



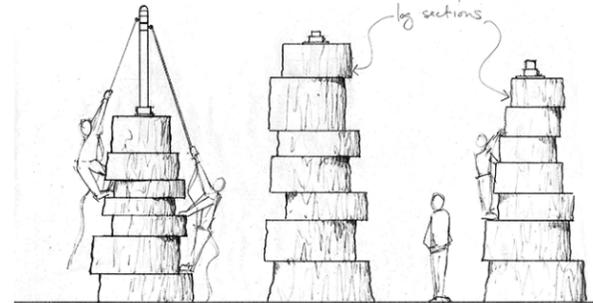
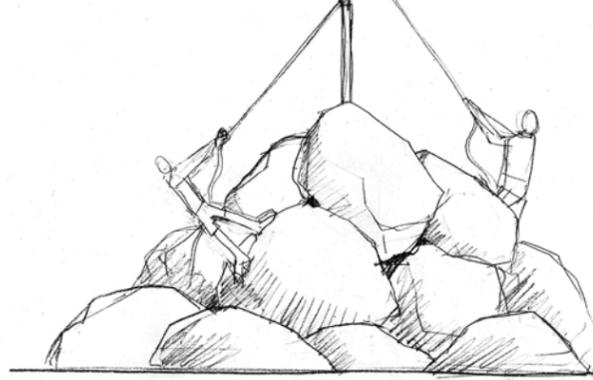
GO WILD, OREGON CHILD

NATURE-BASED PLAY AREAS ARE
PULLING KIDS BACK OUTSIDE.

BY KATHARINE LOGAN

COURTESY GREENWORKS, PC

WESTMORELAND PARK



PLAN

- 1 PICNIC AREA
- 2 SAND AND WATER PLAY
- 3 CREEK MOUND
- 4 CREEK RESTORATION AREA
- 5 LOOSE PARTS/FORT BUILDING
- 6 LOG CLIMBER
- 7 MOUNTAIN MOUND
- 8 SLIDE
- 9 FOREST MOUND
- 10 BALANCE LOGS
- 11 TREE GROVE

IN OREGON, NATURE IS NEVER FAR AWAY.

Trees and rivers, coastal cliffs, mountains, high desert, and countless lakes: The diversity and accessibility of nature are what Oregonians love about living here, and often why they move to the state in the first place. But for children who live in Oregon's cities, nature can seem remote. Portland kids can't just come home from school, drop their backpacks on the floor, and head for the coast—and that's if they'd want to. Even in Oregon, the plugged-in, highly scheduled, indoor lives of contemporary kids make them vulnerable to what Richard Louv termed “nature-deficit disorder”—an idea coined in his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*. Of Oregon parents who responded to a statewide survey, 96 percent wanted more outdoor activity for their kids. So it's no surprise that the nature-based play movement, which in recent years has taken off across North America, has found fertile ground in Oregon.



As the parent of a child who at age five judged two and a half hours of kindergarten too much time indoors, and who at age 11 really only hits peak bliss when we're camping, I'm convinced of the value of outdoor play in any amount. When I heard about a slew of exciting new projects aimed at getting kids outdoors again in Oregon, I decided to visit and see what is going on.

ABOVE
Sculptural play pieces and loose parts engage kids with natural materials.

OPPOSITE
The play area's site plan is structured by a narrative of the park's creek.

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COURTESY GREENWORKS, P.C.

A nature-based play area can be as wild and unstructured as a stretch of forest where kids can do what they like, or it can be as carefully designed as a seemingly random logjam in a neighborhood park—as long as it invites kids to engage in open-ended play with elements of nature. “It's a simple hope,” says Mark Davison, a parks planning and design manager at Metro, Portland's regional government, and a prime mover behind the rise of nature-based play in Oregon, “that kids enjoy nature, and that play in nature becomes the advocacy for nature.”

To succeed, a natural play project has to do three things. It has to provide kids with a substantive physical and emotional experience. It has to win over parents, who play a key role in helping or hindering children's enjoyment of nature. And it has to achieve both those objectives with design that suits its context. For my visit, Jaime English,

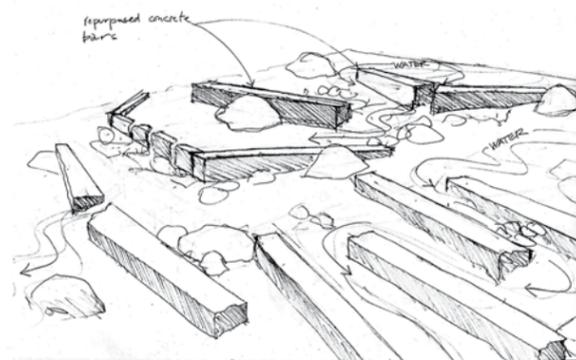
a manager at Oregon State Parks, tipped me off to three exemplary projects that illustrate a range of successful solutions, from urban to rural, structured to free-form.

When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was restoring a creek that traverses Westmoreland Park, a 42-acre municipal park bordering a southeast Portland neighborhood, Portland Parks and Recreation (PPR) took the opportunity to upgrade the park's tired and often soggy playground. Westmoreland now boasts the city's first permanent nature playground, designed as a pilot project for nature-based play in Portland's parks. The new play area has been a hit with neighbors and design professionals alike: PPR staff heard of families visiting twice a day both days of the weekend, and ASLA Oregon acknowledged the project's success with a 2014 Honor Award.



LEFT
Westmoreland's seemingly random logjam is carefully detailed for safety, durability, and ease of maintenance.

BELOW
Sand and water: timeless, open-ended play.



The playground's tilted logjam and sculptures of roped-together log segments invite play akin to tree climbing. A boulder mound presents varying degrees of challenge for climbing, balancing, and unstructured play. Freestanding frames encourage building projects with loose parts—sticks and branches that parks staff members leave out for the kids, or pinecones and stones they find for themselves. Columnar basalt stones engraved with evocative phrases tell the story of the park's recently restored creek. There's a sand and water play area with edges designed for wheelchair accessibility. And beyond the built play area, a grove of giant sequoias encircles a grassy area reserved for free play.

The city gave the landscape architects, GreenWorks, PC, a mandate to “go as wild as you can,” says Michelle Mathis, formerly an associate with GreenWorks and now principal at Learning

Landscapes. As a heavily used neighborhood playground, however, Westmoreland is “definitely more urban and more built than things at the wild end of the spectrum,” adds GreenWorks associate Ben Johnson, ASLA.

Westmoreland's design and construction team committed to creating custom play equipment with natural materials. Designing for these materials was more intense than for conventional play equipment, and fabrication entailed more consultation. There were the sourcing of logs and boulders; the working out of attachments for specific and irregular components; and the instructions to log carpenters in the use of safety probes on site so that the uneven openings between logs would allow *both* head and torso to pass through, or *neither*. PPR also made three technical requirements: These massive, round materials must not move; each log must be detachable to facilitate replacement; and each log



must last as long as possible. “Those criteria made it more expensive and harder to do,” says Sandra Burtzos, ASLA, a project manager at PPR, “but we don't have the maintenance budget to come back soon, or pay a lot later.”

The resulting play pieces, in addition to providing natural play opportunities for kids, have yielded a surprise bonus: intergenerational play. It turns out that adults who feel awkward or bored on conventional playground equipment enjoy climbing a boulder or manipulating the flow of water. “It's because it doesn't look like a toy,” Burtzos says.

Where Westmoreland redefines playground equipment to support nature-based play, the next project I visited, at the Portland Children's Museum, challenges the need for playground equipment at all.

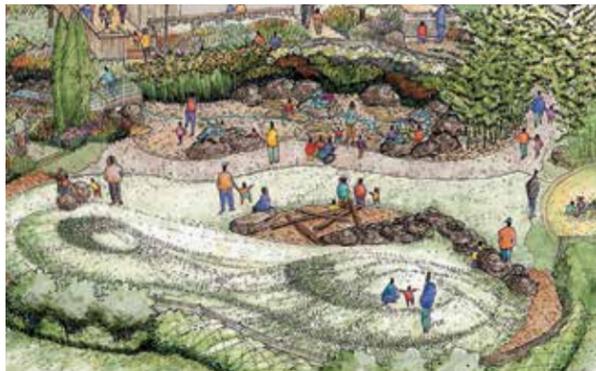
The Portland Children's Museum commissioned the landscape architecture firm Mayer/Reed to design Outdoor Adventure, a nature-based play area on 1.3 acres of wooded hillside with no play equipment, all-natural materials, and genuine landscape engagement. “They wanted to immerse

ABOVE
At the Portland Children's Museum, a western red cedar offers a natural challenge.

LEFT
A vine maple sculpture by Patrick Dougherty invites investigation.

COURTESY GREENWORKS, PC. PHOTOS: ADAM KUBY, DRAWING

ANITA SEEGER, TOP; ANNE SAMUEL, BOTTOM



the kids in landscape," says Carol Mayer-Reed, FASLA, a partner with Mayer/Reed, "and then to give parents the confidence that they can let go a bit and really let the kids play."

So deceptively simple are Outdoor Adventure's play settings that the night before the exhibit's opening, JJ Rivera, the museum's director of exhibits and operations, had a panic attack. "There's nothing out there!" he remembers thinking. "There's nothing to play with!" But the opening day, of course, proved him wrong. "Kids were climbing trees," Rivera says. "They were playing with sticks. They were playing with water and sand. They were playing with each other."

Mayer/Reed's design arranges the site as a series of concentric zones that expand from the museum's back door in increasing increments of wildness: a shaded overlook for parents; a split-

rail-fenced enclosure containing toddler-scale versions of all the play opportunities on the larger site; a boulder-edged water course with pump, rocks, and sand; a patch of bare earth ready for trowels; sticks and logs for building projects; a towering western red cedar with low, spreading branches; an open pavilion that faces an amphitheater of stepped stone blocks; a sculpture of woven vine maple that's part maze, part tree house, part mythical beast; and some apparently unclaimed edges that seem to be growing wild.

"Adults can provide materials and settings," says the museum's director, Ruth Shelly, "but [kids'] ability to take those materials and create experiences of their own devising go far beyond what we could predict or prescribe." Shelly says she at first resented the space taken up by paths that zigzag across the sloped site at an accessible incline. But she has been delighted to see how children at

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Absorbed in nature; a schematic sketch for the steep site; children can create their own play; and a concept sketch for landscape engagement.

OPPOSITE
The farther kids get from the museum's back door, the wilder the site grows.

KATHY FRY, TOP LEFT; MAYER/REED, TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM LEFT; ANNE SAMUEL, BOTTOM RIGHT

ANITA SEEGER, TOP LEFT; CAROL MAYER-REED, FASLA, TOP RIGHT; MAYER/REED, BOTTOM



PLAN

- 1 MUSEUM FIELD STATION
- 2 OBSERVATION POINT
- 3 LOW CHALLENGE/TODDLER AREA, BAMBOO GROVE, SAND/WATER PLAY, MOUNDED LAWN, AND SHALLOW WATER PLAY
- 4 CREEK/ROCKY STREAMBED
- 5 RUSTIC CAMPGROUND, DIG PIT, AND LOOSE PARTS PLAY
- 6 SWITCHBACK TRAILS
- 7 STONE AMPHITHEATER, CAMPFIRE, PAVILION, AND RESTROOMS
- 8 BIG MISTER TWISTER
- 9 WILD EDGES AND THICKETS, PERIMETER FENCES
- 10 ZOOM (CLIMBING TREE)
- 11 MEADOW



different stages of development challenge themselves running those slopes and corners. "It has been one of the most surprising elements to offer instant additional challenge," she says, adding that shortcuts created by the more adventurous kids have been made official with log cribbing to retain the slopes, making a kind of life-sized game of Chutes and Ladders.

At the top of the water channel, I watched a child leap from boulder to boulder, stagger, and recover. We adults exchanged looks of alarm. "Risk is a big conversation," Rivera says. "As a children's museum, we're providing a space that allows people to challenge their abilities. Challenge is how we learn." Having taken precautions such as installing a playground-rated fall zone under the great cedar, the museum largely trusts safety to its visitors' judgment. If staff members who monitor the play area are concerned about a child's safety, the policy is to ask the child's parents whether they think the child is ready for that challenge. "We never want to say, 'Don't do this,'" Rivera says. "This space is all about what you want to do in nature." From there, the hope is that children and their families will want to do more: hike a trail, for example, or camp in the woods.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
A dam allows kids to control the flow of water; Outdoor Adventure is an Audubon Society-certified Gold Backyard Habitat; a rocky streambed has no play equipment, all-natural materials, and genuine engagement.

OPPOSITE
Silver Falls' animal-themed play pods invite children to roar like a cougar or climb like a bear.

ANITA SEEGER, TOP LEFT; CAROL MAYER-REED, FASLA, TOP RIGHT; KATHY FRY, BOTTOM



COURTESY GREENWORKS, PC

For those who want to do just that, Silver Falls State Park, an hour or so south of Portland, offers the opportunity. On a fall morning in the park, sun slants between the trees, striping a green understory of fern, salal, and Oregon grape. In the distance, a creek rushes, and gravel crunches underfoot on the quarter-mile loop that defines the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's

first nature-based play area. Opening off the trail, a series of animal-themed play pods offer interpretive experiences that link children to the forest around them. There will be about a dozen of these pods, three of which—cougar, bear, and bird—are now complete.

The design of the play pods aims to charm and introduce a lively intelligence into the forest. In the bird area, for example, three types of bird's nests are represented, scaled up to more-or-less human size: a giant basket made of steel rings suggests the neat symmetry characteristic of crow's nests; a circle of posts set in the ground provides an armature for kids to weave a nest of branches like a red-tailed hawk's; and a log representing the nest of a woodpecker has been cleaved in two, hollowed out, and put back together with black steel bands top and bottom, with a big round hole for an entrance. Near the nests, steel boxes contain nesting materials for



kids to touch, and assorted large wooden eggs are pleasing for kids to hold, place, and carry.

“It’s beautiful, it fits its context, and it looks like a lot of fun,” sums up Mike Faha, ASLA, a founding principal at GreenWorks, which designed this site as well as the natural play area at Westmoreland Park. “But,” he adds, “that maintenance thing....”

Most of the larger pieces are built of wood set in or on the ground, where it will naturally decay. The whole idea of a play area using natural materials encountered resistance when it first came up during the park’s master planning process, but the prospect of rot doesn’t faze Steve Janiszewski, the park system’s operations support manager. “It’s just the cost of going with wood,” he says. “We’re committed to that.” He notes that the park has a ready supply of replacement logs, and monitoring for deterioration is simply part

of the maintenance process. “This is supposed to be real nature,” he says. “It’s important to touch real materials.”

For children ready to go farther into nature, yet still within the safety of a well-defined zone where parents can watch, a patch of forest enclosed by the trail has been designated as a wild area where children can play as they like: look for insects, build a shelter, play adventure games. A few little animal-print trails are meant to encourage kids to venture off the path, but parks staff can’t tell whether kids are taking up the invitation. “There might be places kids are going where they’re not leaving a lot of evidence,” Janiszewski says. “If they just want to go and hide in the forest and sit next to a tree, maybe we won’t see that.”

Before designating the wild play area, parks staff combed the site for plants, wildlife, or anything else

ABOVE
In the bird area, three types of birds’ nests are represented, complete with wooden eggs.

OPPOSITE
A quarter-mile circuit connects the interpretive play pods and defines a wild play area in the forest.

COURTESY GREENWORKS, PC



COUGAR PLAY PLAN

- 1 LOG CLIMBING AREA
- 2 SEATING AREA
- 3 SLEEPING LIMBS
- 4 COUGAR GROWL STATION
- 5 COUGAR DEN
- 6 ROCK SCRAMBLE
- 7 SAND PIT WITH DEER 'REMAINS'
- 8 STAIRS TO UPPER PLAY AREA
- 9 MAIN PATH



that would be vulnerable or harmful. Beyond that, Janiszewski says, “it’s going to be a balance of free play and preserving what’s here.” ●

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Project Credits
OUTDOOR ADVENTURE LEAD DESIGN, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAYER/REED, PORTLAND, OREGON. **ARCHITECTURE** HENNEBERY EDDY ARCHITECTS, PORTLAND, OREGON. **ARTIST** (VINE MAPLE BRANCH STRUCTURE BIG MISTER TWISTER) PATRICK DOUGHERTY, CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA. **STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING** NISHKIAN DEAN, PORTLAND, OREGON. **CIVIL ENGINEERING** MGH ASSOCIATES, VANCOUVER, WASHINGTON. **GEOTECH** GEOTECHNICAL RESOURCES, INC., BEAVERTON, OREGON. **MECHANICAL, ELECTRICAL, PLUMBING** INTERFACE

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