

Designing Streets for Kids



Global Designing Cities Initiative



Urban Thinkscape

Location: Philadelphia, USA

Implementing organization(s): Playful Learning Landscapes (Brookings Institution), Temple University, Belmont Alliance Civic Association, Community Bible Deliverance Kingdom Ministries, City of Philadelphia, Public Workshop, Architect Itai Palti, Science Museum of Minnesota

Timeline: 2015-2017



BEFORE



AFTER

OVERVIEW

Playful Learning Landscapes wanted to explore opportunities for playing and learning through elements that can be used in public spaces, such as plazas and sidewalks. As part of the Playful Learning Landscapes initiative, this Urban Thinkscape site in West Philadelphia served as a pilot project. Located on a major thoroughfare and adjacent to a bus stop, the site responded to the criteria suggested by the community of the West Philadelphia Promise Zone, which was engaged early in the project.

The participatory design process also involved youth, nonprofits, and volunteers in developing play structures. Community members were also engaged to help construct designs on site, facilitated by design firm Public Workshop.

The project created opportunities to play and learn during children's daily journeys. There are four play and movement installations that explore different skills: a puzzle wall, to engage kids while waiting for transit and strengthen math and spatial skills; jumping feet, to encourage movement and develop impulse control; hidden figures, a metal sculpture that contains images of food, animals, and other objects and becomes a game for children and caregivers to play together; and wooden ramps with painted narrative cues that teach reading and storytelling skills.

The Urban Thinkscape project also includes wooden decking and a pedestrian path. A bench was added to the adjacent bus stop.

STRATEGIES

Upgrade: Installed solar-powered lighting, improved pedestrian facilities

Activate: Added play and educational elements, added landscaping

Extend: Used an empty lot adjacent to a sidewalk to create pause and play space





KEYS TO SUCCESS

Community involvement is key to success. Urban Thinkscape emphasized engaging the local community and listening to stakeholders throughout the design and implementation process. Project advisory meetings included community members, local associations, local nonprofits, academic institutions, and public agencies such as transportation and planning departments.

Partnering with a strong community group, and finding a champion to advocate for the project, was critical.

The project team acknowledged gaps in their own expertise and brought in partners knowledgeable in these areas.

LESSONS LEARNED

Maintenance is an ongoing challenge due to funding required for these activities.

IMPACT

Increased pride of local community (residents and local business)

Increased overall interactions between parents and children

Increased time spent on the site

Increased use of language by children inspired by the physical space

