



Injecting life into barren schoolyards

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[CHRISTOPHER HUME](#)

There's much to be learned in the schoolyard.

Take the example of Denver, the Colorado city of 550,000, where an innovative program has transformed these most neglected of spaces into community centres.

Like so many cities in the United States and Canada, the Denver infrastructure has been in decline for several decades. Schoolyards there were paved-over places that seemed to attract more vandals than students.

Then along came Lois Brink, a landscape architect who teaches at the University of Colorado in Denver and a woman of endless patience. In the early '90s, her kids started classes at Bromwell Elementary, which, she soon realized, was a bit of a mess.

"I knew it needed work," Brink recalls. "There was no grass, no trees ... It was not a pleasant environment."

At the same time, UCD introduced a program that required faculty to get involved in the city. For Brink, the choice was clear, Bromwell Elementary.

Little did she know it would take six years to turn the schoolyard into something worthy of the name. The results have been nothing less than transformational, Brink reports. Vandalism has declined and suddenly everyone wants in. Since Bromwell was completed in 2000, she and her team of graduate students have worked their magic on 41 of Denver's 75 schools. "Sometimes you have to build things in order to get people to understand," Brink says. "Now we have completed the master plan for all the elementary schools in Denver. The results have been dramatic. Most of the schools that have new playgrounds have seen a significant drop in graffiti and gang activity. You've got to change the culture of the school and the neighbourhood."

No one's saying a schoolyard, no matter how well designed, can change the world. But it's a good place to start. In a city such as Toronto, with more than 1,700 public and high schools, the potential is vast.

Brink approaches the schoolyard as a series of rooms, programmed differently but intimate and connected. Unlike the traditional open space, kids here have options that include every part of the yard.

Brink also emphasizes the need to accommodate different age groups. That means playground equipment for young children, for example, and basketball courts for older ones. It also means some

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sections have hard surfaces; others are soft, with grass, flowers and trees.

Among the most important features of Denver's new playgrounds is a shade pavilion. The ground it sits on is always raised about half a metre above the rest of the yard so users are afforded views of the entire area. It's a simple technique, but effective. Jane Jacobs referred to it famously as "eyes on the street." The purpose is to raise safety levels and make it clear to residents the playground also belongs to them, not just students.

Brink also insists that entrances be marked with a full-scale gateway. This, she explains, is another way to let the locals know they are welcome.

In turn, increased levels of community involvement mean there are people around to care for the playground. That leads to lower maintenance costs and a safer environment.

Politically, it also helps because fewer than 40 per cent of Denver voters have children. Brink's program, however, enjoys such widespread support that residents passed a motion in 2000 to give it \$10.6 million (U.S.).

She also stipulates that each school must raise two per cent of the cost of rebuilding. That can take the form of cash or volunteer service. Typically, the cost of rebuilding a Denver schoolyard is \$450,000 (U.S.).

"The capacity to sustain the playgrounds is there," Brink says. "There are already 25 community groups that want in."

Though these schoolyards have created a sense of neighbourhood empowerment, most of all they benefit kids. At a time when children are fatter than ever, the need for physical activity is greater than ever.

"Recess is very important," Brink says. "This is where kids learn socializing skills. Because there are different activities for them to do, it has led to a reduction in bullying. They're not all fighting over one thing. The children come back from recess ready to learn."

Even better than a happy ending, this is the happy beginning.

Christopher Hume can be reached at chume@thestar.ca

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