



## **TENDENCIAS DE DISEÑO PARA PARQUES INFANTILES EN EL ENTORNO URBANO. ESTUDIO DE CASO: BISTRITA, RUMANIA**

*Alexandru Marius Tătar<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Resumen**

Este trabajo presenta las últimas tendencias en el diseño y disposición de parques infantiles en áreas urbanas de rápido crecimiento. El autor analiza la capacidad potencial de los parques infantiles para mejorar el desarrollo físico y mental de los niños, fomentar la capacidad de los parques infantiles para mejorar el crecimiento físico y psicológico de los niños y fomentar el aprendizaje intensivo sobre el mundo a partir de la experiencia del juego. El documento contiene ejemplos del uso de componentes no estándar y estructuras y materiales innovadores en parques infantiles en Rumania. El análisis considera la necesidad de aplicar tecnologías de punta y un enfoque creativo equilibrado con el cumplimiento de las normas de seguridad y estándares de construcción para construir parques infantiles que sean interesantes y atractivos para los niños y útiles para su desarrollo integral. El ejemplo de Bistrița compara el diseño de los distritos históricos de la ciudad y sus distritos periféricos y menciona requisitos específicos para diseñar parques infantiles descritos en los códigos y reglamentos correspondientes. Este documento también describe el marco de cooperación entre clientes del proyecto, diseñadores y residentes del vecindario (usuarios finales de parques infantiles), como en el caso de Bistrița. Otra tarea es analizar la accesibilidad de un parque infantil para personas con movilidad reducida. Explora el proceso de selección de sitios adecuados, el proceso de comunicación con el público objetivo (residentes) y los desafíos típicos que deben abordar los planificadores. El período de investigación es de julio de 2023 a marzo de 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> Universidad Babeș-Bolyai Cluj-Napoca Facultad de Geografía, Escuela Doctoral de Geografía, Romania. 400006.0264-596116.E-mail: [geogr@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:geogr@ubbcluj.ro).

**Palabras clave:** Diseño, Parques infantiles, Entorno urbano, Bistrita, modelo de espacio de juego amigable para los niños.

## **DESIGN TRENDS FOR CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUNDS IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT. CASE STUDY: BISTRITA TOWN, ROMANIA**

### **Abstract**

This work presents the latest trends in the design and arrangement of children's playgrounds in rapidly growing urban areas. The author analyses the potential capacity of playgrounds to enhance children's physical and mental development, encourage the capacity for playgrounds to improve children's physical and psychological growth and encourage intensive learning about the world from the experience of playing. The paper contains examples of using non-standard components and innovative structures, and materials in playgrounds in Romania. The analysis considers the need to apply state-of-the-art technologies, and a creative approach balanced with compliance with safety rules and construction standards to build playgrounds which would be interesting and attractive for kids and useful for their all-around development. The example of Bistrița compares the design for historic districts of the city and its peripheral districts and mentions specific requirements for designing playgrounds outlined in the corresponding codes and regulations. This paper also describes the cooperation framework between project customers, designers, and neighbourhood residents (end users of playgrounds), as in the case of Bistrița. Another task is to analyse the accessibility of a playground for people with disabilities' mobility. It explores the process of selecting suitable sites, the process of communicating with the target audience (residents), and the typical challenges to be addressed by planners. The research period is from July 2023 to March 2024.

**Keywords:** Design, Playgrounds, Urban Environment, Bistrița, a model for child-friendly play space.

### **Introduction**

Bistrița, a city located in northern Romania, is renowned for its rich history, cultural heritage, and stunning landscapes. Situated in Bistrița-Năsăud County, it serves as an important economic, cultural, and administrative centre in the region. The city is surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains, offering a unique blend of urban and natural environments. Bistrița's historical centre, with its medieval architecture and charming atmosphere, attracts both tourists and locals, making it a vibrant community.

The selection of Bistrița as the study area for the topic of playground development is justified by several factors:

- **Urban Growth and Community Needs:** As Bistrița continues to expand, there is a growing demand for recreational spaces that cater to families and children. Playgrounds are essential for fostering physical activity, social interaction, and overall well-being among young residents.
- **Balancing Urban and Natural Elements:** Given its proximity to natural landscapes, Bistrița has the opportunity to integrate playgrounds that harmonise with the surrounding environment, promoting eco-friendly and sustainable urban planning.
- **Tourism and Local Economy:** Enhancing recreational areas, including playgrounds, can boost the city's appeal as a family-friendly destination and support the local economy.
- **Community Engagement:** Developing well-designed playgrounds can strengthen community bonds by providing safe and inclusive spaces for children and families to gather and interact.

By focusing on Bistrița, this study aims to address the need for modern, accessible, and engaging playgrounds that align with the city's unique character and contribute to the quality of life for its residents.

Nowadays given fast urban development, and particularly the vast construction of multi-storey residential areas, the organization of safe and comfortable living environments for kids and teenagers is a very topical issue from one point of view, life in big cities gives children many development opportunities, from another - restrict freedom of movement and access to the natural environment. The classic definition of sustainable development refers to intergenerational responsibility. Meanwhile, paradoxically, children represent a social category often neglected and marginalised, while urban planning is rarely dedicated to them. We are responsible for assuring the next generations a sustainable future and a good present so they will become healthy and educated mature tomorrow.

The words "play" and "children" are inseparable, and children's right to play is rightly recognised as one of the fundamental rights by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2013; Murnaghan, 2019; Morgenthaler et al., 2023). According to Article 31 of the UNCRC: "Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities" (UNCRC, 2013). For children, unplanned urbanisation 'means unhealthy and unsafe environments, limited options for walking and playing, and limited connectivity' (UNICEF, 2018). Playgrounds should be based on spatial planning and quality factors, including children's needs and preferences.

Compared to the older generation modern children and adolescents tend to have fewer possibilities for playing outdoors (Shackell et al, 2018) access to inner-bloc public playgrounds is being restricted due to numerous factors: the rise of cars and the use of yards as parking space (Jansson Merit, 2010); limit access to courtyards for safety; lack of public spaces arrangement during new residential quarters construction; social factors such as parents safety considerations when they prefer to

leave children at home or private commercial organization under constant control and other factors. However, the presence of proper public playgrounds in urban building estates is extremely important for proper children's development.

According to the definition of UNICEF, one of the characteristics of a child-friendly city is the availability to meet friends and have places to play and enjoy themselves. (UNICEF,2018). Properly designed and equipped children's playgrounds in urban neighbourhoods secure necessary conditions for a healthy time in the fresh air, physical growth and development of kids and leisure activities with same-age peers. The research of urban space to plan a landscaping project reviews the latest trends in children's playground design and the creation of a model for child-friendly play space (city recreation) in urban environments.

### **Methodology**

As a method of work, it went in two main directions: review of the bibliography and field observations. The first one focused on the trends and design principles used in the arrangement of a playground are analysed. Designing a playground requires following certain architectural principles to help create fun, accessible play areas for kids. Landscape designers know that design principles and architectural playground equipment are two key elements when creating a playground. As with any building, architectural design plays a significant role in creating a playground. Eight main principles of playground architecture affect every aspect of a playground. These principles ensure that play areas are accessible for all kids. When designing a playground, it's essential to provide space for various types of play so kids can choose their favourite kind. Some of the most common types of play include the following: active play, creative play, and social play. Modern playground components use durable, safe materials to ensure kids have a play space that will withstand the elements and last for years with proper maintenance. Common types of equipment surfaces include metal, plastic, wood, and rubber. The best design will allow for adaptive and inclusive play that shifts with children's interests and abilities. Imagine the types of activities that may go on there: physical games, creative games, social games, games that engage the senses, and areas for those children who may wish to play in peace.

Secondly, observations conducted on the ground where the principles of design and planning of the identified space are established. Field Observation Process for Playground Development in Bistrița. Field observations were conducted in various areas of Bistrița, with a focus on residential neighbourhoods, central areas and existing green spaces. The aim was to identify potential sites for playground development, as well as to assess the current condition of existing play spaces. The process involved: Site Wallowing: the team visited several sites to assess space availability, accessibility and development potential; Community interaction: Residents, particularly parents and children, were asked about their playground needs and preferences; Documentation of physical conditions: Issues such as condition of surfaces, presence of playground equipment, level of maintenance and safety of the spaces were noted.

To select the cases three main categories of situations were identified: Existing but dilapidated playgrounds (some playgrounds were outdated, with damaged equipment or unsafe surfaces); Unutilized green spaces (areas with potential for development but lacking adequate equipment or infrastructure); Areas without playgrounds (New or isolated residential neighbourhoods that lacked playground facilities). The following criteria were established for the selection of study areas:

- Accessibility: Spaces had to be easily accessible for children and families, including people with disabilities.
- Safety: Areas had to be safe, away from heavy traffic or other hazards.
- Space size: Spaces had to be large enough to accommodate play equipment and activities.
- Integration with surroundings: Preference was given to areas that could integrate harmoniously into the urban or natural landscape.
- Community need: Areas with the highest demand from residents were prioritized. Photographs: Visual documentation of the current condition of the spaces.
- Photographs: Visual documentation of the current condition of the spaces and their characteristics.
- Maps and Sketches: Creating maps to locate the areas assessed and propose layouts for future development.
- Observation Forms: Completion of standardized forms that included details about dimensions, condition of surfaces, presence of equipment, and other relevant aspects.

The principles for designing and planning the spaces were established through a structured process that integrated research, community consultation and adaptation to local standards and needs. Here is how each of these principles was defined:

- Functionality: User needs research was analysed through surveys, interviews and participatory workshops (The specific needs of different user groups: children, parents, people with disabilities)
- Ergonomics: Anthropometric studies (Body dimensions of different age groups were considered to design comfortable furniture and equipment); Universal Accessibility (Universal Design principles were followed to ensure access for people with disabilities, including ramps, smooth surfaces and adequate manoeuvring spaces); Comfort testing (Furniture and equipment prototypes were user-tested for ergonomics).
- Aesthetics: Design Research (Design trends and styles that fit the local character of Bistrita were studied); Materials and Colour Choice (Durable materials and visually pleasing colours were selected to create a welcoming and harmonious atmosphere); Landscape Integration (The design was tailored to blend into the urban and natural environment while respecting the historic and cultural character of the city).

Established principles will guide all stages of implementation and the spaces will be regularly monitored to ensure that they meet user needs and quality standards. This process ensures that the playgrounds in Bistrița will be functional, ergonomic, aesthetic and safe, creating an ideal environment for children and families.

## **Results and Discussion**

The research results are divided into three segments: principles of playground design (urban recreation), trends in playground design and model of urban space transformation. The typology of playgrounds is given by their location in the urban space, surface area, the complexity of the facilities and the degree of realisation, the connection with other public functional infrastructures, and the transposition of design principles.

Playground typology is defined by several factors, reflecting community needs, urban spatial characteristics, and design principles. Here is a detailed explanation of the reasons behind this typology in children's parks:

- **Accessibility:** playgrounds should be easily accessible to children and families, regardless of where they live. This means distributing them evenly throughout the city, including residential, central and peripheral neighbourhoods.
- **Integration into the urban environment:** Their location should harmonise with the city's structure, respecting existing green areas and avoiding conflicts with other urban functions (e.g., heavy traffic).
- **Connectivity:** Play spaces should be connected to other public infrastructure, such as schools, kindergartens, community centres and public transport, to facilitate access. **Diversity of activities:** Surface area determines the number and type of activities that can be carried out. The typology of playgrounds has been defined to respond to the diverse needs of the community, to integrate harmoniously into the urban environment and to promote a healthy and active lifestyle.

By respecting these principles, the playgrounds in Bistrița will become safe, inclusive, and attractive places for children and families, contributing to improving the quality of life in the city.

In this sense, this are the ways playgrounds impact children life: playing is a need for children (it is mandatory for their dynamic growth, physical, mental, and emotional development, and ability to communicate and socialize); playing activities establish favourable conditions for the intellectual development ( visual, verbal, and logical thinking); while playing, a kid complies with the rules, gets acquainted with the behaviour and relationships of adults, and obtains communication and self-awareness experience. Thus, a game generates feelings and emotions, encourages volitional regulation of behaviour, and forms competitive motivation. Playing at public playgrounds can be viewed as a model of society where children are encouraged to overcome fears and take risks to cope with difficulties in real life (Sheina y Sokolova, 2016)

The research materials devoted to the study of modern design trends of children's playscapes, the main design principles that provide the realization of the entertaining and teaching potential of open playgrounds (Evergreen, 2016): a participatory approach involving the design process of public interest groups (psychologists, educators, architects, designers, parents, et al., both specialists and end users of playgrounds); safety precautions; accessibility provisions for all social groups; design for the widest possible target audience – for all ages and abilities; taking into consideration the environmental characteristics of a chosen area; satisfaction of child's play needs, providing landscape diversity and multi-purpose elements, ensuring variability of game scenarios; selection of universal playing elements and modules; providing opportunities for research, experimentation and learning through the play; appeal to children's senses; providing opportunities for the identification of risks, controlling, and diversifying potentially dangerous situations, and reasonable experience of one's abilities; design for year-round use, and seasonal versatility; and accounting for the needs of parents accompanying.

There are three types of playgrounds identified in urban areas: Outdoor playground, Park-type playground without tartan carpet, and Neighbourhood playground between blocks with a tartan carpet. To better understand playgrounds in cities, it is important to define and differentiate between the three main types of playgrounds. Each type has specific characteristics that make them suitable for certain contexts and needs. (Table 1).

Criteria	Outdoor Playground	Park Playground without Tartan Carpet	Tartan Carpeted Neighbourhood Playground
Surface	Natural (grass, sand)	Natural or paved	Synthetic tartan carpet
Equipment	There is no fixed equipment.	Fixed structures (swings, slides)	Modern and specialised structures (complex slides, sports fields)
Safety	Medium	Average	High (due to tartan carpet)
Costs	Low	Moderate	High (high cost is due to the special synthetic material used)
Accessibility	In parks or green areas	In parks	Between blocks in residential areas
Destination	Free play and exploration	Active play and socialising	Safe and interactive neighbourhoods play

**Table No. 1** Comparison of the Three Types of Playgrounds Source: Alexandru Marius Tătar.

The three types of playgrounds serve different needs and address specific contexts. Outdoor playgrounds are ideal for connecting with nature and creative activities, park-type playgrounds offer a variety of equipment and activities within

parks, and tartan carpet neighbourhood playgrounds provide a safe and modern environment for children in residential areas. By combining these typologies, the city of Bistrița offers complete solutions tailored to the needs of all children and families.

Park-type playground located in the promenade area of inter-war Bistrita flanked by the defensive wave of the medieval period near the city centre, the space complies with the following conditions: accessibility provisions for all social groups, design for the widest possible target audience – for all ages and abilities, satisfaction of child's play needs, providing landscape diversity and multi-purpose elements, ensuring variability of game scenarios. Figure 1, shows examples of realization principles mentioned above:



**Figure 1.** Park-type playground. Source: Alexandru Marius Tătar, March ,2024, King Michael Park 1

The functionality of the playground is given by achieving the parameters of the stated principle. Typical of Romanian cities (Bistrița is also included), the playground is close to the children in the neighbourhood. Well, maintained it is a functional and useful place for the community. (Figure 2).





**Figure 2:** Playground between blocks or next to buildings. Source: Alexandru Marius Tătar, April 2024 Stefan cel Mare Street.

### **Principles of Inclusive Playground Design.**

The concept of “universal” or “inclusive” design means that the design of products and environments should make them usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. This includes people of all ages with autism, intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and other mental or physical disabilities, as well as their caregivers. The concept also addresses the needs of other children. The goal of designing inclusive playgrounds is to maximise each facility’s usability by individuals with a wide variety of characteristics.

Whether we are talking about learning strategies or physical space, inclusive design operates by a distinct set of principles designed to maximise access and everyone's enjoyment of a space. As with many aspects of our daily lives, one size does not fit all. Well-designed outdoor play environments must include a variety of experiences and be accessible to people with varying skill sets. It examines more closely two principles governing universal playground design: the flexibility in use and size, and space for approach and use

Flexibility in designing inclusive playgrounds means that the design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities, including low- to high-risk takers. A play feature that includes adaptable features for a range of users will be most flexible. For example, interactive elements, like musical instruments, may be flush with the ground to walk on or roll over, at a seated height for touch or overhead to reach and stretch. The output also should be varied (e.g., vibration and sound). Interactive features, like hand bikes and balance beams, can be used in a

variety of positions (sitting, standing, on the ground or on a supporting surface). All interactive features should be mounted or securely attached to a footing so that people can use these elements to move from sitting to standing and vice versa.

About the size and space for approach and uses users' needs inclusive playgrounds, both in accessing and experiencing the spaces, accommodations for approach, reach and manipulation must be made. Such designs, for example, would provide ample space to park a wheelchair or walker while the child engages with water or music play. another example might be that users who are not very steady on their feet may need a larger standing area on the equipment than more able-bodied users.

### **Playgrounds Design Direction.**

The research analyses three trends in the design of recreational spaces for children: Inclusive design for all abilities; Sustainable materials and eco-friendly designs, and Inclusive technology integration for accessible and educational playgrounds.

Inclusive design for all abilities means making playgrounds fun and accessible for every kid, no matter their abilities. This design helps ensure that kids using wheelchairs can play just like everyone else. Sensory-Rich Environments: This inclusive playground has lots of cool things to see, touch, and hear, so every child can find something fun to do. These features help ensure that all children play together, making playgrounds a place where everyone feels included and can have a great time.

On the other hand, Sustainable playgrounds are all about using materials and designs that benefit our planet. These playgrounds look great and teach kids how to care for the environment. Here are some of the incredible ways these playgrounds are helping the Earth: Recycled Materials: Many playgrounds are now built from previously used materials, which helps reduce waste and save valuable resources. Biodegradable Materials: These materials break down naturally over time, so they don't harm the environment. Playgrounds using these materials are leading the way in eco-friendly design. Water and Energy Efficiency: These playgrounds are designed to use less water and energy. This is good for the earth and teaches kids the importance of saving resources. By focusing on these sustainable practices, playgrounds become a fun place where kids can learn about and practice taking care of the world around them.

Finally, there's a growing trend of incorporating technology for educational purposes in playgrounds. From interactive learning stations to QR codes that offer historical or educational information, technology is used to enhance the learning experience while ensuring accessibility for all children.

The evolution of playground design continues to push boundaries, with a focus on creating spaces that not only entertain but also nurture creativity, inclusivity, and safety. As designers and communities collaborate to shape these spaces, the future of playgrounds holds the promise of being engaging, educational, and delightful arenas for children's development and enjoyment.

### **Model of transformation of urban space.**

Following the analysis of the playgrounds, a model for the landscaping of a measured area of about 3235 meters <sup>2</sup>, 0.3235 ha, containing the following facilities: single or double metal or wooden swings, baby swings with special safety supports, slides of different sizes and shapes, including spiral slides, slides integrated into complex play sets, single or double swings, figures on semi-arc, climbing structures made of metal or wood, such as climbing walls or climbing towers, fitness equipment adapted for children, such as pull-up bars and balance equipment, benches and tables for parents and children, activity boards to stimulate creativity and learning, water and sand games for sensory development, litter bins and other items of furniture to keep the place clean. (Figure 5). The design of the proposed model comprised the design principles established in the research (Figure 3).

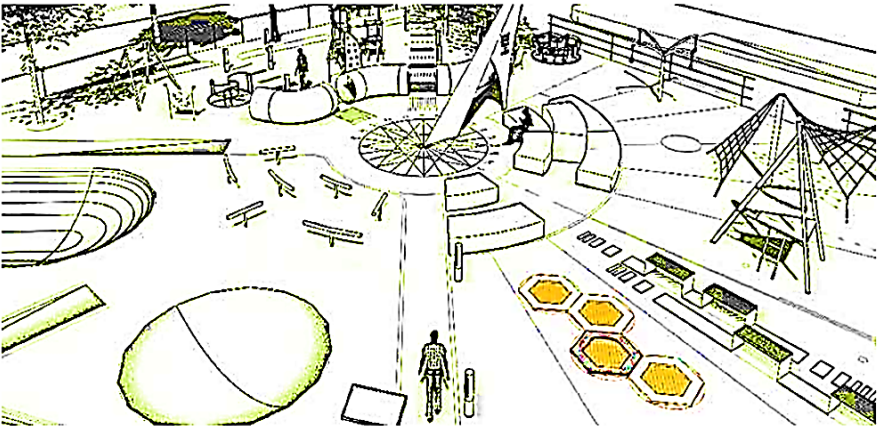


**Figure 3** Space before fitting out, present condition. **Source:** Alexandru Marius Tătar, June 2024.



**Figure 4** Delimitation of the area proposed for planning. Source: Alexandru Marius Tătar realised in <https://www.mapsdirections.info/ro/>

The space is in the Bistrița Nord area: Strada Sucevei-Calea Moldovei -Piața Mică - commercial centre (Bistrița Retail Park 1) The location is crossed by the European road E 58 (Figure 4).



**Figure 5:** Model proposal for playground design. Source: Alexandru Marius Tătar realised in <https://www.bricsys.co>

In the area, there is a residential housing development, a school (three high schools), a wholesale market, a church, a shopping centre, bicycle parking, and a children's playground appropriate for the city's sustainable development. The model sketched in Figure 5 represents a concept of European, multifunctional, citizen-oriented, community-oriented development.

Developing a playground is important in developing the quality of life in the urban environment. Another reason why playground development is a priority is the social integration of children through play. The importance of play for development is well documented (Holt, 2015; Stone, 2017). Over the years, many researchers have attempted to define play, and these definitions vary widely. Most researchers agree that play encompasses a combination of characteristics, rather than the presence or absence of a single defining characteristic (Stone, 2017). Fromberg and Bergen (2006) offered play-symbolic characteristics: meaningful, active, enjoyable, voluntary, intrinsically motivated, rule-governed, and episodic.

## **Conclusions**

Bistrița's playgrounds contribute to improving the quality of urban life by providing places for children and families to relax and play. They promote an active and healthy lifestyle, reducing screen time and encouraging outdoor activities. The principles of universal design address more than just usability; designers also must incorporate other considerations, such as economic, engineering, cultural, gender and environmental concerns — into their design processes. The principles described in this research offer designers guidance to better integrate features that meet the needs of as many users as possible. The analysis of experience of children's playground design allows us to draw the following points: the playgrounds are made for the needs of children and represent the effective development of a game environment where unique landscapes and a variety of elements make creative, inventive, and emotional games for children; the difficult composite structure of the playground gives the chance to realize children's desires and requirements not only in various physical activities but also in the possibility of rest in the rather private quiet space; creation and reconstruction of children's playgrounds to increase their aesthetic appeal, realization of the developing potential, and ensuring compliance to the revealed principles of design of children's game spaces is necessary.

After this analysis we present these recommendations for the future: Modernization and maintenance (invest in replacement of outdated equipment and regular maintenance of existing parks; expansion in outlying areas (Create new playgrounds in underserved areas to ensure accessibility for all residents); Inclusion of educational elements (Adding educational panels, interactive games and themed areas to stimulate children's development). By continuing to invest in playgrounds, the city of Bistrița can strengthen its position as a child and family friendly urban environment, contributing to the well-being of the community and increasing the quality of life.

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