

At one with the magic of nature

Mike Jones, co-founder of Earth Wrights, tells us why he got involved in the design and build of natural play spaces and what his business offers children



Water play at Watcombe playground

Tell us a bit about Earth Wrights and your journey so far

The seeds for Earth Wrights were planted several decades ago when I finished my degree in Landscape Architecture. My focus had always been on how to make urban environments good places to live and creating playable communities is part of that. The pivotal moment came when I was asked to design a play space for a women's refuge in London and couldn't find anyone to build it, so I just got on and built it myself. I saw with my own eyes what a difference it made to the kids to have a playground that was exciting and imaginative and really met their instinctive play needs - allowing them to use the space whichever way they wished, rather than being stuck with just swings and slides.

When I met Mark (Renouard), my business partner, in 1994 we quickly discovered we had a shared passion for creating great outdoor play spaces and started developing our designs and build methods. In 2008 we incorporated as Earth Wrights and we now have playgrounds all over England. Our clients include The National Trust, the Eden Project and most recently Kew Gardens.

What drives you as a business?

Both Mark and I had the privilege of growing up in the countryside with lots of freedom to explore. We value these experiences and can see where it is missing for many of today's children.

So, we are driven both by our concern for the wellbeing of our current generation of children and our knowledge and optimism that the issues they are facing can be resolved with a change of mindset and corresponding investment from decision makers. This means taking the time to understand the needs of the whole child, as well as enabling the creation of spaces where those needs

can be met, i.e. safe streets, more tolerance of children's wild nature and playgrounds that appeal to that wild and free nature while also reassuring parents that their children are safe. We believe that as Earth Wrights we can both raise awareness of the importance of natural play and provide some of the practical solutions, by designing and building great spaces to play and meet.

What makes you different?

We base our design decisions on in-depth knowledge of children's play behaviour, years of personal experience and the millennia of wisdom that nature holds when it comes to good play design. As a species we evolved in natural surroundings that were non-linear and varied and which encouraged a plethora of physical and mental skills which are both useful and enjoyable to this day. Our playground designs draw on those patterns to offer children rich play experiences even when nature is not at hand, or to create invitations to explore the wilderness beyond the playground.

We also have a strong company ethos which is driven less by profit and more by a real passion to provide children with opportunities



Brushwood tunnel at Bishop Cornish preschool



Aller Park, Dartington Estate

to play freely, to learn about the world on their own terms and to foster their innate curiosity and love of the natural world.

Can you explain how you would generally work with a client on a project?

We want to create play spaces that will last, not just in terms of overall durability, but also in terms of being the kind of spaces children will want to play in for generations to come. For this to happen the space needs to fit well into the existing environment, both the physical environment and the social environment.

When we get a request for a design we spend a lot of time gathering information about the site – size, orientation, soil quality, distance to roads, etc – and listening to the client's ideas, ideally consulting with the 'end users' i.e. the children. We then bring our experience and knowledge of children's play needs to this mix and develop an initial design proposal that maximises the site's play value within the space and budget available. Sometimes we get it right straight away, other times we go back and forth a bit until we find something everyone is happy with and we get started on the build. The build phase is very exciting for the children as they love seeing their playground 'grow' and our site team really enjoy telling them what they are doing and love the looks on their faces when the playground is finally opened. It's a very special moment when the first children rush in to play on something we have built.

You exhibited for the first time at Childcare Expo in Coventry – will your approach to the sector change as a result?

We were really heartened by the interest in natural play. We had so many great conversations with people who really want to see a

change in play provision towards freer and more self-directed play. We brought our portapump along and both kids and adults were fascinated by it. Water play is always a big hit.

Based on our conversations it became clear that there is a need for well designed natural play products that can be shipped on a pallet, so we have decided to expand our portable product range and are currently designing some small play huts. We will also be making our play audits available on the website, which help schools and play providers assess their existing provision according to different play types.

You're going to write a series of articles for Early Years Childcare over the next few issues – can you give us a teaser about what we can expect to learn?

We are keen to share our knowledge about and love for natural play as we are - as I am sure you can tell by now - real believers in its power and magic. Behind that magic there is some very solid research and one of our articles will be about the science of that underpins natural play, what it provides for our children's development and why that matters. We will also share tips on how to provide for your children's play needs when you are stuck in the middle of the city with no (or very little) budget and for those people who do have some space we will be writing about how to plant a garden that loves your children. Yes, plants and children can happily co-exist – that is how it is meant to be!



For more information, go to www.earthwrights.co.uk