Plan E has delivered a play area in Perth’s Kings Park with the specific aim of reconnecting children with nature.
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE HAS SINCE ITS INCEPTION ACTED AS A STeward OF NATURE IN CITIES. THIS CONCEPTION OF NATURE HAS SHIFTED TO REFLECT DIFFERENT CONTEXTS. LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT FREDDIEK LAW OLMS TED SAW NATURALISTIC PUBLIC PARKS AND GREENWAYS AS AN ANTIQUE TO THE DEGRADATIONS OF THE INDUSTRIAL CITY. FOR ECLOGICAL PLANNING JAN McLEEHAN, NATURAL AREAS OF HIGH ECOCLOGICAL VALUE WERE TO BE PROTECTED FROM THE REMLESSER HUNGER OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT. PROMPTED BY THE INFLUENTIAL WRITINGS OF JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR RICHARD LOUV, A SHIFT IS OCCURRING IN PARK AND PLAYGROUND DESIGN TOWARDS NATURE PLAY AREAS FOR CHILDREN THAT ALLOW FOR UNSTRUCTURED OUTDOOR PLAY, TYPICALLY IN A SIMULACRUM OF NATURE.

WITH THE EMERGENCE OF THE NATURE PLAY PHENOMENON IN PERTH, THE “NATURE” THAT IS BEING REFERENCED IS URBAN BUSHLAND. IN PERTH THIS CONSTITUTES REMNANT BUSH SITES, BUT ALSO OVERGROWN VACANT LOTS, LAWNEYS AND BACKYARDS. THESE LANDSCAPES ARE RAPIDLY DISAPPEARING IN PERTH, PARTLY DUE TO AN OVERHEATED REAL ESTATE MARKET AND THE PURSUIT OF INFILL DEVELOPMENT TARGETS. THE FACT THAT THESE ONCE UNVALUED LEFTOVER LANDSCAPES ARE NOW BEING SYMBOLOGICALLY RESURRECTED AS EXPENSIVE, HIGHLY DESIGNED, NATURE PLAY AREAS REFLECTS THE BROADER CHANGES THAT HAVE OCCURRED IN PERTH OVER THE PAST DECADES. AS PERTH’S URBANIZATION HAS MARCHED RELENTLESSLY NORTH AND SOUTH, THE DISTANCE TO THE “BUILD” HAS STRETCHED ACCORDINGLY AND IT IS NOW TYPICALLY OUT OF THE DAY-TO-DAY REACH OF MOST CHILDREN. IN PART DUE TO THIS, THE VALUE WE PLACE ON THE CHUNKS OF BUSH THAT REMAIN IS NOW INCREASED. IF CHILDREN TODAY WERE SET FREE IN OUR REMAINING “BUSH FOREVER” SITES OR REGIONAL OPEN SPACES TO BUILD CUBBIES, LIGHT FIRES AND GENERALLY CUT LOOSE, AS THEIR GEN X PARENTS DID, IT WOULD BE CONSIDERED VANDALISM.

THE POPULARITY OF THE NATURE PLAY EXPERIENCE IN PERTH ALSO REFLECTS THE FACT THAT OUR SUBURBAN PARKS ARE BORING AS BAT POO, UNLESS YOU LIKE HITTING OR CHASING BALLS AROUND A FIELD. WHILE WE ARE QUICK TO BLAME THE RISE OF VIDEO GAMES, SOCIAL MEDIA AND TELEVISION FOR THE RISE IN PERTH’S SUBURBAN PARKS, IT MIGHT ALSO BE THE PARKS THEMSELVES THAT ARE TO BLAME. TAKE THE PARKS OF PERTH’S MIDDLE-RING SUBURBAN PARKS. THEY ARE MORE PARKS WITH OVALS (152 IN TOTAL) THAN THOSE WITH EITHER BARBECUE OR PICNIC FACILITIES. AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THEIR SIMPLIFIED DESIGN, THESE SUBURBAN PARKS OFFER LITTLE IN EITHER ECOLOGICAL OR SYMBOLIC TERMS. THEIR HIGHLY ARTIFICIAL NATURE PROVIDING LITTLE RELEASE FROM THE RAPIDLY DENSIFYING SUBURBAN CONTEXT.

IT IS IN THIS CONTEXT THAT KIO-TINTO NATURESCAPE PLAY AREA IN PERTH’S KING’S PARK WAS CONCEIVED WITH THE SPECIFIC AIM OF RECONNECTING CHILDREN WITH NATURE. IN NATURESCAPE, “NATURE” CONSTITUTES THEMED ZONES THAT REFERENCE PARTICULAR LANDSCAPE TYPES FOUND WITHIN THE SWAN COASTAL PLAIN, THE GEOGRAPHIC UNIT WITHIN WHICH PERTH IS SITED – INCLUDING PAPERBARK CREEK AND A WOOLAND. THESE THEMED LANDSCAPES ARE THEN EQUIPPED WITH PLAY INFRASTRUCTURE INCLUDING CLIMBING TOWERS, A CUBBY-BUILDING ZONE AND ROCKY MOUNDS CUT THROUGH WITH TUNNELS. THE CLOSE INSCRIPTION OF SUCH DIFFERENT LANDSCAPE TYPES, WITHIN A CONFINED AREA, CAN BE CONSIDERED A DRAMATIZATION OF THE REAL “NATURE” OF THE SWAN COASTAL PLAIN, WHICH GENERALLY WOULD NOT SUPPORT SUCH VARIETY. WHILE THE PLANTS ARE ECOLOGICALLY ACCURATE, THE ARRANGEMENT IS HIGHLY STAGED. NO DOUBT NECESSARILY SO; PERTH RESIDENTS WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO TRAVEL FAR JUST TO IMMERSE THEMSELVES IN A PATCH OF SCRUB. FINALLY, THESE THEMED “NATURAL” LANDSCAPES ARE THEN WRAPPED IN THE BANXSIA WOODLAND TYPICAL OF KING’S PARK, SEAMLESSLY BLENDING NATURESCAPE INTO THE PARK AS A WHOLE, AND SHIELDING THE HEART OF NATURESCAPE FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD. AGAIN, WHILE THE BANXSIA WOODLAND WOULD APPEAR TO BE THE REAL “NATURE” OF THE SITE, IT IS ITSELF MARKEDLY DIFFERENT FROM THE VEGETATION THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN FOUND IN THE PARK AT THE TIME OF EUROPEAN OCCUPATION. WHILE NATURESCAPE ASPIRES TO CONNECT CHILDREN WITH “NATURE,” EXACTLY WHAT NATURE THEY ARE CONNECTING WITH REMAINS SOMEWHAT ELUSIVE.
Semantics aside, Naturescape’s popularity is evidenced by the lines of SUVs to be found in the adjacent car park of a weekend morning. The design of Naturescape, by Perth-based practice Plan E, has been exceptionally well handled at all scales. From my observation, young children enjoy the extra challenge and interactivity that it allows. It skilfully provides just enough danger without ever being too dangerous. The design also skilfully masks the contradiction that lies at the heart of such nature play areas, that their apparent informality and mutability are actually highly designed, regulated and very expensive. The regulated nature of such playgrounds is evident from the conditions of entry, which include no unaccompanied children, no swimming and no throwing rocks, among others. While nature play areas are typically designed for children twelve years and younger, it will be interesting to see how nature play environments can be adapted to the needs of teenagers, who are particularly sensitive to overt control or surveillance by adults.

Interestingly, this contradiction is shared with contemporary zoo enclosures. In both, a highly staged “natural” scene gives the illusion of being undesigned. The transition from highly artificial playgrounds to naturalistic nature play areas has been mirrored in zoos as enclosures have shifted from equipped cages to pseudo-naturalistic environments. That said, the fundamental difference between nature play areas and naturalistic zoo enclosures is that in zoo enclosures the naturalistic illusion often mostly benefits the viewer, while in nature play areas it primarily serves the occupants. Naturescape is a landmark project that quite rightfully is now being emulated to various degrees in schools and parks around Perth. This proliferation of nature play areas in Perth can only be a positive thing in relation to alarming childhood obesity and “electronic overload” data. However, a broader question remains as to the provision of “nature” in our cities. The blanket application of infill development targets in our middle-ring suburbs has seen vegetation cover, typically conflated with “nature,” decrease dramatically. By way of example the typical Perth middle-ring suburb of Bayswater lost 12 percent of its vegetation cover in the three-year period from 2001 to 2004 alone. If the popularity of nature play environments in Perth is anything to go by, the symbolic equilibrium between the age-old constructs of nature and culture has been disturbed – a situation that in time will require more than a few isolated nature play areas to resolve.
**RIO TINTO NATURESCAPE**

**Perth, Western Australia**

**Practice**

David Smith, Michael Pearce, Jo Dutton, Tony Cook, Christo van Zyl, Tony Buck

**Planning Consultant**

Cardno

**Safety Auditor**

Exceed Consulting

**Electrical Engineer**

ETC Electrical Engineering

**Civil Engineer**

GHD Engineers

**Irrigation Design**

Hydroplan

**Environmental Science**

Nathan McQuoid

**Structural Engineer**

Terpos Engineering

**Landscape Contractor**

LD TOTAL

**Time Schedule**

Design and Documentation: 22 Months
Construction: 20 Months

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**Key**

- 01 Entry and Gathering Forecourt
- 02 Service Access
- 03 Entry screens
- 04 Immersion Entry
- 05 Bush Base Gathering
- 06 Family Seating Pools
- 07 Canopy Hide
- 08 Rock Spring and Pool
- 09 Forest Creek
- 10 Stone Gateways
- 11 Toilets
- 12 Restored Bushland
- 13 Community Gathering
- 14 Amphitheatre
- 15 Education Gathering
- 16 Cubbies and Cocoon
- 17 Compacted Limestone Path
- 18 Timber Path
- 19 Discovery and Immersion Thicket
- 20 Wetland
- 21 Wetland Gathering
- 22 Ground Hide
- 23 Wetland Teaching Node
- 24 Active Immersion Thicket
- 25 Small Informal Teaching Nodes
- 26 Compactated Laterite Path
- 27 Dryland Teaching Node (with fire pit)
- 28 Dryland Teaching Node

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08 **The Timber Tunnel**

Provides a bold architectural element.