

Management and Use of Public Outdoor Playgrounds

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Abstract

Management and use of public outdoor playgrounds have become problematic issues for many municipal organisations. This thesis explores the interrelations between management organisations, playgrounds and users and examines whether playground management can contribute to the benefits for playground users.

The research comprised two multiple case studies, with two comparative cases in each. Two towns with differences in surrounding landscape and local social connections were assessed regarding use and playground qualities. Methods included group interviews with school children, questionnaire surveys to preschools and parents of preschool children, mapping of children's residences, playgrounds and private gardens with play equipment, and interviews with park workers. The differences found between the towns and different user groups emphasise the need for adaptation to the local context and to different categories of users. For children, playgrounds have values such as opportunities for physical and social play and closeness to nearby nature but are also perceived as problematic and inadequate. Variation between individual playgrounds is appreciated. Play equipment can create an interest, but place-specific qualities as regards access, placement and surroundings are more likely to make playgrounds much visited over time.

The second case study was directed towards playground management strategies in two municipal organisations with different management strategies, where professionals were interviewed and playgrounds studied. Internal dialogue and formal user participation processes had positive effects on the professionals involved, but the outcome in terms of physical playground provision was more unclear. Public participation processes may improve playground management but require continuity and inspiration.

Public playgrounds can play an important role for children and other users. They should be viewed in a comprehensive physical and social context and adapted to local needs. Professionals within the management organisation can have a key impact in this but need to become more communicative and cross-sectoral.

Keywords: playground, landscape management, outdoor play, children, user, benefits, municipal organisation, public open space, strategy, landscape planning

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To my parents,
for the combination of freedom and environments rich in affordances

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List of Publications

This thesis is based on the work contained in the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I Jansson, M. and Persson, B. Evaluating standard-influenced playground provision through user needs (Revised manuscript, submitted to *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*).
- II Jansson, M. (2008) Children's perspectives on public playgrounds in two Swedish communities. *Children, Youth and Environments* 18(2), 88-109. Available from www.colorado.edu/journals/cye
- III Jansson, M. Attractive playgrounds: Some factors affecting user interest and visiting patterns (Accepted for publication in *Landscape Research*).
- IV Jansson, M. Public playground management with user focus: Comparing two municipal strategies and their effects (Manuscript).

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1 Introduction

Public playgrounds constitute main elements in the urban environment and in the practice of open space planning, design and management. Their management is associated with a number of issues and challenges concerning how to maintain and develop existing playground provision. Playgrounds and their use (or non-use) have received attention in several research studies within different disciplines throughout the years, but the relationship between playground provision and management on the one hand, and use and user benefits on the other, has been overlooked. This thesis considers playground management as a possible factor in increasing user benefits.

Three main starting points for this doctoral work were management activities, playground use and existing playground provision. The context described and studied is mainly Swedish, although the issues are similar in many other countries.

Public open spaces, including parks and playgrounds¹, are resources and facilities for the public. The actions of the professionals working on provision of these spaces, who may be managers, physical planners, designers, park workers, *etc.*, are expected to affect the outcome, which can be measured either in terms of how the open spaces develop or in the benefits that the public – the users – derive from those actions. This thesis concerns the latter of these, *i.e.* user benefits. However, playground managers are affected and restricted by many other interests in public space than those of playground users, expressed *e.g.* in legislation, standards, budgets, practices and physical planning, which can all be expected to affect the management work.

¹ A more detailed discussion of the term ‘public open space’ is given by Woolley (2003; 2006)

Playground management in times of change

Several changes in the circumstances for playground planning, design and management during the last approximately 20 years make studies of playground provision and its management particularly appropriate and timely. In Sweden, after years of standard influence concerning playground location, size and content (Schlyter, 1976), such detailed, quantitative recommendations were no longer given after the introduction of new legislation in the late 1980s (Kristensson, 2003). Since then, changes have occurred in the role of planners but also in the role of playground managers, who appear to have gotten greater scope to make changes in playground provision. Playground planning, design and management in Sweden can thereby be described as relying increasingly on municipal level strategies as the top-down approach is softened to give more freedom to municipal playground development.

At the same time, there is an increased focus on detailed design and maintenance levels, as safety issues along with legislation on disabled access have been much promoted. The standards for play equipment safety have been particularly influential on management work since they in 1999 appeared in a new version (EN 1176-77) that applies to a number of European countries. They deal with play equipment installation and aim to prevent accidents, mainly falls. Organising annual safety checks of playgrounds is also a rather new task for managers. Laws together with recommendations have established 2010 as a deadline for making public spaces accessible and usable for the disabled², and this issue is thus receiving great attention from playground managers at present. Therefore, playground provision in Sweden today is once again controlled by standards and legislation but on a more detailed level.

Since the 1970s, changes in how children and childhood are considered have developed into new methods and approaches in research and practice (Rasmusson, 2003). The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989, which to this date has been ratified by 193 countries³, states the child's right to play and recreation. It also demands that each child be given the possibility to express needs and preferences and to participate and have a say in matters affecting their lives. Participatory methods are increasingly promoted for all users of public open spaces, for example through Agenda 21, which identifies children and young people as

² Prellwitz (2007) has explored the issue of management of Swedish public playgrounds and their adaptation for use by disabled children.

³ The Swedish government ratified the UNCRC in 1990 and a national strategy was adopted in 1999 (Nilsson, 2003).

a major group, and more recently the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000; Jones, 2007). Improved conditions for children in the built environment and the involvement of children in these improvements have also been promoted through projects and initiatives such as Child Friendly Cities (CFC) by UNICEF and Growing Up in Cities (GUIC), which is a UNESCO programme initiated by urban planner Kevin Lynch in the 1970s.

These and other changes appear to have placed playground provision on the agenda of many cities and municipalities. In telephone interviews with playground managers in 23 Swedish municipalities in 2005 and 2006, high management costs (or strained budgets), adaptation of playgrounds to safety standards, demographic changes (as children in an area grow up or people move) and the low use of some playgrounds were the reasons mentioned behind recent changes to playground provision. Furthermore, changes in the physical playground provision appeared to have led to large differences between municipalities, with a main trend towards fewer but larger playground units (Jansson, 2008). The number of public playgrounds in Sweden can therefore be expected to have diminished lately. However, in some municipalities, the focus on accessibility for disabled children together with the emphasis on safety standards have resulted in more resources being put into playground management (Jansson, 2008).

Research on professionals and on environments for children

Professionals involved in the provision of outdoor environments for children have a complicated task, considering the many possible stakeholders involved (Paget, 2008). Planning for children also contains a conflict between organising the landscape and fulfilling the needs children have to find and even affect their own places (Olwig, 1990; Kylin, 2004). The professionals involved with open spaces, such as planners, designers and managers, are facing increasing complexity in working on spaces that are used by children, as shown in a number of recent Scandinavian studies: Wilhelm (2002) and Kylin (2004) looked at planners' views of children's use of outdoor environments, Åkerblom (2005) developed new approaches to schoolground management, Prellwitz (2007) researched users' and playground managers' views on playground accessibility for disabled children, and Paget (2008) studied how landscape architects work with the complex task of school playground design.

The importance of creating and developing public play facilities and the need to find suitable approaches for this have commonly been argued (Wohlin, 1961; Eriksen, 1985; Moore, 1989; Hart, 2002; Woolley, 2008). Free play in the public open space has been described as positive for children's development, while also supporting the creation of a democratic society (Hart, 2002). Access to play environments of high quality is of importance for children's physical and cognitive development and health (Grahm *et al.*, 1997; Herrington & Studtmann, 1998). However, playgrounds are areas provided with the particular aim of making room for children's outdoor play in the public open space, something which has been both promoted and criticised.

Children's play environments have been described as moving from public areas such as the street into organised allocated spaces such as the playground and more recently into private or increasingly segregated spaces (Karsten, 2002, 2005; Wridt, 2004). However, research on children's outdoor environments has increasingly taken on a comprehensive, child-centred approach, focusing on the environments that children use and relate to, on children's own perspectives, rather than on the environments provided by adults with children particularly in mind. Children's play can be described more comprehensively from the child's point of view, and much of the outdoor space, including that outside the home, playgrounds and child-care institutions⁴, has shown to be an important arena for play (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Rasmussen, 1998; Wilhjem, 2002; Kylin, 2004; Rasmussen, 2004; Cele, 2006). This thesis takes as its starting point the perspectives of children and other users but also considers the existing provision of public playgrounds, the work that is being done to manage them, and the perspectives of playground managers.

Recent research on the work of professionals on children's outdoor environments has often not focused on the role of managers. Some research studies have examined how physical planners can contribute to better taking children's perspectives into consideration (Wilhjem, 2002; Kylin, 2004). Literature claiming the need for change to increase children's access to outdoor environments commonly refers quite vaguely to 'planners' as those who through their work can affect the situation (Perez & Hart, 1980; Matthews, 1995; Spencer & Woolley, 2000). However, management work can also be expected to be important in this regard.

Playgrounds are resources that need to be maintained and developed, and lack of management and investment can be seen as a threat. The success of

⁴ This has been called the 'fourth environment' (van Vliet, 1983).

municipal playgrounds and ‘play parks’ with employed play workers has been shown to depend on how, and by which professionals, the management is organised (Frobenius & Gammelsrud, 1973). Also the state of outdoor environments organised for children can be expected to be important. Worn-out and badly maintained parks and playgrounds tend to be little used (Berglund & Jergeby, 1989). In her studies of school grounds, Titman (1994) found that poor maintenance can actually affect children’s self-esteem negatively. Wridt (2004) studied play in New York over time and described how playgrounds that are not kept in good condition can become considered dangerous places that children and other users avoid. Underinvestment in public spaces such as parks and playgrounds thereby affects children’s access to those environments negatively (Katz, 2004; Wridt, 2004; Katz, 2006). Poor adaptation to available knowledge on children’s environments is another issue (Cooper Marcus & Moore, 1976; Wilhjelm, 2002; Woolley, 2008), as is the low awareness among playground managers about the rights of children in society and about legislation concerning playgrounds (Prellwitz, 2007). Hart (2002), however, claims that local managers and decision-makers have an important role to play, since they have the possibility to change the trend for the better.

We can expect the management organisation and the level of maintenance, upkeep and development of play spaces to have a particular value, and it is possible that children’s and other users’ benefits from those spaces can be affected by the management. There is thus a need to study the role that existing public playgrounds and playground management have in creating user benefits.

Aim and research questions

The main aim of this thesis was to contribute to the knowledge on management of public outdoor playgrounds in relation to the benefits that users can gain from it. It elaborates on the relationship between the playground provision and activities of playground managers on the one hand and the use and benefits of playground users on the other. The main research questions examined were:

- What do playgrounds and their management provide in terms of user benefits?
- How can managers improve their work to better meet user preferences and increase user benefits?

To achieve the aim and answer these research questions, the relations between managers, playgrounds and users were explored. Each of the four papers in this thesis (I-IV) contributes to this exploration.

In Paper I, existing playground provision affected by planning standards and later by management is evaluated through the use patterns and preferences among different categories of users and compared in two different local contexts.

Paper II provides more in-depth descriptions of children's perspectives and preferences on their local public playgrounds and on playground use.

In Paper III, playground provision and function are elaborated on, including the particular qualities that can be found in the physical provision of playgrounds and the qualities that make playgrounds popular or attractive and affect the use and benefits.

Paper IV adds the managers' perspectives and provides information on organisational and strategic questions around playground management in terms of how playground management organisations operate and the effects of different strategies with user focus.

2 Playground development

This chapter provides a description of how public playground planning and management have developed, serving as a history and contextual description of both management work and of public playgrounds. I focus mainly on the Swedish context but regard this as being linked to parallel developments in other countries.

Early ideas about places for children's play

The vast expansion of public playgrounds in parks and housing areas in Sweden and many parts of the world during the 20th century occurred for several reasons. For a long time, children were mainly considered a problem in well-kept parks. From the middle of the 19th century children were seen more as independent individuals and childhood as an important development phase. A discussion began about children's need for outdoor play, in parallel with the aim to protect the parks from children's rough use. In the UK, early organisation of outdoor play areas was connected to ideas of children's health and physical training, which became an inspiration for play provision in Sweden too (Nolin, 1999). Various now obsolete theories about children's need for physical play, such as needing to run off their surplus energy after sitting still, affected the early provision of playgrounds (Hartle & Johnson, 1993). However, it was not until the late 19th century that areas for play and sports were commonly to be seen in Swedish parks and were then often located on the outskirts of the parks (Nolin, 1999). From about 1900, playgrounds were constructed in several of the larger Swedish cities (Asker, 1986; Billing, 1999).

Many playgrounds were created with the aim of offering children suitable environments with opportunities for self-development or as substitutes for

play in nature or in the countryside (Wohlin, 1961). However, there was also a wish to protect children from places that were considered less suitable (Rasmusson, 1998). Playgrounds were constructed to keep children away from dangers in the cities, such as busy and crowded streets, and the correlation between lack of playgrounds and parks and deaths and injuries among children playing in the streets was used as a major argument in the US (Wridt, 2004). Protecting children from undesirable influences, such as juvenile delinquency, was a reason for organising playgrounds in the American playground movement (Goodman, 1979; Frost, 1986), as was the attempt to protect and assimilate immigrant children in particular (Goodman, 1979; Hart, 2002). It was thereby not “recognition of children’s needs to explore the total environment” but a wish to create safe and morally sound places for children instead of the streets that led to early playground construction in the US (Perez & Hart, 1980, p. 253).

In Sweden in the 1930s, a social approach to building was applied, this being based on the wish of architects and planners to improve living conditions in cities (Schlyter, 1976). Alva Myrdal’s functionalist ideals about play settings became influential (Rasmusson, 2003). She described children’s need for contact with adults and with nature, which they had lost on moving into cities, where small children ‘don’t fit’ (Myrdal, 1935). For decades, spatial planning became closely connected to social planning and a reliance on expert knowledge for adapting playground provision to the needs of children of different ages (Schlyter, 1976; Rasmusson, 1998; Wilhjelm, 2002). From around 1940 and for about 40 years, it was common to employ play workers in parks (Nilsson, 2003). Outdoor play settings organised by park administrations can be described as early child-care institutions, later replaced by pre-schools and similar.

Issues of playground management in the 1940s are described by Holger Blom, city gardener in Stockholm 1938-1971, who emphasised the importance of nature for improving playgrounds:

Particularly concerning the younger children’s playgrounds close to their dwellings, the surfaces are not unusually so small that the natural greenery almost immediately becomes worn out. Here, new work is needed, and for the park manager it is a difficult balance between the practical demands and the wish to avoid playgrounds that are similar to concentration camps or squirrel wheels. (Blom, 1946, p. 3)

Playground planning standards

Over time, the provision of playgrounds in Sweden and several other countries became affected by the use of standards and even legislation on national, regional or local levels. Regulations for planning playgrounds of different types have been described in for example the US (Frye, 1964; Hart, 2002), the Netherlands (see Karsten, 2002), Denmark (Eriksen, 1985), Norway (Thorén *et al.*, 2000; Wilhjelm, 2002) and Sweden (Schlyter, 1976; Bucht, 1997; Kristensson, 2003). In an appendix to her doctoral thesis, Wilhjelm (2002) compiled a number of publications on play areas from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, UK, US, France and Germany, with standards and regulations commonly focused on walking distance from children's homes, recommended areas and in some cases also content. In Denmark, a law from 1939 stated that houses for more than eight families should have playgrounds reachable by a walk of 10-15 minutes, changed in 1967 to only five minutes, this in order to increase playground access (Eriksen, 1985).

In Sweden, the long tradition of standard thinking and modernist urban planning and design of playgrounds was characterised by a rational and large-scale approach. Standards of different kinds formed what might be described as a national strategy for playground provision. There was a substantial increase in the number of dwellings during the 'million homes programme' in the 1960s and 1970s⁵. Standards came to have a great effect on playground provision within those housing areas, but also on public grounds. The standards and recommendations on playgrounds from 1959 to 1975 have been described as focusing mainly on three aspects, similar in many other countries, as described above: *dimension* in relation to users (number of apartments, inhabitants or children), *placement* (distance from entrance door), and *content* (equipment, play leaders) (Schlyter, 1976).

The most influential research on the matter in Sweden was performed by architect Hans Wohlin (1961), who was inspired by earlier standardisation programmes developed in the three largest cities in Sweden, namely Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Wohlin's studies were conducted "just when Swedish society was on the look for simple solutions to problems concerning the building process", which contributed to their impact (Bucht, 1997, p. 42). Wohlin made observational field studies of use among children living in densely populated sub-urban areas, focusing on the ages 0-14. He developed recommendations which he called 'preference standards' thus implying something better than minimum requirements. The distribution of

⁵ Following a parliament decision, over one million dwellings were built in Sweden between 1965 and 1975 (Hall & Vidén, 2005).

playgrounds was based upon children's walking distances from the doors of their homes and upon the expected number of children living around each unit. Differently sized units, which Wohlin himself called a 'system of units' (1961), created a 'hierarchic system' of spaces for play (Bucht, 1997). Fifty metres was set as a suitable maximum distance to the nearest small playground (100–200 m²) for younger children. A larger playground, around 1500–2000 m² and with more play equipment, was to be placed within 150 metres from the home and an even larger park playground or gravel pitch for ball games within 400 metres. Small playgrounds were expected to have 1–40 children aged 0–14 in their uptake area, or at most 30 apartments, larger playgrounds 25–200 children or 20–150 apartments. Wohlin (1961) also showed sample playgrounds and recommended particular types of elements and equipment, for example sandboxes, swings and slides, in connection with the standards on size and location.

Wohlin's conclusions about closeness, size and content soon reappeared as building recommendations in other publications (Bygg, 1962; Kungliga bostadsstyrelsen, 1964) and continued to do so through the late 1980s (Bostadsstyrelsen, 1987). They became national standards in *Svensk Byggnorm* from 1976 (Statens Planverk, 1975), standards which have highly affected the playground provision in Sweden. They have been applied in many types of residential areas, often when government loans were granted for building projects (Schlyter, 1976). Particularly the two shorter distances, 50 and 150 m, appear to have had great influence.

The fact that playgrounds often were planned and constructed according to those distances led to their being located both on private land (and thus managed, for example, by housing companies) and on public land such as municipal park land. Playgrounds became the responsibility of different managers, mainly municipal or from housing companies⁶. In some large housing areas, there might therefore be small playgrounds managed by housing companies and larger playgrounds managed by the municipality. Application of the standards to various types of residential areas has also resulted in some areas with detached houses with gardens also having small municipal playgrounds, while corresponding small playgrounds in a multifamily housing area might be managed by the local housing company. In this work, I opted to study residential areas with many detached houses with gardens and with mainly municipal playgrounds.

⁶ However, housing companies may also be municipally owned. According to SABO (the Swedish Association of Municipal Housing Companies), 41% of Swedish dwellings are privately owned houses, 18% cooperatives, 22% rental flats in municipal housing and 17% rental flats in privately owned housing (SABO, 2007).

Despite Wohlin (1961) emphasising that the standards were recommendations, their influence has later been described as becoming remarkably decisive (Bucht, 1997) and long-lasting (Kristensson, 2003). The planning standards must be seen as recognition of the needs of children in urban and suburban areas by Wohlin and other advocates of playgrounds, a compensation for the 'ideal' childhood in the countryside.

Current legislation on open space in the built environment states that:

If building sites are put to use for buildings containing one or more dwellings or premises for a day-care centre or other comparable activity, in the vicinity there must be sufficient open space suitable for play and for being out-of-doors. If there is not enough area for both parking and open space, open space takes priority over parking. (SFS 1987:10, 3 kap. 15 §)

On sites that are already built, the regulations [...] shall be put into practice as is reasonable. (SFS 1987:10, 3 kap. 16 §)

Since 1987, the legislation is no longer accompanied by quantitative standards and what is 'sufficient open space suitable for play' needs to be interpreted in each case by municipalities and building companies.

The claiming of space for children

In the Nordic countries, play environments such as playgrounds were given much attention during the 1960s and 1970s, and children's needs were largely expressed through physical planning (Rasmusson, 1998; Wilhjem, 2002). The large-scale housing areas created during the million homes programme, with play areas often based on the planning standards, became the object of several studies of play environments. Contemporary Swedish research reports presented both criticism and new ideas (Björklid, 1974; Insulander, 1975; Schlyter, 1976; Dahlén, 1977; Norén-Björn, 1977). Norén-Björn (1977), who studied children's actual use of playgrounds, observed that much of the play equipment was little used and that the activity in the playgrounds to a great deal depended on the existence of staff, loose materials and nearby nature. Dahlén (1977) pointed out that playground provision within an area commonly lacked variation, something which he found was connected to large-scale management and maintenance. Berglund *et al.* (1985) found that when the planning standards were followed so that playgrounds for small children were close to the entry door and for older children further away, the result sometimes was segregation between children of different ages, also that the closest area had little space for social activities for adults.

One playground idea originating from children's preferences for manipulation and creativity that has received much attention is the adventure playground, where children get materials and support to construct own play settings or 'houses' and where they can learn to deal with adventure and risk on their own terms. It was invented in the 1940s by the Danish landscape architect C. Th. Sørensen, who got the inspiration when he saw children play on a building site. In Sweden, Arvid Bengtsson was inspired by Sørensen's ideas (Bengtsson, 1970). He started creating adventure playgrounds in Sweden and, in turn, also wrote books to inspire others (Bengtsson, 1972). Adventure playgrounds existed in Sweden during a period in the 1960s and 1970s. Frobenius & Gammelsrud (1973) found that adventure playgrounds in the Nordic countries that were constantly developed and changed together with the children to match their needs functioned better than playgrounds of more fixed types. Despite this, adventure playgrounds have become rare in Sweden. One main reason for their short survival time is that they were messy, dirty and loud, loved by many children but not corresponding to adult preferences (Lindholm, 1995; Coninck-Smith & Gutman, 2004). Another reason is that they are based on having personnel, which gives rise to high management costs. However, in some countries there are examples of well-functioning adventure playgrounds, and a successful adventure playground movement exists today in, for example, Germany, Denmark and Japan.

Wilhjelm (2002) studied how the interests of children have been asserted in physical planning over time and found that the defence of them has weakened compared to in the 1970s, that professionals responsible for children's needs and interests in the urban environment have gotten more diffuse ideas about their responsibility, and that it even has become possible to claim that children's needs don't have to be considered everywhere in the public space. Since the 1980s there has been a critical view of playgrounds among planners, which to some extent can be expected to have effects in practice (Kristensson, 1994). Kristensson (2003) also found a diminished interest among planners and architects in the 1990s in what she calls 'concrete use' of the open space, including children's play.

Playgrounds have, despite changes in ideals and practises, remained rather similar in all types of urban settings until the present day, being a rather stable element in urban planning (Rasmusson, 1998; Wilhjelm, 2002). Previous planning standards ensured that *space* is provided for play, in a way that planners and architects can easily handle. Space must be considered valuable for children and other users (Kristensson, 2003). However, also other approaches might be needed to make play spaces increasingly valuable.

3 Background and theoretical framework

In this chapter, I present a theoretical model that illustrates the relations between managers, playgrounds and users. Those relations are then further explored in a theoretical framework and background for this thesis using previous research and literature. The lack of established concepts within the approach I have to the field of urban landscape management necessitates a comprehensive description of the theory and concepts used.

A playground management model

Urban landscape managers, public open (green) spaces, users, and the interrelations between those three can be considered the basis of urban landscape management research. The specific aims of this thesis concern managers, playgrounds and users. This can be described in a model developed from an 'explanatory model for management of the urban outdoor environment' (Persson, 2005) and a 'park-organisation-user model' (Randrup & Persson, 2009), shown in Figure 1. It includes the three actors/objects: *managers* (playground management on different organisational activity levels), *playgrounds* (resources and landscape features), and *users* (several categories, for example children, parents and preschool staff).

Besides the three actors/objects, the model also shows their interrelations, how they relate to and affect each other. The managers manage the playground provision and the users use the playground facilities and hopefully get benefits from them. In addition, there is a possible connection between the management organisation (managers) and the users in the form of dialogue, consultation or participation. This is part of the management work but takes place between managers and users. User benefits might be derived not only directly through playground use but also through

management work (Delshammar, 2005) or relations with managers. Furthermore, it is also possible that users in different ways affect the physical playgrounds. Each part of the model can be seen in the perspective of the other parts and might also affect them. The research questions of this thesis can all be related to the model and the processes and relations within it. The limitations and prerequisites applied to the system from external agents and factors outside the model (funding, legislation, standards, practices, information) and people's capacity to understand each other's views also have a great effect and are therefore of paramount interest.

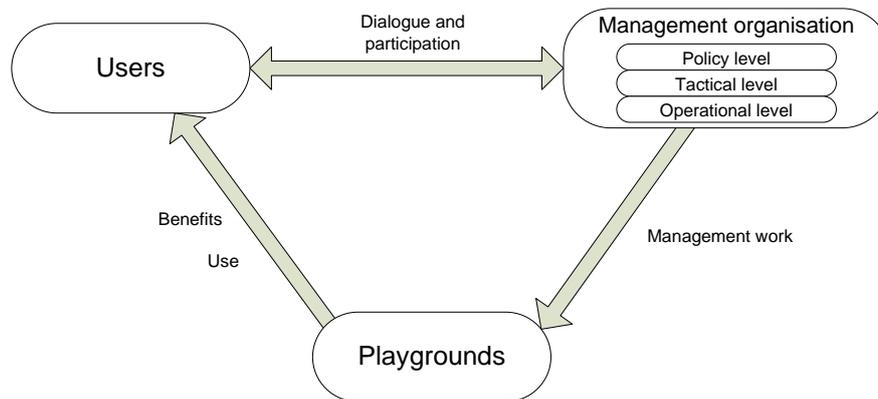


Figure 1. The playground management model

Furthermore, three activity levels in the park management organisation can be specified: *policy*, *tactical* and *operational* (Randrup & Persson, 2009) (or *strategic*, tactical and operational (Gustavsson *et al.*, 2005))⁷. The policy level is the political level in the municipality – the decision-makers who set strategies, allocate resources and make priorities for the work. The tactical level can be described as a professional level, where civil servants with different functions operate. It might include physical planners, park administrators and foremen. On the operational level, work is performed by park workers, working foremen and other staff involved directly in playground construction, maintenance, upkeep and control. Individual professionals might perform activities that are both tactical and operational, which shows that the boundary between those levels is not always distinct.

The model is hereafter referred to in the text as ‘the playground management model’ or just ‘the model’.

⁷ Gustavsson *et al.* (2005) describe the activity levels as three timespans in management work.

Playground management

Management as organisation and people and as activity

Management can be used within several different fields of knowledge, commonly referring to organisation and business. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Business and Management*, management is defined as either “the running of an organization or part of it” or as “the people involved in the running of an organization” (Oxford Reference Online, 2005). This dichotomy can be found in much of the literature on management. Within urban forestry, Gustavsson *et al.* (2005, p. 369) see management both as activity and as organisation, “people and/or institutions (*i.e.* actors) carrying out the activities”. I also use the word in the two different senses, either as activity: the *management work*, or as people: the *managers* and their *management organisation*.

The concepts of management as work and as people/organisation are in many senses intertwined, dependent on and defining each other. For example, *strategic management* within the public sector has been described as “both a long-term and a short-term sense of direction for a governmental agency relative to its internal and external environments, which could be shifting continually” (Poister & Streib, 1999, p. 309). The activities performed should thereby relate and adapt to internal factors such as people within the own organisation, as well as external, *e.g.* users. A definition of management concerning landscape that includes both activity and people is provided by Steiner (1991, p. 4): “*Management* has been defined as the judicious use of means to accomplish a desired end. It involves working with people to accomplish organizational goals.”

Management work can be seen as separate from planning, since planning mainly refers to the work on defining new structures in the landscape, while management deals with existing structures. Albrechts (2004, p. 750) describes strategic open space management as a process where a planned vision gives “the best decisions it can at any given point” through “operational, tactical, day-to-day decisions” which are taken following strategic objectives (Poister & Streib, 1999, p. 308). However, the two concepts can also be considered intertwined as described by Steiner (1991, p 4):

For practical purposes, many see the distinction between planning and management as largely semantic. The management of resources, such as land, may be a goal of a planning process. Conversely, planning may be a means of management.

According to Poister & Streib (1999), strategic management is overall and includes strategic planning, resource management, implementation, control and evaluation. In this thesis, management work is seen as overall when considering existing environments and facilities. It may include elements of planning and be closely related to planning. However, management has its own characteristics. In terms of playgrounds, planning can be described as the process that defines the allocation and size of playground units, while management concerns the activities performed once those frames for playground provision have been set, something that might involve changing them.

Literature on management of landscapes and green spaces often refers to management as synonymous with operational activities, such as upkeep and maintenance in a technical sense (*e.g.* Hitchmough, 1994; Tyrväinen *et al.*, 2003). However, there is a tendency within urban forestry and park management to increasingly consider more strategic levels, organisational aspects and user focus. Konijnendijk (1999) studied urban forest policies in different European contexts and argued the need for more innovative and strategic methods, focusing on planning and policies, not just on operational activities, with increased understanding of users and their needs and preferences. Surveys of users and their use (or non-use) is described as useful for collecting information in urban forestry management (Schipperijn *et al.*, 2005), and there are examples of studies that consider user preferences as the basis of open space management (*e.g.* Hegetschweiler *et al.*, 2007). Recent research on park management reveals an increased focus on organisational and strategic issues (Delshammar, 2005; Lindholst, 2008; Randrup & Persson, 2009). According to Delshammar (2005), park management may comprise activities such as planning, constructing, maintaining and developing parks and green spaces.

I consider playground management to be the entire process around maintenance and development in existing built environments, performed by a management organisation. It concerns activity/work as well as people/organisation.

The municipal playground management organisation

Management organisation in the current context may refer to any organisation dealing with playground management, *e.g.* housing companies, city governments and municipalities. In this work, I have chosen to focus on playground management within municipalities, more specifically the work by the organisational unit that deals with playground management within

the municipal organisation. Although this unit might be constructed in many different ways, sometimes loosely knit or including very few individuals, I refer to it here as the ‘playground management organisation’.

In the Nordic countries, public playground management is frequently associated with – and organisationally attached to – management of parks and other green spaces, and the work often performed by the same group or part of it. About 80% of the responding park authorities in a 2003 questionnaire survey of municipal park management in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland) reported that they were responsible for playgrounds (Randrup & Persson, 2009).

Playground managers surveyed in 23 Swedish municipalities managed from 10 to 200 public playgrounds each with on average around one municipal playground per 660 inhabitants (Jansson, 2008). If that accessibility can be considered representative for the whole of Sweden, it means there might be around 14 000 playgrounds managed by Swedish municipalities in total, but the large differences in playground provision between municipalities make such estimations very uncertain.

Park authorities are organised in various ways within the Swedish municipalities. In some cases, mainly in larger municipalities, the park authority forms its own department. More often, it is a division integrated into a technical department or similar (Delshammar, 2005). Randrup & Persson (2009) describe three different levels within municipal organisations where park authorities might be distinguished: on Level 1, park authorities are organised directly under the political authority (own departments), Level 2 are divisions within other authorities (commonly technical or leisure departments), while at Level 3, authorities are, for example, units within a division of a department. The most common form in Sweden is Level 2, followed by Level 3 (Randrup & Persson, 2009).

Here, managers are considered to be those professionals, on both tactical and operational activity levels who work with playground management, also referred to as *professionals* or *civil servants* (mainly tactical level) and *park workers* (operational level).

The professionals working with playgrounds and their personal attitudes and knowledge might affect the playground management. Wilhjelms (2002) found that planners and architects use playgrounds as a way of showing that children have been considered in their work. Planning practice is often too dependent on time and economic limits to allow for work in more user-directed ways. Kylin (2004) describes the planning profession as too dependent on visual two-dimensional plans and what can be described in them (such as playgrounds) to be able to add children’s more physical or

'sensuous' perspectives, and proposes that planners learn to understand children better, using their own childhood memories as the starting point. Also Paget (2008) argues that it is the professionals' personal attitudes that determine how successful the collaboration with children as users can become. In this context, it is interesting to note that Wohlin's proposed designs were richer and more varied than most of the standard-influenced playgrounds that resulted from the standards being implemented. This shows the importance of planning and management methods and of the professionals involved in achieving valuable results.

Playground management work

Management of public outdoor playgrounds can include a range of activities, strategic, tactical as well as operational, with the aim of maintaining and developing existing playground provision. Besides the described legislation on 'sufficient open space suitable for play', legislation also obliges municipalities to maintain open spaces that they are responsible for (SFS 1987:10, 6 kap. 30 §) and to keep them in a state that for example is not endangering people's health (SFS 1998:814, 2 §). Delshammar (2005) emphasises that park management organisations most probably perform more activities than required by legislation, both in terms of development of open spaces and through other types of activities, such as communication with users. Apart from core activities such as maintenance and upkeep, the range of activities may include elements of planning, design, budgets, construction, control, user participation processes, surveys, public relations and even stunts.

In the case of municipal playgrounds, it is often the municipal playground management organisation responsible that also performs all of this work. However, there are examples of municipalities cooperating with groups of users that take responsibility for maintenance and upkeep of certain playgrounds (Jansson, 2008). These types of arrangements can be expected to increase in the future.⁸ Operational and to some extent tactical level activities might also be performed by contractors. This was the case in one of 23 Swedish municipalities surveyed by telephone interviews (Jansson, 2008).

Of the three activity levels, professionals on the tactical level are of special importance for management. They can be described as linking the other two levels (Gustavsson *et al.*, 2005). Strategic thinking in park

⁸ Such changes in the role of municipal park management are discussed by e.g. Delshammar (2005).

management is important in order to avoid the work from becoming limited to tasks on the operational activity level, such as maintenance and upkeep. A number of park administrations lack a well-developed tactical level. They only maintain (operational level) and do not develop (tactical and strategic levels) their park provision, which means they may lack overview and long-term vision, something that can even cause degradation of green open spaces (Randrup & Persson, 2009). The tactical level managers have particular importance since they consult the other two activity levels and give them recommendations (Guest & Taylor, 1999). Work on the tactical level, including developing plans and analyses, can help in setting strategies (Randrup & Persson, 2009). It can establish functioning connections between the three management levels and create good internal communication within the organisation. Both tactical and operational levels can preferably work across sectors in park management (Randrup & Persson, 2009).

Playground design and management practice have been criticised for changes being introduced slowly and for the large amount of available knowledge from research on children's outdoor play not being implemented in the work or in the physical play settings (Cooper Marcus & Moore, 1976; Wuellner, 1979; Moore, 1989; Thwaites & Simkins, 2007; Woolley, 2008). Instead, different types of standards and legislation proposed in a more top-down manner often appear to have much impact on the work. Strained economy and equipment safety standards seem to have made playground management organisations focus mainly on what is considered obligatory (Jansson, 2008) and letting manufacturers of play equipment have influence (Norén-Björn, 1977; Wuellner, 1979). A need for municipalities and other providers of public play settings to change their ways of providing places for play only as allocated spaces with equipment has also been argued (Perez & Hart, 1980; Hart, 2002; Woolley, 2008), but this appears to have had rather little effect in practice. However, some local management strategies have come to include a broader definition of play spaces, which is the case in for example Dunedin, New Zealand (Quigg, 1999).

Effects of the changes mentioned in the conditions for playground management during the last two decades can be discerned in management work and the role of managers. Differences in strategies chosen by municipal playground managers and particularly the recent decrease in number of playgrounds (Jansson, 2008) raise the question of whether standards of some type are a way of securing municipal playground provision. Without norms or standards there is "confusion as well as political ambivalence concerning children's environmental needs and the priority that these should have"

(Björklid & Nordström, 2007, p. 392). In other words, there is a risk of children's environments losing priority if the need for play spaces is not clearly asserted. However, land-use standards in general are not an effective way to replace what a more holistic planning approach can achieve, and quality requirements and context-based approaches are needed (Thorén *et al.*, 2000). Experiences from the 'million homes programme' show that planning standards are not a guarantee that the environments will be stimulating (Hall & Vidén, 2005). There might be a need for new 'models' and visions for architects and planners now that the building standards have been abandoned (Kristensson, 2003). Rasmusson (1998) reports that there is an 'empty place' after the modernist planning regulations but sees communication and cooperation between children and wise adults as more important than standards in giving children room in the public space.

Adapting playground management to local needs

A number of methods have been presented on how to determine the needs for playground provision in an area to plan, manage and in other ways develop playground provision that matches the needs of users. Already in 1914, Henry Curtis wrote about the importance of studying local conditions before determining the playground provision and locating playgrounds. His methods consisted mainly of observational walks to determine the number of children of different ages, their leisure activities and their effects of these (the children's development), the existing play facilities, and sites where new ones may be placed (Curtis, 1914). Later research directed at determining playground needs and finding suitable standards for playground provision appears to be taking less consideration of local context and local assessments. Instead, distance from the home has been used as the main indicator of playground accessibility (Wohlin, 1961; Dee & Liebman, 1970; Talen & Anselin, 1998). However, factors such as socio-economic conditions have also been taken into consideration (Smoyer-Tomic *et al.*, 2004; Ylmaz & Bulut, 2007). Playground provision has also been assessed in more comprehensive approaches, described in terms of 'spatial equity' (Talen & Anselin, 1998; Smoyer-Tomic *et al.*, 2004), and 'spatial accessibility' (Hewko *et al.*, 2002). With a few exceptions (*e.g.* Bjurman, 1981; Berglund *et al.*, 1985; Moore, 1986; Rasmusson, 1998; Carstensen, 2004; Prellwitz, 2007), actual preferences of children and other users have gained surprisingly little attention in research on needs for play spaces.

Beyond the above described user-directed attempts, other ways of handling playground planning and management seem to be needed, and

they must be adaptable to change: internally, such as in the own organisation and the people in it, and externally, such as in user preferences and needs, in the built environment, in the economic situation, and in standards or legislation.

Since playground planning no longer is based on standards, it has become increasingly important to get an overview of the provision on the municipal level. Municipal playground management appears to be developing increasingly towards strategic and tactical approaches, as shown in a number of recent documents about local strategies for play provision in city governments and municipalities in Sweden and a number of other countries. Some examples are Gothenburg, Sweden (Glader & Petersson, 2007), London, UK (Mayor of London, 2005, 2008), Casey, Australia (City of Casey, 2003) and Dunedin, New Zealand (Quigg, 1999). Such local strategies might include the potential to provide playgrounds that are adapted to actual user needs and preferences, even to move beyond separation of functions and traditional playground concepts (Woolley, 2007) and can therefore be considered a key tool in management work. This may also be a step towards realising playgrounds as an integral and more useful part of the physical and social local environment, a move which has been promoted (Bengtsson, 1970; Noschis, 1992; Moore *et al.*, 1992; Herrington, 1999). Naylor described the need for more local management in order to adapt to actual needs:

It is not necessarily the case that the spaces set aside for play should be playgrounds *per se*. The decision on what to provide for children should be based on a full consideration of the existing and lacking facilities in their local environment. The play needs of inner-city and suburban children are quite different, yet often met by exactly the same 'playground solution'. (Naylor, 1985, p. 126)

Perez & Hart (1980) recommended new approaches in the organisation of play spaces, opening 'new arenas', dealing with the limitations in children's movement in urban areas and using knowledge on children's environmental behaviour. They also proposed work in local participatory manners, an issue connected to the need for locally based playground management strategies⁹. Stakeholder involvement in public sector management can be part of the formation of a strategy for the management work (Bryson, 1995; Poister & Streib, 1999) and can result in mutual learning for the public and public sector professionals involved in the process (Joyce, 2000). More interaction

⁹ This was a focus in Paper IV.

with users has also been proposed as a means of improving park management (Randrup & Persson, 2009).

There are several reasons for questioning the role of playground managers (park managers) as sole providers of public playgrounds, which is shown in some examples. Community engagement has been argued to be a way of improving the function of playground provision in the UK (CABE Space, 2008). The development of play spaces in Japan is connected to citizens' initiatives combined with city policies. Individual adults who function as facilitators have had particular importance for children's participation (Kinoshita, 2007). Other park environments are sometimes initiated and run in a more bottom-up way, such as park areas being developed by users (Delshammar, 2005), or the establishment of citizen-initiated gardens (Larsson, 2009). These examples might be part of a trend towards management closer to users - or even performed by users.

Participation methods are often directed at planning, design or management on policy or tactical levels, but operational level participation approaches might also be a way of improving the outcomes of playground management. Frobenius & Gammelsrud (1973) looked at large, staffed playgrounds in the Nordic countries and found that playgrounds that were constantly being developed and changed together with children, following their needs, functioned better and were less targeted by vandalism than playgrounds with less flexible and user-directed management.

Children's and young people's difficulties in making themselves heard and respected in planning and management processes have often been described (Boverket, 2000; Spencer & Woolley, 2000; Wilhjelms, 2002). The gap between children's knowledge about their own environments and the perspectives of municipal management organisations appears to be huge in many municipalities (Horelli, 1998). Traditionally, children and adult users have had little influence on playground management (Rasmusson, 1998; Hart, 2002), which still appears to be the case in Sweden. When users participate in municipal playground management it is mainly as a form of consultation for example through questionnaire surveys or dialogue with preschool administrations (Jansson, 2008). Children's participation in design and planning has, however, been described as an increasingly common approach (Hart, 1992; Francis & Lorenzo, 2002) and is being promoted as a way of improving playground provision (Rasmusson, 1998; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 2002).

Chawla (2002) concludes that there is much left to do, both in translating knowledge about children's and other users' perspectives into solutions in the physical environment and in giving children the opportunity to be

involved in decisions concerning their environments. This will require a change in the traditional way of managing public open spaces, particularly spaces intended for children. Public service organisation management reforms have been proposed in order to improve services and meet new demands, since traditional approaches might have their limits (Maddock, 2002). Modernisation of the public sector is believed to depend on finding new forms of people management such as strategies with organisational flexibility and user focus (Maddock, 2002; Walker & Boyne, 2006), working in constant processes, freeing abilities and creativity and engaging staff to work towards shared goals (Rodrigues & Halvorson, 1996). This may demand a more holistic view, including communication within and between groups and levels inside and outside the organisation (Grint, 1994). Communication both within the organisation and with external groups and stakeholders may thereby contribute to improving the outcome of the management (Pfeffer, 1992; Tourish & Tourish, 1996; Pandey & Garnett, 2006). To facilitate communication and collaboration, the managers of public open space will need non-traditional qualifications and new knowledge (Delshammar, 2005). Paget (2008), however, found that landscape professionals might have difficulties in adapting to such conditions.

Public outdoor playgrounds

Playground types and provision

Public playgrounds are spaces set aside in the public open space to provide play facilities for children. The playground concept might, despite being well-known in daily speech, refer to play spaces of rather differing types. Hayward *et al.* (1974) presented a classification which is commonly used. *Traditional* playgrounds contain mainly equipment such as swings, slides and climbing frames/jungle gyms on asphalt surfaces. Different pieces of equipment are adapted to the use of different ages. These designs have been criticised for being static and boring (*e.g.* Ellis, 1970). *Contemporary* playgrounds are more designed environments, sometimes around a theme, and where different materials can be used in addition to traditional play equipment. They were mainly invented as a reaction to the traditional playgrounds being focused on gross-motor activities but were, according to Frost (1986, p. 199), “intended to have high aesthetic appeal for adults”. The third type is the aforementioned *adventure* playground, which contains no play equipment but instead materials that children can use to build their

own play environments, with play workers present to facilitate the children's activities. This playground type has often been described as particularly well-functioning and popular among children (Frobenius & Gammelsrud, 1973; Hayward *et al.*, 1974; Naylor, 1985).

Frost (1986) describes a similar classification but adds the *creative* playground as a fourth type. He describes it as a combination of the other three types in a more informal environment. Large playgrounds, or play parks, which could include several of the aforementioned playground types and employ play staff, were described in the Nordic countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Frobenius & Gammelsrud, 1973).

Another possible type is the *playscape*, a term that has been used by *e.g.* Eriksen (1985), Frost (1992), Fjørtoft & Sageie (2000) and Fjørtoft (2004) to imply play areas of a freer character than equipment playgrounds. According to Fjørtoft & Sageie (2000), good playscapes can be characterised by diversity in landscape elements, affordances for play, challenges and safety, accessibility and resistance to wear.

Over the past few years, rubber carpets have been increasingly used as playground surfaces. Woolley (2008) describes what in the UK has come to be called 'KFC' playgrounds containing mainly a *kit* of play equipment, surrounding *fences* and a rubber *carpet* and claims that they tend to fence children in and have them watched rather than providing qualities for children's play.

Today, playgrounds of a rather traditional type still dominate among the municipal playgrounds in Sweden. They often contain fixed-structure equipment such as swings, slides and climbing frames, but mainly sand surfaces instead of asphalt. They also commonly show influences from contemporary, creative and playscape types, being slightly more 'designed' and also often surrounded by green elements such as lawns, hedges or trees. However, it has become very rare to have playground personnel employed. There also appears to be an increasing number of 'KFC' playgrounds or similar, since the rubber carpets are a solution to providing access for children with disabilities. In this work I chose to focus on these playground types, which are common in Sweden.

Swedish playgrounds have been developed as a system of *units* of different sizes.¹⁰ I also refer to playgrounds as units in the text, while I call the total

¹⁰ The classification into three levels has been common in Sweden ('småbarnslekplats', 'kvartersslekplats', 'lekpark') (Kungliga Bostadsstyrelsen, 1960; Wohlin, 1961; Kungliga Bostadsstyrelsen, 1964) and can be compared with what Bengtsson (1970) calls 'playgrounds for small children', 'playgrounds for young children' and 'the comprehensive playground' ('play park').

number of playgrounds within an area of any size *provision*, similarly to other authors (Hart, 2002; Smoyer-Tomic *et al.*, 2004). Apart from playgrounds, I also talk about provision of play spaces or *play provision*, by which I mean all spaces that can be used for children's play in the open space.

Criticisms and suggested improvements

Much of what has been published about playgrounds, both as a concept and as physical play areas, has taken a rather critical approach.

When you see play as part of the child's total development, you notice that it obviously is wrong to create particular environments for play. The most important thing must be to plan for rich possibilities for experiences and expressions. (Norén-Björn, 1977, p. 40)

Even Wohlin (1961) described playgrounds as having less quality than natural and rural environments and called play there 'secondary'. Providing playgrounds set aside for children's play has also been criticised for isolating children from the rest of the public space, resulting in marginalisation of children in society, separating them from possibilities for social interaction and closeness to grown-up's activities, which children often highly appreciate (Goodman, 1979; Noschis, 1992; Hart, 2002). Wood (1971) argues that playgrounds risk segregating children from adults while at the same time failing to be places where they can get away from adults. Public playgrounds are described as one of grown-ups' ways of controlling children's experiences of the public open space, with a design and management corresponding more to parental safety concerns than to children's own preferences or needs (Katz, 2006; Woolley, 2008). Ehn & Löfgren (2001), who write about cultural analysis, describe playgrounds as including a paradox since the fun, freedom and spontaneity in play and children's need for experiences and excitement become controlled and located in particular areas, as an expression of adults' fears for children's safety.

Woolley (2007) claims that in the UK children are no longer expected to play everywhere in the public space, like they used to, but are reduced to depending increasingly on allocated spaces, such as playgrounds:

This trend of expecting children to play only in allocated spaces, can be considered to have derived from two aspects of culture. One of these is a sociological one of how we perceive children in society. The second has derived from the professional approach to the zoning of land. (p. 90)

Although development in the Nordic context may not be as severe as is described for the UK, there may be a similar trend. The fact that children's access to the outdoor environment is strongly affected by adults' perspectives on children and by planning practices is an important issue in the discussion about playground management in Sweden too. The common practice in planning of dividing up land according to functions does not correspond to how children use or perceive their environment. Children who are given the possibility discover and use the environment regardless of land zoning (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Wilhelm, 2002). Contact between children and adults may be lower with allocated playgrounds (Noschis, 1992; Hart, 2002), which may fail in fulfilling adults' needs for social contacts, meaningful activities and recreation (Norén-Björn, 1977; Berglund & Jergeby, 1989). As a reaction against this development, Ward (1978, p. 204) presented thoughts about "a shared city, rather than a city where unwanted patches are set aside to contain children and their activities."

Several authors emphasise that playgrounds have many values for their users but are not sufficient as the only environments available and accessible for children's outdoor play (Cunningham & Jones, 1999; Hart, 2002). Cunningham & Jones go so far as to call the provision of playgrounds a 'confession of failure', referring to the insufficient adaptation to children's needs that has been made in the rest of the public open space and society. It has in different ways been argued that children must be given access to other places in their neighbourhoods than playgrounds and other allocated spaces (Perez & Hart, 1980; Hart, 2002; Kylin, 2004; Karsten & van Vliet, 2006).

During the past 40 years, much criticism has been directed towards the design and construction of playgrounds as being uniform and static, with mainly prefabricated play equipment and even surrounding fences (Holme & Massie, 1970; Insulander, 1975; Wuellner, 1979; Moore, 1989; Wardle, 1990; Hart, 2002; Woolley, 2008). In particular, traditional playgrounds have been criticised for being "duplicated from site to site in a monotony of stereotyped apparatus" and being "essentially static, tubular, safe, predictable, and are often pathetic imitations designed to catch an adult's eye" (Ellis, 1970, p. 8). Being a result of adult demands for play spaces and organised with much influence from economic interests and standards, the playground and its contents risk becoming of limited value to children. Norén-Björn (1977) criticised the situation in Sweden, and Wuellner (1979, p. 11-12) described the situation in the US, claiming that the concern with:

economic competition and liability insurance has resulted in a playground conceptualization based on play object entities that can be carefully designed and constructed according to the latest safety guidelines, colorfully

photographed for brochures, and systematically described by dimension and cost factors. They are designed by adults to please adults, and children have nothing to do with the entire process, except perhaps to ignore them after a few playful encounters on some lot.

New approaches to providing play space and changing the playground concept for the better have been proposed. Woolley, who criticises the current development of playgrounds in the UK, asks for something “more challenging, creative, innovative and informed by the elements within academia” (2008, p. 508). Changes in the playground concept are also argued by rejecting the term ‘playground’, which is associated with many negative things such as uniformity and static play equipment in an isolated space. Instead, terms such as ‘playscape’ (used by *e.g.* Eriksen, 1985; Frost, 1992; Fjørtoft, 2004), ‘playful spaces’, ‘opportunities for play’, ‘playable space’, and ‘playful landscapes’ (proposed by Woolley, 2007) are promoted. These concepts and expressions all emphasise less static and limited play spaces that depend more on landscape qualities than mainly prefabricated play equipment. There are also voices promoting the adventure playground as ideal, pointing out the many benefits they offer for children (Staempfli, 2009).

Playground qualities

Over the years, several positive aspects on playgrounds have been presented, although the values of playgrounds tend to be less heard than the critical voices in the debate. A number of qualities for play that can be provided in playgrounds have been described in the literature, the issue being approached in different ways.¹¹

Playgrounds may fill the function of supplying space for children in the public open space and can thereby make children and their outdoor play visible, even if they do not become the primary arena for play. For planners, playgrounds have qualities in assuring that children become considered in their work (Kristensson, 1994).

Large spaces may have a particular value for play (Karsten, 2003; Kristensson, 2003), but also the closeness and access to playgrounds is of importance for the use (Wohlin, 1961; Dee & Liebman, 1970). Variation, challenge and choice in the play settings have been seen as qualities in playground design (Eriksen, 1985; Wardle, 1990; Woolley, 2008). Different

¹¹ Paper III contains a more thorough literature review on qualities in outdoor play environments.

ways of implementing children's opportunities to manipulate and change the playground settings have been proposed. Playgrounds can be constructed to be flexible, with movable parts and equipment, to meet children's preferences for novelty in play equipment (Gramsa *et al.*, 1972) and allow manipulation and change over time (Wuellner, 1979). Others emphasise that loose parts and materials for children to manipulate can be provided in play spaces (Nicholson, 1971; Norén-Björn, 1977; Mårtensson, 2004), particularly natural elements such as plants, sticks or stones (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1989; Moore *et al.*, 1992).

Play in environments with natural elements has been linked to improvement of several aspects of children's healthy development (Kaplan, 1977; Tuan, 1978; Grahn *et al.*, 1997; Herrington & Studtmann, 1998; Fjørtoft & Sageie, 2000; Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Fjørtoft, 2004). Play equipment placed with careful thought in natural environments, as a combination of equipment and nature, is claimed to create new and better play possibilities (Norén-Björn, 1977; Mårtensson, 2004) and can thereby be expected to increase the user benefits. Variation and diversity in vegetation and topography (Fjørtoft & Sageie, 2000; Boldemann *et al.*, 2006) and environments rich in content (Mårtensson, 2004) can be other qualities in play settings.

In this thesis, qualities defined by actual playground users, qualities that increase user benefits, are of primary interest. In the following, the playground users and their relations to playgrounds will be further explored.

Playground users, use and benefits

Playground user groups and different perspectives

Delshammar (2005) describes *users* (of public park facilities) as an imprecise concept that might include anyone who the facilities are aimed at who is not a professional working on park provision. Even though the use and experiences of public open spaces must be considered individual¹², when it comes to public playground provision, several categories of people can be expected to have particular interests. Besides children of different ages – from babies up to teenagers – for example parents, teachers, preschool teachers, day-care mothers and grandparents also visit playgrounds. A distinction can be made between organised users (schools, preschools *etc.*)

¹² Grahn (1991) found that individuals see different possibilities in open spaces and have different relations to them. User age was identified as an important factor.

and unorganised users (parents, children *etc.*) of public open spaces (see Grahn *et al.*, 1991; Berglund *et al.*, 1985). Berglund *et al.* (1985) see a risk that the unorganised users might be forgotten.

Wohlin (1961) proposed playground planning standards for children aged 0-14 and identified different needs for the age groups 0-4, 4-7, 7-11 and 11-14 years. Differences between age groups were also studied by *e.g.* Dee & Liebman (1970). Recent literature on playgrounds is commonly concentrated on 'middle childhood', children aged about 4-11 (Woolley, 2008). Basing play equipment on studies of the needs and play habits of children of different ages has been common in Sweden (Wohlin, 1961; Nilsson, 1969), but according to Frobenius & Gammelsrud (1973) that approach resulted in more stereotypical and fixed playground settings, compared with Norway.

I refer to different categories of users as *user groups*, between which I aim to make comparisons. In the empirical studies (Papers I-III), I limited the informants to children up to the age of 12, with particular focus on those between 6 and 11. Other user groups were preschool groups (preschool teachers) and preschool children's parents. Adults with responsibility for children can be expected to have much influence on children's access to outdoor play environments (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997) and must therefore be considered important playground users. Parents and other adult playground users must not be forgotten in the playground setting. Playgrounds have been described as often reflecting an adult perspective on children but despite this are not always made suitable for adult use (Berglund *et al.*, 1985).

There are also several reasons for giving children and young people particular attention as users of public open spaces and consequently for involving them in the planning and management of those spaces. Besides studies showing the importance of play in outdoor environments for children's development and health (*e.g.* Grahn *et al.*, 1997; Herrington & Studtmann, 1998) and the frequent preference of children and young people themselves for outdoor environments (Moore, 1986; Chawla, 1992; Titman, 1994), children and young people might also be using those spaces more than many other user groups (Berglund *et al.*, 1985; Berglund, 1996). Despite this, children and young people are described as outsiders in the public open space (Matthews, 1995).

One main challenge within the management of public open spaces is that, besides individual preferences, professionals might have other perspectives on those spaces than users (Berglund, 1996; Wilhjelm, 2002; Kylin, 2004). Adult preferences and perceptions may also differ substantially

from those of children (Francis, 1988; Olwig, 1989; Kylin, 2004; Simkins & Thwaites, 2008), which gives reason to expect differences in preference between children and managers, and between children and other playground user groups. It can be concluded that adults cannot easily understand how children perceive the world. While adults mainly perceive landscapes visually, children are more likely to interpret functions of the environment (Olwig, 1989; Kylin, 2004). Such functions have been called *potentiality* by Olwig (1989) and *affordances* by Gibson (1979). Heft (1988, 1989) proposes using Gibson's concept of affordances to assess what places can offer children. Spencer & Woolley (2000) describe the advantage of this concept as used by Heft in that it offers a psychological concept of environments: "We do not simply describe the physical characteristics of places [...] but rather describe group places according to what they afford the child and how they perceive and value these places" (p. 184).

In an environment that is rich for children there are many positive affordances present, to become *actualised* by children (Heft, 1989). The combination of many actualised affordances and a high level of independence has therefore been described as favourable for children (Moore, 1986; Kytä, 2004). Children value the possibility to move freely and have access to settings offering a variety of activities (Chawla, 2002), as the environment becomes meaningful to them through possibilities for activities such as play and exploration (Olwig, 1989). Grahn *et al.* (1997) showed that outdoor environments that are organised in a way that is appealing to adults are therefore not always valuable to children. Playground design has been accused of reflecting mainly an adult perspective on children, being adapted to adult concerns, fears and wishes to protect and watch over children (Woolley, 2008), which has even been argued as destroying children's play possibilities (Wardle, 1990).

Since the 1970s, children have been considered increasingly subjectively and more commonly included as informants in research (Rasmussen, 2003). In recent years, a *children's perspective* (also a *child perspective*), a more subjective view approaching how children perceive the world, has been introduced, described as "what children see, hear, experience, feel, what their reality is" or "the world with children's eyes" (Tiller, 1991, p. 72) and implemented into research about landscape use (Kylin & Lieberg, 2001). However, the term 'children's perspectives' has been criticised for being misleading, since the child as a competent source is interpreted by the researcher or by other adults. Despite this, the approach might have value as an attempt to capture children's own perspectives, even if in much it is still an adult perspective (Halldén, 2003). Children's perspectives cannot be

expected to be homogeneous but must be considered each individual child's perspective (Lindholm, 1995). It has been argued that the concept does not need a firm definition but might be constantly discussed and developed (Rasmusson, 1994).

With children's perspective in mind, it has become clear that their own preferences for outdoor play settings should be considered, rather than what is perceived as children's needs by adults. In recent research about children and the physical environment, child-centred methods are often used and discussed (Rasmusson, 1998; Herrington, 1998; Titman, 1994; Kylin & Lieberg, 2001; Wilhjelmsen, 2002; Kylin, 2003; Rasmussen, 2004; Cele, 2006).

Children and place

Children's relations to places have been described through a large number of different concepts, some of which I relate to in this work. A common aspect of many of the concepts is that they emphasise the importance of children's possibilities to affect and interact with the environment as the basis for their relation to places. It is through activity that places are given meaning for children. If children can experience complex and varied places without restrictions, their exploration and manipulation will affect their *sense of place* (Hart, 1979). *Place* defines an area that has been imbued with meaning through people's experiences, in contrast to *space*, which usually describes an area or land in a more abstract or geographical sense (Tuan, 1977). "When places are used and experienced as meaningful [by children], a sense of place can arise" (Heurlin-Norinder, 2005, p. 41). Sense of place can also be described as affected by landscape attributes, *i.e.* not only socially constructed (Stedman, 2003). However, there might be cultural differences in children's sense of place. For example, Nordström (2000) found that Swedish children valued nature and the physical environment higher than did children in France.

Children find their own places, to which they attribute meaning. Rasmussen (2004) defines *children's places* as places with which a child connects physically, which results in a process where the child encodes the place with meaning, feelings arise and knowledge of place emerges. Particular examples of children's own places are dens, which are studied in a number of publications (Hart, 1979; Kirkby, 1989; Sobel, 1993; Kylin, 2003) and are closely associated with the ability to physically affect the environment and construct own places. Rasmussen (2004) shows that some of the spaces *for children*, designed and created for children's play, such as playgrounds, can also become *children's own places* if children are given the

possibility to explore them. Similarly, children's *place attachment* is likely to become strong for places that they use much or consider their *favourite places* (Chawla, 1992).

Chatterjee (2005) uses the concept of children's friendship with place and describes *child-friendly places* where many affordances can be actualised, use is repeated, creativity and control can be expressed and secrets and activities are protected from harm. Noschis (1992) describes how particular places that afford activity and the possibility to relate to others can become well-known geographical points or *high points* in the minds of children.

Children's access to outdoor play

Several different points of evidence and argumentation may be used to show the importance of children's access to spaces in their close outdoor environment. Not least, children and young people themselves highly value the possibility to access public spaces (Moore, 1986; Chawla, 2002).

Children's freedom to access environments, on their own or with peers, has previously been described in terms of their territorial range or home range (Moore & Young, 1978; van Vliet, 1983). More recently, *independent mobility* (used by e.g. Hillman *et al.*, 1990; Kyttä, 2004; Heurlin-Norinder, 2005) has been considered as "a license' to move around independently in the environment" (Kyttä, 2004, p. 180).

Studies have shown how children and young people explore their local environments and gradually widen their home range or *cognitive map* (Hart, 1979; Björklid, 1982; Moore, 1986). However, there has been a change in children's use of, and access to, public open spaces over the years, decreasing the level of children's independent mobility in different ways in many parts of the world, for example in the UK (Hillman *et al.*, 1990), the US (Gaster, 1991; Wridt, 2004), Italy (Prezza *et al.*, 2001) and the Netherlands (Karsten, 2002, 2005). Children's access to play in public open spaces is controlled, both by professionals through planning, design and management (Kylin, 2004; Wilhjelm, 2002; Woolley, 2007) and by adults for example through parental control (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Prezza *et al.*, 2001). Wridt (2004) describes the effect this development has had on children's access to outdoor environments for play in New York over three generations, where the decline in children's access to public play spaces has led to a spatial change in the location of children's playtime activities: from the streets, to the playgrounds, to indoor play spaces such as the home, community centers and private pay-for-play commercial centers (p. 101)

Her description of how children's play during the 20th century has moved from the active parts of the built environment, such as the streets, into organised and allocated areas and indoor play spaces might be similar in many parts of the world, as described, for example, concerning in the Netherlands (Karsten, 2005). The development of indoor play spaces also illustrates that play has become characterised by more supervision, institutionalisation and commercialisation (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; McKendrick *et al.*, 2000; Wridt, 2004).

Developments in Sweden have been described as less severe than in many of the cases cited above (Rasmusson, 1998). Studies in Sweden and Norway indicate that children there have rather much independent mobility (Rasmusson, 1998; Wilhjelm, 2002; Kylin, 2004), as have children in the Nordic countries generally, compared with those in other countries (*e.g.* Horelli, 1998; Kytta, 2004). However, Cele (2006) did not find any significant differences in independent mobility when studying children in Bournemouth, UK, and Stockholm, Sweden.

Adults' control of children's use of public spaces is affected by the qualities of the available environment. Mårtensson (2004) describes that children becoming increasingly dependent on the adult world for their activities leads to the use of allocated spaces and environments that "appear to be attractive and safe" (p. 16). This makes providing high quality play spaces that are appealing to both children and adult users a key question in the creation of child-friendly environments today. According to Björklid & Nordström (2007), children's access to the outdoor environment depends on a combination of parents' understanding and the qualities of the environment, where cars and traffic are a limiting factor. It is often parents who set the limitations on children experiencing the close outdoor environment, on their own or with peers (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), but how parents set those limits and how they are followed depends on both the physical and social climate (Naylor, 1985; Gill, 2007).

User-playground relations

When public open spaces and their function and value of to users are studied (in this thesis the relationship between users and playgrounds (see Fig. 1)), it is not obvious which empirical measures and concepts should be considered, but we can try to describe factors such as benefits, needs, use and preferences.

The *benefits* that children and other users may get from playgrounds and playground management is here considered the main outcome of

playgrounds. The benefits of open space can for example be psychological, physiological, developmental, restorative and visual. Description of the benefits of playgrounds can be approached in different ways.¹³ We can talk about the benefits of parks (Ulrich & Addoms, 1981; Grahn, 1991) or of play (Woolley, 2008). In literature, there are for example descriptions of the developmental benefits of playground play (Frost *et al.*, 2005). Delshamar (2005) describes benefits ('utbyte') as "the sum of usefulness, happiness, irritation, discomfort etc., that users perceive" (p. 143) and thereby sees it from the users' perspectives. I choose to see benefits as any positive outcome but mainly as something that can be measured from the users' own point of view and that can be understood as closely related to other concepts: use, needs and preferences.

Use is a concept that may include visits to, or activities in, open spaces and that can be measured in terms of *visit frequency*, which implies active use. However, use can be a rather vast concept and include more inactive dimensions, such as visually or mentally experiencing a place.¹⁴ Visit frequency can therefore not be expected to reveal all possible aspects of use, even if it says *something* about the use. It may also be of importance to recognise that there might be *non-users* (Kristensson, 2003).

Needs is a concept that has been common in spatial planning. It can be found in the literature on open space use (Whyte, 1980) and on the use of children's environments and playgrounds (Holme & Massie, 1970; Berglund *et al.*, 1985; Berglund & Jergeby, 1989).¹⁵ I opted to use the concept of *needs* to some extent in this work, particularly in Paper I, although this was not without its problems. It has been described as questionable, particularly when it comes to the development and use of planning standards (Wilhjelm, 2002). There is reason to question how user needs for playgrounds can be measured and whether the term should be used concerning children's environments. To talk about 'children's needs' may imply a top-down approach that fits poorly with approaches that aim to consider children's perspectives, which emphasises that children are competent individuals and can express their own *preferences* (Rasmusson, 2003). Francis & Lorenzo

¹³ Grahn (1991) describes that benefits can be described through a combination of techniques.

¹⁴ The importance passive use may have to users of open spaces is discussed by *e.g.* Berglund & Jergeby (1989) and Kristensson (2003).

¹⁵ Francis & Lorenzo (2002) even identified a 'needs realm' within social science, where researchers show children's unique environmental needs. "A limitation with this approach is that it assumes that good social science alone can identify children's spatial needs and that children themselves do not need to be directly involved in the design process" (p. 163). Berglund & Jergeby (1989) present similar open space qualities for children and for elderly people, but actually call them needs only considering children and their caretakers.

(2002) describe possible problems with both these approaches, the child as helpless with needs (object) and the child as competent individual (subject). However, when it comes to arguing the priority of children in competition with other users in open spaces, talking about children's *needs* might be a strategy (Kylin, 2004).

In literature, the success of public open spaces is commonly measured in terms of public use (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2001; Francis, 2003), where a good place design is assumed to make people want to spend time there. Use must be considered an important factor, but calculating the number of playground visits or visitors might not reveal actual needs among users, preferences or other factors that determine the patterns of use. Whyte (1980, p. 10) describes a study of New York parks and playgrounds where the research team was struck by "the *lack* of crowding in many of these areas" drawing the conclusion that "sheer space, obviously, was not of itself attracting children", but that "many streets were." Even if Whyte raises the important issue of whether playgrounds set aside for children's play do attract children, the usefulness of crowding as measure of success in places for children's play can be questioned. For example, Moore (1986, p. 108) claims that "regardless of levels of actual use, playgrounds can carry substantial value to children" It is thereby not certain that the value of a playground to children directly affects its visitor frequency. However, the visit frequency to playgrounds, combined with qualitative information about preferences and reasons for use, can become a useful measurement when discussing playground attractiveness and value. It must then be seen in relation to factors that affect the use or non-use.

Studies that focus on how the use of playgrounds can be increased have been criticised, since it should be the children and not the playgrounds that are planned for (Perez & Hart, 1980). Increased use is not a goal in itself. To approach a description of playground benefits, I have chosen to consider both use and preferences in my studies and to measure use in terms of users' own perceptions of their use. I aimed at emphasising users, their needs and preferences, rather than an expert view of needs.

Playground use, needs, preferences and benefits

Playground use is mainly associated with *play*, which has been described and defined in various ways.¹⁶ One adequate way of defining play is as “what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons” (Hooker & Gill, 2006, p. 10). Furthermore, play happens in a context that has both physical and social dimensions (Naylor, 1985; Heurlin-Norinder, 2005). Children look for places that offer the desired possibilities for activities affordances. Children often associate play with fun (Dockett, 2002), and indeed Moore *et al.* (1992) emphasise that play in playground settings should be fun.

Understanding the use as well as factors connected to use, such as preferences, might be of major importance in increasing the benefits from playgrounds. Children’s use of playgrounds and other open spaces can be expected to depend on a number of factors (Moore, 1986), which might be environmental (local landscape and play spaces available), social (parental restrictions on independence), and individual (motivation, age) (Naylor, 1985; Veitch *et al.*, 2006; Veitch *et al.*, 2007).

Children-playground relations have been the subject of a number of research studies and publications with different approaches and also within different research fields, such as landscape architecture (Moore *et al.*, 1992) and environmental psychology (Hayward *et al.*, 1974). Research has shown differences in how children use playgrounds depending on the playground type (*e.g.* traditional, contemporary, adventure) or design (Hayward *et al.*, 1974; Brown & Burger, 1984; Susa & Benedict, 1994).¹⁷ The importance of the structures and qualities in the physical environment in determining the nature of play has been shown in a number of studies (Berg & Medrich, 1980; Naylor, 1985; Fjørtoft & Sageie, 2000; Mårtensson, 2004). Heurlin-Norinder (2005) found that children’s activities in their neighbourhoods were connected to specific places or objects there. We can therefore expect that the characteristics in and around playground settings affect their usefulness.

Play equipment in playgrounds has been described as little used (Norén-Björn, 1977; Wuellner, 1979). Slides, swings and climbing structures have been found to be more used than other equipment, although this varies

¹⁶ I will not present several different theories and definitions of play here, but I wish to emphasise that there is a multitude of definitions which imply that play has many meanings and dimensions.

¹⁷ Pellegrini (1987) has argued against this; pointing out other possible explanations such as children’s playground choice according to age or certain play preferences.

from playground to playground (Naylor, 1985). Children often prefer play in nature or with natural elements (Moore, 1986; Chawla, 1992; Titman, 1994). Studies have shown that children might actually play more in the surroundings of the playgrounds and in nearby nature than on the play equipment (Norén-Björn, 1977; Björklid, 1982). The playground might not be the first choice of play space for children, who might prefer playing in the streets rather than in the playgrounds (Whyte, 1980) or being where other people are rather than in allocated spaces (Noschis, 1992).

Berglund *et al.* (1985) and Berglund & Jergeby (1989) have identified some needs concerning visits to parks and playgrounds. Those are the needs for activity, for safety, for social interaction and for experience of nature/peacefulness. The needs are somewhat different between children and adults and cannot always be fulfilled in the same settings. For example, adults have social and recreational motives for their open space use which are not fulfilled in all playgrounds (Berglund *et al.*, 1985). However, both children and adult users might find qualities for social, physical and recreational use in playgrounds (Berglund *et al.*, 1985; Berglund & Jergeby, 1989). Adventure playgrounds have been linked to particularly many social benefits, both in the play and in low amounts of vandalism due to children's sense of ownership (Frobenius & Gammelsrud, 1973; Staempfli, 2009).

Playgrounds may be used as meeting places and starting points for play (Gehl, 2001), particularly if integrated in the neighbourhoods (Noschis, 1992). The amount of use can affect their attractiveness in offering social interaction (Berglund *et al.*, 1985). Playgrounds can even be described as serving to achieve neighbourhood stability. However, the need for this function might depend on the local social state in an area, particularly on the stability of the population:

Public recreational spaces, such as playgrounds, provide settings for social interaction among neighbourhood residents, thereby creating the potential for building community cohesion and, hence, neighbourhood stability. Neighbourhoods with higher percentages of transient populations have a greater need for facilities that promote social interaction, such as playgrounds. (Smoyer-Tomic *et al.*, 2004, p. 292)

There may also be differences in use depending on personal factors, where individuals who have already established social relations may choose other open spaces than those individuals intentionally searching for meeting places (Berglund *et al.*, 1985). Some reports indicate that playground use is being replaced by play indoors or in the private sphere (Wridt, 2004; Karsten,

2005), and private play equipment in gardens might be used as a means of replacing playgrounds play (Dee & Liebman, 1970).

Playground benefits can be described as playground qualities seen from the users' points of view and can be expected to depend on different factors depending on individuals and user group, as for example adults and children might have different playground preferences (Francis, 1988; Berglund & Jergeby, 1989). To increase the benefits of playground play for users, playground management might therefore need to adapt to the needs and preferences of different user groups. Literature on playgrounds often focuses on how to increase the benefits to children, since playgrounds are expected to lack a child perspective. However, adapting playgrounds also to adult users and their needs and preferences may increase the benefits of parents, teachers, preschool teachers *etc.*

A view expressed by several authors is that for playgrounds to offer good opportunities for children's outdoor play and increase the user benefits, some factors need to be fulfilled. For example, Eriksen (1985) found it important that playgrounds always be open for use, safe and carefully designed. Moore (1986) similarly emphasised that playgrounds have the *potential for becoming* important strategic resources for children and young people in the public open space. In other words, all playgrounds do not have the same value, but certain playgrounds work well as places for play, being meaningful and important to individual children. Examples of this have been shown in a study by Carstensen (2004). When places for children, such as playgrounds, also become children's own places, they can be expected to give children particular benefits. Children might find those places of specific value to them in spaces where they have the possibility of spending time (Rasmussen, 2004). If public playgrounds and other spaces intended for children are provided and accessible, children might have increased possibilities of finding their own places too, in or around playgrounds. The level of accessibility to playgrounds might thereby increase children's benefits from them.

4 Methods

In this chapter I describe the methodological approach and overall research design upon which this work is built and give a more comprehensive picture of the research design to supplement the short descriptions in the papers. I also explain the selection of cases and the methods used and discuss the methods.

Methodological approach

This research was cross-disciplinary and multi-methodological, affected by several methodological approaches and analytical models. The cross-disciplinary approach is common, almost a characteristic, in the young research fields connected with landscape architecture. The present study comprised three main umbrella concepts of methodological approach: It consisted of research with a *qualitative* approach; it was performed through *abduction*; and it was conducted through *case study* methodology. Although these three methodological approaches cannot be totally separated from each other, I explain below how I used each of them.

Qualitative approach

A qualitative approach was chosen to research the complex relations shown in the playground management model and to understand people's perspectives. "Qualitative researchers *are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). The qualitative researcher is also aware of his or her own role as instrument for collecting and analysing data (Merriam, 1998).

Although my overall approach was qualitative, I to some extent combined quantitative and qualitative aspects. This provided opportunities for drawing from strengths had by both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), which is reported valuable for decisions and research within the closely related fields of urban planning and recreation management (Voogd, 1982; Manning *et al.*, 2005).

Several different approaches and traditions have been described within qualitative research. Several of them have given me support and advice in my work. I was mainly inspired by *phenomenology*, *phenomenography*, and *ethnography*.

Phenomenology is a philosophy that underpins all qualitative research. However, it also has its own specific techniques (Merriam, 1998). In data collection and analysis, I was inspired by the phenomenological approach as described by *e.g.* Moustakas (1994), focusing on people's experiences and perspectives, and I sought to develop my own understanding of these. This included an attempt to capture children's perspective.

Phenomenography is a technique which is closely related to phenomenology. Larsson (1986) described a search for people's experiences of phenomena in their environment. Through analytical work, the researcher finds categories that are qualitatively different from each other. Larsson (1986) emphasises that phenomenography thereby should be more deeply grounded in the empirical material than phenomenology, where the researcher's experiences and understanding are central. I have found it important to be grounded in empirics in my qualitative analyses, however I do not see this as separated from developing my own understanding and using it as instrument in analysing.

Some of the previous research studies that inspired me in this work have explored children's use of outdoor spaces based on an ethnographic approach, for example Rasmussen (1998) and Mårtensson (2004). Ethnographic research commonly involves techniques for collecting data, through *e.g.* interviews, diaries and observations, but is mainly characterised by sociocultural interpretation of the data (Merriam, 1998). Although I cannot describe my own research as ethnographic, I combined several methods for obtaining an analysis of the cultural context of a specific group of people: users and managers of playgrounds in towns and municipalities.

Process of abduction

There are several ways to make analytical generalisations from cases, even from a single case (Johansson, 2004). Generally, two different models of the process to achieve knowledge from empirics are considered: *induction* and *deduction*. An inductive approach starts in empirics and derives theory from it, while a deductive approach starts in theory which is then tested empirically. I opted instead to use *abduction*, a process that resembles both induction and deduction but which according to Alvesson & Sköldbberg (1994) is often a more realistic description of the actual process. Abduction has also been described as existing in different types (Johansson, 2004); I followed the process as proposed by Alvesson & Sköldbberg (1994):

Abduction, like induction, can start in empirical data, but it does not exclude inspiration from theoretical explanations. It can even be described as moving from empirics to theory and then back to empirics again and thereby has similarities with the hermeneutic approach to qualitative interpretation (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994).

Case study methodology and research design

The aim and objectives of this thesis were approached by studying the main actors and relations within the playground management model: manager organisation, management work, dialogue and participation, playground provision, users, use, and benefits. With the complex relations within the model as the starting point, there is a need for obtaining context-bound information. Therefore, a research design based on case studies was chosen.

The case study is a combination of different methods, designed to describe and understand the complexity of particular cases. It has been described as a specifically useful approach in fields of research that are practice-orientated and deal with 'real world contexts', such as landscape architecture, architecture and planning (Francis, 2001; Johansson, 2005). According to Johansson (2005), although there are many views of what a case study is, most authors agree that it is contemporary and investigates a complex, functioning unit within its natural context through a multitude of methods. It is thereby a suitable approach for describing and understanding a phenomenon, using many variables, qualities and factors (Merriam, 1998; Johansson, 2005). Stake (1995) sees the case study as based on an interest in exploring and comparing individual cases, rather than the methods used for it. However, a purposeful choice of cases allows for generalisations to be made from them (Johansson, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Besides, we can learn

much from studying cases, as they add to the accumulation of knowledge within a field (Flyvbjerg, 2006), which is similar to the naturalistic type of abduction (Stake, 1995; Johansson, 2004).

This work is based on two multiple comparative case studies (Stake, 1995), each of them containing two comparable cases. The first of these case studies focused on users and playgrounds, the second on managers and playgrounds, with the overall aim of covering all parts of the playground management model. The first case study concerned two small towns¹⁸, *Glumslöv* and *Degeberga*, the second two municipalities/municipal playground management organisations, X and Y. All cases were situated in southern Sweden. Each case was selected for its qualities, and the pairs were chosen mainly as comparable maximum variation cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) with variation in factors of particular interest.

The research design of each case study can be described as evolving over time, following the abductive approach, looking for more knowledge and explanations as the empirical material from the first case studied in each pair became a source of information and of new questions. The starting point was to pick one case that appeared to be interesting and make a vast and open study of that one case, testing different methods. The findings and new questions that grew out of the initial case in each of the two case studies then became the starting point in looking for theoretical knowledge and a second case for comparison. As the second case was chosen, the approach became increasingly based upon formulated questions and hypotheses concerning what was found in the first case. To increase the possibility of generalising from the results, the second cases in each case study were carefully and purposely selected (Johansson, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2006) in a strategic, information-orientated way, in order to make them comparable with the first selected cases but with variation considering some determined factors. The research design of each case study can thereby be described as starting mainly in empirics (the first case), going to theory, and back to empirics (comparing the first with a second case), an alternation between empirics and theory that distinguishes abduction according to Alvesson & Sköldberg (1994). Therefore, the aims of each case study were also formed partly during the studies, as the first case gave rise to questions that were tested by comparing it with a second case.

¹⁸ Glumslöv and Degeberga are referred to as 'towns' here and in Paper I and III, and as 'communities' in Paper II.

Users and playgrounds in Glumslöv and Degeberga

A large part of the empirical data used in this thesis, in Papers I-III, came from the case study of *Glumslöv* and *Degeberga*. Of the three parts of the model, mainly users and playgrounds were studied but to some extent also the operational level managers. The relations between the users and the playgrounds as described in the model – use and benefits – were the particular focus. Methodologically, interviews with groups of school children, questionnaires to preschool teachers and parents of preschool children, observatory mapping of municipal playgrounds and other play provision, GIS¹⁹-mapping of the number of children residing close to each playground and interviews with park workers were used. The data from each of the methods used were first analysed qualitatively and/or quantitatively as described for each method. Besides, I used the data to make comparisons between user groups and look for connections between play provision and use/preferences. I identified playgrounds that appeared more attractive to users than others and also compared the findings from the two towns.

The first case, Glumslöv, was selected on the criteria of its size, character and playground provision. It was accessible and possible to overview, still being a small, limited society with functions such as schools, preschools and supermarkets. It had a comparatively large number of municipal playgrounds which appeared to be highly affected by the previous planning standards. Studying these areas with large numbers of detached houses with gardens and mainly municipal playgrounds was a way of extending the previous objects of study in Sweden as most previous studies of playground provision and use have concerned more densely populated areas with much multifamily housing, often built during the ‘million homes programme’ in the 1960s and 1970s (*e.g.* Wohlin, 1961; Insulander, 1975; Björklid, 1982; Berglund *et al.*, 1985).

The results from the first study in Glumslöv indicated that the very limited pieces of natural environments and forests there functioned as complementary areas to playgrounds. It was therefore interesting to compare Glumslöv with a case with more nature available. This also gave rise to questions about the extent to which local social factors may have affected the results from the first case. The questions resulted in the selection of Degeberga, which is similar to Glumslöv in many ways but different in terms of surrounding landscape and also the social connections between the

¹⁹ Geographic Information System

inhabitants. The two towns can thereby be described as maximum variation cases.

Both towns are highly regarded residential districts, with many detached houses, *i.e.* low density housing and a low level of urbanisation (see Figures 2 and 3). Almost all residents have access to a private garden, and there are public lawns and connections to the surrounding countryside. The towns were both expected to be child-friendly areas, based on the description of the 'Bullerby' by Kytä (2004), which has an advantageous combination of affordances for children and high levels of independent mobility. The towns studied also contain several of the factors favourable for children's development according to Noschis (1992), which includes schools within walking distance and green areas integrated into the neighbourhoods.

The differences between the two cases concern both the landscape and the social context. Glumslöv is surrounded by open arable land, while around and in Degeberga there is much nature and forested areas. In social aspects, while Glumslöv has expanded through immigration in the past decade, the number of inhabitants in Degeberga has slightly decreased. This indicates that the population is more rooted in Degeberga than in Glumslöv. Degeberga has also been identified as a place with close social connections between the inhabitants, as shown in a study of people employed in care of the elderly (Kommunförbundet Skåne, 2005). There were also considerably fewer children aged 0-12 years living within Degeberga (about 150) than within Glumslöv (about 300).

The case study included a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Yin, 2001), which has been described as favourable (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The approach can be compared with how Whyte (1980) used quantitative data to map things such as the amount of use and of 'sittable' space and then used qualitative ways of understanding and explaining the use. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods has thereby proven to be useful for questions about place-man relations and the use of public space.

Different modes of generalisation can be combined in case studies (Johansson, 2005). The two towns can be described as maximum variation cases but also to some extent both extreme and critical cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The sizes of the populations (1 900 inhabitants in Glumslöv and 1 300 in Degeberga) made it possible to collect information from a substantial proportion of actual users and thus get a whole and complex picture of the use and preferences. Both towns had a rather ordinary type of Swedish municipal play provision, mainly based upon traditional playgrounds and equipment, often with sand surfaces and with green areas or

lawns around. There were no adventure playgrounds or employed play workers. If playgrounds can have a value and be appreciated there, without offering something particular or very different from what usually is provided, then they can probably also have a value in other places. This is typical reasoning for critical cases (see Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Both towns contained a large number of municipal playground units, 12 in Glumslöv and 10 in Degeberga, together with a few playgrounds with other management, *e.g.* housing companies. This means there is one municipal playground per 160 inhabitants in Glumslöv and one per 130 in Degeberga, compared with one per 660 on average for 23 Swedish municipalities studied (Jansson, 2008). The extreme in the chosen cases is that they have retained surprisingly much of traditional playgrounds and the standard-influenced playground provision, with many playgrounds spread out according to former standard distances.



Figure 2. Photograph from Glumslöv.



Figure 3. Photograph from Degeberga.

Playgrounds and play environments

The built environments in Glumslöv and Degeberga were walked through systematically to map the play provision there in several aspects. All playgrounds managed by the municipal authorities were particularly studied, documented by descriptions of content, placement, state, size and surroundings as well as by photographs. They were all visited on at least two occasions. Observations also included an estimation of whether the playgrounds had been recently used based on footprints in the sand, toys left behind or, as a sign of little use, weeds in the sand.

Besides the municipal playgrounds, a few playgrounds managed by other organisations were also found and documented but only visited once. The character of the landscape and the built environment in each of the two towns was also described. Private gardens found to contain play equipment of a similar type to playground equipment (slides, swings, sandboxes and climbing frames) were marked on maps of the towns.

Child interviews

Hart (1979), Rasmusson (1998) and Cele (2006) have all tested a number of child-centred methods to find out how children experience place in their neighbourhoods. Their results show that the method is of major importance for how children are able to communicate their experiences and perspectives. Different methods can reveal different parts and aspects of children's multidimensional place experiences (Cele, 2006). Indoor interviews may be successful in bringing up social aspects of the environment and a broad view of the landscape and social patterns connected with it but less useful in finding children's small-scale physical landscape and personal feelings for places than methods conducted in the physical outdoor context (Hart, 1979). Rasmusson (1998) also found that group interviews with children brought descriptions of meetings and other socio-cultural aspects. Even though place-interactive methods such as child-led walks can have many advantages for children's communication on the complexity of place experiences, group interviews are useful for an overview of children's use and preferences of places (Cele, 2006). The need to get an overall view of local use and identify differences between individual playgrounds, both in terms of use and quality, therefore became decisive for the choice of an indoor interview method. Besides, children often prefer research methods in groups (Hill, 2006).

All children with parental permission to participate (in total 141 children, 55 from Glumslöv (all aged 9–11) and 86 from Degeberga (41 aged 6–8 and

45 aged 9-11)) were interviewed. This can be expected to correspond to more than 50% of the children in those ages living in the towns. Children aged 9-11 were initially considered for the study, ages when children's moving range and number of destinations increase (Hart, 1979; Kahn & Kellert, 2002) and when they are expected to have sufficient communicative skills (see Cele, 2006). As the study developed in Degeberga, also younger children (aged 6-9) were included in order to make comparisons between age groups and also because Mårtensson (2004) showed that it can be valuable to interview also very young children.

The interviews were conducted indoors in rooms in the local schools. Groups of 2, 3 or 4 children were formed by the teachers, who sent the children to the interview room. In Glumslöv the groups consisted of mixed ages 9-11, in Degeberga only children of about the same age except for 7-8 year-olds, who were mixed. Most groups included both boys and girls.

Maps and photographs of the local playgrounds were used for orientation and the interviews focused on the playgrounds the children knew about, their preferences about them and visits to them. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The length of the interviews was very variable, from 10 up to around 40 minutes, as some interviews developed into group discussions where little interaction from the interviewer was needed. Other interviews did not reach the same flow and were therefore shorter and more structured. Cele (2006) describes how the success of methods depends much on children's individuality, which was experienced in the interviews.

I conducted all of the interviews with children myself. The method demanded much of me as a person and as an interviewer to earn the trust and motivation of the children in the interview situation. I developed my method along the way and generally found that it is no more difficult to interview children than adults, but it is slightly different. Children are generally honest and serious, with no facades. However, my own role as an interviewer was complicated because I had to consider the power relations between children and adults (see *e.g.* Cele, 2006) and be particularly aware of the impact I, as an interviewer and adult, might have on the data I was collecting (Baker & Weller, 2003). In interviews with children, just as with adults, there is great significance in how questions are formulated. The tendency to speculate was taken into consideration and closed questions were avoided.²⁰

²⁰ Waterman *et al.* (2001) tested the tendency to speculate among children and adults when interviewed. When asked open, unanswerable questions, the majority of children and adults said they did not know the answer, while with closed, unanswerable questions, the majority of the children and about one-fifth of the adults responded 'yes' or 'no'.

Teachers and school staff were very helpful when giving me the opportunity to interview the pupils in school, but they also interacted on some rare occasions by coming into the room where the interviews were held, wanting to listen or interject. One teacher in Glumslöv even tried to affect the interview by encouraging the children to answer in a particular way, to say that the playgrounds were of little importance. This teacher probably perceived the same problem I did – how to get the children to express the importance, or unimportance, of playgrounds in their own perspective while only asking them about playground provision.

I also transcribed the recordings myself and used my experiences from the whole interview context for the work on transcribing and analysing. The transcripts were used for assembling both quantitative data about the frequency of use according to the children and for analysing their use and preferences qualitatively. The frequency of playground visits was quantified by the kind of descriptions the children gave, where words like ‘often’, ‘sometimes’, and ‘rarely’ were commonly used to describe different amounts of use. That children’s perceptions of use might differ from the real use (Wilhelm, 2002) was considered a difficulty and was handled by asking about both visits and preferences, sometimes by discussing the difference. Children’s perception of use may be as interesting in terms of the benefit of playgrounds as the actual visit frequency. Qualitative analysis as described by Miles & Huberman (1994) and Bogdan & Biklen (2006) involves coding parts of the transcribed text and scoring them as to meaning, then placing them in categories. I went through different stages, reading the transcripts, making lists of categories and sub-headings, and coding them, forming categories and larger themes.

Questionnaires to preschool groups and parents

To involve user groups other than school children, questionnaire surveys were distributed to each of the local preschool groups (five groups in each town) and through them also to all parents with children in those preschools, asking for one answer per family. Answers were collected from 29 families in Glumslöv and 22 in Degeberga, which is expected to be about 30%. The questionnaires included photographs of the local playgrounds placed on a map. The questions were about which playgrounds they visited, how often (the frequency of visiting) and the reasons for their visits. In addition, the parents were asked which of the municipal playgrounds was situated closest to their home.

Also the answers in the questionnaires were analysed both quantitatively, as visit frequency to different playgrounds, and qualitatively, forming categories of reasons behind playground use.

Demographic information

Using a GIS technique connected to demographic information from the two towns made it possible to investigate where in the built environment children lived. The radius from the middle of each larger playground was used to determine the number of children living within 200 metres, selected partly inspired by the former standard distance of approximately 150 metres. For very small playgrounds intended for the youngest children, the shorter standard distance of 50 metres from the centre of the playground was used. That those playgrounds were used mainly by children living very close had been confirmed in the child interviews and questionnaires. The number of children living around each playground was also separated into the age groups 0-6 (preschool children and the youngest school children) and 7-12 years (school children).

The reliability of the method depends on the technique used by each municipality and also on whether the database has been updated.

Managers

The managers were studied to some extent in the first pair of cases, as the park workers' (operational level) observations of use from many years' experience of working on the local playgrounds made them interesting to the study. In interviews, they were asked to describe what they had observed: how much and in what way they believed each local playground was used. The park workers in Glumslöv were interviewed indoors, while in Degeberga the interview consisted of a tour of the local playgrounds. Notes and transcriptions from those interviews were used for an overall view of the management work on the operational level and to document which playgrounds the park workers perceived as much or little used.

Managers in two municipalities

The second case study focused on playground management organisations, management and playgrounds in two municipalities in southern Sweden. Here - and in Paper IV - these municipalities are called X and Y. Instead of

using the municipalities where Glumslöv and Degeberga are located, new criteria appeared of higher importance. The aim was to find particularly interesting cases concerning management that included some form of user focus and that were similar enough for a comparative case study. These new municipalities were to be kept anonymous so as to allow the personal attitudes of the managers to be described.

Before two cases were selected, a preparatory study was made in which representatives from 23 Swedish playground management organisations were interviewed by telephone about their existing playground provision, changes made to it and strategies for it (Jansson, 2008). Among those 23 municipalities, one particularly interesting case was found (municipality X), where a public participation process had been used for changing the whole of the local playground provision. After conducting a case study in municipality X, questions arose about the effects of the participation process. To allow for comparison with a municipality where the user focus was different, municipality Y was chosen: here users could contact the managers with comments and propositions but politicians controlled strategic decisions. Both municipalities were considered interesting cases in that playground provision and user focus were high priorities. They were of similar size, with around 30 000 inhabitants, of whom half lived in the regional centres, half in smaller villages. Also these were located in southern Sweden in areas with much natural environments and forests, had about the same amount of playgrounds per inhabitant and were currently putting new resources into the municipal playgrounds.

The approach and methods used were qualitative, aimed at giving an understanding of the management organisations, the managers, their work and attitudes. Both case studies included group interviews (one in each municipality) and individual interviews with professionals on the tactical and, to some extent, the operational level. In addition, observations of playgrounds in the two regional centres were made to give a qualitative overview of the playground provision. Qualitative descriptions of management and playground provision from the two cases were compared in terms of strategy, participation and effects in the playgrounds.

Interviews with playground managers

The study focused on professionals working mainly with public municipal playgrounds on the tactical level and park workers (operational level) with particular responsibility for playgrounds. The policy level (politicians) and the users were not included. In municipality X, seven individuals were

identified as being of interest to the study, two physical planners, one financial officer, one forest manager, one works manager, one foreman, and one working foreman particularly responsible for maintenance and safety inspections. In municipality Y only two individuals were included, the head of park management, who was also foreman and physical planner, and a park worker with particular responsibility for playgrounds, their maintenance and safety inspections.

The case studies started by organising initial meetings that functioned as group interviews. They served to provide an overall picture of the management organisation of recent changes and helped in identifying individuals of interest for further interviews. In both studies, four people attended the initial meeting, but thereafter the number of individuals of interest to the study increased in municipality X but diminished in municipality Y. The individual interviews that followed were qualitative and semistructured (Kvale, 1996) and dealt with the management work and the conditions for it, the existence of strategies and the relations to others in the organisation and to users. Five categories were used, as prepared before the interviews: strategies, knowledge, decision-making, users, and personal attitudes. Each interview took around 75 minutes and most of them were recorded. One individual in municipality Y refused to be recorded, and during both the group interview and the individual interview with that individual I took notes only. Some parts of individual interviews were conducted outdoors, on local playgrounds, and due to windy weather were mostly documented by note-taking.

The interviews were transcribed but not all by myself this time. I thereafter condensed the information from each interview into a narrative (Kvale, 1996) and through those narratives formed a description of the management work in each municipality.

Playground documentation

The playgrounds in the regional centres of the municipalities were observed and documented with photographs and written descriptions to allow for examination of the effects of management on playground resources and for seeing how visible the local strategies were in physical playground provision. By visiting a large proportion of the public playgrounds in each municipality (more than half of them were situated in the regional centres), I was able to compare the data from the interviewees with the physical playground provision and increase my understanding of their perspectives. I used the

observations to describe the playground provision in each regional centre qualitatively.

Discussion of the methods used

The methodological approach chosen – qualitative research, abduction and case study methodology – appears to have been an apt choice for exploring the context-based relations within the playground management model. However, the selection of cases is critical for the ability to draw conclusions or generalise from the results. There might have been advantages in having studied all of the objects/actors and relations in the playground management model in the same case study, instead of conducting two separate studies. For example, this could have enabled comparisons between management strategies and user attitudes and benefits in a more direct way.

The selection strategy of maximum variation, looking for cases that were similar in several decisive aspects and therefore comparable but with one or a pair of factors that varied, posed difficulties in picking cases that fit into that design. Ensuring that there were similarities and differences between the cases was a major challenge in the preparations for the studies. The maximum variation strategy also created difficulties in discussions about the results, since it is problematic to separate out the factors causing various differences, particularly since Glumslöv and Degeberga were selected on the basis of differences in both surrounding landscape and social ties between the inhabitants. In municipality X – as well as in Y – it was difficult to determine precisely the origin of differences in the management organisations and how much effect the management strategies had.

In the first case study in Glumslöv and Degeberga, the combination of many (qualitative and quantitative) methods provided a large amount of empirical material that allowed for many variables and aspects to be compared and discussed. Not making a clear division between qualitative and quantitative methods and using the advantages of both appears to be a valuable way of collecting context-based empirical information.

The child interviews caused much thinking around the validity and reliability of the method. A particular issue was how much of the children's own perspectives could be revealed in indoor group interviews asking about local playground provision. The results from the interviews showed that children in the same interview groups mostly expressed different, personal points of views. There were some exceptions, for example a few children who mostly agreed with each other, of whom many, but not all, were

friends who played together a lot. The difficulty in separating what two close friends say has also been described by Cele (2006). It appeared as though most children felt free to express their opinions during the interviews. Six children claimed independently of each other (as they were in different groups) that they never used the public playgrounds. Many children also put the playgrounds into a larger context in their narratives, talking about how they were related to other features in the landscape or to where people they knew lived, something which increases the reliability of the results.

Using qualitative descriptions for quantitative measurement in the way this study did for children's descriptions of playground visit frequency does not provide empirical data suitable for statistical calculations of the precise amount of visits. It rather gives children's perspectives on, and perceptions of, their own playground use. As a way of comparing the use of different playgrounds in an area, it did serve a purpose.

I made an attempt to characterise the users of public outdoor playgrounds by including a number of user groups. It turned out that almost all of them also saw themselves as users. However, this does not mean that I can be sure of having covered all users.

In comparison, the first case study was more extensive and more worked on than the second, which has resulted in some imbalance in this study. Some parts of the model have thereby been more illuminated than others.

5 Findings and summary of papers

This chapter includes short descriptions of the content in each of the four papers (I-IV), focusing on the main findings.

Standard-influenced provision and user needs (Paper I)

In the case studies in Glumslöv and Degeberga, 135 of the 141 children interviewed, all of the preschool teachers (five preschool groups in each of the towns) and almost all responding parents of preschool children (all 29 in Glumslöv and 21 out of 22 in Degeberga) claimed to use playgrounds, most of them on quite a regular basis. The six children who independently claimed not to use playgrounds at all were all from Glumslöv.

Differences in playground preferences were identified between the different user groups. Children wanted playgrounds with ‘a lot to do’, many possibilities for activity, and appreciated variation between individual playgrounds. Parents wanted playgrounds to be close to the home and in good condition. Preschool staff wanted a walkable distance to the playground and possibilities for activating many children there. In all user groups, especially among children, green areas connected to playgrounds were appreciated. As children, parents and preschool teachers look for different qualities in a playground, the importance of adapting to different user groups in the playground management emerges.

Private play equipment appeared to be common, and the observations of play equipment in gardens around each playground corresponded mainly to the number of young children (up to the age of six) living there. However, there was more private play equipment relative to the number of resident children in the gardens around unpopular playgrounds than around popular

ones, indicating that it might be used as a substitute when users are not pleased with the nearby public playgrounds.

We found several local factors that affected playground use. For example, the distance from home to playground was of major importance, although far from always decisive. Closeness to the home of friends and family or to other places where people often are or pass by affect the choice of playground, as does playground popularity. Access to other places for play such as forested areas had importance, and children in Degeberga, with more access to nature, complained less about playgrounds than those in Glumslöv, who had fewer alternative play spaces other than playgrounds and lawns.

Also different local habits and local needs for playgrounds as meeting places and social arenas were found. Playgrounds were described as meeting places in both towns, but in different ways. In Glumslöv, a number of parents saw the playground visit as an opportunity to meet other children or parents, while in Degeberga, where connections between the inhabitants were close, the playground was a place to visit together with friends or relatives. Considering this, it is possible that both playground use and user benefits depend on local factors such as the existence of other places for play and the social connections between inhabitants.

Asserting the importance of children's play environments through planning standards has turned out to be successful from many perspectives, but also problematic. The large number of playgrounds in Glumslöv and Degeberga was mostly considered very positive among the users, particularly among parents of preschool children, and the existence of many playgrounds meant many possible places for play. However, adherence to planning standards appeared to have resulted in similar, rather evenly distributed units, without the variation between them demanded by children, who preferred to find different things and characteristics when moving between playgrounds. Differences in use and preferences between the two towns indicate that adherence to standards carries a risk of missing local needs and preferences. More local strategies for playground management might result in greater benefits for the users. There is thus a need for approaches based on local needs and preferences and that take into account variation between units. Still, without some sort of planning regulations, there is a risk the number of playgrounds will diminish.

Local management strategies will need increasing user-focused methods. Assessing playground use through *e.g.* interviews and questionnaires can be a useful part of planning and management of children's play environments. Children, even those as young as six years old, proved able to discuss the playground provision and their play preferences in this study.

Children's perspectives on public playgrounds (Paper II)

The children interviewed in Glumslöv and Degeberga expressed many shared opinions and preferences but also individual ideas. They described valuing playgrounds in ways that children usually value other places, in terms of the possibilities for activities offered. That playgrounds were 'fun' was one of their most important aspects, according to the children. A popular playground was referred to as 'fun', with much 'to do', while a less popular playground was 'boring' with too little 'to do' or too few 'things'. The fun in the playground setting can be described as the possibilities for activities it affords, for example through challenging play equipment or natural surroundings. The children thereby made little distinction between activity and place.

The children were also aware of the child perspective in the playgrounds not being primarily their own but more an adult's interpretation of their needs - and they showed frustration about it. Grown-ups were considered to have the potential to affect playgrounds. Maintenance and upkeep were often raised by the school children who, particularly in Glumslöv but also in Degeberga, were upset about playgrounds and play equipment if not kept in good condition. Children identified possible dangers in the play equipment but even possible safety risks afforded excitement. They also showed a fascination for play facilities they could influence or that could be used in ways other than those intended.

Some age and gender differences were found among the interviewees. Many of the children interviewed, particularly the younger children, described not being able to visit the playgrounds that they wanted to, as parental control clearly had much influence. Girls were more upset than boys about untidy playgrounds.

Playgrounds appeared to be important places to children, although each unit was valued in its own way. Several children mentioned the importance of individual playgrounds to them, for example those situated close to their homes or where they had spent much time for other reasons, carrying memories from specific activities. Particular environments, surrounding nature or play equipment could be popular. Many children also wanted to visit several different playgrounds and saw them as high points in their nearby environment. Playgrounds that were considered special or different in some way were appreciated. Playgrounds also emerged as important to children for social reasons, as places to visit together with others.

Generally, playgrounds emerged as paradoxical, as children appreciated them for being fun but at the same time found them inadequate, insufficiently developed and maintained, and controlled and organised much

from adults' and society's perspectives on children's needs. Playgrounds seemed insufficient as the only places available for children's play in public open spaces for children in Glumslöv and Degeberga. The existence of other places in the open space where play can occur appeared to result in less reliance on public playgrounds, as found in Degeberga.

Playgrounds that were located close to forested areas were described as of particular value to children. The existence of natural environments where children for example can hide, manipulate materials, build dens, or carry out role play became qualities of the playgrounds, as the children did not separate the qualities found in the playground itself from areas outside it. Children appeared to find playgrounds linked to nearby forest, which contained other qualities and play materials than the equipment, less problematic and less frustrating.

Among the oldest children interviewed, the 11-year-olds, some no longer saw themselves as very active playground users. Others still visited playgrounds much or wanted to visit playgrounds to a greater extent, had they been more appealing to their needs and preferences. It thereby appears difficult to determine the ages at which children are playground users, and this might depend on local and individual factors.

User interest and visiting patterns (Paper III)

Playground qualities can be considered in different ways. The criteria proposed for improving provision of play spaces for users can be categorised into the following nine perspectives: character and overall design; content; time and change; social dimensions; children's possibilities and perspectives; children's development and training; support for particular play activities; geographical context; and methods for planning, design and management.

It appeared that while some playgrounds were more popular than others, there were also two types of popular or attractive playgrounds found in Glumslöv and Degeberga, being either 'interesting' or 'much visited'. Play equipment that is particular in some sense: new, challenging or unique within an area, can make users show interest in a playground and give it much attention. However, playgrounds that are much visited over time have more place-specific qualities such as placement, surroundings, access and closeness to schools or other central services. The playgrounds identified as much visited in the case studies were surrounded by green areas that formed a rather closed but varied place. The surrounding nature was of a character that could easily be manipulated, rather wild, suitable for hiding or 'being'

in and for den-construction. These much visited playgrounds were also at some distance from busy roads but rather close to where people live and to the local schools and preschools and easily accessible on much-used paths. Place-specific qualities and sense of place appeared more important for frequency than did the equipment.

The results show the importance of working with more place-specific qualities in playground planning, design and management. Play equipment in itself, if particularly unique, new or challenging, can attract users, but for a playground to function well over time, the placement, surroundings and other place-specific qualities are of major importance. Geographical context and most of all methods for planning, design and management can be useful perspectives when providing play spaces of high quality for users.

Public playground management with user focus (Paper IV)

Two municipalities, X and Y, were compared concerning their different organisations and strategies for playground management, particularly concerning user focus, and the effects this had on managers and playgrounds. In municipality X, the managers had turned specifically to playground users through a vast participation process before making changes, while in municipality Y the user focus was informal and involved adapting to user preferences when expressed, if considered possible, while politicians made the strategic decisions. Differences found between the two organisations concern the role of the tactical level professionals, the internal and external communication, and the management work. The differences in the playground provision were less radical. In both municipalities, there were a few large units and many smaller, and playgrounds were often combined with fields for ball games or green areas.

In municipality X, the user participation process was described as having had many advantages. Professionals had learned about local needs and preferences, and users understood the conditions the professionals had to adapt to. Dialogue with users had made possible the removal of some playgrounds, which had saved resources. Furthermore, the management organisation involved people from several professions in a cross-sectoral dialogue. The tactical level was linked to both politicians and users in setting strategies for management. The user participation process appeared to have been a positive experience for the management organisation. Adaptation to user preferences had resulted in a few non-traditional solutions such as forest playgrounds, but some prioritised units had been given a private character.

The professionals had experienced problems in keeping contact with the users after the process. The rather traditional propositions that were the common outcome of the consultation process surprised the managers but might be the result of the participatory methods and of existing ideas on what playgrounds should contain.

In municipality Y, dialogue appeared less developed and the knowledge of users and professionals did not always reach the decision-making politicians. The playground management organisation was small, rather isolated from other parts of the municipal organisation and functioning mainly as an operational unit. However, the professionals felt rather free to realise their own ideas on the operational level. They were interested in adapting play environments to user preferences, tried to follow the ideas of users whenever expressed, and found it positive. However, they found the possibilities for it limited, referring to lack of space and money, restrictions through equipment safety standards and little knowledge among users.

Strategic approaches and tactical level work appeared to be of importance for playground management. Formal user participation processes can have very positive effects, particularly for playground managers. Through dialogue with users, a mutual understanding between users and managers can be created, managers learn about local needs, and changes to the playground provision are facilitated. Participatory processes about playground management can also lead to several difficulties. That users may want to give priority to their own closest playgrounds can result in playgrounds getting a rather private character, which is particularly problematic if the process is not continuous, since users change fast. Ideas of the playground concept in the minds of managers and users may hinder new approaches to playgrounds. Involving many people – not only typical park managers – in the playground management question appears to be positive in several ways, adding and spreading knowledge and increasing the status of playground management.

In both municipalities, standards for play equipment safety and legislation on access for the disabled appeared to affect playground management greatly, and recent investments to the playgrounds had been made mainly to adapt to them. The need to adapt to safety standards appears to risk isolating playground managers from those who lack safety knowledge.

6 Discussion and final reflections

In this chapter I discuss the results concerning the relations within the playground management model. Thereafter I discuss the role of management in affecting user benefits.

User attitudes, use and benefits of public outdoor playgrounds

First and foremost, playgrounds mean many positive things for their users. In contrast to much of the criticism that has been expressed about playgrounds being boring and insufficient for children (Ellis, 1970; Holme & Massie, 1970; Wood, 1971; Insulander, 1975; Norén-Björn, 1977; Wuellner, 1979; Perez & Hart, 1980; Moore, 1989; Noschis, 1992; Hart, 2002; Woolley, 2008), the studies reported in this thesis show the importance that even rather simple playgrounds can have for children and adult users. Almost all children and adults responsible for children in the studies in Glumslöv and Degeberga claimed to visit several playgrounds regularly, describing them as important arenas for outdoor play and social activities. Children appreciate them for several reasons, mainly for affording possibilities for activities. Playgrounds are also rather well-known 'high points' in the minds of children (Noschis, 1992), who carry memories from their activities there. Parents have their own motives in their choice of playgrounds, which are often practical or, as also described by Berglund *et al.* (1985), social.

The use of planning standards for playground provision has resulted in a large number of playgrounds, something which is considered positive by the users. Regardless of the value that existing playgrounds might have in terms of qualities for play, the spaces set aside for playground construction therefore have a value as urban space, as specific places for children in the

increasingly dense urban environment and commercialised public open space. They can be described as a valuable resource created at a time when children were highly prioritised in planning. This treasure of space for children is at risk each time the existence of playgrounds is discussed. The existing playgrounds must be managed with much thought.

Public outdoor playgrounds are also described in more negative ways by their users. Many playgrounds are disappointments in their inability to afford rich play spaces, in not corresponding to the idea of what a playground should be, in being similar to each other, in being poorly maintained or in reflecting other perspectives and demands than those of the users. This duality in the attitudes to playgrounds appeared among users in all user groups in this study and also among managers, they being aware of user complaints and of their own inadequacies in managing the playgrounds satisfactorily.

Children's and adult users' attitudes to playgrounds appear to be largely connected to how those environments are managed in terms of development, upkeep and maintenance of equipment. Insufficient management or maintenance was considered a major problem. To increase user benefits, much consideration must be aimed at management questions.

Changes in visiting patterns

The studies of users in Glumslöv and Degeberga revealed a complex combination of a large amount of factors determining the visiting patterns to outdoor environments, confirming earlier studies (Naylor, 1985; Moore, 1986; Veitch *et al.*, 2006; Veitch *et al.*, 2007). Adults have much influence on children's playground use but also consider children's preferences to be of major importance. The description of parental anxiety as the main determinant for outdoor play (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997) can be questioned in cases like Glumslöv and Degeberga. Compared to children in many other countries (Hillman *et al.*, 1990; Gaster, 1991; Prezza *et al.*, 2001; Wridt, 2004), those in Glumslöv and Degeberga appeared to have more independent mobility, especially the older children in the studies. Despite that, many of them felt they were not free to visit the local playgrounds that they preferred. Closeness to play spaces is thereby of major importance for the access and amount of use, especially for younger children.

Parenting in recent times has been described as changing towards increased adult supervision and control and increased organised activities (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Karsten, 2005). As a consequence, public playgrounds appear to have become less used for everyday visits or by

children not accompanied by adults. Instead, they are increasingly used for outings of different types, to visit on week-ends or special occasions, such as when child-care institutions make excursions. When the closest playground does not provide the preferred qualities, users tend to move further to other playgrounds. The private play equipment in gardens is probably partly used as a substitute for everyday playground play too, as earlier proposed by Dee & Liebman (1970). However, the function of private play equipment relative to playgrounds was not raised in any of the questionnaires or interviews. As fewer but larger playground units often appear to better suit the families and preschools of today, this may be what users ask for when consulted by playground managers, as was partly the result of the participatory process in municipality X. The reduction in the number of playgrounds in many Swedish municipalities (Jansson, 2008) may, however, affect children's access to outdoor play negatively. There is reason to question how 'efficient' provision of play spaces can become. The importance of children's perspective and of keeping green areas when urban land is being built more densely is discussed by *e.g.* Boverket (2004). I will return to this issue when discussing playground management organisation and work.

Playgrounds in a context

The use of playgrounds, the attitudes towards them and even the benefits from them depend on the context, on local factors such as the existence of other play-friendly areas and the local social relations between people, as shown in the differences between Glumslöv and Degeberga. Playgrounds are not isolated features but elements within a social and environmental context. On the level of individual playgrounds, play equipment and place-specific qualities such as placement and qualities in the close surroundings appear to affect users' interest and also their frequency of visits. On a more comprehensive scale, the whole provision of playgrounds, play settings, or possibilities for play in an area might affect the use and benefits. This has not been enough considered in playground planning and management, which is clearly shown in the lack of variation between individual playgrounds.

The main cause of frustration among users, particularly children, is probably not the playground as such but insufficient management (lack of enough upkeep, disinvestment) and the lack of places for play in the 'fourth environment', outside allocated play spaces. Playgrounds are not ideal places for children's play but they are not inadequate either. The provision of playgrounds cannot completely compensate for too little access to the rest of

the outdoor environment, but if professionals would work for increasing the status of children's play in the public open space - including playgrounds - it might cause less frustration and result in more benefits.

Qualities and value of playground settings

The case studies of Glumslöv and Degeberga show that variation between playgrounds in an area is highly appreciated among users but also that playground units that appear to be rather similar in terms of content, design and state might still be used and attended very differently and shown different amounts of interest by users. More than the playground area and its equipment can obviously be of importance to the users.

Early playgrounds in Sweden were seen as substitutes for play in nature or in the countryside (Myrdahl, 1935; Wohlin, 1961). The countryside ideal in urban planning has led to some positive results for children²¹, and playgrounds and nature can in some ways be seen as substitutes for each other. The need for playgrounds appears to be greater in Glumslöv, with little access to nature, than in Degeberga, where the existing alternative that nature provides makes playgrounds less important. Besides, the results from Glumslöv and Degeberga give reason to look further at the *combination* of playgrounds and their surroundings. Playground use depends more on factors such as location, sense of place, general upkeep and character of surroundings than on play equipment. No particularly great effort in terms of play equipment appears to be needed to create playgrounds that become particularly popular among users, if such place-specific qualities are available. However, play equipment can act to create an interest in individual playgrounds, especially if perceived as unique, challenging or new. The combination of nature and play equipment has earlier been found to affect play and play patterns in positive ways (Norén-Björn, 1977; Mårtensson, 2004). I found that the existence of nature that is varied and wild (possible to affect and play in) and that contributes to a sense of place close to playgrounds make children's play experiences less dependent on play equipment and adult users more positive to the playground visit.

Place-specific factors such as the character of the playground and its surroundings can be affected by the work of playground managers. Recognising the importance of so much more in the play environment than

²¹ Rasmusson (1998, p. 210-211), who studied children in a Swedish suburb, found that the countryside as ideal in physical planning for children had created a rich neighbourhood in terms of e.g. services, areas for play and development.

prefabricated play equipment can be a step towards better play provision in many senses. There is much that needs to be organised, arranged and changed if users are to be satisfied over time with playgrounds based mainly upon play equipment, since the interest in them appears to depend on uniqueness, variation and change.

The public outdoor playgrounds not only have a value in being used for play, but their mere existence can also give children access to outdoor play. The surroundings of the playground can be part of the playground experience for users and become a continuation of the playground visit, if interesting to children. Rather than placing playgrounds according to distance from the children's homes, they should be placed where people like to spend time and where things happen or where they can contribute to places becoming attractive to children and other users. Earlier thoughts about making the playground an integral part of the neighbourhood (Noschis, 1992; Moore *et al.*, 1992) and considerations about the character of the local environments when creating playgrounds (Norén-Björn, 1977; Herrington, 1999) are relevant in this regard.

Playground management organisation and work

The playground management organisation often appears to be a rather isolated part of a parks department or a technical department in Swedish municipal organisations. Traditional management practice and the specialist knowledge required to manage play equipment, particularly in terms of equipment safety standards, risk making playground management the task of only a few people in each municipality. The work is, despite attempts to make strategic approaches, to a large extent operational. This in turn contributes to diminishing the importance of the playground issue and thereby also the possibilities for playground managers' activities. Spaces for children thereby become limited to small, scattered spaces following a land zoning that is often many decades old. Playground management has become separated from other urban development and, due to the specialist knowledge required, from management of other public outdoor spaces. Children appear to have low priority as users of public open space, as have playgrounds and their managers. That planners and architects for a long period have had a negative view on playgrounds (Kristensson, 1994) might also have affected the conditions for playground management negatively. Municipality X is an example of a slightly different approach – that of involving people with different professional backgrounds and from different

positions and municipal departments in playground management and making playground management increasingly tactical, which led to several positive outcomes, particularly for the managers themselves.

Earlier approaches to playground planning, design and management have resulted in rich, but in many cases also uniform, provision of play spaces, which are increasingly being converted into fewer but larger units. Playground management tends to adapt to the current tendency of needs when changing the playground provision into spaces suitable for outings for whole families or groups. However, providing fewer playgrounds may also result in a decrease in children's spatial freedom, which can be expected to depend on the amount of accessible play spaces (Naylor, 1985; Björklid & Nordström, 2007). If playground managers adapt to such changes in actual use, it might in the long run make the built environment less child-friendly and decrease children's freedom. Large play spaces may offer many possible activities (Kristensson, 2003; Karsten, 2003) but with fewer playgrounds the access may be poorer. There might be a need for both large spaces and small nearby playgrounds.

Participatory approaches in playground management might, despite methodological difficulties, have many advantages in adapting to actual needs and preferences. Playground planning and management appear still in many cases to be performed rather far away from the users, which might have an effect on the playground function.

Improved playground management for increased user benefits

The main aim of this thesis was to identify the role playground management can play in increasing user benefits. The case studies show that playground management is of importance for user benefits. A few ways to increase these benefits are discussed below. They concern the composition of the playground management organisation, *i.e.* who is involved, and also the activities and activity levels that should be provided.

To increase user benefits, the playground management organisation will need to focus increasingly on users, work in freer ways and extend their work to outside the playground area. For this to happen, playground management will need increased status and strength. Similarly to what has been proposed by Randrup & Persson (2009) for park management, there appears to be a need for more work on the tactical activity level in addition to technical and operational aspects. One way of achieving this is by making playground management cross-sectoral by involving professionals working

with related aspects of playground management, for example physical planners, financial officers and educationalists. Similar cross-sectoral ideas have previously been described (*e.g.* Frost, 1986; CABA Space, 2008, Randrup & Persson, 2009). Involving many people within the municipal organisation in playground management in a cross-sectoral manner, with cooperation between different actors on the tactical level, can increase the status of playground management and diminish its isolation from other municipal services.

Management approaches and strategies have the potential to increasingly adapt to local conditions, needs and preferences. A more locally developed management might also create the conditions for something different in terms of play areas. A new mentality about places for children is perhaps needed, including the courage to provide children with places for play involving something other than prefabricated play equipment and similar (Bengtsson, 1970; Woolley, 2008). The point is not to abandon the playground concept but to both improve the existing playground provision and look for several alternatives to the traditional playground. When current and potential values in existing playgrounds are recognised (*e.g.* by planners, managers and researchers) it also becomes easier to identify values that are missing and to make improvements.

Former planning and management appear to have resulted in playground provision that is quantitative rather than qualitative²², with many rather similar units. At present there is a strong focus on details in design and maintenance as regards safety standards and disabled access. What is needed in the future is a more comprehensive approach to the management of play provision, the major challenge being to find approaches to play space management where both quality and quantity are considered and where qualities that are needed and preferred in general terms and in a local context are identified. Children need access to outdoor play spaces that offer excitement, challenge, imagination and social contact, which should be the starting points for playground development rather than traditional practices of professionals and decision-makers, standards and other external demands.

Playground managers appear to be lacking an adequate overview of the existing playground provision and need more knowledge about the actual users. The overview includes seeing playgrounds as part of a larger context. It can include considering the playground's placement and surroundings more and also taking a stronger grip to make the whole of the public outdoor space child-friendly and thus broaden the views on what a

²² Quality and quantity are here not to be considered opposites, but are two different characters of open spaces. Large spaces (quantity) can also be a quality (Kristensson, 2003).

playground is and could be. Local knowledge is about having direct contact with actual users and building on their needs and preferences through some sort of user participation involving several user groups. Children must be given a fair chance in any participation process. Parents might find it a reasonable agreement to give up the many small playgrounds available for fewer units with more equipment, and it might be difficult for children to assert their need for nearby play spaces in such processes.

Kylin (2004) describes how the planning process focuses on visual and measurable aspects and an abstract view of space, in contrast to children experiencing places through their senses, making communication between planners and children difficult, even though the planners may understand children's wish for 'doing'. In their contact with users, managers have the possibility of using their physical, hands-on knowledge of the play spaces and close contact with the physical playground settings. However, the focus on economic issues, equipment and safety standards can still make communication between playground managers and users difficult. Managers will need to learn how to handle such external regulations and issues in ways that do not disturb their collaboration with users and the needed adaptation to children's wish to affect and 'do' in the playgrounds. New knowledge and attitudes are needed for managers to be able to work more closely with users (Delshammar, 2005; Paget, 2008).

A future task for playground management is to make playgrounds increasingly attractive to many different categories of users. Different perspectives have had effect on the way playgrounds are provided: adults', society's, researchers', planners' and managers' perspectives on children. Adult safety fears might lead to play areas becoming too safe and boring (Wardle, 1990; Katz, 2006; Woolley, 2008). With the decrease in the influence of planning standards, it is possible that the managers' own perspectives, a 'green' park manager perspective, can become more visible in the playground setting, but playground settings today still appear to lack a children's perspective. However, since children's playground use also depends on adults' choices, it is also of major importance for children's access to outdoor play that the preferences of adult users are taken into consideration. There is a need for organising playgrounds so that they are appealing to children of different ages and also to adult users, with a balance between the perspectives of adult safety fears and children's wishes for adventure.

Propositions for playground management

This leads to my proposing a number of ways in which playground management can be developed to give increased user benefits:

- More integration of the playground management issues into the municipal organisations through cross-sectoral approaches
- Development of the tactical activity level
- A more comprehensive approach to playground management including the whole provision of play spaces and also the surroundings of playgrounds, the local context, and variation between individual playgrounds
- Development of playground provision in terms of quality (sense of place, variation, maintenance level) and to some extent also quantity (number of playgrounds, accessibility, size)
- Adaptation to preferences among several different user categories
- Greater awareness among playground managers and planners of how to communicate with users concerning conditions for management work

Conclusions

There is a need for numerous places that suit children's needs and preferences in the public open space. Playgrounds have the potential for being such places, fulfilling some of these needs and preferences, and playground management the potential for increasing user benefits. Public playgrounds have particular values for children and for other user groups, providing user benefits by meeting some of the particular preferences and needs of different user categories.

Management has a major role to play in determining how playground provision is maintained and developed but needs to become increasingly based upon context such as local landscape, social connections between inhabitants in an area, and the preferences expressed by different user groups. Children should be considered main users, but adult users must also be closely considered. It is important to maintain the quantity and accessibility of many child-friendly spaces and to ensure that those spaces become varied and of high quality.

Improving the playground management organisation and its status might be a means of improving also the status of playgrounds. Critical approaches to playgrounds must become increasingly constructive. Marginalising

playgrounds does not improve the situation but might instead result in fewer possibilities for play in the public open space.

The playground management model used to illustrate the objects/actors and their interrelations in this work functioned as a starting point for theoretical reasoning around playground management and can act a tool for discussions about urban landscape management in the future. However, further development is needed of the theoretical approaches within this field of knowledge.

Proposed future research

Surprisingly little research during the past two decades has considered public playgrounds in Sweden. Hopefully, this work will contribute to creating a new interest in assessing play areas organised for children in the public open space in various aspects. One issue that might be of interest for future research is to look more deeply into the role of playground managers, the internal and external factors affecting their work and those involved in the work, for example power relations within municipal organisations.

There is a lack of research on how children and other users perceive participation processes about playground provision and their possibilities to have influence there, something that has not been developed in this thesis and will need further investigation. A relevant issue is how participatory processes can increase user benefits.

This work studied playgrounds in periurban environments managed by municipal organisations. It would be interesting to study playground use and management in other types of environments, for example in denser urban settings with more complex management situations.

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