



THE MAGAZINE WITH IDEAS & SOLUTIONS FOR RECREATION, SPORTS & FITNESS FACILITIES MANAG

All-Access Pass to Play

Tilles Park in Ladue, Mo.

By Kelli Anderson

When the playground at Tilles Park in Ladue, Mo., opened for its first full season this past May, its creators quickly realized that the park's goal to provide interactive play for children of all ages and abilities had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

"The park is getting over 2,000 kids a day," said Jim Wolterman, principal with SWT Design of St. Louis. "No one expected it. It's become an icon where people are measuring other play experiences."

With an assenting nod to the success of the new playground and splash play area, the park was recognized as the best playground in the St. Louis area by St. Louis Magazine this past summer.

The park's initial concept was sparked by the St. Louis Children's Hospital's desire to create an inclusive play space where children with disabilities could fully interact with their able-bodied and/or neurologically typical siblings and friends. "It was all started by an ER nurse in St. Louis who was tired of needless playground injuries," said Greta Todd, director of advocacy and outreach at the hospital. "Since the late '90s, we've built over 30 playgrounds, but it was evident we also needed a place for children with special needs. Every child needs a place to play."

When the hospital approached SWT Design with the idea for an inclusive playground, it was evident that research into the specific needs of disabled children was going to be key. "You've got to do your homework," said Mike Flad, project manager and landscape architect with the St. Louis County Parks Department, a collaborative partner in the project, providing land and now maintaining the space. "It's very important to figure out who is your customer base—ours was very wide. We talked with people who were knowledgeable about auditory processing disorders, autism, the hearing-impaired and more to incorporate as many stimulating experiences as possible."

Recognizing, however, that ADA compliance and safety concerns often lead to boring play design, collaborators on the project were determined that accessible could also mean fun. The result was a park design that limits no one and includes everyone in its invitation to play and imagine. Slides, for example, are made of stainless steel because plastic slides generate electricity that can short out cochlear implants in the hearing-impaired.

Physically disabled children who require special swing seating can now swing and squeal alongside their able-bodied friends and siblings. The sand area, raised high for wheelchair access, enables kids of all abilities to build their towering masterpieces together.

A poured-in-place rubberized surface throughout the park ensures that from the parking lot to every area of play, children with wheelchairs or walking devices are never limited. "It is totally accessible—that's number one," Flad said of the surfacing selection. "And number two is that when we have a downpour of rain, in five minutes or less it has drained well enough for play."

The park's crowning glory, however, is undoubtedly its central feature—the spray fountain. "The heart of the project is the plaza where people gather and meet. It's a spray ground," said Ted Spaid, principal designer on the project with SWT Design. "It is surrounded by seat walls and is a hub from which everything radiates."

As a stellar example of how-to-do-it-right design, the fountain area is not only multipurpose and multi-seasonal, it is whimsical, colorful and, above all, fun. Function artfully follows form as the plaza's pinwheel floor design, with its large center stone, spouts countless nozzles and sports an array of

animal statues. The statues' noses, when pressed, activate a variety of choreographed spray events. Fountain jets—some continuous stream, some pop-jets, some vertical, some forming a loop—all combine to create repetitive shapes and unpredictable patterns. Children, delighted by the performance, invent games like water tag, positioning themselves over the nozzles to eliminate the players who are sprayed first. Not dependent on the mobility of the players, games like this demonstrate how ideally the design is suited to foster play for those of all abilities.

The park's commitment to artful fun is similarly echoed in the natural-stone seating wall surrounding the spray ground. From this drier vantage point, where visitors can connect with others who understand a special-needs-impacted life, there are yet more design elements intended for all ages to enjoy.

"The seating has a fun thing," Spaid explained. "Bronze ants climb upon the wall and incomplete nursery rhymes are written on it. A child that can read will finish it, or a mother teaching her child to read engages in that activity with them when they discover it."

The park's popularity—particularly the fountain area—has even led to the creation of family changing rooms, retrofitted in the pavilion, for the many who wear their swimsuits to the park during Missouri's hot, steamy summer days. "This is great fun, and you don't have to pay for a pool," Wolterman said of the million-dollar park. "These spray grounds are cost-effective. An aquatic center is expensive, but a spray ground is reasonable for the play value."

When summer's heat comes to an inevitable cooler end, the plaza transforms its fountain space into an area where children still play around whimsical features or enjoy the entertainment of a professional performance. Park features, like the plaza, strive to be multipurpose and multi-seasonal.

"Today's consumer wants to see beauty," Spaid said. "The days of concrete and hot, unshaded slabs without a place to sit are over. People want to be inspired by beautiful parks, and this place elevates that in the experience and in the landscape as well."

What is most remarkable, however, is that despite the park's achievement of beauty, creativity and fun, it has succeeded best in its goal to include those of any ability and any age. That's a success worth repeating.

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SWT Design: www.swtdesign.com

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