing intergenerational mixing of the young and elderly is often overlooked.

The idea of "place" and fostering a local appreciation for it matters for landscape architects who seek to instill a sense of stewardship for the land. How better to encourage a child to someday campaign to protect a watershed than to introduce her to sustainable irrigation in a desert playground? How can a sensory garden help children and adults learn that interacting with nature can be so much more than a visual of a "landscaped scene." That it's more about a thorough understanding that insects, the seasons, growth and decay are all part of nature's cycles.

This session explores the concept of placemaking in play spaces and looks at two specific projects that were successful in creating a sense of place for their community. Though from two very different regions of the country, Arizona and Minnesota, they both show how design for play can encourage conversations, fantasy play, and new awareness of regional ecology and history.

At Tumbleweed Park in Chandler, Arizona, we visit a park that interprets its past and tells stories, through a variety of methods and experiences, of three historical eras of

the regions development: fossil discovery and the ancient past, farming and the recent past, and the city growth of modern-day Chandler. The park's tribute to the past educates children and helps shape the area's character today.

At Lake Rebecca Park Reserve, west of Minneapolis, Minnesota, we learn how a park can educate kids about the historical significance and importance of the native "Big Woods" forest ecotype of central Minnesota and its importance for the Upper Midwest.

Both projects create meaningful senses of place and experiences for their visitors. Both help us appreciate placemaking in a new way.

## Session Outline

### I. Introduction to Placemaking in Play Spaces

- a. The “Placemaking” Movement:
  - i. Placemaking is not a new concept; originated 1960s
  - ii. Placemaking is growing into broad, international movement
  - iii. Placemaking strikes a balance between the physical, social and even the spiritual qualities of a place
  - iv. Placemaking involves creating experiences, not structures
- b. Define placemaking in *play spaces*
  - i. Draw cultural, geological or historical *significance* from the environment or community
  - ii. Utilize custom design to create educational and interpretive play and gathering spaces that are *meaningful* to children and families
  - iii. Expand the scope to include programming and other park elements to complete the experience
- c. How placemaking in play design addresses emerging trends
  - i. Losing sight of history; spaces can be customized to a historical theme
  - ii. Isolation of children from nature; spaces with nature theme and natural elements helps create connection between kids and nature
  - iii. Regimentation of children’s lives; parks with sense of place draw kids outside and encourage creative, imaginative play
  - iv. Regionalism; placemaking in design can highlight specific regional attributes
- d. Benefits of designing a sense of place in play spaces
  - i. Creates educational opportunities
  - ii. More attractive as a multi-generational gathering space; draws people of all ages
  - iii. Preserves legacies of the past
  - iv. Connects a regions history, culture, habitat or geology to the present place
  - v. Celebrates nature and history; can expose an areas “story” in a way that can be learned and celebrated in a fun, imaginative way
  - vi. Creates dynamic community gathering space
  - vii. Draws more people for longer periods of time
  - viii. Revitalizes areas of interest

e. Example – Kellogg Park, La Jolla Beach, California



## II. Case Study – “Playtopia,” Tumbleweed Park, Chandler, Arizona

*A success in connecting a regions rich history to the present – from dinosaurs of the ancient past, to farming of the more recent past, to the city of modern-day.*



### a. Description

This exciting phase is the newest addition to the City of Chandler’s 205-acre Tumbleweed Regional Park. The improvements included a 26-acre facility that provides recreational activities and creative play opportunities for children of all ages. The project includes group pavilion picnic areas for up to 480 people, 11 themed picnic ramadas, a soft-surface multi-use trail, concrete paths, horseshoe pits, volleyball court, three multi-use sports fields for soccer and football, a parking area, overflow event parking, a restroom facility, and “Playtopia”, a children’s playground. “Playtopia” is the City of Chandler’s 3-acre premier destination play area that has been referred to by the *Arizona Republic* newspaper as the “Mother of all Playgrounds”. “Playtopia” and the new park facilities opened to the public in May, 2007.

### b. Vision

Inspired and symbolized by three historical eras of the City of Chandler’s development: fossil discovery and the ancient past, farming and the recent past, and the city growth of modern-day Chandler. These three themed play areas, which offer an ideal place for imaginative, stimulating play for children, are “**Critter Land**”, “**Farm Land**”, and “**City Land.**”

1. Critter Land – pays tribute to the area thousands of years ago when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Includes a fossil dig where, just 12 years ago, remains of a Woolly Mammoth were unearthed



2. Farm Land – pays homage to Chandler’s agricultural roots and provides imaginative play with distinctive farm-themed apparatus



3. City Land – urban themed landscape, symbolizing how Chandler evolved into what it is today: paved streets, street signs, city vehicles and lamp posts



- c. Project Goals
  - i. Create a major regional draw, a destination playground
  - ii. Utilize effluent water for the landscape areas
  - iii. Maintain Tumbleweed Park’s rural aesthetic character
  - iv. Maintain a sense of the agricultural heritage of this site and of Chandler’s past
  - v. Interpret Chandler’s history
  - vi. Educate children about the area’s past
- d. Experience of the Park
  - i. Parents will experience the comfort of letting their children run and roam freely over the acres of grassy berms and open space, without the dangers of vehicular traffic
  - ii. Children will experience the feeling of “utopia” as they’re allowed to explore dinosaur digs, farm land and city life
  - iii. Visitors will experience a sense of imagination, creative playfulness and also education from signs placed throughout the park that display historic photographs of Chandler that tie into the themed elements inside Playtopia



e. Connection to the Environment

Site improvements provide vast areas of green open space and planting while utilizing Chandler's reclaimed water system to supply water to the landscape



### III. Case Study – “Big Woods Play Area” at Lake Rebecca Park Reserve, Minneapolis, Minnesota

*An excellent example of environmental stewardship.*

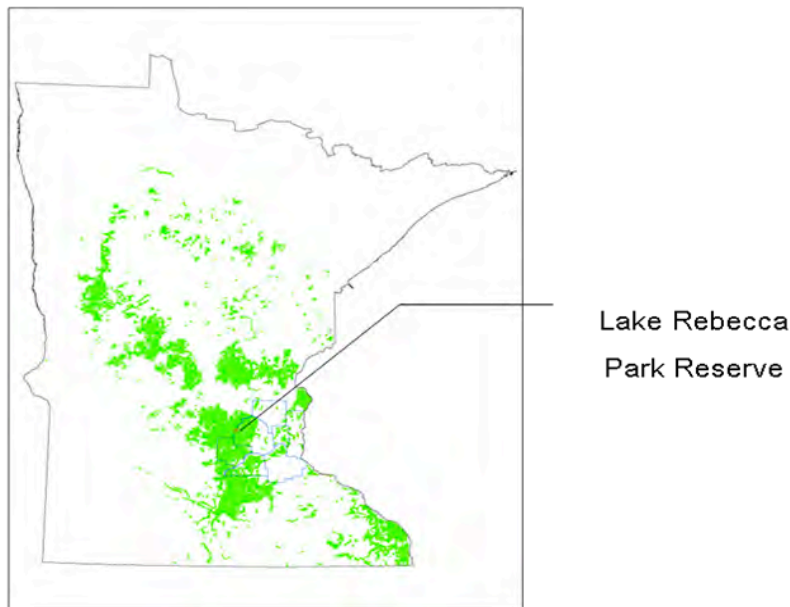
*Note: this project was under construction at the time this handout was due. Updated photos will be shown at the presentation in September.*



- a. Vision: The “Big Woods” forest ecosystem  
Preservation and promotion of natural resources is central to Three Rivers Park District’s mission and operations. Lake Rebecca Park Reserve is located in the middle of the largest area of pre-settlement “big woods” forest of the region. Besides providing environmental education, Three Rivers Park District wanted to tell the story of the relevance and value of this native forest. The story includes how the forest type has been diminished to only two percent of its original pre-settlement extent in the upper Midwest.

b. Project Goals

Create a unique and creative play environment that educates and allows kids to relate to the native forest eco-type for much of Central and Eastern Minnesota. The “Big Woods” forest (dominated by sugar maple, basswood and oak species) was first coined by French explorers who noticed that the trees were taller and straighter than other forests of the region. This play area project is designed to emulate many aspects of this historically significant and important ecology to the upper Midwest.



c. Project Design

The design includes custom play structures that look like a hollowed out fallen tree, a tree house and a cabin, all of which have various climbers, slides and crawl spaces. Scattered throughout the play area are various hidden critters native to the forest which are a part of a ‘scavenger hunt’ for kids. A fabricated rock out-cropping provides a climbing experience and includes a cave, complete with bats, fossils and petro glyphs.

**Scavenger Hunt:**

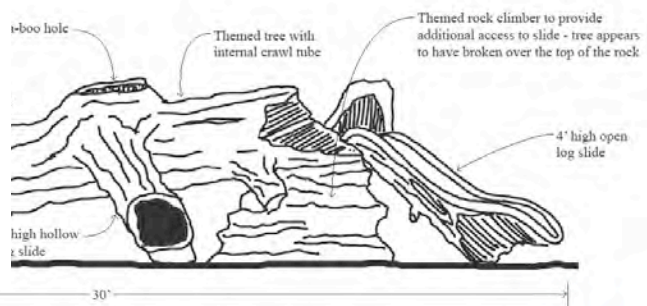


Squirrel  
Plaque

**Tree House Sketch:**



**Tip-up Tree Sketch:**



**Cabin – under construction:**



**Cave (kids can find concrete bats and salamanders inside!):**



#### IV. Q&A

## Speaker Bios

### 1. Steve King, LSI

Steve King, FASLA, is a registered Landscape Architect, co-founder and chairman of Landscape Structures Inc., and a member of several industry task forces on playground safety standards. He has been designing play equipment for more than 36 years and is the originator of the “continuous play” concept used in nearly all of today’s playsystems. He continually works towards creating playgrounds that are “beyond accessibility,” allowing children of all abilities and disabilities to play together.

### 2. Jeff Velasquez, RLA from Tumbleweed Park project

Jeff Velasquez is a 1995 graduate of California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Landscape Architecture. He is a registered Landscape Architect in the state of Arizona and is also a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). Jeff has over fourteen years of professional experience in Landscape Architecture. Jeff has been a project manager and directed multi-disciplinary design teams on a variety of projects that include: regional, community and neighborhood park design, environmental restoration and native revegetation projects, pedestrian-oriented streetscape redevelopment, multi-use trail systems, sports complexes, and major planned community developments.

### 3. Stephen Shurson, Landscape Architect/Project Manager for the Big Woods Play Area project

Stephen Shurson is a 1982 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with bachelor degrees in Landscape Architecture and Horticulture. Stephen is a registered Landscape Architect in Minnesota and is also a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). Stephen has twenty seven years of professional experience in Landscape Architecture in the private and public sectors. For the past eight years Stephen has been a landscape architect for Three Rivers Park District, a large regional, natural resource-based park system located in the west suburban communities of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. Stephen’s role at Three Rivers Park District has been as project manager, designing and coordinating projects including many park play areas, multi-use trail and various site planning projects.