

Allowing children the space for recreation and experimentation was a guiding principle of post-war design. RIBA Photographs Curator *Justine Sambrook* reveals how architects responded with innovative and unexpected designs, frequently challenging what might be considered 'child's play' today.

Architects at Play



With their outlandish concrete constructions of ships or flying saucers, the architect-designed playground is a lesser-known aspect of post-war design in Britain, and one explored in the RIBA's Architecture Gallery this summer. The sharp edges, perilous heights and hard surfaces of these structures may seem alien to today's health and safety conscious society but reflect a period when children were offered more freedom to learn through – sometimes painful – experience.

Architects' fascination with building for children peaked in the mid-20th century. While Modernism's grand ideas for social reformation focused attention on children as an optimistic symbol of a bright future, there was a growing belief post-war that architecture could solve the problems of disadvantaged members of society.

Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse – the utopian urban plan he devised in the 1930s and '40s; realised in the Unité d'Habitation of 1947 – exemplifies this attitude. This 'city of the future' was designed

to improve the lifestyle of its inhabitants, with an abundance of open spaces and access to sunlight. This, in turn was expected to lay the foundations for a better society. Corbusier's design included several features intended to help children adapt to high-rise living, including flexible play-spaces within the flats and a kindergarten on the roof. Writing in 1948, the architect presented the project as primarily a child-centred environment:

"We are setting up an extraordinary network of services for raising children, extending from infancy to adolescence, each age group being given intelligent pretexts for coming together... This youth will be king of its own household, and will be given the possibility of administering itself."

Le Corbusier's vertical community became the blueprint for Britain's high-rise experiments of the 1950s, when the Modernist notion that fresh air, exercise and, most importantly, play were recognised as tools for societal improvement. This philosophy became a core principle in the design of post-war estates.

Previous pages: Churchill Gardens Estate, Pimlico, London, by John Malby; children on the climbing frames in the playground, Park Hill Estate, Sheffield, Architectural Press Archive. Above: children's play area, Park Hill Estate, Sheffield, Architectural Press Archive. All photographs courtesy of RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

