

Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation:

**Tools Supporting the Processes of Designing Small
Recreational Public Spaces**

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Abstract

The doctoral dissertation entitled “*Tools Supporting the Processes of Shaping Small Recreational Public Spaces*” focuses on the analysis and improvement of the processes involved in preparing and implementing small urban spaces designed for play and recreation—particularly playgrounds. The research combines theoretical study, empirical analysis, and design experimentation, resulting in the development of a practical tool that supports the formulation of design assumptions for such spaces. The main objective was to identify factors influencing the quality of public spaces, to understand the roles of various stakeholders within these processes, and to create a solution that both educates and facilitates collaboration among them.

Research Context and Scope

The study concentrates on small recreational areas - playgrounds and urban spaces - which play an important social and cultural role within the urban fabric. Their significance was examined in the context of contemporary transformations in urban design and the growing use of participatory practices in urban planning. The dissertation is situated within both local and European frameworks, with particular attention devoted to a comparison of Polish and Slovenian experiences in the design and implementation of playgrounds.

Research Methodology

The research part of the dissertation focuses on analyzing the processes of creating recreational spaces, emphasizing the identification of factors determining the quality of design outcomes and their reception by users. The study was conducted by an interdisciplinary team composed of a designer, an urban planner, and an architect. Two cities - Katowice and Ljubljana - were selected for analysis due to their comparable population sizes and similar socio-economic contexts. Both cities share post-socialist conditions characterized by urban transformation processes after 1989. This comparison allowed for the examination of different yet related models of creating and managing small public spaces in similar cultural and economic environments.

The aim of the research was to collect knowledge about the preparation, design, and implementation of playgrounds, and to determine the values and criteria that define a well-designed space. The study sought to capture the relationship between the design process, its agenda, stakeholder participation, and the final quality of the resulting spaces. The fundamental assumption was that the success of a project is determined not solely by the designer, but by specific stakeholder groups guided by diverse value systems and spatial expectations.

Research Process

A set of key questions was formulated regarding the origins and processes of playground creation, their use, the roles of stakeholders, and the values considered essential in the evaluation of designed spaces. The research sought to answer: *Who is responsible for the final form of public spaces? To what extent does the local community influence their creation? How does user participation affect the qualities of the designed environment?* The research was conducted in several stages. The first phase involved a literature review encompassing theories of public space design, participation, stakeholder theory, and contemporary urban concepts. This informed a detailed research methodology and case study selection criteria. Seven specific case studies - four in Katowice and three in Ljubljana - were analyzed, differing in scale, context, and method of implementation, as well as in the combination of stakeholder participation. Each case included an analysis of design documentation, location conditions, investor assumptions, and implementation processes. Field research involved site visits, photographic documentation, and in-depth interviews with designers, city officials, and users. Data were collected through structured questionnaires based on pre-established value matrices.

Research Tools and Conclusion

The study employed several tools: a value matrix, photographic documentation, document analysis, expert opinions, and interpretation of survey results. The value matrix provided a comparative basis for the projects and helped determine which

features were considered key by stakeholders. Photographic and design documentation captured spatial relations and usage patterns, while interviews and surveys provided insight into user perceptions and social aspects of the spaces.

The value matrix, developed through literature review and field experience, included nine main categories: genius loci, accessibility and permeability, layout and equipment, functionality, comfort and image, sense of community and social impact, safety and security, sustainability, cost-effectiveness. These categories reflected spatial, social, and economic dimensions, enabling comprehensive evaluation.

The results indicated that playground quality depends not only on design but also on the process and the involvement of informed stakeholders at each stage—from preparation through design to implementation. Projects developed through multi-stakeholder collaboration display greater coherence and value diversity, while those created without consultation often fail functionally or aesthetically.

The findings demonstrated the need for a tool that structures the design process of small public spaces, raises stakeholder awareness, and facilitates communication between them. Such a tool should support defining goals, values, and design assumptions prior to concept development—forming the foundation for the design stage of the dissertation.

Design Phase

The design phase develops conclusions from the empirical research and focuses on creating and testing a tool supporting playground design. The main identified problem was the lack of easy-accessible educational and awareness-building methods concerning public space creation, especially among influencers of urban interventions. The lack of clear design guidelines and mutual understanding between designers, communities, and local governments often leads to random and low-quality implementations.

The goal of the design phase was to develop a tool enabling the identification of necessary stakeholder groups and increasing awareness of values and needs to be addressed in designing recreational spaces. The process involved analyzing existing creative and participatory tools, and based on their structure and functionality, developing an original, locally adapted solution.

The Final Tool: “Make a Good Playground”

The result is a tool named *Make a Good Playground* - a toolkit consisting of forms and guidelines enabling users to prepare design assumptions for planned spatial interventions, such as playgrounds. The tool was designed as open-access and user-friendly, intended for various stakeholders—from residents and local leaders to designers and municipal representatives.

The work on the tool proceeded in three stages, each ending with a testing phase: prototype of an information and consultation point – to jointly define playground assumptions with initiators, prototype of participation workshops – testing a set of value cards for a specific location through moderated group work, and final tool – a free digital brochure for self-printing and use individually or in group workshops.

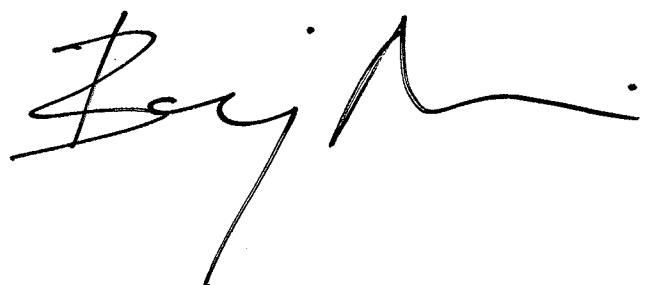
The tool is based on nine value groups defined in the research part. Each group was expanded into simplified questions that help to identify user needs, understand spatial context, and clarify expectations. Users can respond affirmatively or negatively, add comments, and identify stakeholders that are necessary for collaboration. The tool serves educational, consultative, and pre-design functions - helping identify community values, support collective decision-making, and prepare design briefs. Prototypes demonstrated that it enhances mutual understanding, reveals potential conflicts early, and facilitates collaborative solutions. It encourages a more conscious approach to design, promotes user participation, and strengthens shared responsibility for public space.

Conclusion

The research and design outcomes demonstrated that the quality of recreational public spaces largely depends on the planning process and the level of user involvement. The traditional model of design - where decisions are made unilaterally by institutions or designers - no longer meets the needs of contemporary urban communities. Instead, approaches based on dialogue, empathy, and cooperation are required.

The designed tool *Make a Good Playground* exemplifies socially responsible design, integrating research and practice. It is both the outcome and continuation of the research, which revealed the need to structure the topic and prepare stakeholders for co-creating public spaces. The dissertation demonstrates that even small spaces such as playgrounds can serve as catalysts for building social relationships, strengthening local identity, and developing design awareness among residents.

The proposed solution has a universal character and may be applied to other contexts - such as planning parks, small urban squares, or other shared public spaces. The dissertation documents the entire process - from problem diagnosis, through analysis and research, to the creation of the final tool - showing that design can serve both as a means of knowledge generation and a practical method for addressing social challenges.

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