

LET'S HACK OUR PLAY!

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Most playgrounds today are bought straight off of a catalogue, resulting in cookie-cutter and standardised play experiences. Given the importance of play in a child's development, there is a need to rethink how we design and build play spaces in Singapore. Particularly, it is important that children, educators, and parents are included in the process of designing play spaces so that each one can become a tailor-made experience that meets the community's needs and learning objectives.

Hack Our Play (HOP) is Singapore's first participatory, community-built play space at St. James' Church Kindergarten (SJCK). It is an initiative that lets children, educators, and parents co-create their very own play space, from start to finish. Together, they will be able to conceive, create and curate a safe and unique play experience while also fostering stronger bonds and a shared sense of pride and excitement through the process. This new model of design demonstrates how a play space can be created and transformed by everyone who uses it. The use of non-standard structures, recyclables, and everyday materials in its construction not only encourages non-linear thinking but also allows the HOP space to be reconfigured over time.

THE PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESS

The HOP team started by building relationships with people who are experts in the landscape of play and engaging in thorough literature review and case study research. They also interviewed educators, parents, and children to gather insights on their experience of play in Singapore.

The typical process of creating a playground usually only involves children in the last stage, as users. In this project, it was decided that they would begin with children and the community that surrounds them. To gain a deeper understanding of their needs, challenges and opportunities, the team held engagement activities such as Crayon Conversations, One-Day Pop-Up Play and Field Observations of the existing playgrounds in Singapore. In a series of workshops, children, parents, educators, and volunteers helped to build components of the play space by painting tyres, decorating barrels, pots and pans, and planting greenery.

WHAT DO CHILDREN WANT IN THEIR PLAY SPACE?

HOP asked children and parents from SJCK, as well as members of the public, what they value most in a play environment. The children preferred spaces that let them play comfortably in groups or alone. They loved colours and wanted to have the freedom to choose what and how to play. They also wished for spaces where they could indulge in their fantasies and imagination.





Parents wanted a balance of natural and man-made elements, as well as sensory stimulation areas that were safe yet challenging. They also appreciated the inclusion of comfortable spaces for them to rest.

With this in mind, the HOP play space is designed to ‘evolve’ into what the children want it to be. It has loose elements for children to build upon, and its green wall integrates nature into the play area. The mix of fixed structures and loose elements provides a variety of play and rest spaces for children and accompanying adults.

The design also reflects input from experts, including architects, designers, playground suppliers and early childhood educators on technical and safety aspects and how to encourage different types of play behaviour.



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DO'S

Let children enhance their learning by doing. By active engagement they can:

- **Develop creative thinking and hands-on construction** as they explore play possibilities with structures and materials not commonly found in regular playgrounds.
- **Learn to construct, deconstruct, reconstruct**, solve problems, and take ownership of the play space.
- **Foster the skills of collaboration** as they co-create with peers and subsequent users of the space.
- **Learn about the impermanence of life / situations / materials** as the HOP space keeps changing and materials respond to wear and tear.
- **Gain skills to adapt to today's speed of change and disruption**, as well as skills for the future.

COMPARISON OF HOP PLAY SPACE AND REGULAR PLAYGROUNDS

	Regular playground	HOP play space
Creation process	<p>Designers and experts choose the outcome.</p> <p>Children, as main users, are not part of the design development. They are consumers of the end product.</p>	<p>Participatory design: Play space is co-created with children / educators / parents, making the process as important as the product.</p> <p>The benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children, educators and parents become collaborators, not just consumers. • Recognition that every child has something positive to contribute to the process. • Children / educators share ownership over the space, as well as a sense of excitement.
Structures	<p>Only fixed structures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The play experience and play structures are pre-determined. • Play spaces are made into specific scenes which limit creativity and imagination in play. 	<p>Fixed and movable structures so play space is dynamic and constantly evolving:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The different materials and structures offer more possibilities for engagement and creative play. • Built structures are neutral (no obvious label and form) thus allowing children to use their creativity and imagination.
Materials	<p>Built from scratch from new, raw materials.</p>	<p>Built from everyday recyclable / used materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less waste, using what already exists instead of making something new. Children learn to care for the environment. • Children are given the freedom to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct.
Learning for children / educators / parents	<p>Predictable design of-fering fewer avenues for creativity and therefore limited learning.</p>	<p>Brings learning to broader and deeper levels for both children and educators / parents.</p>

DON'TS

Educators and parents may assume children will learn in a safe and secure environment like a classroom. Show educators and parents that they can enhance their teaching and parenting skills as they continuously help to extend the children's development through play. A few points to remember:

- **Don't underestimate children's imagination.** Observe their responses to the 'invitation' to create, and use these observations to enhance the children's learning.
- **Don't stop evolving.** Facilitate / support the children's learning by continually engaging them through play.

Hack our Play is presented by Lien Foundation and Participate in Design and in collaboration with St. James' Church Kindergarten.



**In loving memory
of Mizah Rahman, co-founder of
Participate in Design (1986-2020)**
