

# Art & Social Action: Case Studies from the Mekong Region

## Think Playgrounds

### A Case Study of Creating a Playable Hanoi

#### VIETNAM



## Creating a Playable Hanoi: Think Playgrounds and its Projects

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### Introduction

In Hanoi, Vietnam, an organization called Think Playgrounds (TP) is attracting attention as a powerful actor encouraging to provide urban children with playgrounds. It is a global common issue that kids living in highly developed cities do not have enough space to play as they want, with physical energy, experiencing relationship with others. A number of cultural workers are found in different parts of the world today, and their approaches greatly vary according to the diversity of cultural, societal, political and economical contexts. This paper examines how TP in Hanoi has been working on this issue, proposing a contextualization.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. What is Think Playgrounds?

TP was founded by Chu Kim Duc and Nguyen Tieu Quoc Dat as a volunteer group in 2014, and established as a social enterprise in 2016. They have produced more than 200 playgrounds. Currently, in March, 2021, TP is composed of 15 members who have been involved as volunteer staff collected via Facebook as each project was launched, having interest in architecture, social work or education. IT professionals, journalists, and bank workers are included in the team, as well as three experts in architecture skilled in 3-D modelling. The diversity of their expertises contributes much to the collective practice.

According to Kim Duc, TP has dual domains of activity: commercial and non-commercial projects. This structure reflects a unique condition of Vietnamese society in which the government is not willing to accept NGO or other non-profit organization which aims at solving public problems. Here lies the reason why TP maintains its way of accepting orders from clients and investing the income into non-commercial projects supported by different funding bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> This research is based on my own interviews with **Chu Kim Duc** and **Nguyen Tieu Quoc Dat** on February 2, February 19, February 24, and March 3, 2021. I'd like to express my gratitude to both of them for their cooperation. All photos in this article are retrieved from Think Playgrounds Facebook with their permission.

There are several main forms of TP playground projects. One is to activate unpopular parks or dead spaces in residential areas. The "dead space" refers to the gaps between buildings in a housing complex or unused common areas, where garbage is dumped or illegal parking is unchecked. The second is the "mobile playground," which is an event to transform a specific space into a playground by bringing toys and equipments into it. The third is to receive orders from clients to build playgrounds in the premises of private schools, hotels, etc.

One of the founders, Kim Duc, studied urban design at the Hanoi University of Architecture and landscape and garden design in Paris before returning to Hanoi in 2007. After working for a design company, she attended a documentary film making workshop to broaden her scope, where she met an American woman who had been traveling around the world taking photos of children's playgrounds, and through her, she became interested in the field herself.

As shown above, TP was not born as a collective of playground experts. Rather, its activities have continued to grow both theoretically and technically through hands-on experience up to the present, and as we will see later, this seems to have given TP a unique openness.

## 2. To Change People's Mindset

In order to build children's playgrounds, a process of negotiation with real and specific social spaces and their inhabitants is essential. On the other hand, unless we can change people's values about children's playgrounds and play, it will be difficult to increase the number of playgrounds that are currently lacking. In other words, the creation of playgrounds is not just a physical task, but a social project, which is why both Kim Duc and Quoc Dat recognize that the biggest challenge is to change people's mindset. So how did TP deal with this?

### (1) Negotiation and Collaboration with People

TP's first playground was created in 2014 in Bai gia, a low-income residential area along the Red River in the suburbs of Hanoi, which is also home to floating houses. They chose this location because of the strong sense of community among the residents and their willingness to accept TP's proposal. In close collaboration with them, TP created and installed swings, slides, and seesaws in the vacant lot in the neighborhood where the residents live, by painting old tires and recycled wood. The residents were very cooperative and happy with the completed playground.



One of TP's Facebook posts says,

Hanoi, nowadays, lacks the earthy grounds and empty spaces where children are the center of the adults' attention. We hope this beginning will inspire us to loosen our shoes, step onto bare ground and find our way back to our childhoods, when we are passionate about conquer our own favorite games in our own little imaginative world.<sup>2</sup>

For them, the success of this project marked the beginning of serious engagement with the theme of children's play in the contemporary city. By choosing a location that was relatively less difficult to negotiate, TP was able to gain rich experience. It also attracted media attention and was highly praised for being produced at a low cost of only 10 million dong (about US\$430).

Following the Bai giua project, TP immediately launched PlayDay, an event where toys and equipments are brought in to create a pop-up playground for children. The first PlayDay was held on November 1-2, 2014 at the premises of the American Club in Hanoi, with the first day dedicated to workshops for adults on how to build a playground, and the second day to invite children to the temporary playground, which was also open to public observation. The number of visitors reached 2,000.



Figure 1: TP's first playground in Bai giua, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Post of May 23, 2014, retrieved Apr 18, 2021 from

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=thinkplaygrounds&set=a.751405994904089>



Figure 2: TP's first playground in Bai giua, 2014.

Support from the US Embassy, the Ford Foundation, and the Cultural Development and Exchange Fund (CDEF) of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs must have contributed a lot to the project's success to achieve social impact. The strategy of producing high-profile events by collaborating with foreign funding sources and companies has been a consistent feature of TP since then.

In this way, TP established two forms of activities: the construction of sustainable playgrounds and organization of PlayDay events, and increased the social impact of its activities by running both in parallel. As a result, TP's activities have been divided into two categories: non-profit activities to create playgrounds in collaboration with residents in urban Hanoi, and commercial jobs to receive orders from private schools and corporations. For the latter, TP received its first order from a private kindergarten in 2015, and since then has received more than 100 clients as of March 2021, including schools, companies, educational farms, hotels, and developers. According to Kim Duc, they have been able to sophisticate the quality of their productions by experiencing many projects with ample budgets.



## (2) Advanced Theories on Play

Children's play is still a minor subject in contemporary societies that put emphasis on productivity, except in the context of early childhood education and welfare. As Miguel Sicart points out, conventional understanding about play as something separate from "real life" blocks us from recognition of "the creative and expressive capacities of play."<sup>3</sup> The richness of play, such as creativity, expression, imagination, and communication, cannot fully be categorized by historically conditioned notions such as "sports" or "arts." Because of its amorphous nature which escapes our cultural institutionalization, the accumulation of discourse on play has not been so extensive. However, awareness of the issues surrounding play has been growing worldwide in recent years, and organizations working in various regions have formed an international network. For example, the Global Play Alliance, a list made by Australian NPO Playground Ideas, has 24 registered organizations from around the world (as of April 2021), and some of them are developing their activities globally.

TP has been actively involved in this broader context since 2018, and this has clearly taken it to the next phase. In other words, they moved from the stage of simply "creating playgrounds" to a stage of more specialized inquiry into what kind of play is needed and what possibilities play has.



Figure 3: Conference on play at the Play Campaign, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel Sicart (2014), *Play Matters*, The MIT Press, p.104.



Figure 4: Wood workshop for children at the Play Campaign, 2018.

TP presented a proposal to the Goethe-Institut Hanoi for a project entitled "Play Campaign" which was accepted. The idea was to invite experts working on play in Europe to Hanoi, and to hold a conference and workshop to share and deepen insight with parents and educators. The Goethe-Institut, in collaboration with Institut Français Hanoi, invited Bianca Ergas from KuKuk Kultur (Germany) and Deborah Gentès from Jouer pour vivre (France) to Hanoi.

In this project, three concepts were introduced: "creative play," "loose-part play," and "risky play. The Play Campaign ran workshops based on these concepts to learn about potentialities of play, from May to November 2018.

In the "Creative Play" workshop, children were taught woodworking and shared the fun of making their own toys and other things they like. In the "loose-part play" workshop, children were encouraged to invent their own way to play using recycled items, straw, pieces of wood, and other things that do not look very attractive or useful on their own, or sometimes even look like mere trash. In each case, the focus is on the value of emergence of play that results from the stimulation of materials, rather than the mere consumption of toys distributed in the market. The concept of "risky play" is also based on the idea that children's intelligence, imagination, and creativity are stimulated more by play that dares to leave room for physical risk than by play that takes every precaution to ensure safety.



Figure 5: Building an Adventure Playground at Ecopark, 2019.

In 2019, TP conducted another Play Campaign in collaboration with the Japan Foundation. TP and its counterpart in Japan, Tokyo Play, visited each other's countries and created an Adventure Playground in Hanoi, drawing on the expertise of Tokyo Play. "Adventure Playground" is a space designed to stimulate the creative and intellectual opportunities inherent in play, where children can enjoy "risky play" with their bodies, assemble materials, and even work with fire, all under the watchful eye of adult playworkers. Therefore, this project not only involved the creation of a space, but also a workshop to train playworkers.

Thus, by exchanging with other advanced experts, TP has been able to learn for itself the concepts and know-how that have been accumulated in other contexts, and at the same time has used the opportunity to build international cooperative relationships and develop human resources in Hanoi at the same time.



### 3. Latest Projects and TP's Characteristics

In the previous chapter, we saw how TP has deepened its practice along with shared experience. Next, closer look at recent projects as examples would allow us to examine how the two agendas of collaborative processes with the community and updating the concept of play are currently developing. Quoc Dat identified three projects that he thought were particularly important to them. Let's look at each of them in detail.

#### (1) Three Latest Projects

##### (1-1) An Inclusive Process: Tan Mai Project

In their project in Tan Mai district in 2019, TP attempted to transform a dead space in a residential area of the city, using a videogame *Minecraft* to conceive designs of the space. "This has allowed us a very inclusive process," explains Quoc Dat. Officially released in 2011 and recorded now as a worldwide hit, *Minecraft* is a game that invites users to freely create structures in an infinite virtual space. In recent years, it has also been applied to the field of education, and the makers of the game are the sponsors of this TP project. In addition, TP also collaborated with UN Habitat and Healthbridge (a Vietnamese branch of a social welfare NPO based in Canada).



Figure 6: Designing the space with *Minecraft*, 2019.

In this project, the staff first recreated the actual space in the game, and the residents designed the space virtually by installing what they wanted to build in it. They then brought in the plans, discussed them toward implementation, and started the actual work. Flowerbeds were created by assembling bricks, benches made of cement around trees were beautifully decorated with embedded pieces of pottery, and a jungle gym was installed for the children of the nearby pediatric hospital to play on.



Figure 7: Building the space according to the blueprint, 2019.

The introduction of *Minecraft* as a design tool, which is relatively easy for anyone to manipulate, had the advantage of directly reflecting the wishes and decisions of the residents, but according to Quoc Dat, it also had two additional effects. One was that the novelty of the process of designing with a videogame attracted the interest of the residents, and the other was that the young people taught the elderly, who made up the majority of the residents involved in the project, how to operate the game, and that the latter stepped into the game room normally used by the young people, thereby promoting intergenerational exchange.



### (1-2) Installing Adventure Playground: Bai giua Project



Figure 8: Creating an Adventure Playground in Bai giua 2020.

In 2020, TP returned to Bai giua, where they had made their first playground in 2014, to create an adventure playground in order to implement the methods they learned from the Japanese organization. They had maintained a good relationship with the residents of this area, and the children from six years ago had grown up to become their workmates. Bai giua is a region rich in nature that attracts holidaymakers and tourists, and TP's involvement was welcomed to boost the local society. The decision to build an adventure playground here was made because the natural environment with soil, grass and trees was suitable for outdoor risky activities including making fire. It was also meant to provide a playground for children who were unable to travel far due to the effects of the Covid-19. The project was funded by Healthbridge.

### (1-3) Collaboration with an Artist: Dong Anh Project

The project, developed in Dong Anh between the end of 2020 and February 2021, was a collaborative effort with artists to improve a plaza in a residential area in the center of town, and was carried out in partnership with the Women's Union of Hanoi. The project was therefore a close collaboration between three actors: TP, the Women's Union, which seeks a safe space for young women's relaxation and amusement, and Uu Dam, an artist who creates works in public spaces based on conversation with the community. The main funding source was the British Council.





Figure 9: Meeting between Uu Dam and local residents, 2020.



Figure 10: Magic Crossbow Playground, 2021.

In this project, Uu Dam proposed the installation of a structure that would serve as a landmark symbolizing the area. He referred to the legend of the ruins of the Co Loa Citadel, located about 5 km from the site, and chose as a model the crossbow, which is said to have been used by King An Duong Vuong in the 3rd century BC to defeat foreign enemies. Then TP gave it a structure that can be used as a children's playground equipment for climbing or hide-and-seek. On the day of the unveiling, Uu Dam and the residents held an event to paint the structure colorfully and complete the whole process. This project added a new element to the children's playground that TP has been working on. Namely, it is not only a space for children to play, but also a landmark for the local community, and has educational effects on local history and culture. Here the playground became a highly meaningful site that bundled multiple functions related to the entire community.

## **(2) Analysis**

I would like to point out three noteworthy aspects of TP's activities.

### **(2-1) Activating Potential Network for Funding and Opportunity**

As mentioned earlier, there is little room for NGOs and NPOs to operate in Vietnam. For this reason, TP has taken a semi-profitable form as a social enterprise, but it is unique that they have been actively connecting multiple domestic and international funding sources and actors from the very beginning to create opportunities. They collaborate with foreign NGOs, cultural exchange organizations, corporate CSR, local communities, local organizations such as the Women's Union, or contemporary artists. This is a flexible development that takes advantage of the multifaceted nature of the motif of "children's playground."

### **(2-2) Creativity and Experimental Mind**

By introducing video game, implementing Adventure Playground, or collaborating with artists, TP attempts to give new shapes to playground. Thus, the TP project is not simply a reproduction of existing culture, but has an "experimental" nature, to use Quoc Dat's term. As we have already seen, TP has absorbed various theories of play, but moreover, the novelty and creativity of trials to uncover the hidden potential of play can dispel conventional understanding and attract wider attention. Such an open attitude may make it easier to connect with new social actors one after another.

### **(2-3) Simultaneous Development of Practice, Learning, and Dissemination**

Rather than simply working within their peer group, TP has actively engaged in raising people's awareness about the need for children's playgrounds and building networks by

holding workshops for adults, inviting local residents to visit, and working with volunteers. As we saw in Chapter 2, even when they tried to learn and absorb new theories and methods from other experts, they took the form of conferences and workshops to share the learning opportunities with parents and educators.

In Tan Mai project, they have introduced *Minecraft* as a new tool not only to design playground but also to give the role of teaching the elderly to the youth in the community. In Bãl giũa project, TP took on the challenge of making non-commercial Adventure Playground for the first time, and at the same time, young people who were children in 2014 turned to the side of the staff and gained experience as playworkers. In other words, TP maintains practice, learning, dissemination of ideas simultaneous and inseparable, which seems to give TP's "experimental" activities an open character.

## Conclusion

As a part of alternative movements concerned with play spreading worldwide today, TP has been growing rapidly, increasing its social impact by interacting with communities, markets, media, and funding resources. Partly because of the government's negative attitude towards non-profit public projects, their explorations do not look modest but rather wild.

TP's history of seven years, still short but dynamic, reveals that they have been drawing out the potential inherent in play by shedding light on it from a variety of angles. They stimulate people's mindset about play and encourages them to find new dimensions by crossing various values such as creativity, learning, and social bonds. Now we can imagine that play has a wide array of future paths to follow; it can become more and more artistic, or educational, or social etc.

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