From ball pits to water slides: the designer who changed children’s playgrounds for ever


FULL TEXT

Before he built the world’s greatest playground and transformed the world of children’s design, Eric McMillan had spent little time thinking about how kids played. In 1971, the 29-year-old English immigrant was a design consultant living in Toronto, Canada—a sleepy city whose nickname “Toronto the Good” both referenced the place’s lingering Victorian moral rectitude and seemed to set a hard ceiling on its expectations for greatness. It would never be Toronto the exceptional, and the locals seemed content with that.

McMillan’s job was to design an exhibition for a massive new waterfront park called Ontario Place, whose somewhat unpromising theme was the glorious past and thrilling future of the province of Ontario. The architect Eberhard Zeidler had created a series of artificial islands and “pods” that stuck out of the water of Lake Ontario, skewered by columns like olives in a martini. The question of what to do with these architectural wonders, however, seemed to come second. “Now we had to think up a great idea for what to do with our island,” wrote Zeidler in his autobiography, Building Cities Life. “We thought we might have a nature reserve on them, but this was a short-lived dream because the wild animals could easily escape.”

When the park opened in summer 1971, while visitors were awed by the park’s self-flushing toilets and Imax movies, one oversight quickly became clear: there wasn’t enough for kids to do. When the park decided to remedy that by building an area devoted to children for the following year, its director, James Ramsay, turned to McMillan. The designer was lanky and outspoken, a wild-eyed Englishman with the accent and mannerisms of one of Monty Python’s more unhinged characters. He’d been responsible for the park’s most successful exhibition that year—a multimedia tour through the province’s history called Explosions—but he’d never built anything for children. During a meeting with Ramsay, McMillan remembers his boss asking for his opinion on the park. McMillan didn’t hesitate. “I think it’s boring,” he said. “Well, what would you do?” asked Ramsay. “I don’t know,” said McMillan. “Give me two weeks.”

McMillan huddled with his assistant, David Lloyd, and when they returned it was with a series of sketches for a playscape unlike any seen before. Children’s Village would be a massive success. It would launch McMillan’s career. It would sit at the centre of kid-life for a generation of Torontonians and, briefly, promise to revolutionise the way the world plays.

“I thought it was just another job,” says McMillan today. Ramsay thought differently. “He told me: ‘This is going to make you famous.’”

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The playground is a curious creation. The first one in North America was a simple pile of sand in Boston’s north end, installed in 1885 by female philanthropists who wanted to give poor immigrant children a place to play and, crucially, a means to assimilate to American society. That push and pull, between providing children with autonomy and controlling them, has been at the heart of playground design ever since. They are places to expand children’s imaginations while constraining their physical bodies. “Playgrounds are places made by adults, for children, always with the hope of harnessing their play to a specific location,” writes Alexandra Lange in her book...
The Design of Childhood.
In theme parks, where the prerequisites of play meet the demands of capitalism, the balance between stimulating a child's creativity and keeping them in control becomes more wobbly. Parks in the Disneyland mould are, above all, about managing the play of children, moving them along efficiently, safely and profitably. The equipment is to be used in a specific way, with no latitude for experimentation. The modern theme park seems to apportion its share of imagination in a perverse way, offering boundless creativity to its designers while leaving little scope for the children themselves.

McMillan wasn’t interested in controlling kids. In designing Children’s Village, his driving philosophy was simple: “What would I, as a child, like to do?” But his conception of what a child might like to do was shaped by a childhood so full of Dickensian deprivation and casual violence that the idea of transplanting that experience to quiet 1970s Toronto is impossible to imagine.

In McMillan’s account of his life—a mixture of fact and family mythology that is difficult to untangle—he was stillborn during the bombing of Sheffield during the second world war and revived by a nurse, and from there life only got harder. “Lots of violence, lots of drinking, lots of poverty,” is his summary.
As a child, McMillan was often hungry and nearly always dirty. For a time, his family lived in the shadow of the Manchester prison called Strangeways. They were desperate enough that, one cold winter, his uncle and father broke into the prison to steal coal. He was constantly moving from rooming house to rooming house, school to school. His father was a day labourer, when he had work. On weekends, he would put on his one good suit and play piano in local pubs, earning as much in a single night as he would in a week, before drinking it all away.
The other side of a childhood of neglect is absolute freedom. “My early memories were just being like a dog, let out in the mornings and let in at night,” says McMillan. In those early years, he would play in the rubble of bombed-out buildings, clambering over the ruins, playing violent games with bricks, building paper airplanes out of the pages of discarded books. There were no restraints, no control.
When he left school at 15, he could barely read or write and his hygiene habits were highly questionable. “Have you seen when the live crabs at the market are trying to crawl out of their crates? You’ll observe that the ones in the back are pulling back the ones that are trying to escape,” says McMillan. “That’s basically where I grew up.”

He got a job as a painter's apprentice and prepared for a life as a labourer. The trade school was attached to an art school, however, and as he slowly began to talk with the neighbouring students, members of a social class he had never really encountered, the idea of applying there himself became fixed in his mind. He took the exams, got in and immediately entered a new world. When he graduated a few years later, it was with growing confidence and an enormous chip on his shoulder. After designing exhibitions in England, he saw ads looking for a designer for Expo 67 in Montreal and made his way across the Atlantic.

On his personal website, McMillan tells the story of how he escaped his upbringing with a characteristic mix of arrogance and deadpan understatement: “I became an apprentice house painter, and then moved up to art school and then I became a genius and moved to North America.”

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I’ve known Eric McMillan since I was a child. My father, another English immigrant who found himself in Canada in the 1970s, was also on the original Ontario Place team, and the two quickly became friends. I remember him striding into our house—a wild presence, all jutting elbows and knees, who would appear out of nowhere with a trunk full of plastic balls or a truckload of couch-sized interlocking plastic blocks, prototypes for a new experiment in fort-building.
At Children's Village, McMillan was left to himself with a $700,000 budget. Prickly and protective over his vision, he demanded full control. “I think I have the reputation of telling more ministers and deputy ministers to fuck off than anyone else,” he says.
The time in which he was working was a remarkably fertile one for children's design. In the postwar era, with the baby boom, there were suddenly new economies around childhood. “It led to tremendous innovation,” says Alexandra Lange. With government and institutional support, designers felt free to experiment. “People at the
highest echelon of design were interested in childhood,” says Lange. “It wasn’t a subset, it was at the centre of
design.”

This was the era in which “junk playgrounds” or “adventure playgrounds” – places where tiny children were given
tool belts and fistfuls of nails and left to build their own forts – proliferated across the continent. It was an era in
which designers emerging from the 60s, full of dreams about building political and social utopias, took their
visions to the local parks, building abstract sculptures and modernist experiments that children could clamber
over.

At Children’s Village, McMillan built two and a half acres of mayhem under an orange canopy —reproducing in the
safety of Toronto his feral childhood spent scrabbling through rubble, with mountains of colourful vinyl and foam.
He erected an enormous spider web structure that hung from soaring watchtowers. He built a series of wooden
ladders that spun on their axes, hurling would-be climbers to the mats below. He strung swinging monkey bars
over a pool of water and suspended a forest of punching bags at the centre of the village that was, for decades, the
most reliable producer of bloody noses in Toronto.

When the park opened in July 1972, it immediately became the city’s capital of kids’ play. “I had never seen
anything like it,” remembers Irina Ceric, now a professor in British Columbia. “It was entirely designed just for kids
in a way that other parks weren’t. It was the best thing that I had ever seen.”

In my memory, the overriding feeling of entering Children’s Village was an exhilarating, perhaps even slightly scary
freedom. The world under the iconic orange canopy was capacious enough that you always felt as if there were
undiscovered corners — a child-sized hamster wheel beneath a small hill, a new rope bridge from one of the
watchtowers you’d never taken. Here, at last, was a place that had been built specifically for you and then left to
your dominion. There were no parents to help you in the chaos of the punching bags. Exactly how you chose to
scramble your brain while flinging yourself between the giant vertical rubber bands was your business. The place
was yours. It was your village.

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Children’s Village was a hit. Families flocked to it and international media praised it, with Time calling it “one of the
most imaginative playgrounds in the world”. The next year, the Ontario Place brass gave McMillan control over
another section of the park and he set to work creating a water play area, with lagoons and climbing equipment
amid rushing water.

Building before the first water parks or splash pads, McMillan created his attractions from scratch, gathering a
team of prop builders, metal workers and craftspeople to manufacture the enormous squirting faces controlled by
pumps and bicycle-powered water guns he dreamed up. One of the early visitors to McMillan's park was an
American named George Millay. Today Millay is credited as the father of the water park, the progenitor of a
massive industry. When Millay opened the first Wet ‘n Wild in Orlando in 1977, however, the name he gave the
children’s area was a tip of the cap to his inspiration: Canadian Water Caper.

With his success at Ontario Place, McMillan became a major figure in the blossoming world of children’s design.
“Suddenly I became the world’s expert on child’s play,” says McMillan. People were calling him the next Walt
Disney and the “father of soft play” for his use of vinyl-clad foam. Over the next decade he designed playgrounds in
various SeaWorlds in America and amusement parks in France. He built a park in a mall in Chicago and was
shuttled out to Alabama and asked to transform 3,000 acres into a science park. In 1980, McMillan teamed up with
Jim Henson’s Children’s Television Workshop to create Sesame Place, the first of a planned series of tactile
amusement parks to be built across America with the aim of helping children “learn through play”.

It was a decade of remarkable creativity. McMillan remembers sitting around with Lloyd one day and looking at a
glass jar of pickled onions. “Wouldn’t it be something to be able to roll around in there?” he thought. They set about
ordering masses of light plastic balls for a “ball crawl” in San Diego – the world’s first ball pit, an invention that
soon became ubiquitous in McDonald’s and Ikess across the world.

It seemed to McMillan as if he was working in virgin territory, designing places for kids with a seriousness of
purpose he hadn’t seen before. Watching children use his equipment, often in ways he could never have
anticipated, made him more and more certain: play wasn’t a frivolous distraction from learning, but something essential to childhood and indeed humanity. The line-up-and-go-on-an-iron-ride model of the theme park was defunct. The key was to build things that sparked interaction, between kids and the equipment, but especially between the kids themselves. According to his design philosophy, each park wasn’t just a place to jump on a shockingly large air mattress. It was “a place where a child can ask questions of what it means to be human”. McMillan formed his own design company, determined to build his own series of parks his way. “After Sesame Place, I was getting really arrogant, really confident,” he says. “I had sites. I had Montreal, I had Sacramento. I was going to build and operate my own parks and show them how it would be done.

“I got crazy, mate. I was going to change the world. I was going to change American culture and therefore the world. I was sure I was going to do it.”

Instead, the world changed without him. The skills required to fund and run a theme park, of course, are very different from the creativity needed to design one. Spoiled by the free rein he had been given at Ontario Place, he often chafed at the demands and restrictions of his corporate partners. One project fell through, then another. McMillan grew tired with throwing himself into designs only to watch them collapse for reasons beyond his control. “Eric could project a very pure kind of childlike play,” says Henry Piersig, a German-born prop builder who was one of McMillan’s collaborators. “But maybe eventually he ran out of steam.”

More than that, the times had changed. If the design for children in the 60s and 70s had been full of possibility and experimentation, the prevailing mood in the 1980s was of caution. “In the 80s, there was this real turn towards a safety culture,” says Lange. “We tamped down on a lot of innovation and a lot of the risk and reward of the children’s environment.” After a series of lawsuits against playgrounds, “liability”, not “creativity”, became the most important word in children’s design. The adventure playgrounds that once dotted North America were shuttered. The massive wooden jungle gyms in schoolyards were replaced with modest climbing structures.

With its bright colours and unruly design, Children’s Village became a relic on the lakeshore – a vision of the future from the near past. “It feels like it was meant to be the beginning of something,” says Ceric. “But it ended up ending there.”

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Children’s Village was closed in 2002. The rest of Ontario Place shut down in 2011. Recently, though, I’ve seen more and more of my peers reflecting nostalgically about the “gloriously unsafe majesty” of Children’s Village. The park is a lost part of childhood for a whole cohort of Torontonians. It feels like a strange dream. Were the towers really so high? Did the ziplines really run so fast? Nowhere is more infused with nostalgia than the places you played in as a child. Looking back on the playgrounds of the past, however, is more than mere sentimentality, and it isn’t just specific to people who remember Children’s Village. “There’s something in the air,” says Alexandra Lange. “We understand that children’s play environment has been impoverished. And so looking back at those times when it wasn’t so impoverished feels really important.”

Today, as the kids who grew up running through the punching bag forest are having children of their own, it’s impossible not to think that Children’s Village represented a brief moment when a different style of mass play was possible. Instead of an amusement park in which kids line up for hours to sit passively on a moving piece of intellectual property, what if a park just provided the raw materials for child-instigated, slightly dangerous adventure?

This summer, the provincial government is accepting proposals for new developments on the Ontario Place grounds. In the years since it closed, there have been plans for a year-round water park, for a casino, for an enormous ferris wheel. There have been calls to relocate the Science Centre to the waterfront or turn the entire thing into a public park.

No one’s asked Eric McMillan what should be on the site of the former kids’ utopia he built on the waterfront. Now 77, he lives with his wife, Rose, in the Quebec countryside. He has an orange tree he likes to visit. He and Rose hand-grind their own coffee, build stone walls, snowshoe up the hills in the winter. The place is their own personal playground. “I can’t imagine a more privileged existence,” he says. He hasn’t visited the grounds himself in years.
“Ontario Place long ago became a very sad ruin of what could have been an interesting place,” he says. Still, McMillan can’t seem to stop himself from thinking about it. Recently, he came up with his own proposal for the site. In his reimagining, the empty pods have been transformed into massive lake filters – sucking up the water from Lake Ontario, cleaning it, and then sending it cascading into the lake below. The design takes Zeidler’s buildings and turns them into massive pieces of interactive art, where kids can help control the flow of water. The plan is whimsical and audacious, as outside-the-box and indifferent to the demands of commerce as ever. When I ask him what else should be done with the Ontario Place pods, he answers immediately. “They just can rip them down and turn them into scrap metal and build condos along the edge,” says McMillan. “Or …they can go really crazy.”

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