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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

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SUPER FUN

At Copenhagen's "super wedge"

CARVE

The Dutch office where work is play

WHY BOCCE IS BACK

The secret appeal of a very old game

THAT NOISE IN BERKELEY

The Adventure Playground,
30 years on





FEATURES

FUN IS ALLOWED

To bring energy into a city, bring kids. They need good schools. They also need places to play, as do their parents, who are necessary, and coffee seems a good enticement for them. Kids and parents also enjoy meeting people, whether they admit it or not, and in places where everyone is from somewhere else, that can be hard. Superkilen, in Copenhagen, the playgrounds by Carve, in Amsterdam and elsewhere, and a seasoned standby, the Adventure Playground in Berkeley, California, put people at ease. They make meeting other people natural and inevitable. They give everyone something pleasurable they didn't expect that day.

THIS SPREAD
King Crawler: This
Carve-designed
playing wall relies
on imagination and
multifunctional
surfaces for fun.





FLUID, DYNAMIC

IN AMSTERDAM, CARVE MAKES DELIRIOUS PLAYGROUNDS
WITH THE SOBER MOTIVE OF MAKING COMMON GROUND.

BY MICHAEL DUMIAK

Two children, one sitting



on a skateboard and the other poised to give it a push,

were at the top of a brick sidewalk slope in Amsterdam as a raw spring breeze came off the Kostverlorenvaart Canal.

Soon the push came. With a squeal and a clatter, the youngster steered the board, bumping to rest against a low wall.

No signs, rules, or ramps needed: just two kids, a board, an incline.

On the other side of the wall, through a bright orange door, the designers at Carve are pursuing the same thing, an improvisational, willful, earnest spirit of play that the founders, Elger Blitz and Mark van der Eng, have been chasing a long time. The pair got to know each other as skateboarders on proto-punk ramps they built themselves. They founded the small studio in 1997. Van der Eng is the engineering and technical brains; Blitz is the designer and public voice. Carve can now count a series of bold and increasingly assured constructions: more than 50 skateboard parks, nine schoolyards, 14 playgrounds in parks, 10 urban renovations—all involving playgrounds or athletic parks in some way—two nature parks, and a couple dozen object designs.

Carve's work is centered in free-wheeling Amsterdam and its staid companion city, The Hague, as well as a scattering of other cities and towns across the flat, wind-swept north of the Netherlands. The studio made its name with a serious approach to play, a willingness to take risks, and a collaborative spirit. Now Blitz and van der Eng are pushing farther afield to Singapore, Istanbul, Malaysia, and China. They've built an interdisciplinary team, including a skilled young landscape architect, Hannah Schubert, brought over from the office of Karres en Brands. "Landscape here is always meant as a base for play. You always have the angle of play in your landscape," Schubert says. "For me that means some rethinking." The skateboarders are learning new tricks.

Kids at recess were in a whirl outside in the Kortenaërplein—*plein* means square in Dutch—as Blitz sat down with a coffee and stretched out his skinny legs in black jeans and red-mesh,

gold, and neon-green late-model Nike Flyknit Trainers. Blitz shows a brash front from the start in presenting Carve projects as more than aligning play equipment in an ideal way—even well-designed equipment. The well-designed playground, rather, is one connected to what is around it. It is a cultural and social space

for people, for fun, for growing up, a first kiss, dealing with bullies and bruised knees, making friends, parents making friends. "My goal is to see what can be a contribution to the city. Our metaphor is the playground," he says. "Maybe that's why we stand out. I'm not interested in making playgrounds. I'm interested in neighborhoods."

Carve sets out to create communal areas of free play as much for adults as for children. Blitz thinks schoolyards should also be truly public space—that it's kind of absurd for city playgrounds and school playgrounds to sit near one another. Play should not be prescribed and signposted. "We don't like making ships, because a ship can only be a ship" is something he'll say more than once. Carve doesn't make duplicates. It will design variants, with like purposes, but not cookie-cutter repeats for new parks. The designers aren't purists, though. Carve had a hit with its Wall-Holla design and decided to license it. Still, the studio is best known for unique playground objects and abstract forms, and for working meticulously to place them so they relate to their surroundings, small or large scale.



OPPOSITE

The Wall-Holla structure has been a big hit for Carve.

LEFT

Carve's cofounder Elger Blitz and a colleague work in the firm's Amsterdam studio.

These traits emerge across Carve projects in varied locations: in central and suburban Amsterdam and The Hague, in neighborhoods both rough and those gentrifying, in new open spaces, in the celebrated old Vondelpark. There's the 2011 remake of van Beuningenplein, a city square in a rapidly changing neighborhood; a park for disabled kids in The Hague that doesn't look as if it's for disabled kids; a new youth center where a skateboarding bowl is carved out of one of the walls. "The objects are not so hard to make," Blitz says. "It's always about climbing. Sliding. Turning. Jumping. Hiding."

Bang! A soccer ball from the play square bounces off the studio's plate window. "We're one of the few here who really can't complain," the designer says.

Blitz was born in Amsterdam in 1964; his mother was an economics teacher, his father an electrical engineer. Work took them through the suburban city of Apeldoorn on to Nijmegen in the west, where Blitz took up skateboarding. He and his friends would build scratch ramps and half-pipes—it was the only way to have them. The day after finishing high school in 1982, he moved back to Amsterdam. He would skate through the city and over obstacles built in a squat warehouse building.



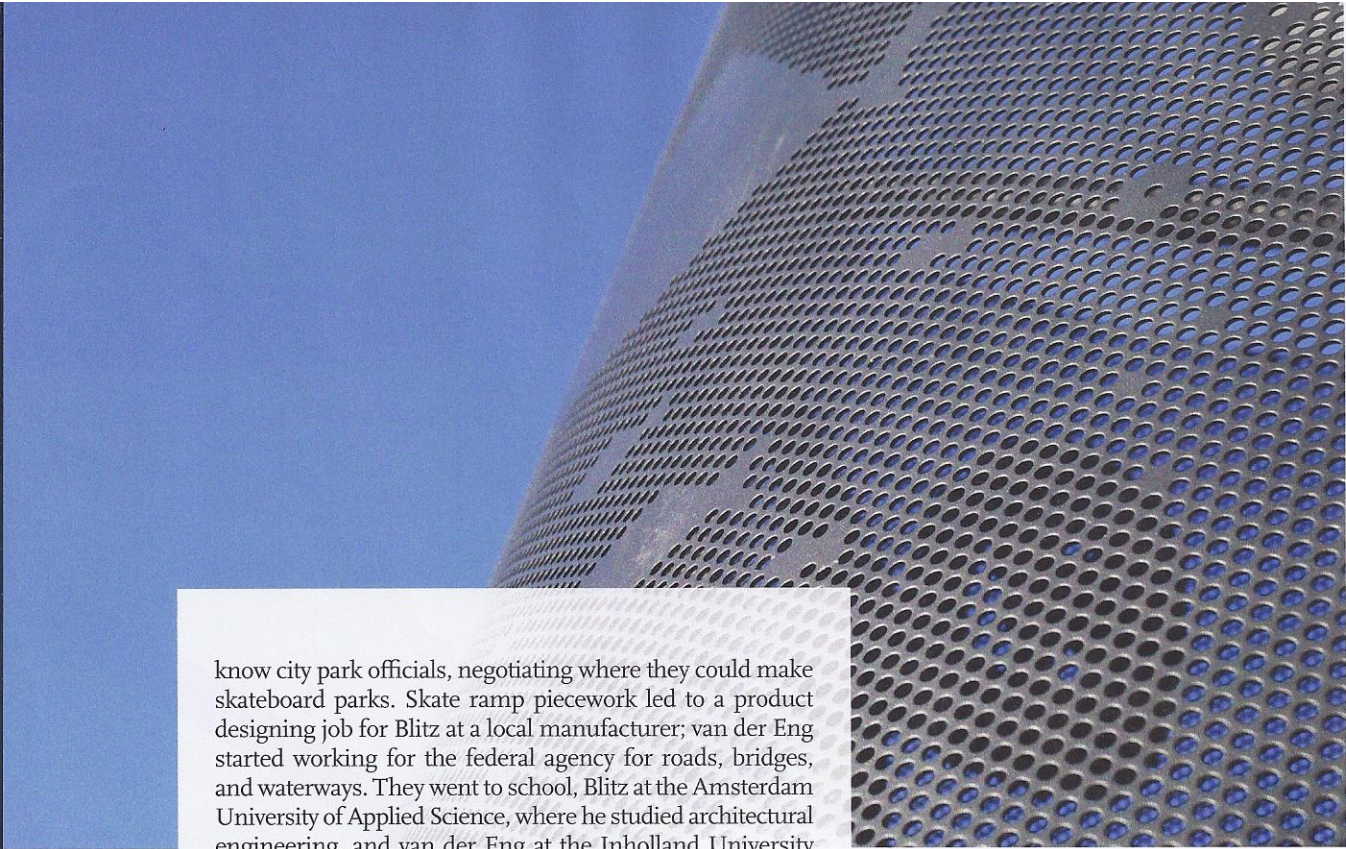


OPPOSITE AND BELOW LEFT
A long linear play space in Biljmerpark, perpendicular to the King Crawler, is connected together and to the Crawler by rope bridges and a small zip line.



On somewhat different terrain in a village called Uitgeest, 20 miles north of Amsterdam in the reclaimed sea lands called *polder*, van der Eng, a year younger than Blitz, skated just as furiously. “They were from the village; we were from the city,” Blitz recalls. “But there weren’t that many skaters, so we had to get along.” Getting along and negotiating potentially awkward social space is something Carve goes back to again and again in its design concepts. Blitz himself likes these situations, seeks them out. Perhaps only in a small country like the Netherlands would 20 miles outside the capital count as village countryside—but the Netherlands is small enough that 20 miles means the local Dutch accent and dialect are already changing.

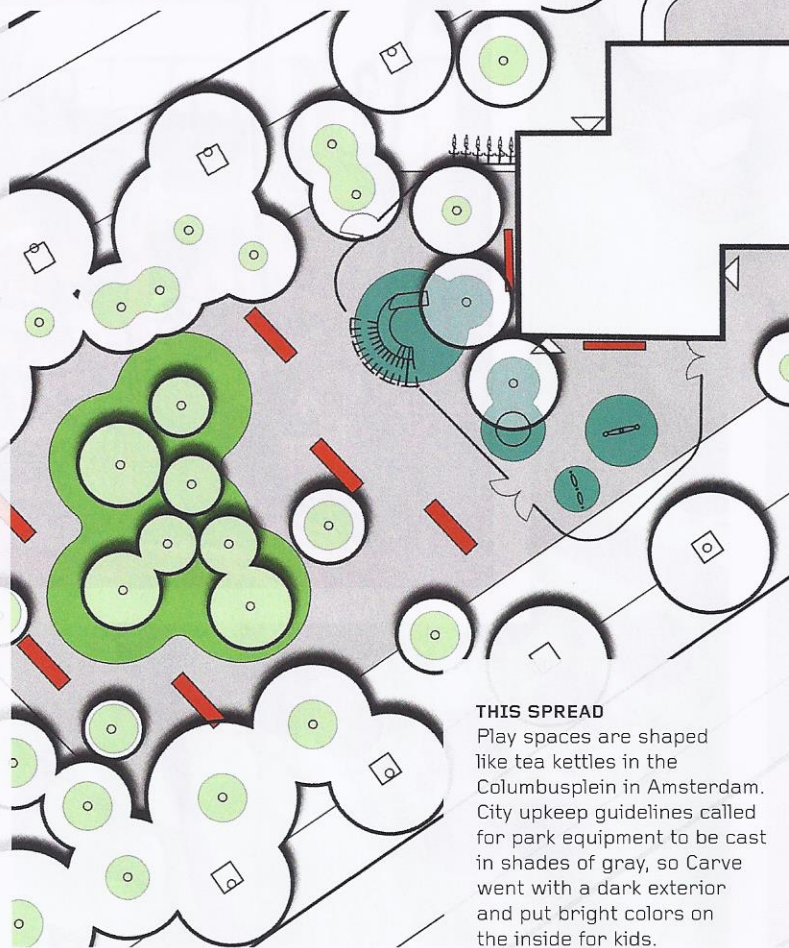
The two met on the fiber ramps behind an ice-skating rink at a skateboarding competition in 1979 in Leiden. They were good. Van der Eng skated for the international brands Gullwing and Sims, eventually nabbing a British sponsor, which produced a van der Eng-model board; Blitz skated for Santa Cruz. It was through skating that the two first started to get to



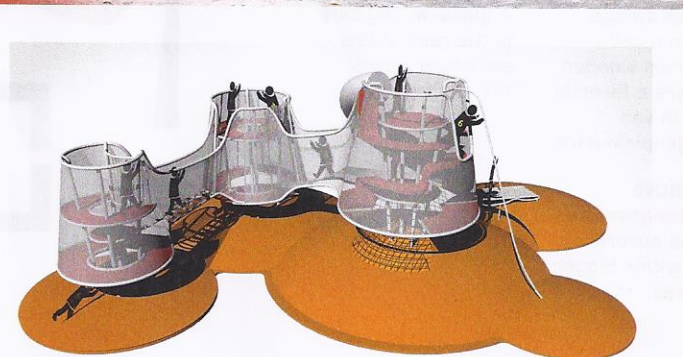
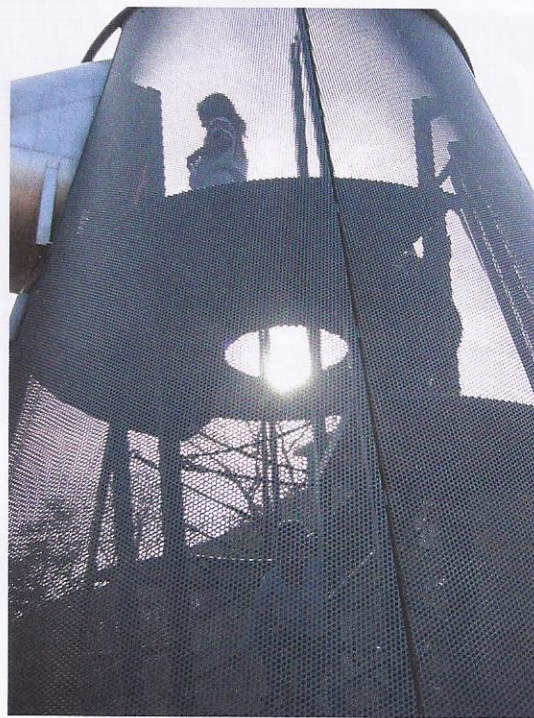
know city park officials, negotiating where they could make skateboard parks. Skate ramp piecework led to a product designing job for Blitz at a local manufacturer; van der Eng started working for the federal agency for roads, bridges, and waterways. They went to school, Blitz at the Amsterdam University of Applied Science, where he studied architectural engineering, and van der Eng at the Inholland University of Applied Sciences Alkmaar for civil engineering. By 1995, the two had had enough of their respective jobs. Normally the quiet one, van der Eng spoke up. "I'm falling asleep over here," he told Blitz one day. "We need to start something."

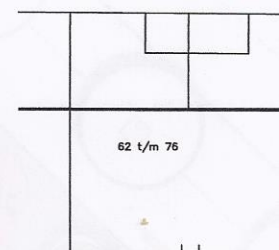
The studio opened in the low numbers on the Herengracht—this is a chic address on a 17th-century canal, with small bridges, sandstone and brick neck gables, the spring evening thrum of the city off the Rembrandtplein fading over the water as if on an old university campus. "We were in a basement rathole. But it looked good on the business cards," Blitz says. They started naturally enough with skateparks, including wide canyons with a raised skate pool that doubles as a climbing wall in the small western fen city of Zutphen, and an award-winning moonscape for skaters under an interstate overpass. Much of the visual and structural language Carve would employ first in its skateparks and then its broader projects springs from a spirit familiar to skaters—it's free-style, both practiced and improvisational, like jazz, but with a punk's do-it-yourself sensibility and anarchic soundtrack.

Carve took on its first employees and moved addresses, building stand-up plywood pillar-shaped desks on wheels, screens set on top like backlit busts on pedestals. People would wander in wondering if the studio was an Internet café. The studio had its first—and biggest—hit in stand-alone play equipment with Wall-Holla, a black-and-orange vertical play space with twin rectangles of fencing 15 feet high by 50 feet long bounding a ribbon of undulating rubber folded over and back on itself in a reticulum. Wall-Holla is a bold statement of Carve's intent—but its concept of neighborhood space is even more clearly seen in broader projects like the renovation of Amsterdam's van Beuningenplein.



THIS SPREAD
Play spaces are shaped like tea kettles in the Columbusplein in Amsterdam. City upkeep guidelines called for park equipment to be cast in shades of gray, so Carve went with a dark exterior and put bright colors on the inside for kids.

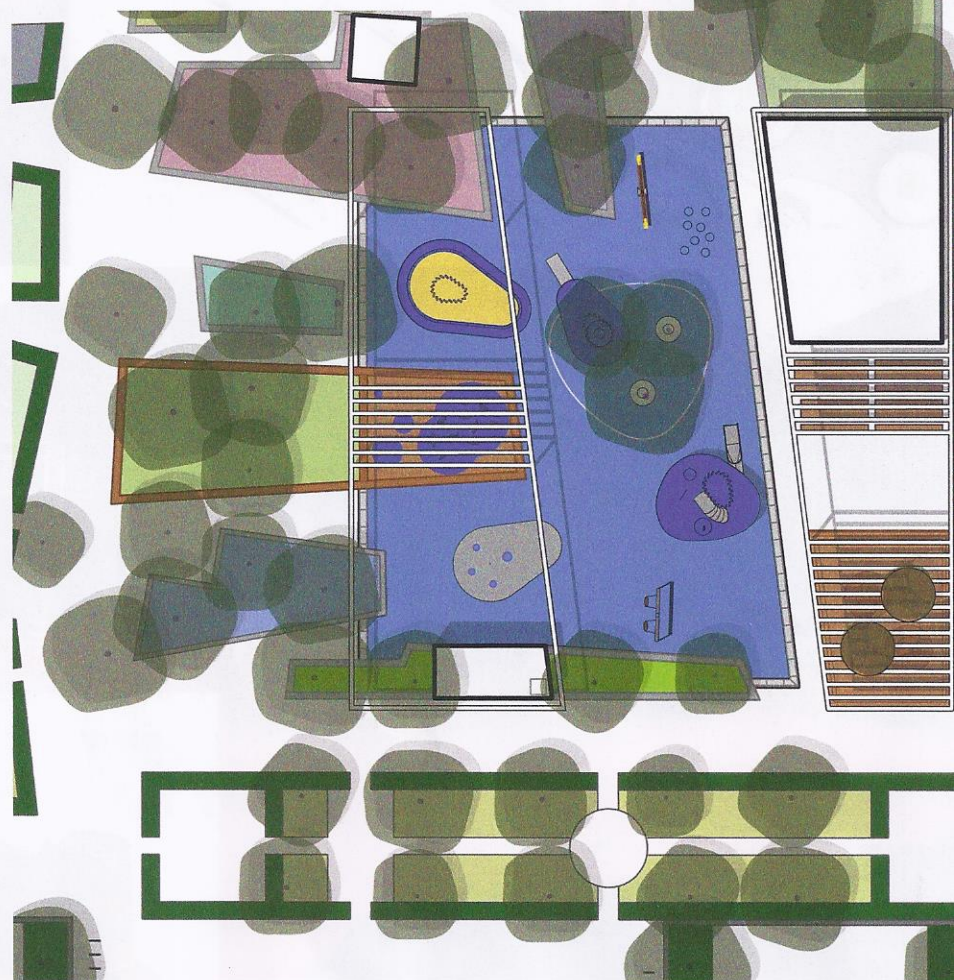


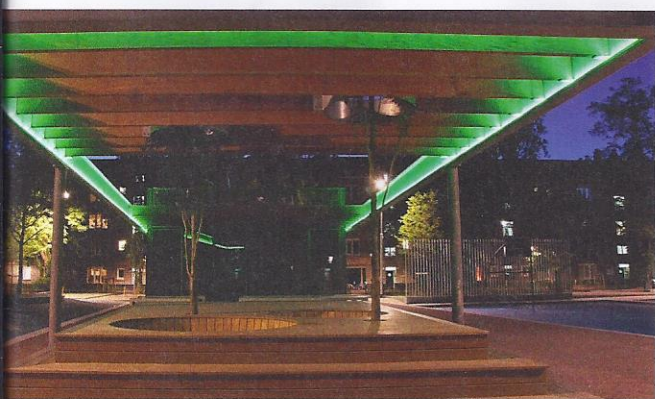


TOP
Hammock swings strung in a cat's cradle from wooden beams are a favorite for kids in van Beuningenplein park.

INSET ABOVE
Carve designers like to create surprising spaces within bigger structures.

OPPOSITE TOP
A glass-walled café in the rear of this structure makes the adults happy.





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There are always people on the van Beuningenplein now, but it wasn't always so, says Miriam Siane, a 28-year-old economics postgrad visiting home from Paris. In the middle of the square, Siane sat in the sun reading a paper at one of several wide concrete tables under wooden slats and shade in front of a small coffeehouse in the middle of the renovated square. The sight lines are open. It's easy to see across the park from the middle out. Siane's young son played nearby on a set of hammock swings strung at various levels in a cat's cradle from 11 bilinga wood beams supported by an open trapezoidal frame made from steel girders 100 feet long. "It used to be derelict here, with a lot of junkies," Siane says. "Now it's more cleaned up and open. The neighborhood is changing a lot."

The square also used to be an island, bounded on all sides by trafficked streets and parked cars. It was already a poor neighborhood, and over time the park became a no-go area, a hangout for vandals and addicts, says Rob van Dijk, the landscape architect charged by the city with rebooting van Beuningenplein. They wanted an underground parking garage, and above it should be green space, with play areas and three small buildings. The master planning was up to him. Existing Italian poplar, magnolia, and black locust trees stayed; new beds of rhododendron, geraniums, and beech and holly hedges created green space, quiet areas, and pathways. Van Dijk knew Carve from previous work on a skatepark. "What you normally do as a landscape architect is get a big catalog with all kinds of play equipment in it and choose something," van Dijk says. "Carve designs its own play elements, which are much more interesting than picking out of a book." Recommended by van Dijk, the studio won a bid from the city of €460,000 (\$597,000) to design and commission the playground, sports fields, and play equipment.

Van Dijk also asked to take out two streets, cutting traffic and moving the green space right to the doorsteps of two sides of the plein. One concern everyone had was that cyclists and young people on mopeds would cut through the square. "So we lowered the playing surfaces by a foot. I discussed it with Elger and he said, 'Oh, good, I can use the edges for skating and for other things.' That's the way we work." Concrete, the Amsterdam-based architect studio picked to do the buildings, used the roof over what would become the coffee shop for more community activities: yoga and reading groups, for example. And as Jesper Magnusson says, the coffee in the café—which is small enough not to take over the square, smart enough not to try—is very good. Magnusson, a former design magazine editor now working on a doctorate at the Institute for Urban Studies in Malmö, Sweden, is writing a case study on how playgrounds can induce human interaction. "And here there's a lot," he says of van Beuningenplein. "There are always people, and most are from the neighborhood. But some are from other parts of town—it's partly because of the playground and partly because of the coffee."

THIS SPREAD

Melis Stokepark in The Hague is a wheelchair-accessible play space.



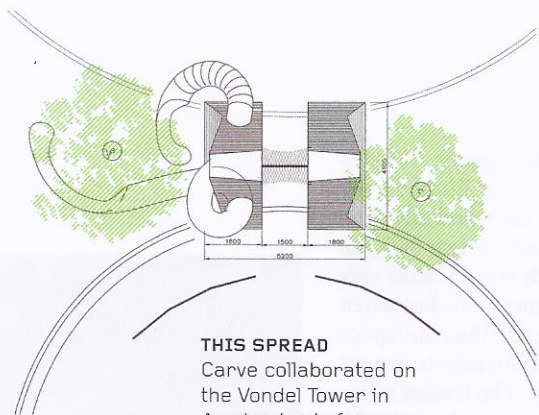
Magnusson came to the Netherlands because of the legacy of the architects and planners Aldo van Eyck, Cornelius van Eesteren, and Jakoba Mulder. After rebelling from CIAM, the International Congresses of Modern Architecture, van Eyck made his name, first in Holland and then internationally, with some 1,000 small playgrounds woven into the city fabric from the 1940s to the 1970s. Many streets in Amsterdam will make an L bend into which a little playground is tucked away. Following van Eyck's trail led him to Carve. "These are not just playgrounds, but a kind of common ground for all different ages. It is a mixed neighborhood with a lot of North African immigrants; at one end there are more upscale residents; on the other end it is poorer. This is a meeting place." Even so, for Siane—though she likes the plain—it may not be for much longer. As the Westerpark district becomes more and more upscale, her aging mother is thinking of moving back to Morocco, so she'd have no reason to visit. Back in the studio, Blitz scratches his chin. "You do see the mixing of different kinds of groups. It's great. But it doesn't ever seem to last for very long," he says. The Netherlands, with its tolerant facade, has been sorely riven on integration and immigration of late. "I think it's about class, not ethnic background so much. You don't care if your neighbor is a doctor or lawyer from Turkey, as long as he's a doctor or lawyer."

Gabriela Burkhalter, a Swiss sociologist who is currently preparing an exhibition for Pittsburgh's Carnegie International on the history of playground design, wonders if lawyers may

be having another effect on play spaces. "There's a big difference between here and Europe," she says. "Here in Pittsburgh we can't find any challenging playgrounds; they more or less look the same. Safety issues and liability are obviously very important, and people are concerned. But when risk is banned, the unexpected too, the space to develop social skills autonomously is almost gone." It's a long-contested area: The United States can also show a history of adventure playgrounds, activism, and bright new designs, with names like Richard Dattner, M. Paul Friedberg, FASLA, and Isamu Noguchi on this list. And Europe has plenty of safety regulation. Perhaps it is the litigious nature of American dispute settling that makes the difference. Though he's exaggerating a bit, Blitz basically has a skater's attitude. "Breaking your leg is okay. Killing yourself is not."

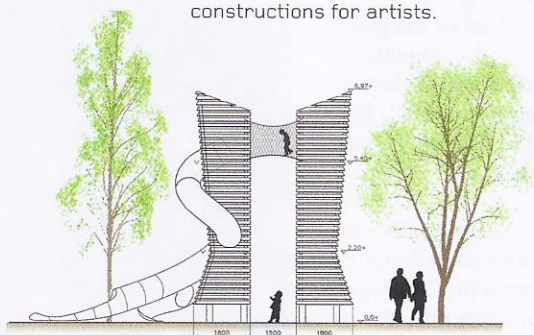
Van der Eng and Blitz got to know Ap Olierook as the duo showed a new skate ramp design on the beach in Scheveningen, north of The Hague. Olierook, a parks and commission official who started as a caretaker, has seen his new suburban city zone grow from 5,000 residents to 45,000 in the past decade. "There was nothing there for kids. I told the developer that I wanted ramps and





THIS SPREAD

Carve collaborated on the Vondel Tower in Amsterdam's famous Vondelpark with Ton Lonnens, who does steel constructions for artists.



playgrounds," Olierook says. And he thought of Blitz. "He's a free thinker. Always crossing lines and always something other than normal," he says. "They never make the same thing. Always something else. That gets kids to go from place to place." Olierook commissioned Carve as part of the €600,000 (\$784,000) development of two important park projects for the district.

One of these is called Melis Stokepark, a sandpit ringed by a blue rubber hill roughly in the shape of a croissant. The park, an 8,700-square-foot undulating wood-plank ring surrounding a sky-blue rubber bowl containing sand and a hammock swing, is wheelchair accessible but also features a small climbing wall. "I didn't want it to look like it was special for disabled, though," Blitz says. Blitz recalls riding the school bus with disabled kids as a youngster, and it was a loud group—sometimes using prosthetics to whack one another in the hurly-burly. They wouldn't want a soft design. Usable, yes, not dangerous. "They want to *play*," Blitz tells this story at a dinner party with a dozen architects, his girlfriend, Mariska van den Berg (an art historian who is currently involved in a guerrilla urban farming project called Urbaniahoeve with the artist Debra Solomon, who always carries a trowel with her in case she spots wild vegetables, which if there are enough she will transplant and proliferate), and a graphic designer who's agitating against Vladimir Putin. The crowd is serious, practiced, improvisational, raucous; as evening comes down on the old brick Daniel Stalpertstraat, it's infused with the spirit of play. ●

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