

One Gardener's Almanac

When children play, they need more space for their imagination than conventional playgrounds and equipment allow.

Katie Winter's minimal designs set the spirit free BY TOM CHRISTOPHER



Children from the Immaculate Conception School play in a maze of colored poles. It is one of five play spaces that Winter installed to encourage original games for students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade.

KATIE WINTER DOESN'T care much for playgrounds. Everybody knows what they are: flat or slightly contoured expanses hosting off-the-shelf play equipment. What Winter designs are play areas—environments she pieces together in odd corners of urban spaces using a sculptor's instinct for mass and void and the transformative imagination of a child, something this Yale-educated architect somehow never lost. All of it is done on what Winter describes as a "tiny, tiny budget."

Ten years ago Winter was part of an established architecture firm in Manhattan, doing what she describes as "high-end residential work." She had been volunteering at a parochial school in the Bronx and offered to help it create an outdoor play area. She began to think about how children play (she is a mother of three now, but at the time had no children) and soon realized that conventional playground equipment, besides being expensive, is a limited system imposed by adults on the young. Each piece is designed for a specific

age, and equipment that bores older children, she notes, often tempts younger ones to play beyond their capabilities, putting them at risk. Equally unpleasant, from her perspective, is that each slide, swing, and set of climbing bars is designed for one function, thus prescribing and limiting play.

Winter understands that less, when masterfully deployed, is more. The hallmark of her designs is a spare, abstract

CHALLENGING CHILDREN MENTALLY IS WINTER'S GOAL. PLAY AREAS SHOULD BE EDUCATIONAL SPACES, SHE SAYS

quality that provokes a child's imagination and allows room for it to be expressed. That first play area in the Bronx has led to a steady string of commissions from the Archdiocese of New York.

East Gun Hill Road, Bronx: Katie Winter shows the way between the Church of the Immaculate Conception and its school of the same name. We pass standard-issue urban chain-link fence and enter an immaculate architectural conception of her own. Winter calls it, with wonder, an extraordinary site—almost half a city block that the neighboring Capuchin friars offered so that students would no longer have to spend recess in the street.

To an adult, the resulting landscape is disconcertingly spare. There's a swath of gray grit inlaid with a constellation of round pavers; a pair of grassy mounds, one topped with pipes fitted into the sketch of a tower; a rudimentary amphitheater at the rear; and to the right a rectilinear forest of steel fence posts enameled in brilliant blue and red. Zigzag fencing, in a luminous yellow, marks one boundary while creating triangular planting pockets for an allée of cherry trees and spring-flowering bulbs.

The power, Winter says, is in the patterns. A child may not recognize the astronomical motif of the pavers, but their arrangement provides a framework around which to build games. The fence post forest, she points out, changes every time you change perspective. Move a step to the left or right and the apparent relationship of the posts changes, altering your perception of the enclosed space. Challenging the children mentally is one of Winter's goals; play areas should be educational spaces, she believes.


Budget limitations obliged Winter to emulate her youthful clientele and play

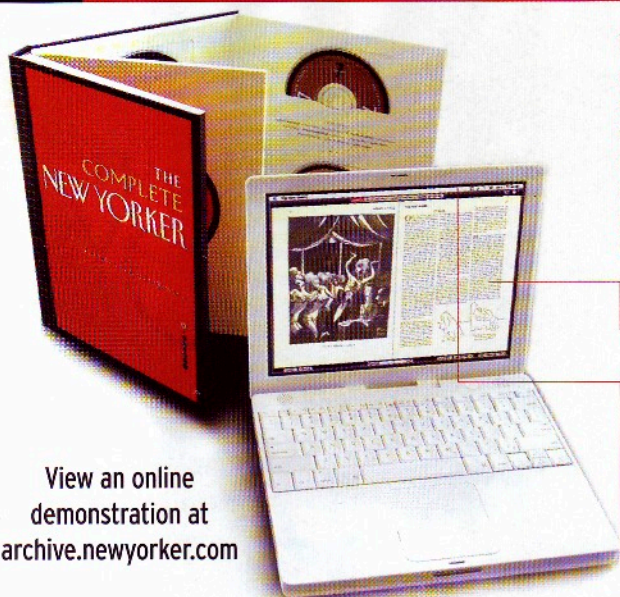
with what she found on the site. There was an old above-ground concrete swimming pool at Immaculate Conception; instead of paying for its removal, Winter and Dorothy Bothwell, the landscape architect with whom she collaborated, decided to bury it. They left just one corner of the concrete rim exposed, to create an elegant, inscribed bench on the flank of a knoll. They made the amphitheater from trees felled in clearing the site; after cutting the trees into logs, they planted them end down and side by side in arcs for stadium seating.

Winter, who has operated her own firm since 2000, also works on the redesign of school libraries, media centers, and cafeterias. She is currently excited about a seniors center she is doing in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood. But the play areas remain special for her. She describes one project, made from a parking lot at the Resurrection School in Harlem. The mature maples that overhang the site's perimeter had been ignored for years until Winter painted an abutting apartment wall yellow to match the color of the autumn foliage and added artificial grass. Only then did the children begin to bring fallen leaves back to the classrooms. What had been dross is now, miraculously, gold.

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