



Jeff Cutler, space2place architect and creative director, tests the Contiki, which is from Germany, at the Garden City Park.

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# A lot of childish thinking went into new play park

**DESIGN** | Architects took the time to find out what the kids wanted before they started building

BY ALISON APPELBE

When Vancouver landscape architects space2place needed to design a playground, they went straight to the users — the kids.

Hired by the City of Richmond to design a \$1-million, one-acre park on Alberta Road off Garden City Road, the staff at space2place design inc. — no capital letters — sought out kindergarten through Grade 7 pupils at nearby Anderson elementary school.

In workshops with design staff, the pupils spurned the same-old climbing apparatus and swing sets and even the accessible wooden boat, painted in primary colours, that routinely appears in playgrounds.

"Children don't impose this on themselves," said space2place principal architect and creative director Jeff Cutler.

Instead, and well supplied with Plasticine, they came up with a raft of ideas that contributed to the design of a novel — some might say off-the-wall — playground intended to encourage healthy social, cognitive and physical development, not to mention good fun. The Garden City Park opens Saturday.

This consultative approach — space2place was the only project applicant to propose working with children — has been a factor in catapulting the seven-member design studio, with offices in the century-old Mercantile Building on Homer at Cordova, to success in just seven years.

Of time-consuming, often patience-testing discussion with would-be clients, Cutler said: "The solution is not to look at it as a chore and really embrace it, to ask, 'What can we do to create the best project possible?' And when you ask higher-level questions you get higher-level discussion. It's something we've used in all our parks."

While today the firm handles municipal projects such as the redesign of Oppenheimer Park in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and a waterfront park in downtown Kelowna, as well as private projects like the landscaping of multi-million-dollar residential properties in West Vancouver, it got its start in public skate parks.

From the beginning, the design team held workshops with skateboarders. It learned that they wanted features as mundane as seating, water fountains and fire pits. Some preferred a bowl-style facility; others wanted space for street-style skateboarding.

The result, in the case of the Metro Skate Park in Burnaby near Metrotown, is a multi-level park with "zones" for differing abilities and ages, "hangout" locations, and a concrete cylinder with a viewing platform on top, set in a particularly curvaceous bowl.

"This is one of the ideas that came out in a workshop," Cutler recalled. "We got a good sense of what they wanted. They helped to keep things fresh."

The Metro Skate Park has won awards of excellence from national and provincial parks and recreation associations, a U.S. skateboard organization — even the BC Ready Mix Concrete Association ("special applications artistic merit"). Space2place was off to a flying start.

Cutler, who studied landscape architecture at Guelph University before moving to B.C. in 1994, began by working on golf courses, including Furry Creek near Porteau Cove and Big Sky in Pemberton. The same principles still apply: "reading the site and seeing what it has to offer" and then "building on its strengths."

"People are drawn to thoughtful landscapes based on [design] intervention," he said. "The challenge is to find the right connection between the natural and the human." He cited the example of a low-elevation trail that the firm is currently designing for the city and district of North Vancouver, in cooperation with West Vancouver.

While the multi-use trail will follow, where possible, the waterfront and existing parks, it will also connect to the wider environment — natural features like Mosquito Creek and Lynn Creek — as well as the surrounding commercial infrastructure.

And as with a project called UBC Sustainability Street — one that landed the firm a 2008 merit award from the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects — this Spirit Trail will seek out "desire lines" — the paths or byways that pedestrians habitually take based on intuition or convenience, rather than artificially imposed structures or guidelines.

"A lot can be determined just by watching how people behave, then working back from that," Cutler said. "With the 'desire lines' we try to bring clarity to how people want to use a space, and strengthen that. At the same time, you can never really ascertain how a space will be used. There will always be uses that were unintended."

The stereotype of landscape architects as professionals who

design walls and rockeries, then add shrubs and flowers, lingers.

For space2place, landscape architecture draws on industrial design, architecture, graphic design, as well as environmental and horticultural know-how. "We think of it as all integrated — tied into the context of place," Cutler said.

The intent of the Garden City Park is to encourage spontaneous play while establishing a connection with nature and living organisms throughout the seasons.

In what's believed to be a first park of its kind in North America, it brings to the surface an underground storm water system, and then spirals the water through unusual channels and man-made structures—including a maneuverable sluice, hand-pump and water wheel—all of which encourage what Cutler calls child-driven "interventions."

An oddball collection of old-growth tree limbs has been assembled into a welcoming "log nest," while a cluster of long-abandoned stumps — power-washed, sandblasted and treated for climbing — are visually and physically inviting.

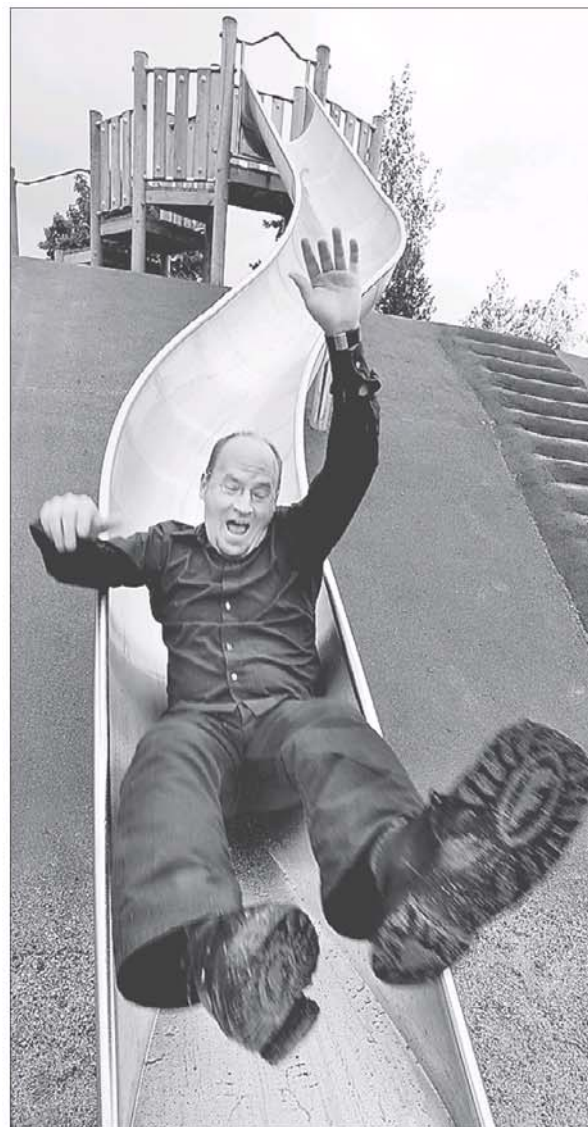
A gentle slope is covered in a tactile red rubber — an exception to what is otherwise a mostly nature-inspired colour palette. "Our play equipment [imported from Germany] is quiet and natural," Cutler said. "But when we did get into colour it was bold and very intended." Unusual plants — seed heads and grasses "in weird and wonderful shapes and colours" — add novelty and texture to the unconventional park setting.

The workshops also showed that children favour borders and "gateways" — yet here they're casual and intuitive, rather than restrictive and ordering. They include a series of unconnected shapely steel posts — those in red ripple like grass; bright yellow ones appear to shift as your perspective changes — and a "pathway" of meandering concrete stepping posts of varying heights.

"It's going to be a little messy," says Cutler happily of the entire park.

For private projects, the space2place process remains pretty much the same.

Said Cutler: "If a client says they want a certain landscape — say an English country garden — it limits your ability to solve the challenge [of maximizing the site]. So we like to put that idea aside for the moment and look at what the property presents us with." (Cutler personally prefers a garden with "a long



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Architect and creative director Jeff Cutler of space2place slides home safely at Garden City Play Park, which opens later this month.

life span"—one that reflects and respects all the seasons, natural light and age-old hydrological and horticultural cycles.)

Above Eagle Harbour in West Vancouver, space2place has cantilevered a staircase beyond a rock face to connect a house with a pathway below in a natural way. In the front yard, a curving steel fence and concrete walls (with a wire-mesh hole) create an unusual courtyard. On Bowen Island, the firm is redesigning a foreshore property in

such a way that "the house feels inserted into the landscape."

"We use traditional ideas in a contemporary context," Cutler added. "That's what sustainable design is. In fact, a storm water system is a kind of ditch — we do a lot of very fundamental things. Space2place implies transformation, yet a lot of what we do isn't that ground-breaking."

And that includes listening to children.

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