

Built to Play

Understanding the outcomes of play spaces and skateparks

Final Report
2022-2023

Gehl


RALPH C. WILSON, JR.
FOUNDATION


THE SKATEPARK PROJECT


KABOOM!

At the edge of a wooded hillside in Seneca Nation, a young girl gestures eagerly to play structures towering overhead. “Look! My dad is a turtle. I’m a deer!” she says, pointing to the illustrations of Seneca clans — turtle, deer, beaver, wolf, and more.

This girl frequents Salamanca, New York’s Highland Ave Park Playground, which opened in 2018. She doesn’t just visit to find herself and her family in the play space. Along with many other kids in the region, she embraces the adventuresome play equipment, which lets her energy and imagination run wild. Ziplines, climbing structures, obstacle courses, and more fill the space, providing an essential outlet for local kids to stay physically active and socially connected with their peers.

This is a story born of sustained community action, led by the City of Salamanca Youth Bureau and supported by the Built to Play initiative. A monumental effort to expand access to spaces that stimulate free play for kids, Built to Play — with funding support from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation and operational support from KABOOM! and The Skatepark Project — has led to the creation of 90+ play spaces and skateparks

across Western New York and Southeast Michigan since 2018. The initiative was inspired by mounting research^{1,2} on the importance of free, self-directed play for youth development, and the lack of access to quality play spaces — both in the focus regions of Western New York and Southeast Michigan, and more broadly for kids in Black, Brown, indigenous, low-income, and rural communities nationwide.

Five years into its creation, the Built to Play program is already demonstrating how play does much more than entertain kids. Gehl’s multi-method study found that over 70% of kids observed in the nine play spaces were observed being physically active. What’s more, in the brief time since the projects had opened, 25% of parents and guardians are reporting a boost in physical activity and free play among the kids outside the play space or skatepark — suggesting the spaces’ ripple effect on kids’ play habits.



**Highland Ave Park Playground
Salamanca, NY / Seneca Nation**

Executive Summary

Much of this physical activity can be attributed to the open-ended and challenging designs across the portfolio. Project leads report that kids rave the most about challenging, multi-sensory, and open-ended play elements: ziplines, ramps and bowls, whimsical structures, climbing equipment, and natural materials like gravel and logs. The projects also build on previous research that finds challenging play elements improve social skills; half of survey respondents reported they've made new friends or acquaintances in the space, and 32% of kids observed in play spaces and skateparks were striking up conversation.

The impact of play spaces and skateparks on physical and social activity is even greater for kids

who have historically lacked access to healthy play spaces — particularly BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) kids and kids from low-income households. They report visiting more frequently, making friends at greater rates, and feeling more attachment to these projects than their White and high-income household counterparts, respectively.

These individual impacts on kids translate to wider ripple effects on civic pride, stewardship, and public life: 70% of adults surveyed said the projects made them feel proud to live in their communities; 46% of project leads have seen a rise in foot traffic and public life in the surrounding area; and 40% of project leads reported more community stewardship of the space since the playground or skatepark opened. What's clear is that play spaces are more than just a place to run wild — they're a platform for healthy civic life.

These project outcomes didn't come without their share of challenges, which were reflective of wider, systemic barriers to play space and skatepark development: cultural aversions to challenging play; physical limitations to free play access; funding gaps to support creation and

The importance of play spaces and skateparks on physical and social activity is even greater for kids who have historically lacked access to quality play spaces.

Built to Play Outcomes at a Glance

ACTIVE

The vast majority of kids observed in Built to Play spaces were physically active, and guardians are already starting to see their kids engage in more free play outside the space since the projects have opened.

SOCIAL

The spaces serve essential social functions for kids of all ages, who gather with friends and meet new ones, too. Adults also report social benefits — from parents meeting each other, to elders “staying young.”

ADVENTUROUS

Inventive design features are most popular, according to a survey of project leads. Kids embrace the challenge of obstacle courses and ramps, and invent their own tales, inspired by nature and whimsical play equipment.

EQUITY-FOCUSED

Kids from BIPOC, rural, and low-income areas and households benefited especially — often visiting with greater frequency, making more friends, and feeling more attached and connected to the spaces.

CATALYTIC

Projects have led to local ripple effects — making people more proud to live in their communities, fostering stewardship, and creating a unifying platform for public life, and community and economic development.

INTEGRATED

The process forged cross-sector partnerships among non-profits, government agencies, and community advocates — relationships being used to drive wider efforts to prioritize play and kids in communities.

maintenance; siloed responsibilities and goals across sectors and agencies; access issues for marginalized communities; and design, development, and construction know-how.

For each of these challenges, Built to Play projects have lessons learned to offer future play space and skatepark advocates and organizers, no matter what stage they're in: setting up a similar program, building the case for play, finding funding, designing the site, building it, operating it, and monitoring and adapting over time. For each step of this lifecycle, this report offers recommendations for a mix of stakeholders —

local youth, families, civic leaders, local government, philanthropy, and more.

Ample cases from this study reveal how play is a unique platform for connecting people, places, communities, and systems. Now is as pivotal a time as ever to seize the potential of play — and we all have a role to play. What will yours be?

— June 2023

1. Aspen Institute, 2015.
2. Aspen Institute, 2017.



Built — to Play —



The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is dedicated to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York.

KABOOM! is a national nonprofit committed to ending playspace inequity. Since 1996, KABOOM! has partnered with kids and communities to create or transform 17,000+ playspaces.

The Skatepark Project offers grants to help finance public skateparks in low-income communities.

The Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan manages charitable assets and works with donors to increase the impact of their giving.

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo is a public charity holding more than 800 different charitable funds, large and small, established by individuals, families, nonprofit agencies and businesses to benefit Western New York.

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Gehl is an urban design, strategy, and research consultancy with experience working in over 300 cities around the world. We believe that by applying a people-first approach to planning, design, and research, we are able to solve some of our communities' most pressing challenges. Gehl has studios in Copenhagen, New York City, and San Francisco.

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Introduction



Play!



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ART FOR RURAL AMERICA



PHOTO: CORYN KEMPSTER

Play is the most important thing a kid can do and lays the foundation for healthy child development.
When play takes root in a community, it brings outsized benefits for kids, from well-being to safety and beyond.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ADVANCING MACOMB



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHANDLER PARK CONSERVANCY

The Challenge

Every kid knows how to play — but not all kids have a quality place to do so.

From Aspen’s State of Play, extensive regional research initiatives set in motion by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, we know that play is essential to a child’s healthy development. But due to a shortage of places where they can engage in non structured play, fewer kids than ever — especially those living in lower-income, rural, and Black and Brown communities have access to joining in the fun.



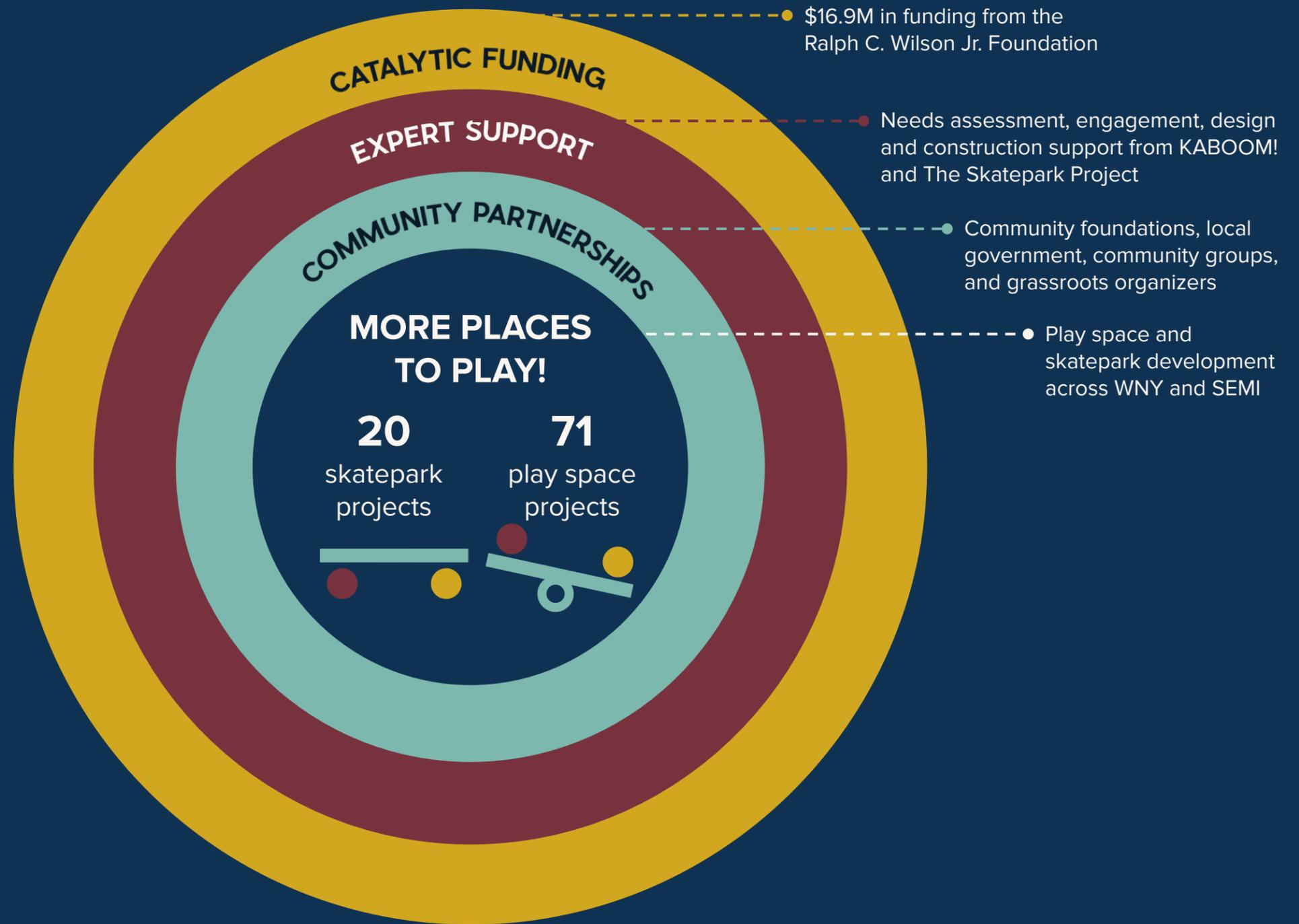
1. Aspen Institute, 2015.
2. KABOOM!, 2022.
3. Pullias Center for Higher Education, 2020.
4. Baran et al., 2013.
5. Taylor et al., 2022.

The Opportunity

Built to Play: a monumental effort to advance access to play.

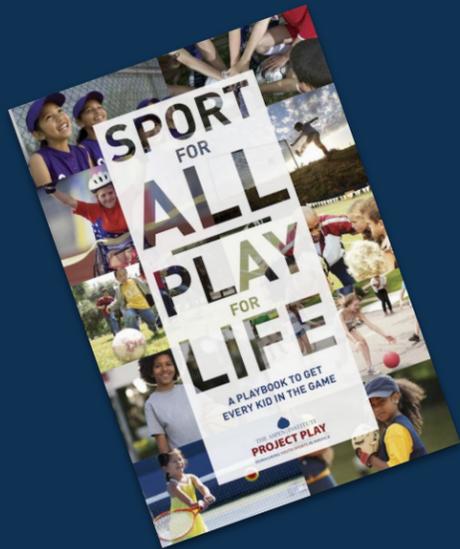
The Built to Play program has a tiered structure, deploying \$16.9M in Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. funds through KABOOM! and The Skatepark Project — established, national leaders — to grantees. The result? Greater access to quality play spaces and skateparks in Western New York (WNY) and Southeast Michigan (SEMI) communities that need them most.

The Built to Play Model



The Strategy

Built to Play embodies many of The 8 Plays.



The Built to Play initiative is guided by many of the best practices — or “8 Plays” — outlined in Aspen Institute’s landmark 2015 “Sport for All, Play for Life” report, from encouraging more unstructured play space design to engaging kids in the design process.

ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT

- ★ Leaders engage youth from inception to implementation, to make big-picture visions real

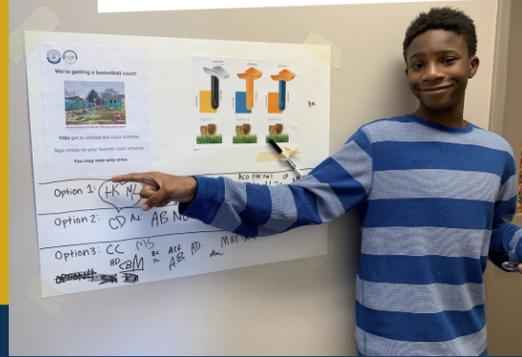


PHOTO: COURTESY OF COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK

REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY

- ★ Site designs make free play the easy choice — through open-ended, challenging, and imaginative elements



ENCOURAGE SPORTS SAMPLING

- ★ Skateparks encourage new entrants into the sport through multi-level design and ample programming



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHANDLER PARK CONSERVANCY

THINK SMALL

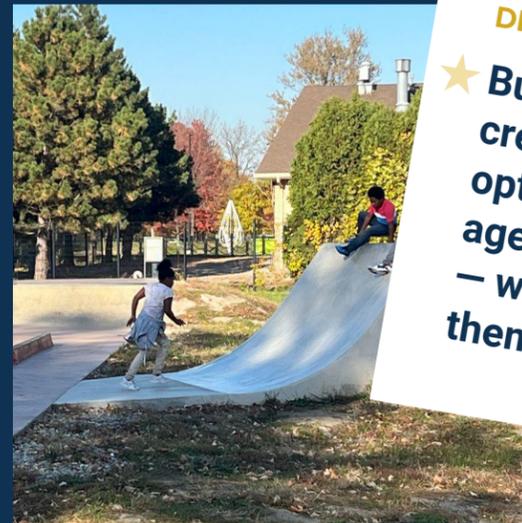
- ★ Play Everywhere sites challenge what and where a play space can be — bringing them to main streets, bus stops, and more.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOWELL MAIN STREET INC.

DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT

- ★ Built to Play projects create a gradient of options for different ages and skill levels — without segregating them from one another



The Study

A multi-method study to understand outcomes.

Gehl explored how the Built to Play program impacted play space and skatepark access and quality across six focus areas — many tied to the theory of investment, with three goals in mind:

- 1 **Understand outcomes** of Built to Play in improving access to quality play spaces and skateparks for kids, families, and communities
- 2 **Reveal actionable opportunities** to improve program, design, and process for future investments within and beyond the Built to Play program
- 3 **Generate new insights** on the process and outcomes of play and place for the wider field of funders, practitioners, and communities

Evaluation Focus Areas



Awareness & Understanding

How were **publicity and communications** built into the project process?




Community Participation & Power

How were **community voices** elevated and incorporated into the projects?




Everyday Play & Life

How did the design and program of the sites foster **equitable access and healthy behaviors** among kids and local residents?



Project Infrastructure & Sustainability

How did the projects navigate **funding and operational** challenges to ensure long-term sustainability?




Community & Economic Development

How did the projects have any intended or unintended **impacts on their local communities and economies**?



Public Opinion & Policy

How did the projects elevate the role of play spaces by **shifting mindsets, shaping policy, or amplifying investment** in play spaces?

The Projects

Gehl reviewed the full portfolio of Built to Play projects.



Play Spaces

Projects studied included 63 Play Everywhere and 8 Community-Built Spaces supported by KABOOM!



Skateparks

Projects studied included 20 skatepark projects supported by The Skatepark Project



Community-Built Destination Playgrounds

8 Projects



The Skatepark Project Sites

20 Projects

The Focus Sites

Nine sites were selected for deeper study.

Gehl worked with the Built to Play team to identify nine sites for deeper research that had a representative mix of:

- **Space types:** Play Everywhere (PE), Community-Built Destination Playgrounds (CB), Skateparks(SK)
- **Race / ethnicity**
- **Geographic type:** urban, suburban, rural



HIGHLAND AVE PARK PLAYGROUND
SALAMANCA, NY CB



JTNY POWER HOUSE SKATEPARK
JAMESTOWN, NY SK



PLAY WALK
ROCHESTER, NY SK



MLK, JR. PARK PLAYGROUND
BUFFALO, NY CB



HOWELL SUMMIT GARDENS
HOWELL, MI PE



SUPER SLIDE
PORT HURON, MI PE



CHANDLER PARK SKATEPARK
DETROIT, MI SK



STEIN PARK PLAYGROUND
DETROIT, MI CB



SPRINGVILLE SKATEPARK
SPRINGVILLE, NY SK

The Methods

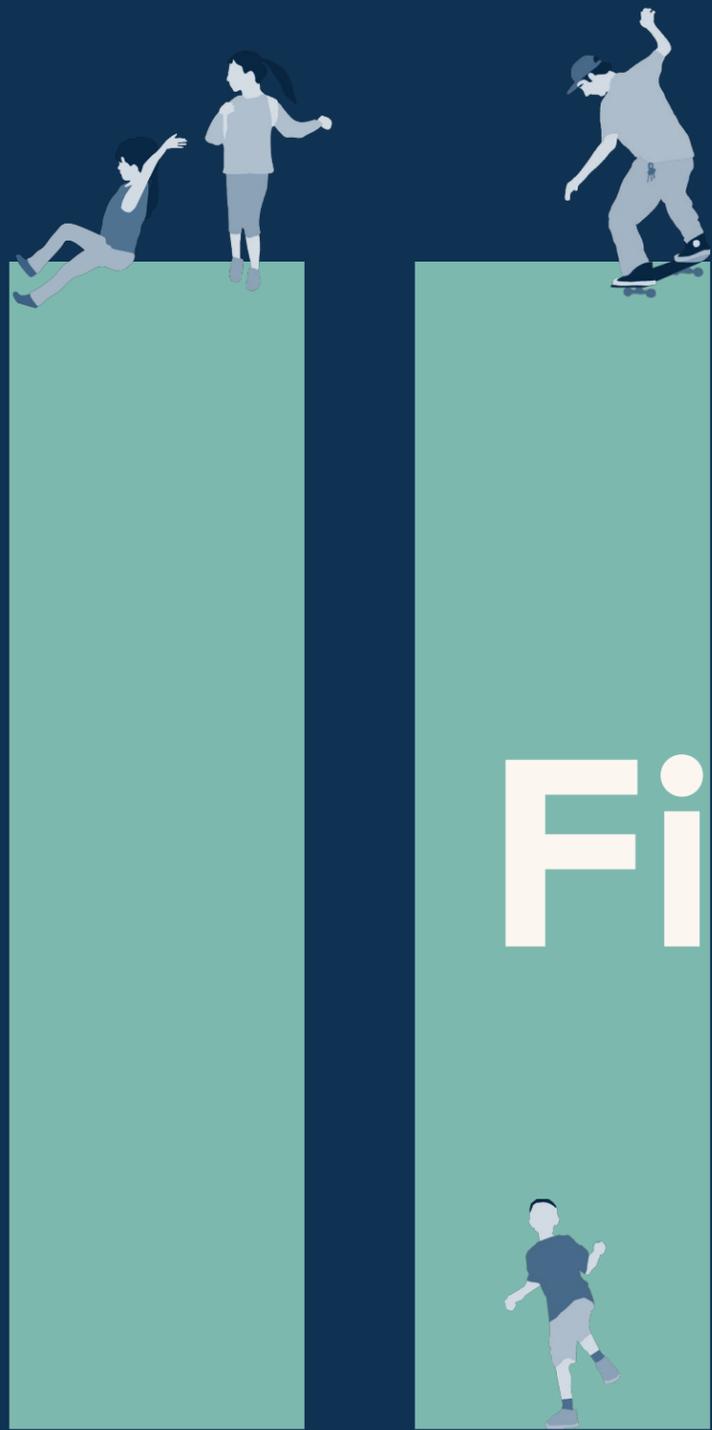
A mix of methods were used to understand outcomes.

These qualitative and quantitative methods provide insight into the life (e.g., sentiment, activities, demographics) and space (e.g., design features, access) of Built to Play projects.

For more background on methods, visit the Appendix



QUANT **QUAL**

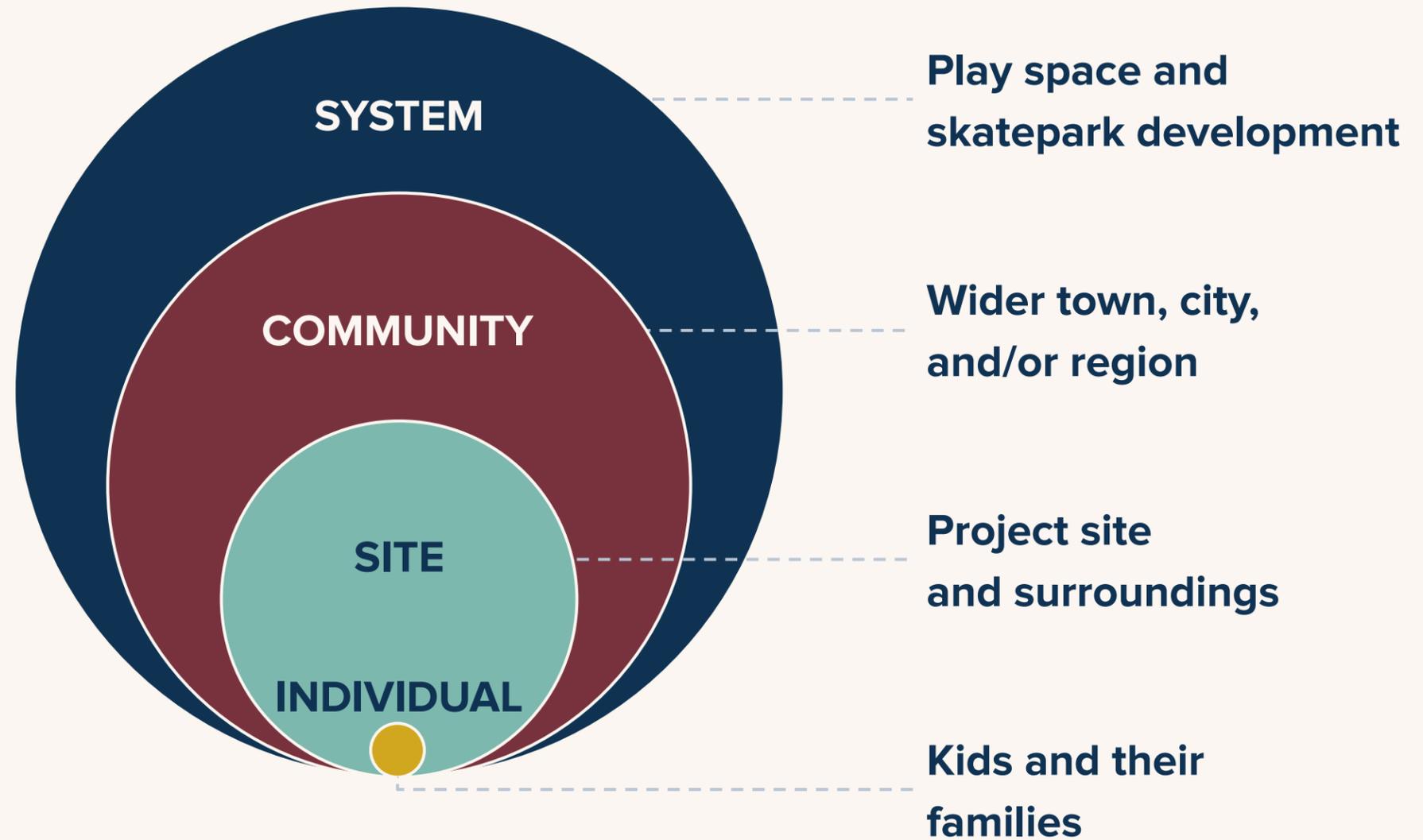


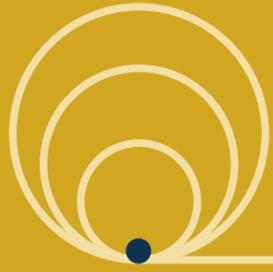
Findings

Overview

Built to Play projects generate outcomes across four scales.

From incorporating more physical exercise into kids' everyday lives, to spurring economic development locally, to providing a new model of grantmaking in the play space and skatepark development world, Built to Play projects are making an impact.





Fostering greater physical and social activity for kids

Built to Play projects are spurring more play and providing a place for social connection. This is especially true — and especially important — in communities that have historically lacked access to these resources, like BIPOC and rural communities.

Built to Play projects ...

Keep kids physically active by stimulating free play within and beyond the sites.

Over 70% of kids observed were being physically active.*

From skateboarding to mastering the obstacle course, kids embraced the range of unstructured play options. Some saw the equipment as a welcome training opportunity for their organized sports involvement, too.

n = 278

*70% in Community Build spaces, 78% in Play Everywhere spaces, and 76% in skateparks

Parents are starting to see an impact on kids beyond the space.

Early in these projects' lifecycles, 25% of parents in play spaces and 14% in skateparks report kids engaging in more self-directed play outside of the spaces since they opened.

+ Longitudinal research could explore how Built to Play projects inspire free play beyond the play area.

n = 267

“It’s good to remain active during off-track season... non-sports playgrounds are better because it’s more relaxed.”

— TEENAGER, HOWELL SUMMIT GARDENS



Above: Martin Luther King, Jr. Park Playground in Buffalo saw especially high physical activity after school hours, with nearly 80% of kids observed playing

Left: Stomach skateboarding at Chandler Park Skatepark in Detroit

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHANDLER PARK CONSERVANCY



“It’s important for kids to see others who look like them.”

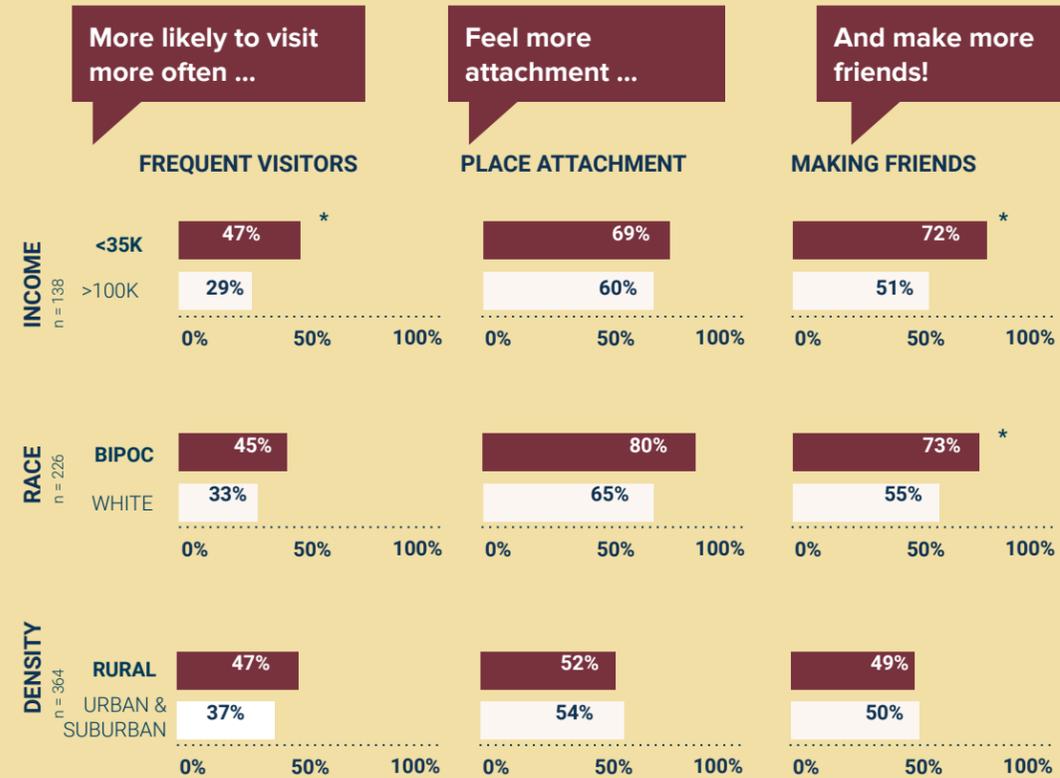
— KEVIYAN RICHARDSON, ORGANIZER AT CHANDLER PARK SKATEPARK



“The worst part of the playground is when we have to leave!”

— PARENT, HIGHLAND AVE. PARK PLAYGROUND

Comparison of Visit Frequency, Attachment, and Relationship-Building



Built to Play projects ...

Boost access for kids who face longtime barriers to play.

BIPOC visitors and visitors from households with lower incomes were more likely to visit often, to feel more attachment, and to make more friends.

For example, 80% of BIPOC visitors felt the space was special to them, compared to 65% of White visitors. For historically marginalized groups, Built to Play projects catalyzing physical activity, pride in place, and social connection at greater rates than their counterparts.

* Statistically significant differences.

Rural kids benefit in particular from play spaces and skateparks because they often lack other public play options.

63% of parents who live in rural areas indicated their child would play at home or a friend’s home — such as to play video games or to play in the backyard — were it not for the project, compared to 51% of parents in urban or suburban areas. Built to Play projects fill a need for quality, social, and publicly accessible play spaces.



Above: Roc City Skatepark has drawn attention for its “Rochester Rolling Resettlement” skate program for Afghan refugees.

Built to Play projects ...

Build social connection by creating a place to gather for all ages.

The social benefits carry over for adults, too.

68% of adults observed in play spaces were actively engaged in a social activity, including many elders who valued opportunities to connect.

“ [We are] great grandparents who enjoy watching community children enjoying the outdoors ... and being around the kids keeps us young too.”

— SURVEY RESPONDENT, SPRINGVILLE SKATEPARK

People make new friends at Built to Play sites.

Half of survey respondents reported making new friends or acquaintances at their play space or skatepark. The social function of projects varies from interactive play to people watching.

n = 261

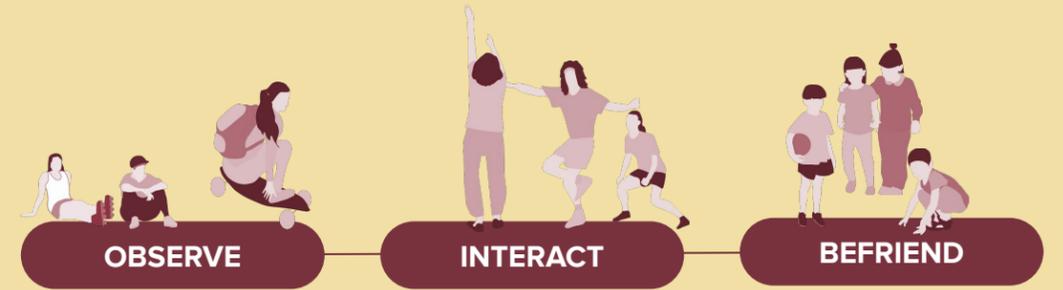
“ I'm shocked to see how many teens use the area. ... We also have a fitness area where folks are working out. Teens are just challenging each other. You can tell it's not organized. They're just at the park.”

— KENYETTA CAMPBELL, PROJECT LEAD, STEIN PARK

PREVIOUS STUDIES SHOW ...
 Design matters for interaction; for example, interactive play is more common in adventure playgrounds.¹

1. Hayward et al., 1974.

The Spectrum of Social Interaction at Built to Play Projects



3 in 10 people observed in skateparks **were people-watching**, 2x more than in other sites.*
 n = 454

7 in 10 adults observed in play spaces **were engaged in a social activity**.**
 n = 176

Half of all survey respondents reported **making new friends or acquaintances** at their site.
 n = 261



Interactive play at Highland Ave Park Playground

* Statistically significant difference.

** Includes being engaged in conversation and active caregiving.

The Complementary Social Roles of Play Spaces and Skateparks



Built to Play projects ...

◀ **Complement each other in fostering diversity and social activity.**

Play spaces invited a more even mix of genders.

Compared to skateparks, play spaces invited a more even mix of genders, with a 50/50 girl/boy gender split observed, compared to 25/75 split at skateparks.*

Skatepark respondents visited more frequently and stayed longer.

Skatepark respondents visited 10% more frequently and stayed 14% longer than play space respondents.* What’s more, 55% of adult respondents at skateparks report making friends or acquaintances, compared to 20% in play spaces.* There is no difference among kids; about a third report making friends at skateparks and at play spaces.

n = 294
* Statistically significant differences.

n = 454



Built to Play projects could ...

Diversify visitorship and deepen their impacts on kids and teenagers.

Teenage girls are underrepresented in play spaces and skateparks, compared to girls across all ages.

At play spaces, 31% of teens are girls, compared to 51% female representation across all ages.

At skateparks, 21% of teens are girls, compared to 25% female representation across all ages.

There is room to foster deeper, lasting social connection through design and program of the sites.

55% of adult respondents at skateparks report making friends or acquaintances, compared to 20% in play spaces.*

There is no difference among kids; about a third report making friends at skateparks and at play spaces.



Top: Howell Summit Gardens
Left: Springville Skatepark

* Statistically significant difference.



Raising the bar for imaginative play design and supportive amenities

The high-quality design of Built to Play projects keeps kids engaged and invites adults to play, while the supporting amenities and activities make these spaces comfortable and welcoming to the community as a whole.

Built to Play projects ...

Use design to foster creativity, risk-taking, and inclusive access for all ages.

Challenging, multi-sensory, and open-ended play elements were most popular with kids.

Of the 13 play spaces that reported which features were most popular with kids, 5 mentioned challenging elements, 5 mentioned multi-sensory ones, and 4 mentioned open-ended ones. Project leads cited traditional equipment (e.g., slides, monkey bars) the least often. As one kid at MLK Jr. Park Playground reflected, "I like how it's not just swings and slides. You can choose what you want to do here."

Open-ended play spaces and skateparks also invite a more multi-generational audience.

Sometimes adults need an invitation to get playful, too. At Howell Summit Gardens (right), half of adults observed at the site were playing — nearly eight times the shares across all sites. Skateparks did, too — 33% of skatepark survey respondents identified as adult visitors, compared to only 3% at play spaces.

n = 27 (Howell) and 176 (all sites)
n = 354 (skateparks)

PREVIOUS STUDIES SHOW ...
Challenging play improves socialization, problem-solving, focus, self-regulation, creativity and self-confidence, and reduces stress, boredom and injury.¹

PREVIOUS STUDIES SHOW ...
Kids interpret play spaces for themselves; one study found that kids' imaginative play was unrelated to themes designers or manufacturers explicitly design into a play space.²

1. Brussoni et al., 2017.
2. Herrington et al., 2006.

Free Play by Design

"Kids love the slides and the gnome hats (mini stages) and main stage for acting out their own adventures."

—KATE LITWIN, PROJECT LEAD, HOWELL SUMMIT GARDENS

Open-Ended

"Kids love to climb."

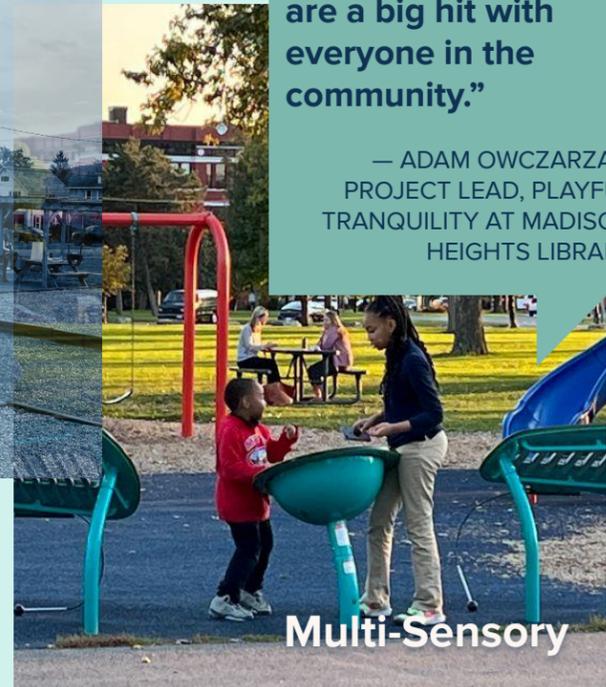
— CYNTHIA FLAHERTY, PROJECT LEAD, CASSADAGA BEACH



Challenging

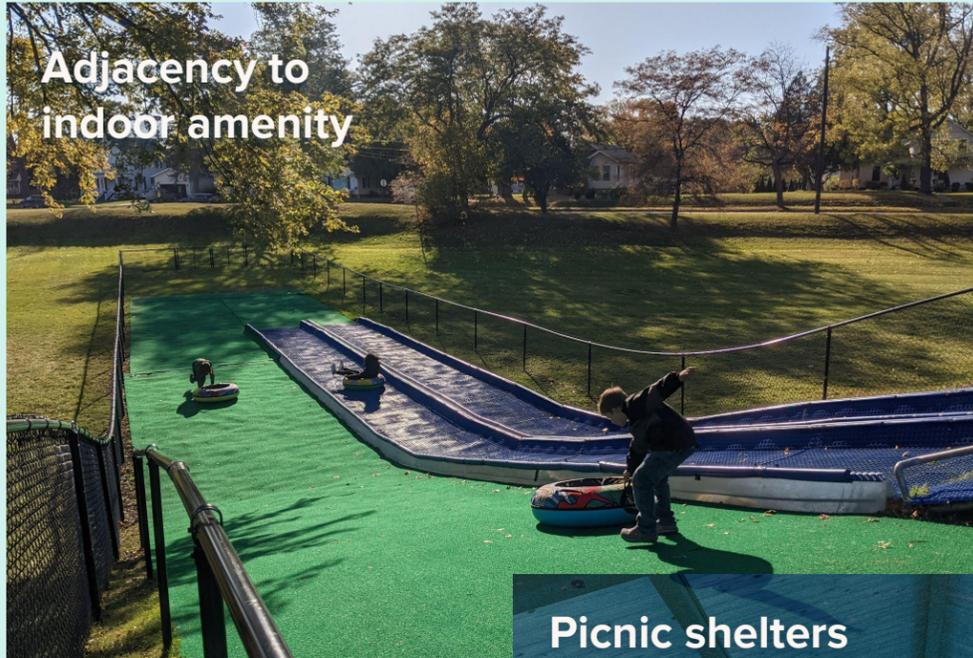
"Musical instruments are a big hit with everyone in the community."

— ADAM OWCZARZAK, PROJECT LEAD, PLAYFUL TRANQUILITY AT MADISON HEIGHTS LIBRARY



Multi-Sensory

Top: Howell Summit Gardens
Middle: Highland Ave Park Playground
Right: MLK Jr. Park Playground



Adjacency to indoor amenity



Picnic shelters

"[It's] nice they have restrooms — it doesn't cut the play short"

—ADULT SURVEY RESPONDENT, HIGHLAND AVE PARK PLAYGROUND



Restrooms

Top: Port Huron's Super Slide is co-located with an indoor rec center nearby
 Middle: Stein Park Playground
 Left: Highland Ave. Park Playground

Built to Play projects ...

Serve as local gathering spots with the amenities and activities needed for ongoing use.

Many sites have the amenities in place to invite people to stay and socialize.

Play spaces with proximity to amenities such as pavilions for shade, restrooms, and drinking water fountains are popular for kids and adults alike. As visitorship increases, there's demand for more investment in public amenities from both project leads and visitors.

Nearby institutions are using these spaces and making them their own.

Sites that are used by nearby institutions are also less likely to report plentiful play alternative spaces in the area for kids to play (38%) than those that are not used by institutions (83%), suggesting communities with fewer alternatives rely more heavily on the space for hosting events and other community programming.*

n = 30

* Statistically significant differences.



The stage at Howell Summit Gardens is used by DJs and musicians

PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOWELL MAIN STREET INC.

Built to Play projects ...

Encourage active mobility to, from, and within the site.

Projects are walking and biking destinations, and convenient access is a reason to visit.

In areas where 75-90% of all travel is by car, 34% of visitors report walking and 12% report biking to get to the site. Convenient access matters; 58% of respondents report choosing to visit the play space or skatepark because it is easy to access or closer to home or work.

n = 368 (arrival mode to site)
n = 294 (reasons for visiting)



Parents valued Howell Summit Gardens' proximity to shopping, recreation, and the library downtown.

Integrating play spaces and skateparks with trails is an opportunity.

Trails connecting or bordering some skateparks and play spaces, like Jamestown Skatepark and Highland Ave Park Playground, provide safe access and another opportunity for exercise.



"[I love] that I can ride my bike to it because it's close to our neighborhood."

— KID SURVEY RESPONDENT, CASCADE IN THE SHADE

Q: What do you love about this play space / skatepark?



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE CITY OF ROCHESTER



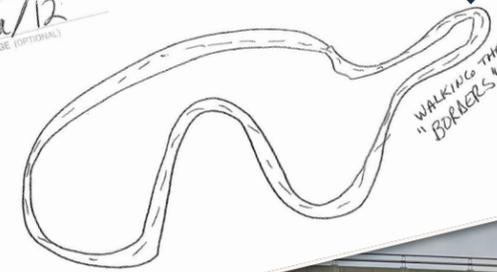
Top: Trail along Jamestown Skatepark
Left: Trail along Roc City Skatepark



Focus group response in Highland Ave Park Playground

What do you love about this playspace?

Jayla / 12
NAME / AGE (OPTIONAL)





As part of the environmental requirements of their grant, many skatepark designs included rain gardens that collect and filter stormwater runoff from the surrounding concrete. A few sites were complete with signage that explains the environmental features to visitors.

Top: Geary Park Skatepark
Right: Springville Skatepark



Built to Play projects ...

Integrate sustainability into design.

◀ The dedicated environmental grant for skateparks is working.

Skatepark grants had a separate \$50,000 portion completely dedicated to environmental components. 57% of these project leads rated a favorable experience with the experience with the TSP environmental consultant.

n = 21

Play spaces also independently integrated sustainability.

67% of play space project leads reported integrating environmentally-conscious measures into the design, such as biodiversity measures, recycled materials and stormwater features.

n = 20



The Playful Path incorporates biodiversity measures, recycled materials and stormwater features

PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANT ALLIANCE INC.

Built to Play projects could...

Be further amenitized and consistently designed with sustainability in mind.

Now that projects see regular use, project leads and visitors are calling for additional public amenities.

There is untapped potential to foster environmental features not just in skateparks, but across all sites.

Top amenities to add/update

BATHROOM



DRINKING WATER FOUNTAIN



While more than half of play space project leads who responded to the online survey indicated voluntarily including a range of environmental features, play spaces could learn from TSP's model requiring direct integration.



Top: Palmer Park Super Slide

Left: Opening hours for Springville Skatepark

The top desired amenity indicated by skatepark survey respondents specifically was additional lighting.



Elevating community in the process, design, and life of play spaces.

The Built to Play program empowers local leaders to engage their communities in the development process and advance community development priorities through play; the success of these efforts is reflected in the community pride in these new play spaces and skateparks.

Built to Play projects ...

Build local pride through quality design.

Across all project types, local identity and history show up in the design of the play spaces and skateparks.

Community leaders took efforts to integrate local identity into the design of spaces — with murals, architectural cues, and interactive games that tie to local culture. Together, these gestures and the quality of the space translate to local pride and attachment to the space. 70% of adults surveyed reported that the space makes them feel proud to live in their community. Early in the projects' life cycles, 53% said the sites feel special to them.

n = 50 (community)
n = 245 (site)

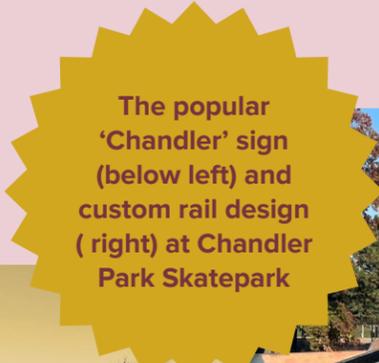


The shape of the rails mimics the roofs of neighborhood homes, and the brick mimics them, too. We also wanted a big feature. The 'Chandler' sign in the skatepark has become iconic. Skaters like taking photos over it."

— ALEX ALLEN, PROJECT LEAD, CHANDLER PARK SKATEPARK



Seneca Nation clan iconography at Highland Ave. Park Playground is the basis for an on-site scavenger hunt activity.



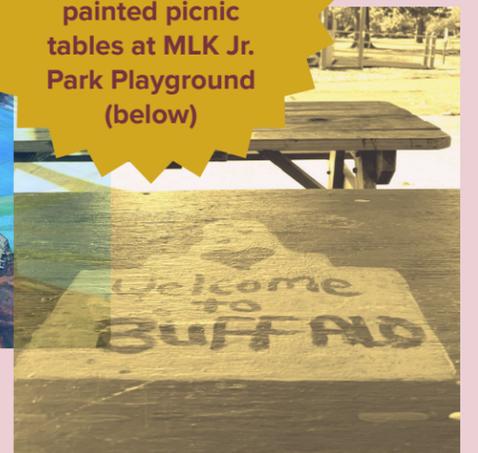
The popular 'Chandler' sign (below left) and custom rail design (right) at Chandler Park Skatepark



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ADVANCING MACOMB



A mural at Cascade in the Shade (left) and community-painted picnic tables at MLK Jr. Park Playground (below)



“This park is near and dear to my heart. I grew up in the neighborhood so helping the community design what we wanted the park to look like and bring value to the park has been an inspiration.”

— KENYETTA CAMPBELL, PROJECT LEAD, STEIN PARK PLAYGROUND



“I always have a book of ideas and inspiration that I’m working from. For Super Slide, I saw this cool snow slide that can be used in the summer, and that’s how the idea came.”

— NANCY WINZER, PROJECT LEAD, PALMER PARK SUPER SLIDE

“This is a volunteer-led main street community. This project was done with a lot of volunteer sweat and labor. My job is keep this all going and occasionally dreaming up fun projects like the gardens.”

— KATE LITWIN, PROJECT LEAD, HOWELL SUMMIT GARDENS



Built to Play projects ...

Engage and elevate local voices and leaders.

Community organizers and advocates are essential project champions, especially in resource-strapped communities.

Strong local leadership helps ensure community representation at the eventual play space. In tight-knit areas, this is especially important. For example, rural respondents were more likely to have heard about the play space or skatepark from community leaders than urban or suburban respondents.

Personal relationships and word of mouth help spur regular visitorship.

Visitors who learned about the project through word of mouth were more likely to visit frequently than those who learned about it through social media.* While social media communications can help cast a wide net, community-based organizing is more effective.

n = 143
* Statistically significant difference.



Ribbon-cutting at the Ypsilanti Township Community Skatepark

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE SKATEPARK PROJECT

Built to Play projects ...

Amplify wider community development and build support for play and skating.

Built to Play projects have shifted perception in favor of play spaces and skateparks.

54% of project leads noticed local policymakers being more receptive to play space or skatepark development, and 43% report more community stewardship of the space.

n = 41 (project leads)
n = 297 (visitors)

Play spaces generate foot traffic — which supports local businesses and brings eyes on the street.

Nearly half of project leads report that the project has produced more foot traffic in the surrounding area, and 66% of survey respondents who cite ease of access as a primary reason to visit the play space also report visiting local businesses often during their visit.

Gehl — Making Cities for People

n = 41

This space helped catalyze the south end of main street. We saw an abandoned restaurant become renovated and open its doors, and a large historic building was renovated into new village headquarters with accessible senior living on the top floors.”

— CASSANDRA BULL, PROJECT LEAD, FASSETT GREENSPACE PROJECT



“Anybody who lives here is very happy about the park system, talking about it more than ever. We got **over 70% approval** which is huge especially when people are being taxed for that.”

— NANCY WINZER, PROJECT LEAD, PALMER PARK SUPER SLIDE

“The New York State Parks Commissioner challenged Parks Directors in all 10 regions of the State to **replicate our project.**”

— LOREN PENMAN, PROJECT LEAD, THE PLAYFUL PATH AT THE AUTISM NATURE TRAIL

“**Skating now has a positive connotation, because there’s a space** and people can see it in action. You have people who are looking out for each other here. That’s Detroit.”

— INTERCEPT SURVEY RESPONDENT, CHANDLER PARK SKATEPARK

Built to Play projects could...

Require additional support for inclusion in projects located in disinvested communities.

Sustained resources for engagement, design and activation are needed to attract locals and ensure they remain the primary beneficiaries of the space.

32% of survey respondents who visited Chandler Park Skatepark identified as Black, far lower than the share of the population of the Chandler Park area (99% Black)*.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CHANDLER PARK CONSERVANCY

25 local kids in Chandler Park, Detroit participated in summer skating lessons in the skatepark's first year — a critical platform for inviting local youth to the space.

* Statistically significant difference.



Catalyzing new play spaces and skateparks.

The Built to Play grantmaking model builds on the shared priority of play in many communities to encourage cross-sector collaboration at the local level. It also provides the practical and financial support needed to spark new play projects that catalyze investment in public spaces after the grant is spent.

Built to Play projects ...

Break down silos across sectors, organizations, and people.

Play is a shared priority that brings together a diversity of groups and sectors.

57% of project leads reported more than one type of partnership that brought the play space or skatepark to life.

n = 41

The experience of working across organizations was a generally positive one, despite some challenges.

40% of non-municipal grantees rated the experience of working with the municipality a 5 out of 5.

n = 25

“One of the moms who is in the tribal marshal and I were pushing carts back to back [during Build Day]. This did more in building trust in the community than any other project I’ve worked on.”

— SANDI BRUNDAGE, PROJECT LEAD, HIGHLAND AVE. PARK PLAYGROUND

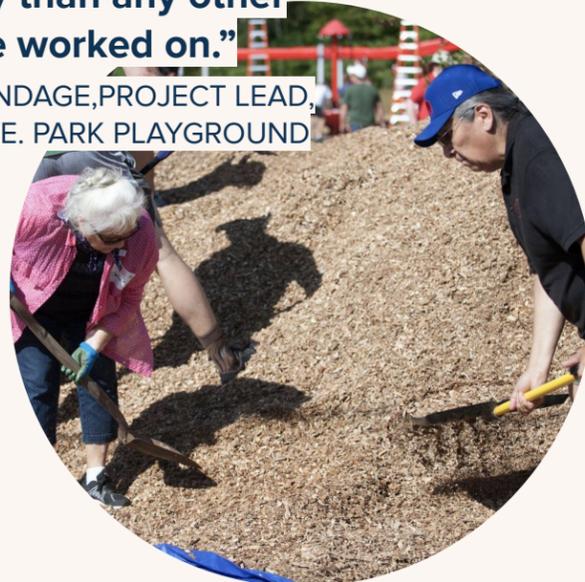


PHOTO: COURTESY OF CITY OF SALAMANCA YOUTH BUREAU

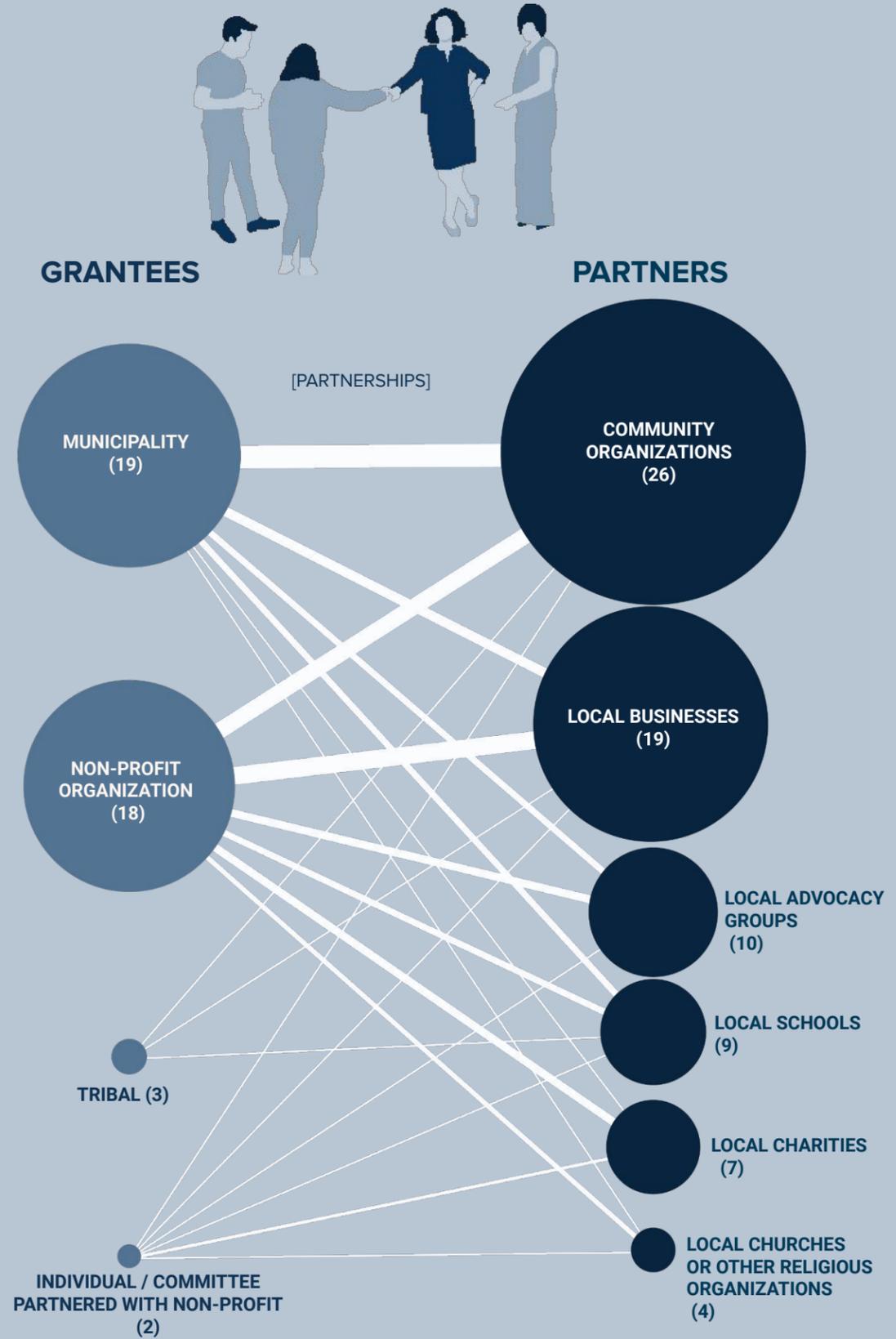


PHOTO: COURTESY OF SK8EVL TEAM



“Having Trevor in place is the most important. Might have been just as important as anything else ... He’s part of the success.”
— ALEX ALLEN, PROJECT LEAD, CHANDLER PARK SKATEPARK

“My contact at KABOOM! was always super helpful and the process was very clear.”
— AMANDA ZAMBRANO, PROJECT LEAD, KPAC KIDS ZONE



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ORION TOWNSHIP

Top: SK8EVL skatepark fundraising with Trevor (TSP)
Right: Cape Agawam Build Day
Bottom: SK8EVL Skatepark

Built to Play projects ...

Connect to expertise and peer knowledge.

Built to Play projects are sharing knowledge informally with other local advocates and nearby communities.

4 of the 9 deep-dive sites reported sharing knowledge (either formally or informally) with other nearby play space or skatepark projects.

◀ **Direct support and program partners’ presence on the ground matters.**

73% of project leads rated communications with the Built to Play program highly, and 57% of skatepark projects rated the experience of working with the The Skatepark Project environmental consultant favorably.

“ **KABOOM!’s engagement process is phenomenal in terms of making sure that kids and residents who are impacted by it are at the forefront.**

— KENYETTA CAMPBELL, PROJECT LEAD, STEIN PARK PLAYGROUND

n = 41

Built to Play projects ...

Catalyze play and public space investments.

Visitors overwhelmingly support more public funding for play spaces or skateparks.

84% of survey respondents overall indicated they would support more city funding for play spaces like the one they go to. 66% of respondents who disagreed or were neutral about how special the play space was to them would still support more city funding, indicating they understand these sites are about more than play.

n = 297

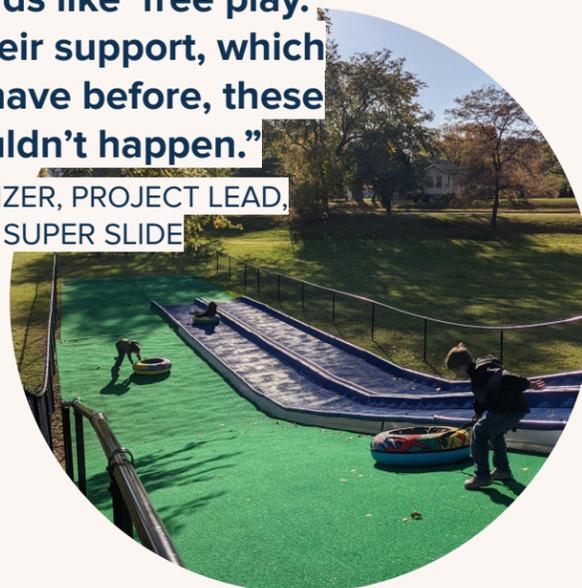
For most projects, Built to Play is a catalytic source of funding – a starting point for further investments in public spaces for kids.

43% of projects reported follow-on funding after receiving the Built to Play grant. The most common source of financial support to continue operating is public funding (44%).

n = 21

“ [Super Slide] has definitely spurred other projects... I’ve [now] got people like the city manager and the mayor, saying words like ‘free play.’ Without their support, which we didn’t have before, these things wouldn’t happen.”

— NANCY WINZER, PROJECT LEAD, PALMER PARK SUPER SLIDE



Support for funding

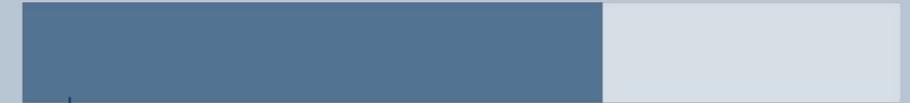
84%

of respondents overall indicated they would support more city funding for play spaces like the one they go to.



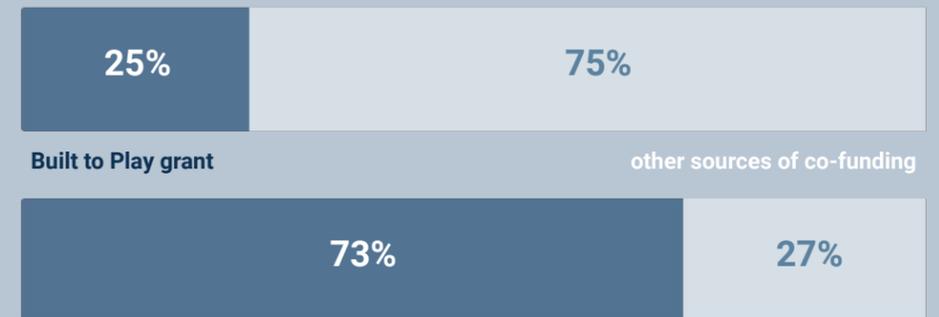
66%

of respondents who disagreed or were neutral about how special the play space was to them would still support more city funding.



Sources of funding

Skateparks
Play Spaces



n = 21*

One quarter of the funding for skateparks came from Built to Play and the remaining three-quarter from outside sources – driven largely by the matching grant requirements for skateparks.. **The inverse is true for play spaces.**

* Only 21 projects provided financial information.

Built to Play projects could...

Expand their reach and connect the network with peer and technical support.

Grantees lack a formal platform for knowledge sharing to trade best practices on design, construction, and operations.

“The rain garden was an afterthought for everyone because options were limited... We wish we had more examples [precedents] to work from.”

— REED BRAMAN, PROJECT LEAD, SPRINGVILLE SKATEPARK, SPRINGVILLE

4 in 9 deep-dive project partners reported a need for more support on the ground — especially during construction.

“Getting the site ready was more challenging than I thought it would be. There were weather and equipment problems and I felt we had pressure to get it done by a certain time.”

— PROJECT LEAD, MLK JR. PARK PLAYGROUND, BUFFALO



Top: Springville Skatepark's rain garden feature was installed in the center of the skating "loop"



Left: Coordination issues resulted in the installation of the wrong rubber surface thickness, causing higher maintenance efforts at Buffalo's MLK Jr. Park Playground

Recommendations



We all have a role to play — what's yours?

Depending on where you sit in the life cycle of play space or skatepark development, there are a range of lessons learned from this study that can inform your approach.



Let's ...
Build the Case

You're a champion of skateparks or play spaces and need to get a diverse range of stakeholders on board to support your vision. What role will you play?



←
You might relate to someone like Pete Scheira (left) and Chase Burbank (right). Pete is a passionate skateshop owner and skating instructor in Jamestown, NY, and Chase is a (then) 11-year-old skater – both helped get the City and the skating community behind the future JTNY Power House Skatepark.



Build the Case

Talking points to communicate the varied benefits of unstructured play

Sandi Brundage, project lead for Highland Avenue Park Playground, rallied the community around a new playground that serves as an everyday gathering space for Native American and non-native community members and a point of pride for indigenous families. →



Underscore free play's role in fostering health and social outcomes for kids (and adults!)

Investing in play spaces and skateparks means investing in well-being, physical activity, and social connection.

- ★ Over 70% of kids observed in Built to Play spaces were being active, and 25% of caregivers surveyed report their kids engage in more self-directed play since the site opened.

Communicate the necessity for physical infrastructure that enables unstructured play.

There is a need for more public spaces that allow kids to play freely, especially in underserved communities.

- ★ 63% of parents surveyed who live in rural areas indicated their child would likely play at home or a friend's home if the Built to Play play space or skatepark did not exist.

Highlight play spaces' and skateparks' community development impacts.

Play spaces can have spillover effects – such as bringing foot traffic to local businesses, to building a sense of neighborhood pride.

- ★ Nearly half of Built to Play project leads report that the project has increased foot traffic in the surrounding area.
- ★ 70% of adult survey respondents reported that the play space makes them feel proud to live in their neighborhood.

Embrace the potential of play to steer area and city planning.

Play can become a pillar of public space planning and wider community health efforts, due to its impacts on health and social connection.

- ★ In Rochester, the Play Walk and Roc City Skatepark came to life as the city was revitalizing its downtown. In part thanks to the Play Walk – a project led by an organization that advocates for play as a health priority – play is now embedded in the city's latest Comprehensive Plan.

Celebrate the consensus-building power of play projects.

Play spaces are a source of common ground and an effective platform to build buy-in for a wider public space agenda.

- ★ Over 80% of survey respondents indicated they would support more public funding for play spaces.
- ★ 58% of survey respondents believe perceptions of skating improved after the construction of their new skatepark.

Let's ...

Find Funding

You have rallied support for a new play space or skatepark in your community – now you need to find the resources to bring it to life.



← You might relate to someone like **Nancy Winzer** of Port Huron, MI Parks & Recreation, who used the unifying power of play to bring city leaders and philanthropy together to back a range of play projects – from nature play to SuperSlide to a skatepark – across her city.

You might be...



Find Funding

Tactics for raising funds and building buy-in to get the project started

A “Skate of the Art” fundraising event in Ellicottville, NY was one of many initiatives put together by the project team to raise funds for their new SK8EVL skatepark, including a BBQ cook-off, a soup bowl fundraiser, ski and skateboard raffles, and more. →



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SK8EVL TEAM

Make the vision concrete through visuals.

Help potential donors imagine the proposed play space with conceptual sketches, renderings, and other visuals that bring the project from an abstract idea to a space that feels plausible.

★ Kate Litwin, project lead at Howell Summit Gardens, reported that early renderings from a landscape architecture firm helped communicate what’s possible, and catalyze fundraising for her whimsical play space vision.

Target funding sources that are earmarked for connected community priorities.

Expand beyond play-centric funding sources to those related to environmental, community and economic development, health, and other priorities.

★ The Rochester Play Walk used health-related funds, including funding from the New York State Department of Health, the Greater Rochester Health Foundation and Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield.

Identify savvy public servants experienced in cobbling together funding sources.

Connect with trusted, local civil servants who can help get funding across the finish line.

★ In Springville, NY, the grantee organization, Green Springville, initially faced challenges fundraising during COVID; the organization worked with the Village Administrator, Liz Melock, who unlocked public funds for the new skatepark.

Show the catalytic effect of investing in play through follow-on funding.

As a fundraising messaging strategy, highlight the return on investing in play space development.

★ 43% of Built to Play projects who participated in a survey reported follow-on funding after the initial investment from the grant.

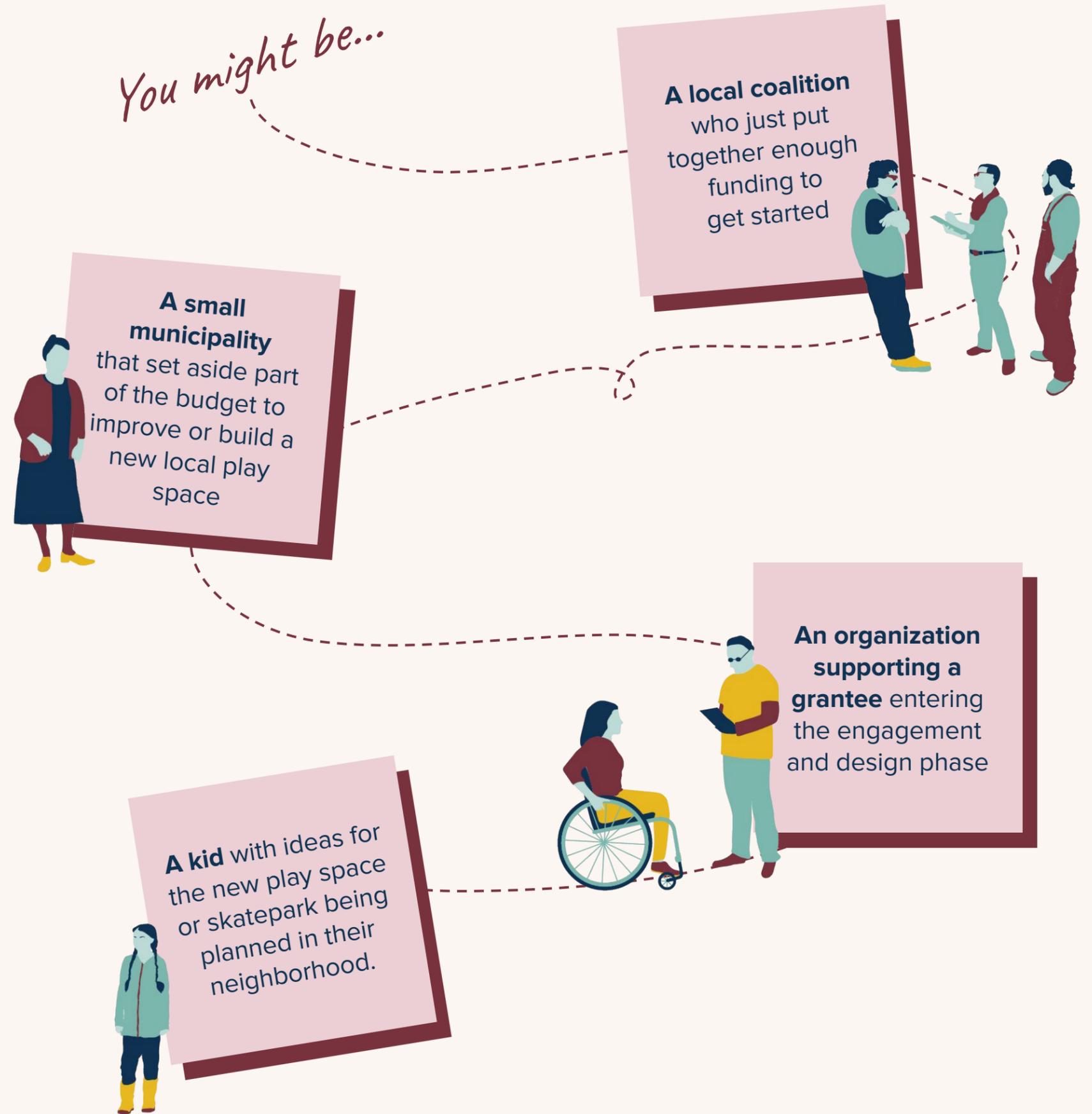
Let's ... Design the Space

You have the community and financial support to create a new play space or skatepark. Now it's time to imagine what it will look like and how it will function.



←
You might relate to someone like Kate Litwin, Howell Main Street Chief Operating Officer and Howell DDA Director, who had a back-of-the-napkin sketch for a whimsical play space and worked closely with landscape architects, KABOOM!, and community partners to bring Howell Summit Gardens to life.

You might be...



Design the Space | **Select a Site**

Strategies for **site selection, engagement, and design**

The Fasset GreenSpace Project was built on a previously abandoned site in Wellsville, NY's Main Street to bring foot traffic to the area. Today, the Village cites it in applications for economic grant funding as an exemplar of communal gathering and play. →

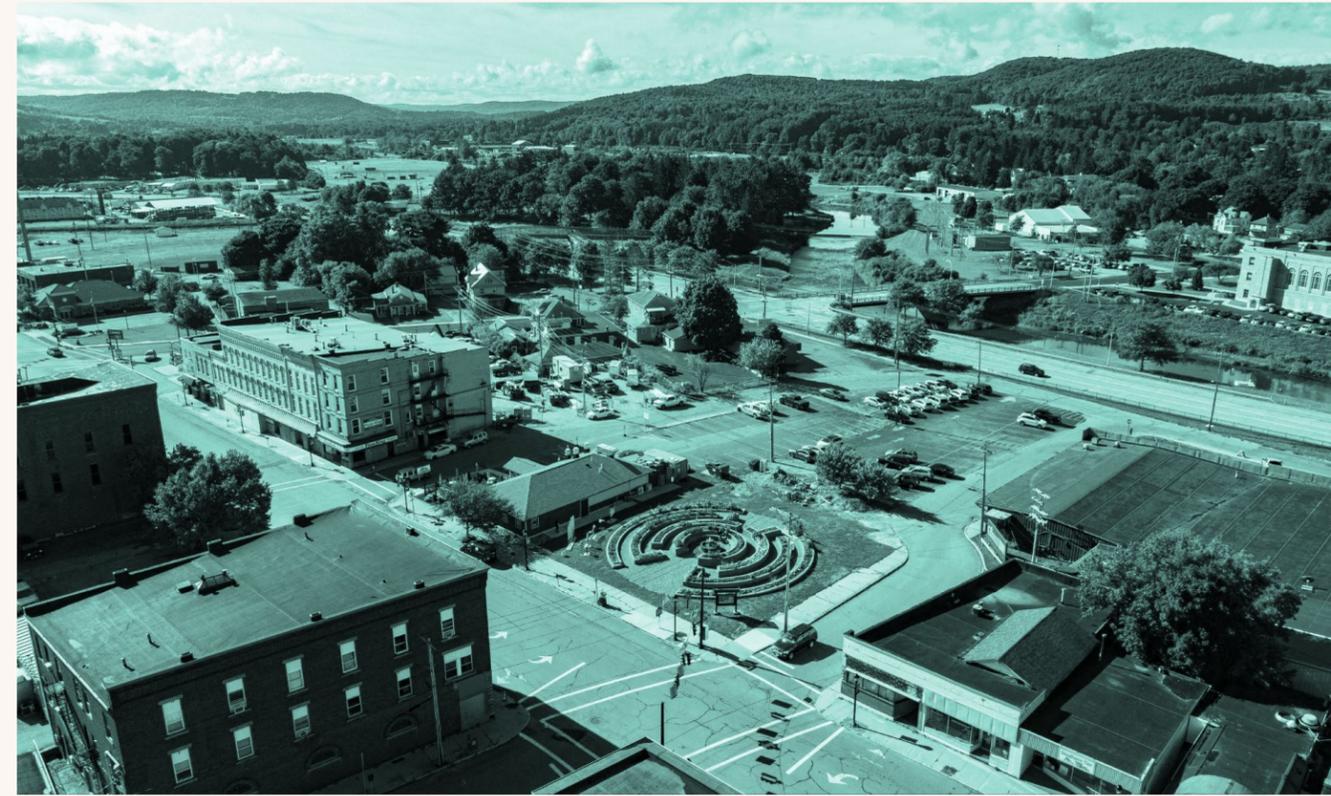


PHOTO: COURTESY OF ART FOR RURAL AMERICA

Locate play spaces near where residents already spend time, and with access in mind.

Spaces that are located within walking or biking distance of schools, senior centers, or residential areas encourage active mobility and maintain visitorship.

- ★ Built to Play projects were conveniently located to encourage active mobility: 34% of visitors reported walking and 12% reported biking to the sites, in areas where 75-90% of all travel is by car.
- ★ Howell Summit Gardens was sited in the main street's "Social District" so that adults could keep an eye on their kids with a drink in hand.

Cluster spaces with different types of play for multiple ages and visitor groups.

Locating spaces that give kids of different ages opportunities to be physically active near each other allows families or groups with multiple age groups to all find something to keep them engaged.

- ★ Play spaces and skateparks play complementary roles in fostering diversity and social connection — siting them near each other can promote cross-pollination between the two.
- ★ Chandler Park Skatepark was located by a playground and sports fields, allowing for complementary physical activities — kids reported visiting the skatepark after sports games, or while their friends and siblings playing at these other spaces nearby.

Improve existing community sites that need more love, instead of starting from scratch.

Spaces that build on or lend visibility to an existing asset in the neighborhood may get neighbors on board faster and tap into an existing visitor group.

- ★ At Springville Skatepark in Western New York, project leads rallied neighbors around a common concern for the state of the previous run-down skateplex. The site was a "flag in the ground" that helped people envision an improvement to the space that addressed not only noise and safety concerns, but provided a much-needed space for teens to spend time.

Design the Space | Engage Local Communities

Strategies for site selection, engagement, and design

Community engagement events held with kids for Serpentine Nooks in Orleans County, NY were hosted by the design team at a local school. →



PHOTO: COURTESY OF LYNDONVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Tap into and compensate trusted local advocates.

Play space development efforts can reach more people and more regular visitors if they are done in partnership with well-networked, trusted community leaders that have built relationships over time.

- ★ Respondents who heard about the play space over social media tend to visit less frequently versus those who heard about it by word of mouth.

Meet people where they are.

Engagement that takes place at existing community spaces where key end users already spend time are effective in building trust. This also helps overcome barriers to participating in typical engagement events.

- ★ Stein Park playground in Detroit, MI held engagement sessions with KABOOM! at the local high school adjacent to the site of the future play space. This allowed KABOOM! to provide technical expertise in a non-threatening environment for local kids and teens.

Bring girls more intentionally into the engagement process.

Explicitly engage and create visible opportunities for girls to guide the design process – due to their history of exclusion in play and recreational spaces.

- ★ Teenage girls are underrepresented in play spaces and skateparks – with the latter experiencing a bigger gender gap across all age groups.
- ★ [Make Space for Girls](#) is a U.K. organization advocating for designing with teenage girls in mind; reference their collection of resources and tips for engaging this group.

Continue engaging after opening — especially in marginalized communities.

When investing in communities that have experienced disinvestment, use ongoing activation to ensure their representation in the life of the space.

- ★ Chandler Park Skatepark offers skateboarding lessons and equipment to local kids from the surrounding, predominantly Black neighborhood – creating a pipeline of young Black skaters.
- ★ BIPOC and low-income respondents in Built to Play spaces were more likely to report making friends at the spaces than their counterparts – use social ties to drive visits to the space.

Design the Space | Design the Site

Strategies for site selection, engagement, and design

The adventure course in Highland Avenue Park Playground in Salamanca, NY fosters informal competition and challenging play between teens. It also provides exercise opportunities for adults, such as a UPS worker who uses the equipment on break.→



Invest more in designs that encourage innovative, challenging play.

Play spaces that allow kids to experience perceived risk are not only popular with kids, but are proven to contribute to healthy child development.

- ★ Of 13 play space project leads that reported which features were most popular with kids, the greatest number (5) cited challenging play elements (e.g., ziplines, climbing structures).
- ★ Previous studies show that challenging play improves socialization, problem-solving, focus, self-regulation, creativity and self-confidence, and reduces stress, boredom and injury.

Design for diversity of users, including multiple ages, skill levels, and abilities.

Include play equipment that caters to beginners, people with disabilities, and those looking for general exercise into the design of play spaces.

- ★ MLK Jr. Park Playground set an example for the rest of the city of Buffalo when focusing on ensuring the playground had universal access. “Folks will comment just to say how much they appreciate (...) being able to bring children with special needs to the site when in the past they would have to drive,” says a staff member from the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy who oversees the site. “When we first did this I don’t think there was an inclusive playground, certainly not within the city of Buffalo (...) the nearest one was a 45-minute drive out to the suburbs.”

Design (and/or future-proof) as a complete public space with amenities to make play spaces comfortable, safe and accessible.

If funding is limited, lay the foundation for longer-term public realm improvements around play spaces; put in place the right infrastructure that make it possible add amenities such as lights, bathrooms, and water fountains later on.

- ★ The Skatepark Project embeds conduits into design so that lighting can be added afterwards — consider expanding this to other kinds of play spaces and amenities.

Let's ...

Build the Space

Whether you are working with contractors or organizing volunteers, the time for breaking ground has finally come. What is the best way to manage the construction process?



← You might relate to someone like **Kenyetta Campbell**, Executive Director of the Cody Rouge Action Alliance, who worked closely across stakeholders and community partners to prepare for and navigate the challenges of Stein Park's Build Day, including an unexpected storm!

You might be...



Build the Space

Tips for preparing for construction and breaking ground

Build Day at Stein Park Playground was an opportunity for local Cody Rouge youth to get hands-on experience improving their neighborhood, along with volunteers from the CRCAA, KABOOM!, and the City of Detroit. Reflecting back on lessons learned from this day, project lead Kenyetta Campbell shared there was tension built in the pressure to build the playground in a single day with unskilled volunteers and challenging weather. →



Building and engaging together builds relationships that last beyond project completion.

Working toward a common goal strengthens community stakeholder relationships.

★ In Salamanca, NY, the process of building Highland Ave. Park Playground brought together members of Seneca Nation and other residents. Previously, interactions were occasional (e.g., festivals, games). Today, the playground is a space for regular interaction between the two groups.

Do not underestimate the construction of play spaces or rely solely on volunteer labor.

Play spaces and skateparks involve significant construction processes and infrastructure requirements.

★ 4 of the 9 Built to Play projects that visited reported challenges related to designers, contractors and/or construction. For example, the conservancy that lead and manages MLK Jr Park Playground shared that they struggled with staffing capacity and equipment required for grading and preparing the site for installation. Coordination issues with the contractors also resulted in the installation of the wrong rubber surface thickness, creating ongoing maintenance issues.

Let's ...
Operate the Space

The ribbon has finally been cut and neighbors are enjoying their new play space. How will you ensure that the space continues to serve the community in the months and years to come?



←
You might relate to someone like Kevyan Richardson, an avid skater from the Chandler Park neighborhood who helped shape the skatepark design process. Today, he is a near-daily visitor who teaches summer skating lessons and introduces newcomers to the sport.

You might be...



Operate the Space

Maintaining for the long-term



Stein Park Playground in Detroit, Michigan hosts an annual clean up day for community volunteers to come together and maintain their shared space. Further, groups who frequent the space such as Little Leagues teams maintain it organically and informally. →

Consider a collaborative funding approach.

Generate buy-in for long-term maintenance by bringing multiple stakeholders to the table in project financing and operations.

★ Built to Play’s approach to bringing a mix of stakeholders to the table — from community organizers to community foundations — creates a sense of shared responsibility for the space’s long-term success.

Tap into community leadership of play spaces.

Projects that seed a sense of ownership in the space and cultivate a sense of organic stewardship help maintain the site beyond completion.

★ “It’s important to build that community support, so that hopefully you get that volunteer core that comes out and does an annual clean up there, [they] come out and decorate and activate the space. They’re donating their time to keep that [maintenance] budget down.” Kate Litwin, Howell Summit Gardens Project Lead

Achieve a “whole government” approach by breaking down silos in the design process.

Collaboration with multiple departments from the outset of the project engages those eventually charged with maintenance.

★ Maintenance for the JTNY Power House Skatepark in Jamestown, NY falls under the Public Works and Parks departments, which project leads describe as a good model for inter-departmental communication.

Think strategically about material and labor quality choices.

Maintenance expenses can be minimized through design & construction decisions like choosing high-quality materials and hiring qualified installers.

Amenities can build a sense of shared ownership.

Designing for a wide range of users, including those who do not play in the space but use its wrap-around amenities, generates more demand for a well-kept space.

★ Springville Skatepark sits within the larger Heritage park, complete with other amenities such as pavilions and restrooms, creating a sense of shared responsibility over the complete park space, not just the skatepark itself.

Operate the Space

Activating and boosting access

Pete Scheira, project lead for JTNY Power House Skatepark, has been providing skating lessons, classes, and events at the indoor skatepark he has owned for years before the official opening of the BTP funded skatepark. The effort has paid off, as one proud grandfather of a young skater girl at the new skatepark exclaimed: “The first thing that got her interested was the roller derby practices... once she saw that, she was in like Flynn!” →



Bring local businesses and organizations into the everyday life of the space to activate it on a regular basis.

Invite more activity in the space — without having to run formal programming — by inviting others to “own” and activate the space.

- ★ Consider a range of activation possibilities: What if a local skate shop set up a rental booth at the skatepark? What if an organization serving seniors held a fitness class using the new playground’s adventure course play space equipment? What if a local ice cream shop had a cart out by the playground on Saturday afternoons?

Encourage community-driven activation, tapping into existing systems when possible.

Invite local organizations with established ties in the community to use the space for events and classes that invite the community in.

- ★ Michigan’s Howell Summit Gardens is more than a playground that encourages imaginative play, it is also a vibrant community commons that invites community-led events such as food truck rallies, concerts, and holiday markets

Invite community members into the space early and actively — especially in niche recreational spaces like skateparks.

Activation is especially important for niche recreational activities like skating that community members may not already be involved in, and for underrepresented groups that may not feel automatically welcomed.

- ★ In Chandler Park Skatepark, skate classes run by the Chandler Park Conservancy, the organization managing the space, introduce local kids to skating and provided them with skateboards. In Stein Park, the community hosts its annual Family Fun Day by the playground.

Let's ...

Monitor the Space

You want to advance the play space development agenda. How can you learn from existing play spaces to inform your work?



←
You might relate to someone like Sandi Brundage, project lead of Highland Ave. Park and Salamanca Youth Center Director, who keeps a close eye on the space along with summer teen staff. This helps elevate improvements to the space and its edges (e.g., upgrading crosswalks, improving amenities).

You might be...



Monitor the Space

Measuring outcomes and adapting over time

The skating community of Roc City skatepark in Rochester, NY originally felt the first phase of the skatepark wasn't everything they had been promised. In 2023, the local project team and advocacy group has secured State funds to expand the park with more amenities and achieve the "skate plaza" feel that the community desired.→



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE CITY OF ROCHESTER

Hold pre- and post-visioning sessions with grantees.

Together with grantees embedded in their own communities, use the play space development process as a starting point to think about broader priorities and systems.

- ★ What if, after construction, a foundation facilitated a visioning session where a small group of grantees in the same region can discuss learnings and larger scale goals and priorities for play?

Continuously observe how people are using the space to understand use and adapt accordingly.

Monitor who is using the space, when and how, in order to learn what is working / not working, adapt the space, and contribute to the wider field of research.

- ★ Informal observation of a space can help guide updates over time – for example, many project leads' informal observations have led to changes in accessibility (e.g., crosswalks, paths), play equipment, and amenities (e.g., restrooms, seating).
- ★ Consider more formal observation of play spaces and skateparks, too: What if local organizations across a region recruited volunteers to do public life counts at their respective play spaces? The data could help inform changes to design, and broader priorities for play space development in the region.

Dive deeper into impacts.

Zero in on impacts at one scale of outcomes (individual, site, community, systems) with a more extended research timeline to uncover more deeper insights.

- ★ What if a play space development organization like KABOOM! or The Skatepark Project partnered with a local university to conduct a longitudinal or pre/post impact study looking at communities before and after a new play space opens?

Start and scale a program to drive access



You want to invest in more places to play — whether you're a foundation, a nonprofit advocate, a public sector leader, or a play space / skatepark design expert. How can you learn from Built to Play to set up and scale up a successful grant program ?

Provide Support

Ground grantmaking in local needs

Provide catalytic funding where it's needed most.

Built to Play successfully worked with community foundations, local partners, and governments to identify project opportunities and build financing momentum through an initial investment.

★ **Consider...** developing a matching grant system to expand community foundation, private, and grassroots funding. Use the eventual space's success to secure more public dollars toward space improvements and creation of new spaces.

Support grantees that lack fundraising expertise.

Program leaders supported many grantees in the fundraising period, providing short-term guidance on tactics that could be translated to long-term fundraising capacity-building.

★ **Consider...** within grant applications, including questions such as: "have you applied for a grant before?", "Do you have experience matching funds?" or, "Do you have any other potential funders?" in order to flag grantees that need additional support.

Create a platform for ongoing design support.

Built to Play provided local leaders with unparalleled access to play space / skatepark experts (e.g., KABOOM!, The Skatepark Project) who helped translate community dreams into a design.

★ **Consider...** creating a living database or catalogue of play, environmental, inclusive features in play spaces was available to grantees to browse through for inspiration.

Facilitate Connections

Embracing the role of liaison

Unify communications with room for local tailoring.

A brand identity and media push helped build awareness and excitement — landing features in local publications and providing local leaders with assets to point to as they built support.

- ★ **Consider...** providing a mix of communications collateral (e.g., outreach language, fliers, etc.) in a central program website, which local grantees can use when fundraising for additional dollars and getting the word out at the local level.

Facilitate knowledge sharing across experience levels.

Built to Play project leaders reported setting up informal meetings and visits with nearby communities (both grantees and non-grantees) that want to replicate their success.

- ★ **Consider...** amplifying the network effect of a regional program by pairing new, less experienced grantees with a “buddy” organization that has already completed a similar project in scale, type, or context.

Connect project leads to on-call technical expertise.

Fill the expertise gap of grantees by providing additional funds or connections to people who can help them avoid preventable construction and installation challenges.

- ★ **Consider...** curating an on-call list of experts in technical areas (e.g., environmental design, construction administration) that leaders can tap into as part of their grants.

Continue Learning

Improving the program along the way

Explore gaps in access to the grant.

While Built to Play as a program led to major play space and skatepark investment at scale, some grantees did not successfully complete the grant application cycle. Ensuring as streamlined and achievable grantmaking process as possible can help improve equitable access to grant funds.

- ★ **Consider...** creating a system to identify applications not completed, and then distribute a short survey to those applicants to better understand — and address — barriers to completion.

Learn from silo-busting grantees.

Many Built to Play projects involved collaboration across multiple municipal (and sometimes, state) departments — their lessons learned could inform improvements to a program’s operations, and could be of value to future grantees taking on ambitious projects that involve multiple stakeholders.

- ★ **Consider...** holding an exit interview with grantees who handled particularly large, complex projects to identify lessons learned — these could help a program better invest in larger projects that maximize impact and access to play spaces and skateparks.



Conclusion



Conclusion

Building a more playful future

Built to Play projects are benefiting kids and communities throughout Southeast Michigan and Western New York.

The work of advancing equitable play space and skatepark access, however, is far from over. The challenges encountered in Built to Play projects are reflective of those facing the wider fields of play space, skatepark, and community development. For play space advocates across sectors, Built to Play offers some lessons learned.

CHALLENGE · Aversion to challenging play **OPPORTUNITY** · Build the space to build the case

While parents' concerns for the perceived safety of their kids can be a barrier to free play ¹, Built to Play projects demonstrate that self-directed play that increases perceived risk is both possible and palatable. While some projects faced pushback for their inclusion of challenging play elements, now they are popular with kids and families, who see their impact on child development.

CHALLENGE · Physical limitations to free play **OPPORTUNITY** · Catalyze public realm upgrades

Many communities face barriers to safe, accessible play spaces — from unsafe crossings to high speed limits. Built to Play projects used their popularity to respond to these challenges. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. Park Playground in Buffalo installed boulders at the edges of the site area to prevent unauthorized cars from entering the park and play area.

CHALLENGE · Funding for long-term success **OPPORTUNITY** · Use grants to build credibility

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation's support of this initiative sent a signal to play skeptics that unlocked more funding. "Our cause is one usually overlooked by philanthropy. Our work is not seen as a key component of the solution (...) So here we had a large foundation saying play was key to their mission, and infrastructure was a key part of the solution." reflected James Siegal, KABOOM! Senior Fellow.

CHALLENGE · Inequitable access to play spaces **OPPORTUNITY** · Center kids at the margins

Historic inequities in play space and skatepark access persist — from underrepresentation of girls in skating to lack of access to quality green spaces in formerly redlined neighborhoods.² Deliberate design, organizing, and activation are critical to overcoming these barriers. Change can start small. For example, a slight change in the location of a legacy playground in Martin Luther King, Jr. Park in Buffalo made the new space more accessible to the historically Black neighborhood nearby.

CHALLENGE · Siloed responsibilities and goals **OPPORTUNITY** · Bridge operational divides

Play projects tend to cut across city departments — which presents coordination challenges and learning opportunities for future projects. "Maintenance [of the skatepark] falls under Department of Public Works and Parks Department," says Principal Planner Ellen Shadle of the City of Jamestown, NY. "We try to coordinate as much with them as we can. There hasn't been a history of that. There's been a lot of siloed operation in the past.

CHALLENGE · Technical knowledge gaps **OPPORTUNITY** · Link locals to experts

Building high-quality, sustainable, accessible play spaces and skateparks can often be a design and technical challenge beyond volunteer capacity. While four of the nine deep-dive projects studied reported issues related to design and/or construction, project leads strongly valued the presence of KABOOM! and The Skatepark Project experts on the ground during the engagement and design stages.

1. Lee et al., 2015.
2. Gehl, *Making Cities for People*, Casey, 2021.

Starting now

The successes and challenges of the Built to Play program can inform the work of anyone interested in building a more playful future for all kids. If you are a play space development organization or funder, consider these parting lessons.



★ **Replicate the model**

These outcomes stemmed from a clear program structure to channel funds directly to the communities most in need.

★ **Engage and activate local leaders**

Local organizers are essential to building trust, driving visitorship, and sustaining the project over time.

★ **Focus funding in a region**

Develop focused relationships and expertise to build a critical, regional mass of play space and skatepark investments.

★ **Respond to the local context**

Play does not look the same everywhere — consider how the space can be integrated into wider community development efforts.

★ **Build for a wide audience**

Investing in play benefits more than kids — expand its reach to adults and seniors who benefit from the physical and social benefits of play.



Overview of Data Collected

In close coordination with the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, KABOOM!, and The Skatepark Project, Gehl developed a research plan that included selecting a select number of case study sites for deep-dive evaluation out of the 91 confirmed projects across the portfolio, a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and metrics for measuring impact. The research plan was catered to understanding impact across six focus areas tied to the foundation's theory of investment.

Gehl conducted a multi-method evaluation that included a specific methodology for measuring impact across all sites (broad-based) and for comparing findings across nine case studies (deep-dive.) While for the broader portfolio-wide assessment we will compare findings across all sites, in the deep-dives, we will focus more on stories and insights from a specific place and go into more depth around process and outcomes.

The methodology reviewed includes the deep dive site selection, qualitative data methods and quantitative data methods.

The data collected in this evaluation does not provide a complete picture of public life at each site, but an initial understanding of how people are using the site. For example, the public life observation was limited to one day during the fall — a more complete picture could be obtained by comparing to other times of year, such as peak summer use and winter use.

Deep Dive Case Study Selection

The following methodology outlines the process taken to ensure the case studies were representative of the overall portfolio, a diverse mix of sites, and account for a range of parameters.

Two methods were used to select the sites: Listening sessions with Program managers, and GIS data analysis.

Listening Sessions

During the listening sessions, we asked program managers to introduce the portfolio of their Built to Play projects and identify 3-5 sites that might be most conducive to a "deep-dive case study."

GIS Data Analysis

To select the 9 sites, the team started by reviewing the list of completed projects provided by the client early in the process. Most project details listed the entity and city/town where the project was located, the status of the project, and the grant amount. The data was loaded into a geospatial mapping tool (QGIS) for further analysis.

Sociodemographic data from the 5-year 2020 American Community Survey was downloaded at the Census Block Group level. The metrics used for data analysis were:

Project Name	Status	Lead Partner	State	Recommended in Listening Sessions	Scale Bucket			Income Bucket			Non-white Population %			Population Density		
					Micro	Med	Large	<50% state median income	50-100% state median income	>100% state median income	Majority POC High	Majority POC Low	Majority White	<1k/sq mi	1-5k/sq mi	>5k/sq mi
Niagara Falls, NY - Fit Facts by the Falls	Completed	PE	NY	Consider	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Cassadaga, NY - Loopholes	Completed	PE	NY	Consider	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Lake Orion, MI - The Playful Dragon	Completed	PE	MI	Consider	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Detroit, MI - REST, PLAY, RIDE*	Confirmed	PE	MI	Consider	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Jamestown, NY - Chadakoin Adventure Trail	Completed	PE	NY	Consider	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Howell, MI - Howell Tales Trail	Completed	PE	MI	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Port Huron, MI - Palmer Coast	Completed	PE	MI	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Rochester, NY - Play Walk in Downtown Rochester	Completed	PE	NY	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
North Tonawanda, NY - Mayors Park	Completed	CBP	NY	Consider	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Jamestown, NY - Jamestown	Completed	CBP	NY	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Salamanca, NY - Highland Avenue Park Playground*	Completed	CBP	NY	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Port Huron, MI - Optimist Park	Completed	CBP	MI	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Detroit - Stein Park*	Completed	CBP	MI	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Springville - Springville Skatepark	Completed	TSP	NY	Consider	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Jamestown NY - SK8 Jamestown Skatepark	Under Construction	TSP	NY	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Ypsilanti Township - Ypsilanti Township CommUNITY Skatepark	Completed	TSP	MI	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Detroit - Chandler Park Skatepark*	Completed	TSP	MI	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Detroit - Littlefield Community Association	Under Construction	TSP	MI	Recommended	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.

↑ Data matrix used to organize metrics for each Built To Play project

Project Scale (Square footage of space)

Across the portfolio, projects range in size from a small 100 sq. ft. on a sidewalk to 500K sq. ft. at a large skatepark.

Socio-economic diversity (Income bucket)

The cutoffs for High, Medium, and Low income were set based on the median income for the state each project was located in - New York and Michigan. The cutoffs used were

- High: >100% of state median income
- Medium: 50-100% of state median income
- Low: <50% of state median income

Area context (Population Density)

The cutoffs were designed to capture relatively distinct population densities and by visually scanning Google Maps to validate the cutoffs. The cutoffs used were

- Low: <1000 people/sq mi (in general, more rural areas)
- Mid: 1,000 - 5,000 people/sq mi (in general, neighborhood areas)
- High: >5000 people/sq mi (in general, more crowded urban or downtown areas).

Racial diversity (% of non-white population)

The cutoffs here were set to <50% of the population identifying as people of color, 50-74%, and >75%.

Deep Dive Case Study Selection

Continued

The sociodemographic data points were then joined to the site projects based on which Census tract the project was geographically located in. Census divisions were chosen because they usually align with features like major roads, residential subdivisions, or natural features like streams. Therefore, they can be a good proxy for the “neighborhood” or “area” characteristics that describe the location of the project. To validate the use of Census divisions, average demographics within a 1-mile buffer radius of each project were also calculated and yielded similar results.

While Census Block Groups provide an objective benchmark we can compare across all sites, it comes with some caveats. It does not capture all the data needed to understand a place and Block Group boundaries will

not correspond to specific service areas for individual sites.

We used a diverse mix of methods in the research phase to better understand conditions around each site, including qualitative research and notes and findings from Built to Play leaders.

Where we had more nuanced information from conversations with leaders on conditions around a site, we used that information rather than Census Block Group data.

We merged the feedback from KABOOM! and The Skatepark Project with the results of the data analysis and identified the final 9 case studies, representing the following characteristics across the portfolio:

Socio-economic diversity (Income bucket)

- 5 low
- 2 medium
- 1 high

Area context (Population Density)

- 2 rural
- 3 suburban
- 4 urban

Racial diversity (% of non-white population)

- 4 communities of color
- 5 majority white communities

Regional diversity

- 4 SE Michigan
- 3 Rochester & Finger Lakes
- 2 Buffalo/Erie County

Qualitative Data Methodology

A variety of qualitative and quantitative methods were deployed in broad-based and deep-dive sites to collect information about the life and space of the Built to Play projects over the span of four months. While no single method can fully capture the outcomes of a project, the methodology was designed to triangulate insights across methods to yield meaningful findings.

Project Lead Interviews

Hour-long interviews were conducted with the leaders of grantee organizations that spearheaded each project (“project leads”). The interviews included questions about the grant application process, the arc of the project from engagement through construction, the life in the space today, and lessons learned. The list of people interviewed for each project are listed below.

Howell Summit Gardens Howell, MI

-Kate Litwin, Director of Howell Main Street and Downtown Development Authority Director

Stein Park Playground Detroit, MI

-Kenyetta M Campbell, CEO at Cody Rouge Community Action Alliance

Palmer Park Superslide Port Huron, MI

-Nancy Winzer, Director of Recreation and Parks at the City of Port Huron

Downtown Playwalk Rochester, NY

-Jenn Beideman, Director of Whole Child Advocacy at Common Ground Health

-Ellen Soffa, Landscape Architect at the City of Rochester

-Holly Sienkiewicz, Director of Research at Common Ground Health

-Beatriz Lebron, PlayRocs Project Coordinator at Common Ground Health

Chandler Park Skatepark Detroit, MI

-Alex Allen, President and CEO at Chandler Park Conservancy

MLK Jr. Park Playground Buffalo, NY

-Brian Dold, Director of Planning and Research at Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (BOPC)

-Greg Robinson, Director of Parks at BOPC

-Troy Drake, District Supervisor at BOPC

-Bob Stotz, Assistant Director of Operations at BOPC

-Zhi Ting Phua, Director of Engagement and Inclusion at BOPC

JTNY Power House Skatepark Jamestown, NY

-Pete Scheira, Owner at Jamestown Skate Products

-Ellen Shadle, Principal Planner at the City of Jamestown

Highland Ave Park Playground

Salamanca, NY

-Sandra Brundage, Youth Bureau Director at the City of Salamanca

Springville Skatepark Springville, NY

-Liz Melock, Village Administrator at Village of Springville

-Seth Wochensky, Executive Director at Springville Center for the Arts and board member of Green Springville

-Reed Braman, President at Green Springville and Village Trustee



Qualitative Data Methodology

Continued

Program Manager Interviews

Hour-long interviews were conducted with program managers from KABOOM! And TSP, Carrie Leovy and Trevor Staples. These interviews helped the Gehl team gather perception-based information from the people who helped bring these spaces to life; including the behind-the-scenes factors that made both the program and projects possible, what TSP and KABOOM!’s role was in the process, and the impact of the B2P partnership in supporting the project.

Focus Groups

Focus groups engaged a specific group of kids who frequent the play space space in a casual conversation to share their thoughts and perceptions of the space in their own words, led by a trusted local leader who were familiar faces for the kids.

Site Walks

Site walks accompanied by project leads took place on 10/08/2022 - 14/08/2022 in Western NY and 18/08/2022 - 21/08/2022 in Southeast Michigan. Project leads oriented the Gehl team to the site and shared more information about the project. In some cases (Port Huron, MI, Springville, NY) the project leads extended the walk beyond the project site to provide more context about play space and community development efforts in the community.

Given time and resource limitations, only two sites held focus groups, listed below and to the right.

Stein Park Playground Detroit, MI

-Torrianna Bradley, Youth Coordinator at Cody Rouge Community Action Alliance
-22 10th graders from Cody High School

Spatial Analysis

The spatial analysis was carried out in person during site visits by the Gehl team, guided by the Place Inventory and 12 Quality Criteria worksheets – both established Gehl methods adapted for the context of play spaces and skateparks for this project.

Play elements and amenities were inventoried, and sites were scored on qualitative criteria like comfort, opportunities to socialize, open-endedness, etc.

Note: this method has both qualitative and quantitative aspects.

Highland Ave Park Playground Salamanca, NY

-Sandra Brundage, Youth Bureau Director at the City of Salamanca
-17 people ages 8-26 at the Youth Center



Quantitative Data Methodology

A variety of qualitative and quantitative methods were deployed in broad-based and deep-dive sites to collect information about the life and space of the Built to Play projects in the span of four months. While no single method can fully capture the outcomes of a project, the methodology was designed to triangulate insights across methods to yield meaningful findings.

Public Life Observation

The public life observation data collected in this report provides a look into public life activity at the project sites through foot traffic and stationary activity data. Each site was observed once during the Gehl team's site visit. Movement and staying activity was recorded multiple times during peak activity hours.

Almost 500 people were observed interacting, playing, hanging out, and socializing in the eight play spaces where we ran public life surveys. One play space — the Play Walk in Downtown Rochester — was not observed due to inclement weather and low foot traffic.

Project Lead Surveys

Surveys hosted in both Google Forms and a printable Word document were sent out to project leads of all sites over email. Out of the 91 projects, 41 project leads responded. The survey included roughly 50 questions about their general experience with the program, their perception of use and public opinion on the space, operational aspects such as maintenance, funding, and sustainability, and more.

In addition to the survey questions, project leads were asked to share financial information about the project, photos and plans, and any other additional information they wished to share.

Visitor Survey

Visitor surveys hosted in Google Forms were conducted both in-person (as an intercept survey at deep-dive sites) and digitally (shared online to all sites as a link by project leads through their networks). A breakdown of the data collected is listed below:

- A total of 368 people were surveyed of which 40% represented *Skatepark* sites, 39% represented *Play Everywhere* sites, and 17% were *Community Build* sites.
- 106 responses were collected in person and 262 online.
- 52% of the responses were from people who identified as parents or guardians of kids who played at the space, 21% from adult users of the space, and 17% from kids themselves.





Endnotes & Acknowledgements

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