

Strolling through Melbourne's Southbank precinct you might stumble across a large cluster of monolithic bluestone boulders perched atop a series of small workshop dollies; a contorted slide balancing precariously atop a stack of colourful plastic buckets; and what looks like a pile of concrete demolition debris, held tenuously together with ratchet straps.

At every point, children can be seen crawling across this site like ants: swinging their bodies from warped, dented monkey bars and balancing along rope-webs strung between stones.

This new play space, called *Rocks on Wheels*, is the work of artist Mike Hewson. The project can be confusing for the public. Is this a playground? A sculpture? Or an unfinished piece of urban infrastructure?

Hewson's playable public art works in Sydney and Melbourne are known to be 'risky' – but risk means different things to different people. And it's both the actual risks – and the *perceived* risks – that make his artworks so important across a range of disciplines: the art world, landscape architecture, urban design, planning and child development, among others.

#### Play and public life

Urban play has long been synonymous with the cultural life of art and the city. In the decades of Europe's baby boom, new play-space concepts emerged with a focus on 'free play' (distinct from earlier playgrounds resembling open-air gymnasiums), as one of children's fundamental needs.

*Tufsen*, Egon Möller-Nielsen's unusual sculpture was the first unscripted free play sculpture of its kind, created in 1949, bringing together abstract art and playability in a public space. This new approach generated a subsequent boom in innovative playable sculptures.

During the 1980s we saw a significant shift in response to questions of risk, hazards and children's safety. The risk of accidental harm began to dominate peoples' concerns, which went hand-in-hand with threats and fears of potential litigation<sup>[1]</sup>. As play-safety standards were introduced in Australia and other modern industrialised countries, innovation in the arena of a playable public realm slowed dramatically. This led to the saturation of standardised, off-the-shelf playgrounds that continue to dominate so much of our public realm today: in these spaces children are fenced off from public life, and their potential movement in these spaces is entirely scripted: up, across and down.

Over the past 30 years, interpretations of these safety standards continue to regularly confuse the meanings of 'risk' and 'hazard'. A risk being something the child is aware of, forcing them to identify, analyse and overcome a challenge (= good); whereas a hazard puts one in danger because a condition for injury exists the user cannot perceive (= not good). Conflating these distinctions has resulted in an attitude toward play which is highly risk-averse, and counter-productive to children's well-being.

#### The risk of no risk

The irony is that, while these generic off-the-shelf playgrounds may indeed be "safe" as far as accidental injury is concerned, there is a hidden risk associated with such safety: children are denied opportunities to learn about risk in a controlled environment.

Children need consistent exposure to risk from an early age to develop both physical and psychological resilience. Ongoing exposure helps them develop resilience, adaptability, and self-determination in response to risk. We should equip young people with the tools to deal with stressors as they transition from childhood to adolescence, university-life and beyond.

Based on this premise, Hewson's 'risky' sculptural play environments can bolster, fortify and increase both physical and psychological resilience among children. In contrast to the conventional playground where movement is predetermined, Hewson's projects offer children the opportunity to explore unfamiliar, unscripted, innovative and playable sculptural worlds.

#### Cultural value

Hewson's sculptural playgrounds don't just offer the opportunity for children to take risks. They also have rich cultural value, operating in the intellectual realm of art discourse.

As with much great art, with *Rocks on Wheels* nothing is quite as it appears. While it may appear that the whole work is held together with sticky tape and chicken wire, each playable element has been meticulously designed, structurally engineered and thoughtfully integrated into the surrounding urban realm. It is the *illusion* of danger that gives the works a creative sense of the uncanny.

Hewson's sculpture references a 1962 Diane Arbus photo, also titled *Rocks on Wheels*, which depicts seemingly weightless fake rocks being rolled into place on workshop dollies, somewhere near Disneyland, California. Arbus' artwork is a brooding monochrome image that contemplates the edges of a simulacra, where the perceived 'reality' of Disneyland begins to break down. The signs and symbols of both Arbus' image and Hewson's sculpture have detached from their real-world counterparts to take on a life of their own.

As exemplified by Hewson's project, playable sculptures serve to enhance the role of public art in shaping a culturally diverse, intergenerational public space, all while challenging the conventional notion of

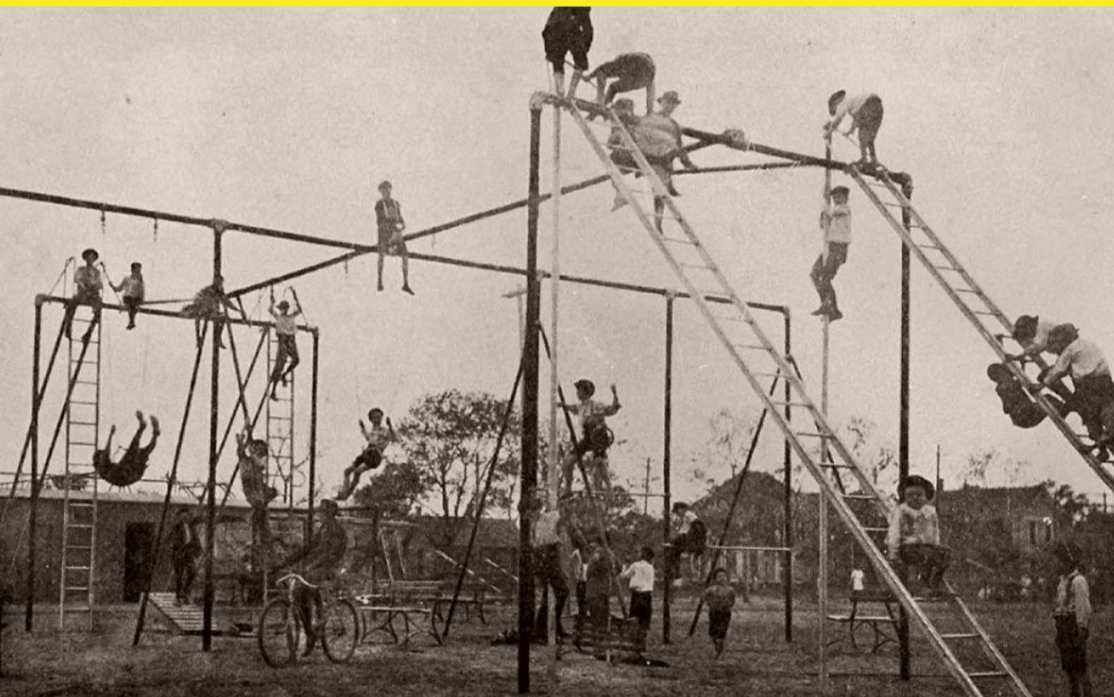
the standardised, risk-averse playground. In reshaping the future of Australian cities, playable sculptures can play three vital roles:

**1. Environmental Sustainability:** We embrace the urban densification model, with the rising trend of families relocating to high-rise apartments. However, this comes with urgent growing practical needs for families, including a diversification of play opportunities for our children and young adults. The incorporation of playable sculptures into the urban landscape liberates children from the traditional, isolated 'fenced off' playgrounds situated on the outskirts of public spaces, and encourages them to actively engage as integral members of civic life.

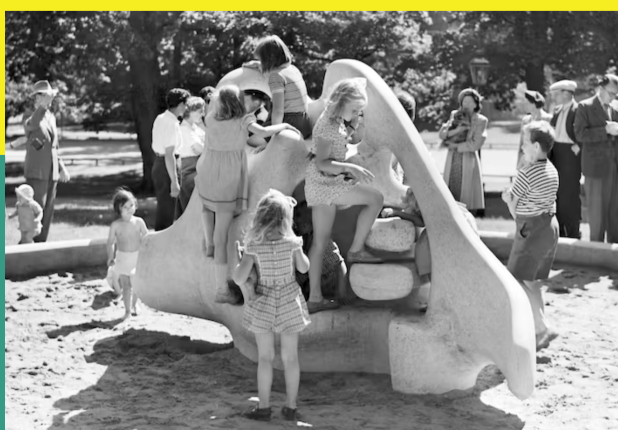
**2. Social Justice:** Cities are expressions of power, and by challenging traditional spatial norms, - which enable greater flexibility and disruption of typical urban routines - playable sculptures confront the established symbols of power that govern our urban areas. Designing for those that have traditionally been excluded allows for greater social inclusion.

**3. Risk and Resilience:** Designed with play-affordances that invite an array of curious and unpredictable responses from all ages, these sculptures-for-play present us with chances to embrace the 'challenges' necessary for fostering resilience - be it psychological, intellectual, or physical - ultimately preparing us for life ahead.

As we continue to transition towards the urban densification model, I firmly believe that the incorporation of playable sculptures across our cities play a crucial role in the essential transformation of our environment, facilitating the emergence of a fresh, intergenerational vision for our future cities.



[1] Today, in the modern industrialised world, playground risk is extremely small in terms of fatalities. In terms of lesser injuries, the risk is far lower than for most traditional sports which children are encouraged to engage in, and about the same as the risk encountered at home. Australian records show us that threats of litigation seldom lead to actual claims. There was an average of 3 public playground claims per year in VIC & TAS from 2007 – 2014, most of which were minor injuries including fractures, sprains and bruises. [Play Australia Risk Management Guide - Getting the Balance Right: A guide to the assessment of risks and benefits in play provision and Australian Standard 4685:2014].



## Speaker Bios

**Mike Hewson** is a visual artist with a background in structural engineering and heavy-civil construction. His award-winning projects pioneer new ways to merge conceptual art projects into the public realm.

**Natalia Krysiak** is a practicing architect, play consultant and founder of 'Cities for Play'.

**Louise Pearson** is the studio director at Aspect Studios, Sydney. Trained as an artist and designer, Louise has more than 25 years of experience in shaping the public domain.

**Dr. David Eager** is the Professor of Risk Management and Injury Prevention at UTS, and an internationally recognised expert on the safety aspects of playgrounds.

**Dr. Quentin Stevens** is Associate Dean of Research and Innovation in the School of Architecture and Urban Design at RMIT University in Melbourne.

**Owen Café** is a proud Whadjuk-Pindjarup man working as the principal landscape architect at Blaklash.

**Claire Edwards** is a researcher and practitioner focusing on public space, place and playful cities.

**Abbie Galvin** is the 24th NSW Government Architect. She is

responsible for championing design excellence across the State, as well as shaping quality places and public spaces through policy and advocacy.

**Agatha Gothe-Shape** is an internationally recognised artist whose practice spans improvised and procedural performance, visual and public artworks.

**Dr. Gregor Mews** is an academic and award winning author, whose research focuses on transforming urban conditions through evidence-based and more-than human design around the globe.

**Anne Loxley** is an award-winning curator with deep expertise in the public domain and in collaborating with artists and communities to creatively address significant issues. She is currently Executive Director of Arts & Cultural Exchange in Parramatta.

**Lleah Smith** is an artist, curator and researcher working at the intersection of pedagogy and art. She was Curator of Programs and Learning for the 2022 Biennale of Sydney.

**Nadia Odlum** is an artist and PhD candidate at University of Sydney, researching historical and contemporary intersections of public art and play.

**Dr. Sanné Mestrom** is an artist and academic at University of Sydney. Her research advocates for the transformative power of urban play.

Top: Playground in Dallas, Texas, early 1900s.

Above: Mike Hewson, *Rocks on Wheels*, Melbourne, 2022.

Right: *Tufsen*, Egon Möller-Nielsen, 1949

# Panel Summaries

## Panel 1 The Potency of Play

Claire Edwards  
Quentin Stevens  
Owen Café  
Convened by Sanné Mestrom

Play is a phenomenon that extends far beyond the realm of childhood. 'The Potency of Play' will explore the transformative potential of play within public space. Play's potential is both subversive and emancipatory, and it is as important for adults as it is for children. Within the context of play, we encounter the concept of 'loose space'—a breathing space within the fabric of urban life. Loose space offers a myriad of opportunities for exploration, discovery, and embracing the unexpected. It represents the unregulated, the spontaneous, and the risky aspects of human behaviour. This panel discussion will generate fresh perspectives on the role of urban disciplines in "loosening up" public spaces and contribute to an enriched and diversified understanding of play: How do we create physical and cultural conditions in our cities that make space for play? Drawing upon interdisciplinary approaches and knowledge, this panel aims to transcend the categories of 'play' generally ascribed to the design of the built environment. It will re-consider conventional understandings of play, and challenge attendees to consider play's potential to 'loosen' public space, to create vibrant and inclusive urban environments for all generations.

## Panel 2 Risks and Rewards: Interdisciplinary Collaboration in the Search for the Playful City

Abbie Galvin  
Agatha Gothe-Snape  
Gregor Mews  
Anne Loxley  
Convened by Nadia Odlum

In an era where private interests are continuously encroaching upon our cherished public spaces, "Risks and Rewards: Interdisciplinary Collaboration in the Search for the Playful City" offers an interdisciplinary discussion on reshaping the future of civic life. Art, culture, and creative endeavors are emerging as potent catalysts for 'loosening' up public space and revitalising the public realm. We recognize that artists and organizations bear a profound responsibility to advocate for the people, driving the transformation towards people-centric cities. This panel explores how diverse disciplines can unite to expand opportunities for urban play. We'll delve into the challenge of reconciling risk perceptions with the creation of innovative, inclusive projects that draw participants from all walks of life and age groups. We'll explore community consultation and co-design methods as powerful tools for tailoring playable projects to user needs. Spotlighting the distinctive contributions of contemporary public art to this dynamic field, we'll tackle the myriad constraints, peculiarities, boundaries, and obstacles that confront artists working in the public realm. Join us in envisioning a future where the public realm becomes a playground for all, shaped by art, culture, and community engagement.

Imagine a city where play is not confined to traditional playgrounds, but permeates every corner of the urban landscape, creating a vibrant and dynamic environment that encourages creativity, social connection, and resilience.

In this **Play Beyond Playgrounds** symposium we will challenge the status quo of urban play, asking the crucial questions: How can we harness the transformative power of play in public life, to create better future cities and empower individuals and communities? And what role can public art and design play in this vital transformation?

This two-day symposium explores the need for play beyond playgrounds in our increasingly high-density cities.

Comprising of keynotes, panel discussions, workshops and site visits this dynamic interdisciplinary event will bring together experts from public art, urban planning, landscape architecture, child development, and urbanism to collaborate, converse, grapple and play.

Led by visual arts researchers Dr. Sanné Mestrom and Nadia Odlum from **ART/PLAY/RISK**, in partnership with leading landscape architect firm **ASPECT Studios**, join us to shape the new playable city that empowers individuals of all ages to thrive and grow.

**ART  
PLAY  
RISK**

**ASPECT Studios**



Australian Government  
Australian Research Council



2023 SYMPOSIUM  
Thursday 30th November &  
Friday 1st December  
University of Sydney,  
Camperdown Campus

# Program



QR for Detailed Program and Venue details

	DAY 1	DAY 2
9:00am	Registration, Acknowledgement of Country	Arrival and Introduction
9:30am	Speaker 1: Sanné Mestrom	Workshop 1: David Eager
10:30am	Panel 1: The Potency of Play	Workshop 2: Gregor Mews
11:30am	Speaker: 2 Natalia Krysiak	Workshop 3: Sanné Mestrom
12:30pm	Lunch at cafés on campus	Lunch at cafés on campus
1:30 pm	Speaker 3: Mike Hewson	Bus to Aspect Studios 'Wild Play
2:30pm	Panel 2: Risks and Rewards	3:00pm Bus to Mike Hewson's 'St Peters Fences'
3:30pm	Speaker 4: Louise Pearson	
4:30pm	Networking at Chau Chak Wing Museum	5:30pm Mingle at the Local Pub
6:00pm	SCA Graduate exhibition opening, Sydney College of the Arts (on campus)	

**PLAY  
BEYOND  
PLAY  
GROUNDS**

Rethinking the  
role of public  
art in urban  
play.



Diane Arbus, Rocks on Wheels, Disneyland, 1962. Cal.