

Woodland Tribe - A manifesto for adventure play



Play, Build, Dream – re-presenting adventure play

Woodland Tribe are a not-for-profit social enterprise promoting adventure play in the UK. Taking the best ideas from playgrounds in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Japan Woodland Tribe are revolutionising playtime. Our rallying cry is 'Build your own adventure playground!' We give children and families hammers, saws, nails and a huge quantity of wood to build from scratch the playground of their dreams.

Woodland Tribe's re-presenting of adventure play is capturing the public's imagination, 1000's of children across the UK are embracing adventure play, spatial agency and co-production. Feeding an inherent need for children and families to take control of community space, to play and build together.

Woodland Tribe's vision is to find new audiences and make adventure play a popular culture all over the UK. We have used large and small festivals to promote our adventure play philosophy and have recently started to engage with schools and art galleries. Woodland Tribe's unique skill is in helping children and families create extraordinary play structures and amazing spaces. These co-created environments are non-permanent, full of uncertainty and possibility, always playful, organically changing moment to moment, day to day.

'It's like magic! I have never seen my children so engaged.' Parent

Adventure Play for the many not just the few!

Adventure playgrounds or junk playgrounds as they were originally called started in Denmark during the 1940's. The idea was brought to the UK in the 1950's by social campaigner Lady Allen of Hurtwood. In the 1980's there were over 300 adventure playgrounds in the UK. Tucked away on urban estates they have been laboratories of children's play, cultural exploration, playwork and political resistance.

There are adventure playgrounds all over the world. In Copenhagen there are over 150 adventure playgrounds, one in every neighbourhood. In Hamburg and Berlin adventure playgrounds are called bau-spiel-platz (work-play-ground) and there is a strong emphasis on children building in the original tradition of adventure play. Inspired by these European playgrounds Woodland Tribe are promoting a child-lead building methodology in the UK.

We believe the time is right to make adventure play a popular culture in the UK, as popular as Quentin Blake's drawings that represent a free-range childhood full of exploration and discovery. Adventure play combines hands on building, creative expression and an overwhelming sense of childhood freedom and playful liberation rarely seen in mainstream society.

'[Adventure playgrounds] a free society in miniature' Colin Ward

Reclaiming a childhood in the here and now

Adventure play offers an exciting 'we can do it' narrative of children's play that celebrates children's agency in the here and now. A powerful experience in a world where children's freedom to play is increasingly denied or controlled. We believe childhood is not just a preparation for adulthood to be measured with outcomes and targets. We reject the progress rhetoric of developmental psychology and celebrate a socio-cultural perspective of children's play and childhood.

Adventure play is good for children in so many ways. It is good for their health, burning calories, being active outside, establishing healthy preferences for life. Building and playing is also good for children's mental health, it gives them a break from the digital age, allows them to let off steam, problem solve, develop emotional resilience, and simply have a moment of fun in a progress driven society.

Adventure playgrounds are unorthodox or heterodox, symbols of children's defiance in an increasingly obtrusive world. They are places of possibility, drama and tension, a space for children and adults to come together and co-produce a dynamic space that is radically different from other services for children.

'There is always a risk about being alive and if you are more alive there is more risk!' Henrik Ibsen

Children are active agents with spatial agency

To let children construct their own play space is a powerful act, an act of agency that is denied elsewhere in society. Adventure play lets children manipulate, deconstruct and change that environment which reaffirms children's rights as active citizens and their place in the public realm.



We encourage children to write and draw on the structures that they build, a fundamental representation of their emotional connection. Articulating their own playful and imaginative narrative with song lines that help them understand and navigate their very own play landscape.

Woodland Tribe believe that play (not learning) is the most important part of childhood. It is how children explore the world around them and understand their relationship with it. Play is children's culture, it's how they build ideas, explore creativity and develop interests that become their cultural framework for the rest of their lives.

Affordances and letting children taking control

Woodland Tribe's build-play philosophy is all about letting children take control of their own play space. It is hard to describe the sight and sound of 50+ children, equipped with hammers and saws clambering over and furiously adding to a huge structure that they themselves have built. The resulting aesthetic is rickety, shonky (our favourite word) and full of dynamism, and clearly built by children to please no-one else but themselves.

Children tell us that being allowed to build fosters an incredible relationship between them and the space. Academics have identified affordances in adventure play interweaving mind, body and environment. A complex assemblage of hands on construction and the fantasy of imaginative play, where the experience and resulting attachment to the space is amplified for every child and adult taking part.

Feedback tells us families put a value on participation, making something together is a rare opportunity for co-production, a hands on playful culture that is highly engaging for the whole family. A blank canvas means everyone can contribute, to have norms and rules playfully disrupted, for adults to revisit moments from their own childhood.

'A celebration of the temporary, fragile and risky, a space where children are fully competent to judge their own risk, make an assessment, change what they don't like, keep what they do.' Tom Williams

A temporary and fragile co-existence

When children are playing they embrace a world of uncertainty, they thrive on a succession of 'what if' moments when playing and building. 'What if we now built a bridge' 'What if there is a dragon on the other side' 'What if the dragon is friendly'. When the children have gone and the dynamism of the build has ebbed away the structure is left in stark fragility, a testament to the energy and uncertainty that has swept through the space.

Woodland Tribe believe that temporary, fragile and shonky play spaces allow children new ways to exist outside of established systems of societal control, consumerism and consumption. We put a value on children's parallel existence, the opportunity to place a child-lead fantasy and reality into a heavily adult constructed world.

Adventure plays methodology pose interesting and challenging questions for adults. Children are in control of their own creativity and means of production in a space that matters to them. Adventure playgrounds are lived space, a visceral and unique experience that combines building, playing and dreaming!

'Children are rejecting factory made play structures and adult interpretations of how children play.' Samuel Horrocks

Woodland Tribe provide a broad mix of empowering ideas, community engagement, event management, infrastructure building, business, fundraising and strategic knowledge. Woodland Tribe are supporting existing adventure playgrounds in Bristol, Cornwall and London. Protecting and sustaining valuable spaces that matter to communities. We are also intend on 'breaking out' and creating new exciting play spaces in all over the UK where children and adults have asked for support addressing the play deprivation in their community.

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If you would like a copy of this manifesto we would be happy to email it to you or download it from our website.