

State of Play: What's in Demand in Today's Playgrounds?

By Scott Roschi, creative director at Landscape Structures

There is perhaps no better refuge for kids from social media and screen time than their local playground. And with today's bigger, more colorful and more engaging playground equipment, kids are enjoying richer play experiences than ever.



Building a successful playground requires more than selecting equipment from a catalog. Communities are increasingly asking for play spaces that feel distinctive, reflect local identity and serve a broad range of users. In doing so, agencies are creating better playgrounds and also strengthening the sense of place and belonging within their communities.

Among the things that communities are trying to achieve in their playgrounds today are:

1. Spaces that reflect the community

Communities are creating unique play spaces that they can claim as their own and use to showcase their identity and history.

In Napa, Calif., Playground Fantastico redefines community spaces with its contemporary approach to playground design by creating a vibrant and engaging environment to invite imagination and social connection. And the walking bridge that connects two play towers at a new playground in Peachtree Corners, Georgia, recreates the pedestrian bridge that was recently built above a highway at the entrance to town.

Play spaces are even helping shape the identities of communities that don't have central gathering spaces. In Shoreview, Minnesota, a destination playground was built on the same campus as a library, community center and other amenities. Together, they've created a community-defining town center.

2. Taking play to new heights

Playgrounds are also growing upward. Until about a decade ago, most playground structures topped out around 8 feet. Today, it is common to see towers rising 30 feet or more at destination playgrounds.

These taller structures offer multiple benefits. They allow communities with limited park space to build vertically when they cannot expand horizontally. They also introduce graduated challenges, letting kids choose how much risk or complexity they want to take on as they climb, slide and explore.

Modern materials such as netting and belting help keep these structures safe while still offering excitement. Elevated platforms can also create social spaces where kids gather, observe and interact, appealing to those who may prefer social play over high-energy movement.

3. Playgrounds built through collaboration

Collaboration is another defining feature of today's playground projects. In many cases, equipment providers help communities maximize play value within tight budgets or small footprints by offering preconfigured designs that pack in a wide range of activities.

In other projects, collaboration goes deeper. Landscape architects, designers and park staff are working together to integrate playgrounds into existing terrain, trees and natural features. Slopes, elevation changes and shade can become part of the play experience rather than obstacles to work around.

Inclusive play advocates are also helping everyone from playground designers to city leaders make play more accessible. Together, they're building playgrounds that can be enjoyed by kids of all abilities. And they're closing "play deserts" and making playgrounds more available to historically underserved community members.