

Great escapes

Landscape architect Cameron Rennie and consultant Tina Dyer discuss their approach to the design of play 'scapes'.

Words by **Michael Barrett** Photograph by **Sue Wake**

Last year's *New Zealand Herald* wrap of Auckland's "coolest" playgrounds revealed that two firms were producing a bulk of the best playgrounds. Isthmus Group was justifiably recognised for its intriguing work at Barry Curtis Park and Hobsonville Point. That firm's Wynyard Quarter project was cited as "best new playground". Meanwhile, LandscapeWorks, headed by Cameron Rennie, had also designed a lion's share of top-rating projects, including Schnapper Rock and Schopolo Reserve, near Albany, on Auckland's North Shore. Rennie's designs – many of which are also on the Shore – are often developed in collaboration with play consultant Tina Dyer, from Park Central. Dyer offers a belated bouquet to the North Shore City Council, saying it had a "really good philosophy towards play" and that, "It was keen to embrace the playscape".

"Most of the new things we've tried have been there, because they were keen to give it a go – there was a willingness to experiment."

Rennie says that the first project he and Dyer worked on together was at Castor Bay. This early example of a play 'scape' – as opposed to a play 'ground' – references the post-World War II gun emplacements at the site. Rennie sunk the playground, so it resembles a gun emplacement.

"The kids love running around in it and because it's sunken the parents love it – once they put the kids in then they know they are in. That was our first playscape, and I really enjoyed it, because I was learning all about Tina's side of things."

Rennie says he, like many of a generation, grew up with something akin to a rusty tractor as a playground centrepiece.

"I remember thinking, 'Is that it?' Now I see what kids can get, it's quite exciting – but sometimes disappointing, especially with smaller councils, when things look like they've just landed and there's no relationship to the car park, or the paths or the drinking fountains. As a landscape architect that's frustrating, because you want to organise the furniture into some sort of order that makes sense of things for both children and adults."

Dyer's background is in parks management. She became interested in playgrounds, worked for a manufacturer for a few years, then set up her own consultancy, which allows her to "go in and help specify". Her

work encompasses child development, safety standards, design, project management and integration into landscape. The improved playgrounds of today are easy to measure against the dark days of the rather gloomily named 'module'. The module, says Dyer, categorises an era of playground: "It was when playgrounds started to be asset-driven from a council perspective; that's when we got that 'landed-from-Mars' style of playground."

"Historically, playgrounds were well spaced. You'd have a big rocker and such things. They were nice places, which then they became quite horrible, driven by the asset management systems – condition ratings, compliance, and safety standards, bigger fall zones. They lost their way. We went through a period where standards drove things. We had our standard – the Australia/New Zealand standard, and that was probably the worst. That was the module era. I think that there was a period of backlash against that. We adopted the European standard in 2004, and that's what's given us so much more scope. It's very defined but it also actually allows you to do a lot."

So, how do Rennie and Dyer work out a design? Rennie says that they're given an idea about demographic, what's needed, what category of playground as defined by council, a destination or a neighbourhood project.

"Schnapper Rock was just grass, but with a bit of a slope, which made it more interesting. There might be existing plantings, but a lot of our North Shore sites were just grass – blank canvases – which is good and bad. When you have existing trees, or attributes, then you have parameters to work with. Tina and I will chat about equipment, and then pull it together and make it an interesting place to visit as a parent or a child, which links to all the parts of the park."

These projects can also be a cheeky way to do up other parts of a reserve, he says, by widening the scope to put in footpaths or public furniture under the umbrella of a playscape. "We know that the train's pulled out once we're done; we only get one shot at it."

Rennie's designs can also be about re-using what exists on site. At Schnapper Rock, he took excavated soil and created BMX mounds down the slope. "We saw that the kids were riding there anyway. So the soil came out and went over there. It was quite a cheap solution, but very effective."

Dyer says that key play-related trends currently involve water and sand, but look out for sound-based pieces in the future. A German-designed Archimedes screw at Schnapper Rock lets kids wind water up before sending it down a 'stream' filled with West Coast pebbles that change from "cream to green" when wet. It's interventions such as this, that go beyond climbing frames and swings, that extend the scope of play and make a playground a playscape. 01

01: A playscape detail from Schnapper Rock.

