The Place Where Children's Dreams Come True

50 Years of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald E.V. association

Sabine Börchers



"Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays."

Friedrich Schiller

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Preface



The Place Where Children's Dreams Come True – 50 Years of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald E.V. association

"Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays." Friedrich Schiller

Preface

Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald is a veritable institution in Frankfurt. For five decades now, it has supported children in the city, offered them entertainment and activities, and contributed to their development. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary, I would like to thank everyone for their active support and commitment. And allow me to add to those thanks my heartfelt congratulations. The fact that the association has existed for so long demonstrates that it always offers something that appeals to children, and which they and their families gladly make use of. Hessen is a strong state at the heart of Europe which stands out for its democratic constitution steeped in the rule of law, its powerful economy, and its rich culture. Frankfurt, Hessen's largest city, is one of the state's powerhouses, and both the city and the state derive their energy from the strengths of the people who live and work here. Anyone who grows up in Frankfurt can enjoy many an experience with Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald that will contribute to their personal development, which is important as it allows those children to walk through life with their heads held high. And that matters to society as a whole, which rests on each and every one of its members.

The children who encountered Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald in its early years have long since become adults. Perhaps they have children of their own who have likewise enjoyed using the services the association offers. And in the coming years and decades, an institution such as this will continue to be an important part of the social life of the city. I would like to take this opportunity to offer Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald my very best wishes for the future.

Boris Rhein

Minister President of the State of Hessen

Preface



Ladies and Gentlemen,

dear Children,

I am delighted to be able to congratulate the team at Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V. today on their 50th jubilee and would like to add that I do very much hope that a great many children in future generations will likewise enjoy unforgettable experiences with you in their free time.

It is now over half a century since the beginning of the summer holidays in 1973 when, with the support of volunteers from among the residents of Riederwald, the adventure playground opened there. With financial backing from the City of Frankfurt, it was not long before the first construction site trailer was procured along with tools and playground equipment.

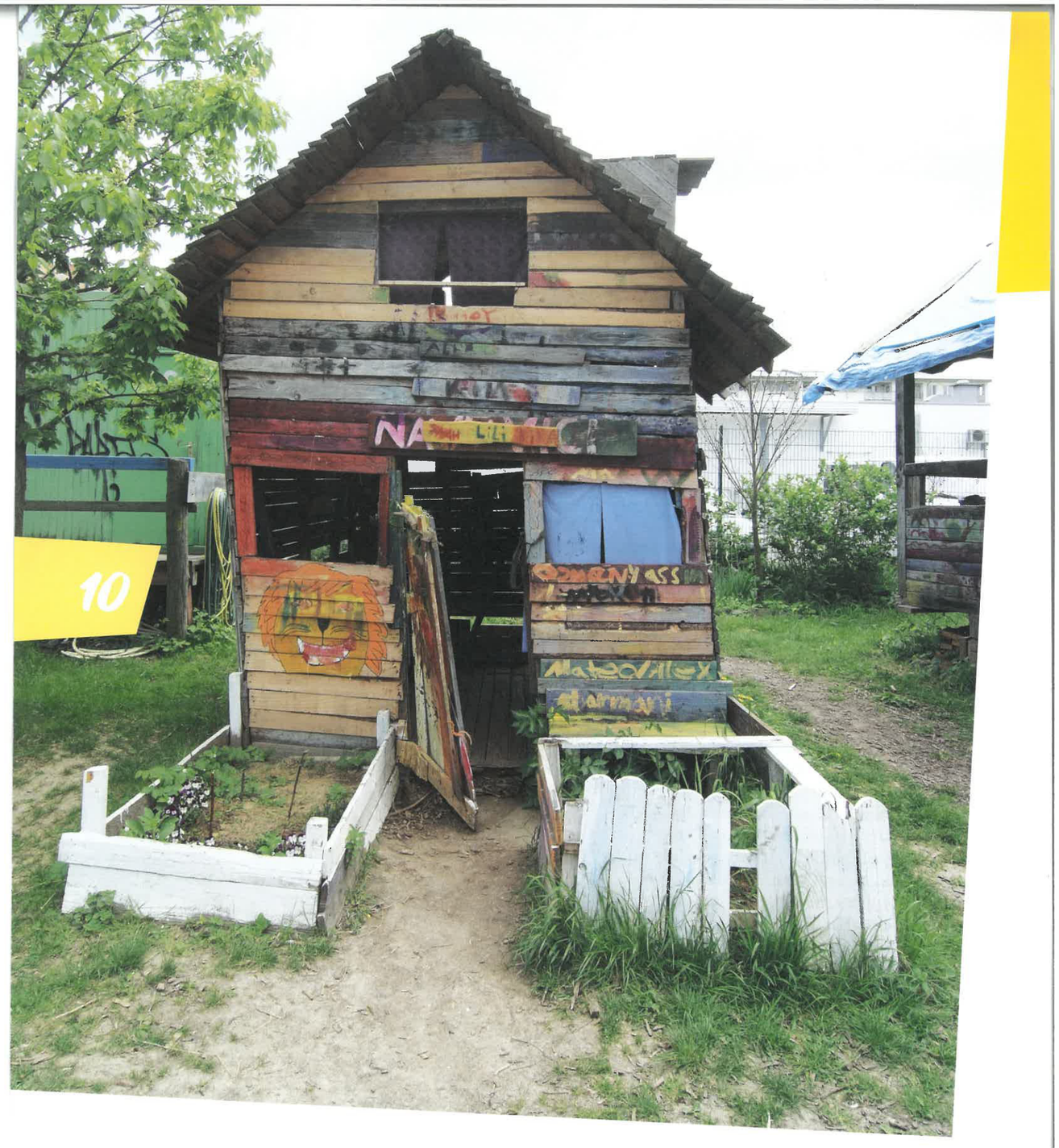
Another important step took place in 1974 with the foundation of the non-profit association "Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V.". In the years that followed, the range of services the association offered was expanded to meet the great demand from parents and children alike. From the outset, the children had a say in things and brought their ideas and imagination to bear in the further development and shape of the playground, for example in the choice of play equipment.

The association can rightly be proud of the services offered today: It now operates three adventure playgrounds managed by educationalists, as well as four "playmobiles" in Frankfurt and one "water-fun van". Through its professional and continuous commitment and in particular its attractive services, Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V. has emerged as the largest cultural events organizer for children in Frankfurt/Main. Some of the playground activities regularly offered have long since become annual "classics" of the association's work, among them the children's culture festival, the "Mainspiele" and "Opernspiele" fun festivals, as well as the "Magical Lights" festival and the St. Martin's Day bonfire.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the dedicated volunteers for their longstanding efforts and wish our "birthday child" all the best as it turns 50.

Mike Josef

Lord Mayor of the City of Frankfurt/Main


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This book tells the story of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association and how the playmobiles and the three adventure playgrounds came to be, not to mention the people who turned the small association into the city's largest enterprise for play and, at the same time, how difficult it has always been to finance the offerings for children through grants and subsidies. In this way, the book of course also tells the story of Michael Paris, the Frankfurt impresario of fun, who, in the final chapter, takes stock and looks ahead at what is to come and what an adventure playground could look like in 50 years' time.

I have tried, by relying on newspaper articles and other publications, to reconstruct the history of the association. Some sections can only be recreated on the basis of Michael Paris's memories. Some of his companions, such as the former and current heads of the adventure playgrounds, have helped flesh out events from various perspectives.

Frankfurt is home to around 130,000 children and young people aged under 18, who together make up about 17 percent of the total population. This is the massive target group, for which the largest organizer of cultural events for kids in the entire Rhine-Main region provides imaginative play services year after year. Its events are a factor strongly in Frankfurt's favor, especially when it comes to encouraging families to settle here. As long as the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald exists, which it hopefully will for many years to come, the German financial capital will preserve a key colorful and fun side to life here.

My thanks go to Michael Paris for the many hours he made available for interviews, to the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association team for the innumerable conversations, information, and photos, and to photographer Rainer Rüffer, who contributed many of the images in this book.

Sabine Börchers

January 2024

Foreword

In our city, the colors yellow and red represent fun for the kids. Virtually any resident of Frankfurt who has children will be familiar with the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald logo. Or the red playmobiles that drive around town bringing pop-up fun and games to locations all over the city. The three adventure playgrounds in the Riederwald, Nordend, and Dornbusch districts have enabled innumerable Frankfurt kids to spend time messing about in the mud, banging about with hammers, or even climbing trees. It is now 51 years since they were first able to do so – and back then it was only in the Riederwald. So long ago, in fact, that today the grandchildren of some of those kids are the ones now clambering about.

The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald non-profit association was founded exactly 50 years ago. It was originally intended simply to be the group running the playground, with educational aims inspired by socialism. Today, it offers a whole host of services, ranging from the playgrounds and the fun weeks on the banks of the Main and on Opernplatz during the summer holidays to trips on pirate boats, fun festivals, and cultural events for kids, through to spring festivals, flea markets, Halloween parties, and lantern walks on St. Martin's Day. In short, the association is a lodestar in the list of what Frankfurt has to offerchildren, and it is pretty unique nationwide for a single association to host vacation-time games weeks on such a scale, let alone the countless other services. Thanks to its active participation in the International Play Association, Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald is known and renowned internationally, too.

Many of the events on offer today arose on the back of a spontaneous idea or because children and parents asked for them to be made available. They started out small and gradually grew to the scale they are at now, often attracting several thousand people, and are thus representative of the entire association, which has meanwhile grown to the size of an SME.

One of the association's initiators remains closely bound up with its story, namely the former Social Democrat politician Michael Paris, who has successfully chaired the association for 50 years now. Together with his team of what are now 15 full-timers and 100 volunteers, he has opened Frankfurt up to fun and games for kids, a goal that the association has pursued since day one. What he and his nevertheless comparatively small team manage to achieve each and every year is more than impressive and frequently goes well beyond what a normal working day could deliver. After all, anyone working for children and seeing the delight in their eyes probably isn't constantly checking when they can clock off.

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This book tells the story of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association and how the playmobiles and the three adventure playgrounds came to be, not to mention the people who turned the small association into the city's largest enterprise for play and, at the same time, how difficult it has always been to finance the offerings for children through grants and subsidies. In this way, the book of course also tells the story of Michael Paris, the Frankfurt impresario of fun, who, in the final chapter, takes stock and looks ahead at what is to come and what an adventure playground could look like in 50 years' time.

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January 2024


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The early days in Riederwald



Children should be able to explore the adult world while playing.

Older Frankfurt citizens no doubt remember how, in their childhood, they played out in the street or possibly even in the rubble and ruins left by war-time bombing raids. In the hustle and bustle of big-city life today, it's hardly possible to let children go out and have fun outside their own front door. If children are to develop freely and learn playfully, they need space and options, a "natural" habitat as it were. It was for this reason, and in the wake of the 1968 student revolt in Germany, that the first adventure playground was created. During those heady days of the student movement, existing educational concepts were questioned, and an open form of children and youth work came into being that tried to improve the sociocultural condition of children's lives as well. At the same time, the idea was to make youth work a central political field. Rural life in villages or on farmsteads was taken as the role model, where still today children experience the environment directly and help shape the world in which they live. Alongside this free creativity, the idea was to enable outcome-oriented play such as building, painting, or crafting things and to explore the adult world by means of role-play. The idea also caught on in Frankfurt, where the urban children's house in Nordweststadt became the first to set up an adventure playground in 1973.

Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald was soon to follow. The initiator, Michael Paris, had at the tender age of 15 helped set up the local arm of the Socialistische Jugend Deutschlands – Die Falken (Socialist Youth of Germany – The Falcons) in the district where he lived: Riederwald. The SJD at the time had set itself the objective of championing political and educational work to promote the realization of socialism. Once a week, the SJD offered opportunities for children and young people to play in a room in the Riederwald Jugendhaus youth club. "Those group sessions didn't really go well. The children didn't really have fun," Paris says, looking back. There was no dedicated room that they could outfit however they liked, and the young visitors, almost all of whom came from working-class backgrounds, also proved to have difficulty concentrating for longer periods. Some were even aggressive, which made it challenging to work with them. In the minutes of a SJD national convention held in Dietzenbach outside Frankfurt, Michael Paris first encountered the concept of construction and/or adventure playgrounds. After conducting in-depth research and attending a training session at the State Association in Hessischer Jugendhof Dörnberg near Kassel, at the end of 1971 he and other members of the SJD district association, all of them between 15 and 16 years old, came up with the idea of creating just such an adventure playground in Riederwald in order to realize the goals of socialist youth work:



"I find it truly remarkable that a private project has managed to offer such services for 50 years now."

JULIA (45)

"We want to create a space in the shape of the adventure playground where the children's behavior could be better used in social and political learning processes than in two-hour group sessions," the later concept stated. And the preamble to the statutes of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V. non-profit association is even clearer: 'All education seeks to introduce the child to its function in society. The current education system is geared towards maintaining the status quo as regards social relations. For this reason, in our society the children of workers are taught to be willing workers without any class consciousness, uncritical consumers and manipulable voters. Socialist education is aimed at changing such relations and aspires to contribute to establishing a socialist social order.'"

An SJD Riederwald project group was set up specially to this end, and it initially engaged with the Social Democrat executive council and the chair of the local advisory council before approaching the municipal authorities. It was hoped there would be strong support from the 5,000-odd inhabitants of Riederwald, most of them working-class families in which both parents went to work.

Just short of 800 children lived in the district at the time, for whom there were 11 playgrounds, albeit with very meager equipment. This was even the case as regards the forest playground there, and as a result the playgrounds tended not to be used. The SJD members hoped this argument would convince the authorities (who initially concluded that the children had sufficient opportunities in the forest grounds to play extensively and undisturbed), or so Michael Paris remembers. "Even among the SJD members there were some who were against all this 'kiddies' stuff'. But among our ranks we had Hans-Jürgen Platt, who was already over 20 years old and was studying social work. He helped us draw up the plans for the concept." With this invaluable assistance, the group also obtained information on existing adventure playgrounds in Berlin and used the experiences gained there with the "Berlin model", as it was called, as the basis for their own plans.

Several years were to pass before the idea could be put into practice. In early 1972, five or six youthful members of the SJD joined up with Hans-Jürgen Platt not only to create the theoretical concept but also to develop ideas together with the kids from the Riederwald youth club. Yet the discussions kept going nowhere due to a lack of time and the respective youth worker changing jobs. At a weekend working session in Naturfreundehaus Billtalhöhe, in 1972 the group then drew up a 12-page discussion paper that was also used for presentations to the authorities, parents, and other organizations. The group skillfully argued with numbers and international comparisons, but did not shy away from criticizing the Frankfurt status quo:



Encouraging an active approach to play

The concept originally hinged on the SJD's goals with their socialist thrust:
"The plan is to give workers' children in Riederwald an opportunity to play in a way that is often no longer possible in our urbanized society. In other words, we intend to offer them unfinished elements of enjoyment and a variety of materials intended to encourage them to play actively and experiment. This means rejecting climbing frames and seesaws that promote passivity. If our educational goals are to ensure children learn to be active, to satisfy their own needs, to understand their family and social situation as workers' children, to defend their interests themselves, and in this way change their own situation in the long term, then they need to be given a framework in which they can achieve those goals."

"The German Olympic Society calls for five square meters of space for sports and recreation per head of population. In most big German cities only 0.5 square meters is available, meaning a tenth of the surface area called for.
In Sweden and England, by contrast, 20 square meters of recreation space is estimated for each inhabitant. (...) Growing urbanization means children are increasingly losing any natural areas in which to play. Playgrounds should theoretically help make up for this and enable children to play in a manner appropriate to them. If children go to a playground to give their sense of play free rein, then such a sense will merely find itself surrounded by the sterile, impersonal steel frames of a playground subjected to coldhearted standardization– and that merely serves to document adults wanting a clear conscience towards children. The playground is designed such that it makes it impossible for the children to indulge in long and intensive play. The children are degraded to the status of mere equipment users."

“Real adventure playground kids have invariably put a nail through a foot.”

PETER (42)



The first ideas for the SJD project.

Erwachsenen den Kindern gegenüber. Der Spielplatz ist so gestaltet, dass (er) ein langes und intensives Spielen der Kinder unmöglich macht. Die Kinder werden zu bloßen Gerätebenutzern.“

Durch Zeitungsberichte und eine einwöchige Ausstellung im Foyer des Bürgerhauses Riederwald im Juni erfuhr auch die Öffentlichkeit erstmals von dem Vorhaben. „Abenteuer auf dem Spielplatz“ titelte damals die Frankfurter Neue Presse und die Frankfurter Rundschau bescheinigte den Falken, ein „heißes Eisen“ aufzugreifen. „Noch nicht einmal ein Drittel aller Kinder bis sechs Jahre spielt auf den herkömmlichen Spielplätzen, auch wenn sich diese in Wohnnähe befinden. Eine Schaukel, eine Wippe oder ein Karussell können die Aktivitäten der Kinder nicht fördern. An den meisten öffentlichen Spielplätzen ist rücksichtslos vorbeigeplant worden und wird immer noch an den Spielbedürfnissen vorbeigeplant“, zitiert die Zeitung den Ortsverbandsleiter Michael Paris, der am Erscheinungstag, dem 2. Juni 1972, 17 Jahre alt war.

Die Falken erhofften sich, nun auch die Behörden und Eltern ins Boot holen zu können. Doch ein Informationsabend, für den sie Dias und Filme vorbereitet hatten, verlief wenig zufriedenstellend. Zu der Veranstaltung erschienen nur zwei Jungsozialisten. Ein ebenfalls zu Werbezwecken organisiertes Kinderfest zum „Tag der offenen Tür“ der Stadt Frankfurt auf dem Gelände am Licht- und Luftbad im Riederwald begeisterte zwar die Kinder, die dort Spielformen eines Abenteuerspielplatzes kennenlernen konnten, stieß aber bei den Eltern trotz Infotafeln und Aktionsständen erneut auf wenig Interesse. Die Gruppe verlegte sich daher aufs Klinkenputzen: „Wir waren beim Stadtbezirksvorsteher, dem damals noch neuen Ortsbeirat, beim Jugendamt und Grünflächenamt. Überall wurden wir kritisch beäugt, so als fragte man sich, können diese Jugendlichen das überhaupt?“ Doch dank ihres Einsatzes gelang es der Spielplatz-Projektgruppe, nach und nach


Spielplatz

Hier wird spielend geworben

Frankfurter Allgemeine

ZEITUNG FÜR DEUTSCHLAND

Mittwoch, 18. Oktober 1972

Hilfe für SPD und Kinder

Ein Luftkissen-Kinderspielplatz

The newspapers covered the project from an early date.

With the local and national elections just around the corner in October and November 1972, the Frankfurt district group found it had the support of the Social Democratic Electoral Initiative, originally founded to drum up support for Willy Brandt in election campaigns and now ready to prove its practical commitment to social democracy “on the ground”. It organized an “election party” in Toni’s “Künstlerkeller” in the Carmelite monastery, where artists such as painter Ferry Ahrlé had made signed prints and posters available for auction. Michael Paris remembers that evening and his first public appearance with a microphone like it was yesterday. “Elmar Gunsch moderated things, and I was supposed to go up to the mike and tell everyone what we wanted to do.” He had prepared a piece of paper with key items on it and held it in his hand behind his back. “Elmar Gunsch simply took it away from me just before I went live and said: Just tell them what’s on your mind.” Despite the sudden shock, the young man soon won over his audience, and the first grant was in the bag.

Ferry Ahrlé had also been busy “painting the pavement” outside Katharinenkirche with his ideas for a “more human city” and had readily collected money from all and sundry. All in all, close to 5,000 deutschmarks were raised. The day after the “election party”, Michael Paris and his companions were summoned to the office of the Lord Mayor Rudi Arndt, so he remembers. The politician promised, to their great delight, that he would privately round the figure up to 10,000 deutschmarks. “He went over to the cupboard and took out a roll of bills for us.” With this massive sum at their disposal, the project group decided they first needed to celebrate and downed a couple of beers in the bar opposite – and then discussed at great length whether they should or should not pay for the drinks from the 10,000 deutschmarks or not.

The Youth Welfare Office finally indicated it would be ready to help if the adventure playground was to open during the 1973 summer vacation. After further discussions and negotiations, as well as a letter to Martin Berg as Head of the Social Welfare Department in which the initiators outlined their ideas for the desired grounds, the local advisory council assigned them a site of nearly 5,000 square meters in spring 1973 in the middle of the forest. Thanks to the firm plans for how the grounds would be used, the City Council was also persuaded and, following a motion tabled by the Social Democrats (SPD), agreed to provide 20,000 deutschmarks from an extraordinary budget to support the adventure playground for children aged four to 14.

From wasteland playground to educational adventure

Adventure playgrounds first arose in Germany at the end of the 1960s in order to provide new space for children in inner cities. Post-war reconstruction had focused on industrial areas and much-needed housing, often in the form of satellite towns that were functional but offered little quality of life for children. An adventure playground requires social workers or educationalists to be on site and can have two focuses: building wooden huts (construction playground) and interaction between humans and animals (children's farm). Danish landscape gardener Carl Theodor Sørensen created the prototype for the adventure playground during the war, in 1943 in Copenhagen. He had noticed that children preferred to play on scrap heaps and wasteland and was thus inspired to design "skrammellegepladsen" (scrap playgrounds), which then evolved into "byggelegepladsen" (construction playgrounds). In 1948 the term "adventure playground" first cropped up in London and Manchester. In Amsterdam, a first adventure playground was created in the early 1950s in an effort to involve street children. The "Jeugdland" (Youth Land), as it is called, straddles a full 40,000 square meters of space and still exists. The first children's farm in Germany was founded in 1962 near Stuttgart, while the country's first construction playground was established by students in Berlin in 1967 – the Märkischer Viertel, which also served as a role model for the adventure playground in Riederwald. In Hamburg, North Rhine-Westphalia, and in a few localities in other states in West Germany, parents' initiatives, educationalists, or students created countless such playgrounds, and by 1990 there were around 400 of them, with most concentrated in the conurbations. Bund der Jugendfarmen und Aktivspielplätze e.V. currently lists around 200 such facilities.



The plan: to create an adventure playground in the Riederwald woods.

Work commences

Now the time had come to realize the plans. First of all, the entire grounds had to be cleared and a fence erected from old railway sleepers. "It was hard physical labor, and we members of the SJD put in three or four entire weekends. Usually, it was the same group of people," recalls Michael Paris. In total, some 30 volunteers took part, putting in 1,500 hours of work, one report states. The then Chair of the Sub-District for the SJD, Christian Tschierschke, as well as the SJD Treasurer for Riederwald, Arno Roth, were both involved. For the sand and mud zone, large conduits filled with gravel were sunk five meters into the ground so that the water could seep away. "On the day, there were only three of us in the forest, and it rained – that was pretty frustrating. We toiled away all day long," Michael Paris recalls. In the evening, they treated themselves to a warm meal at Haus Riederwald and then made an exception by drinking a schnapps paid for by the kitty.



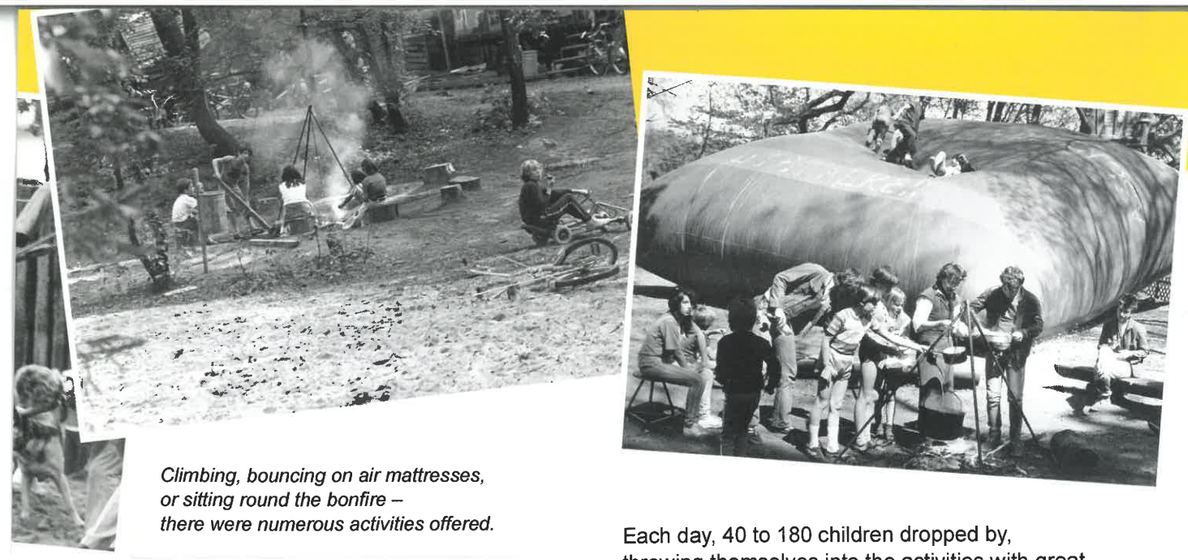
Children were to be involved in designing the playground from the outset.



The SJD used flyers to advertise the playground.



For all the challenges, they managed to get the ground ready in time and to kit out a construction trailer as a storage room, paint it colorfully, install a painting wall inside, and build a gate by way of an entranceway. The Parks Department laid a water pipe, provided supplementary fencing, and supplied the sand. Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald opened on Monday, July 9, 1973, at 10 a.m., just in time for the start of the summer vacation. On the association's request, the Municipal Schools Department distributed no fewer than 10,000 leaflets to schools in the surrounding districts, ensuring a high level of interest. The SJD invitation had said that children should "also have an opportunity to break things now and again without immediately being told off. They should learn how to survive dangers, understand rules, overcome problems, accept failure, make and realize plans, take possession of things, gain friends, and make their own decisions. All the possible activities such as building cabins, digging caves, making fires, painting, crafting various things, etc. are not meant as purposes in themselves but to convey processes of social learning."



Climbing, bouncing on air mattresses, or sitting round the bonfire – there were numerous activities offered.

The children immediately made the space in Riederwald their own. On the grounds in the forest, they were able to build huts, dig caves, play in the sand and mud, and paint to their hearts' content. "In the beginning, there was a huge heap of planks. The kids even nailed planks to trees and built treehouses. There was a small pine forest, like a natural labyrinth. But they also sawed down some trees and cleared the grounds further – those were pretty wild days," remembers John Leicher, who is now in charge of the adventure playground. There's a pit for making fires and a free zone with an inflatable cushion sized about ten-by-ten meters. "It takes two to three hours to inflate it, so we only filled it by about one third, and then the kids started jumping from the tree onto the airbag." Together, the team and young visitors used old car tires and ropes to build two swings and to create spaces to be used for carving and working with breeze blocks.

Each day, 40 to 180 children dropped by, throwing themselves into the activities with great enthusiasm. The first huts were soon completed, only for outsiders to destroy them at night or over the weekend – yet the space and the wood for building huts soon ran out. Leicher remembers how the kids used to hide their tools so that they would be able to use them the next morning. Some things got lost. The mud area was another great attraction, with dams getting built along with gutter channels. After ten weeks, the summer on the adventure playground came to an end on September 23 with a kids' party by way of a retrospective inauguration celebration. Singer-songwriter Fredrik Vahle, back then still together with his partner Christiane Knauf, played for the kids, performing songs that were cheeky and funny, and always decidedly leftist. The duo also had decidedly agitator objectives and hoped, for example, that the younger generation would create a better society; hence, their political children's songs addressed topics that were otherwise taboo, such as unemployment or xenophobia.

Educational concept

The concept behind the Frankfurt adventure playgrounds is geared towards children of all ages themselves designing a specific, large playground area: There are few, if any, toys, meaning the grounds can be designed and continuously redesigned. The unstructured, open surroundings encourage kids to experiment, explore, and take risks. They can garner experiences with different materials and develop their own crafts and creative skills.

Almost in passing, they learn load-bearing and mechanical laws and familiarize themselves with ecological cycles and contexts. The underlying idea of the adventure playgrounds is to give kids a sense of happiness, self-confidence, and social skills, thus promoting their independence. In order to successfully design the playgrounds and exploit their full potential, above all qualified staff are required who encourage the kids without directing them and only intervene if necessary.

Since the staff are role models, it is key that their presence is guaranteed long term. They take care to ensure that the playground rules set by the kids are adhered to, and in their role use conversation and experience to offer alternative forms of behavior. The affection they show is destined to create an atmosphere that fosters the children's willingness to change how they behave. In all of this, the children need time more than anything, and first have to be able to do things wrong in order to find the right path.



Michael Paris, Arno Roth, and even at that early date, John Leicher were at hand to look after the kids during the vacation period, along with two older temporary staff members provided by the Youth Welfare Office. The latter also provided additional wood, tools, and breeze blocks for the kids to build things with, along with pots of paint. The two staffers from the Youth Welfare Office were both at university studying education but were neither SJD members nor did they know the kids. Their involvement was therefore eyed with a touch of suspicion, as they "lacked the motivation to work with the kids (they simply considered the work a vacation job)", or so we can read in the retrospective produced by the SJD to mark the fifth anniversary of the adventure playground. The report also includes an element of self-criticism, for example that the organizers had not managed to involve parents more intensively in the project. On the positive side, the children "learned swiftly and by themselves how to use tools. There were no major accidents – if one excludes the fact that some children now and again managed to step on nails. There was gratifying communication between the boys and the girls, who often built things or played together." In other words, there were sufficient reasons to continue the project through to the end of the autumn break. "Arno Roth and I were tied down preparing for our high school graduation exams, but the Youth Welfare Office provided two temporary paid staffers for that period," Michael Paris recalls.



The bonfire site on the grounds was an attraction from the outset, and that remains the case today.

The problem with retaining staff was a persistent one. Even at the opening, it had not been clear whether the City of Frankfurt would be willing to finance a trained person to staff the adventure playground for the following year. As a result, Michael Paris put out a call for donations for the first time. “The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald lacks money, tools, and materials. Give your imagination free rein and remember what you did when you were kids. Your donations are tax-deductible (...),” he wrote in the first press release.

The best solution: Founding a non-profit association

In September 1973, the SPD members on the relevant local advisory council advocated the creation of two budgeted positions for educationalists or social workers for the adventure playground for the following year. Only then would it be possible to implement the didactic concept, so they argued. The City Council then approved one such budgeted position for the following April, with the position being attached to Jugendhaus Riederwald since the SJD was not an official non-profit entity. It was thus the managers of the Jugendhaus, namely the “Haus der offenen Tür” association, who decided not only who would fill the position but also the educational concept to be realized. The SJD in Riederwald, who wanted the education offered to also be socialist in thrust, were not keen on suddenly having no say in the matter. And they feared that the municipal authorities would use the Jugendhaus to seize control of the adventure playground in its entirety.

The SJD initially protested against the arrangement by printing flyers. “We have proven that we can manage the Abenteuerspielplatz in the interest of the kids and are able to work with them in educational terms,” they wrote. After all, the Youth Welfare Office had made it clear to them that there were only two different ways to deal with the situation: either to accept that the Jugendhaus would assume management of the facility or themselves found an association, so Paris recalls. And the project group decided in favor of the latter approach in order to manage the adventure playground itself. “So, there we were, aged 18, asking ourselves what you had to do to set up an association. We wanted to be revolutionary and not subordinate ourselves to the administrative powers that be.” But now they had to draw up statutes, find a sufficient number of people who wanted to be members, and then get official recognition as an independent provider of youth welfare in order to be eligible to receive grants from the city.

By April 9, 1974, all the groundwork had been laid and Verein Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V. was officially established. Its management board was made up of Michael Paris, Christian Tschierschke, and Arno Roth. The initiators created the statutes on the basis of their original concept paper, including the socialist ideas contained therein. Yet the Tax Office refused to



Abenteuer um einen Spielplatz

Die CDU wollte einem von „Falken" getragenen Spielplatz das Geld entziehen

The association also had to contend with political opposition.

accept this, as a non-profit association had to be open to anyone and everyone. They thereupon reformulated the overtly political thrust in a preamble: "Socialist education has as its goal changing conditions and seeks to contribute to establishing a socialist social order. In doing so, it particularly addresses those who are most affected by the injustice of the capitalist system: working-class children," it stated. Nevertheless, they had already submitted the first version of the statutes to the District Court, and the wording had been entered in the register of non-profit organizations. "Evidently it never got changed. Which is why ten years ago I lost a bet for a bottle of champagne with Conservative City Councilor Jochem Heumann, who claimed the original wording was still there. We thereupon had the statutes amended," Michael Paris narrates.

In Jörg Jonas, a full-time playground manager was appointed for the period from June to September; he was an SJD member but had previously worked for the Youth Welfare Office and therefore represented the interests of both sides. Additional funding on the part of the city was only forthcoming for the vacation project, and then only to the tune of 6,000 deutschmarks. In the first year, Jonas was still under contract to Jugendhaus, and it was not until 1975 that the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald non-profit was recognized as an independent organization and was therefore able to assume responsibility for managing the facility.

Nevertheless, the second year of the adventure playground activities was again successful. Up to 150 children messed around on the grounds each day. "All of them had an opportunity to build huts, make a fire, build dams, and get muddy to their hearts' content. There were no limits to the imagination, with the result being that individual huts soon added up to a veritable children's village, where at lunchtime soup was cooked over an open fire," wrote the Riederwald Kurier on September 5, 1974. Excursions and weekend trips were also organized as well as a large kids' party to celebrate World Children's Day. In total, between June 18 and November 31 a total of 4,500 children flocked to the grounds, including kindergarten groups.

After the financially difficult year, in 1975 a grant of no fewer than 54,000 deutschmarks was approved by the City of Frankfurt, of which 40,000 deutschmarks alone went for the payroll costs for the full-time social worker, a part-time educationalist, and hires on an hourly basis for vacation time. The Parks Department had a table-tennis table and a swing installed, and for the first time the association was now running the facility, ensuring it opened in the afternoons from 2 until 6 p.m. from March 22 to December and all day long during the vacations. This had been preceded by almost 40 meetings with the various civic authorities the prior year, as Michael Paris stated at the association's first AGM. At that time, he had not yet even graduated from high school but already had his first employee, as he likes to say today with a smile. "For the salary payments we relied on the printed tax tables, and for our accounts we used a diary that covered the whole desktop." After graduating from high school, he had to do social welfare service in lieu of military service and hit upon the idea of creating a social welfare service position for the adventure playground and performing his duties there. In order to make that possible at such short notice, he had to rely on contacts. The SJD asked the then SPD Federal German Minister of Finance Hans Matthöfer to fast-track the decision pending at the Federal Office for Social Welfare Service. And he did, meaning that Michael Paris was able to continue to work for the adventure playground and during that time was quite literally his own boss.

Children's Day

The adventure playground celebrated Children's Day for the first time in 1974. Originally resolved as a charter in 1924 by the then General Assembly of the League of Nations, the day was established to focus attention on the protection and well-being of children. The charter also included socialist goals, and in Germany it was primarily the workers' movement that championed the celebration of Children's Day. In 1954, the UN General Assembly recommended to its member states that a World Children's Day be established, and today more than 145 countries mark it. Germany chose September 20 as World Children's Day, and 20 years later in its founding year the adventure playground celebrated a children's festival. There was a café for children and adults with cakes, pudding, grilled sausages, and Caro coffee everyone prepared. There were booths for darts, hitting nails, and painting, and the large air mattress was a major attraction. To this day, the SJD celebrates Children's Day in Ostpark – with the support of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association. Since 2002, the 10th anniversary of the adventure playground in Günthersburg, the association has also celebrated a children's festival each year in the neighboring park, which since 2003 has been called the "World Children's Day Festival". (Photos: Riederwald 18-19, World Children's Day).



A great children's festival was organized for World Children's Day.



"I myself played here as a child; now I bring my son here. Liam was not even three when we first used the ropeway together. He can develop creatively here, and I can relax because my child can be what he wants to be. If he's covered in dirt, then I know he's had fun."

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In 1975, the facility attracted just as many children as the prior year. And there was a new activity on offer in the summer and fall school holidays: The kids were taken to view a lemonade factory and a farm in order to get an idea of the world of adult work. While it remained difficult to establish closer contact with the parents of kids from Riederwald and even harder to motivate them to get their hands dirty and take part, the Frankfurt general public showed a great interest in the project, as can be seen from the many newspaper articles on it that came out. Even ZDF TV reported on the adventure playground in its "Schüler Express" program.

Ideological battles

The SJD not only had to contend initially with countless challenges when running the adventure playground but also handle political resistance to the project. The concept of free fun and games and the wish to raise children in line with socialist ideals was a thorn in the side of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) on the district administrative council. As early as 1976, it demanded for the first time that municipal grants for the playground be scaled back – by that time it was open 238 days a year and visited by more than 6,000 children from all over eastern Frankfurt. The CDU members resorted to populist arguments, claiming, for example, that the social workers were only "deployed as park security" and could just as easily be replaced by pensioners, for whom a far lower grant would be required. They also suggested the concept of an adventure playground was "if only in terms of logic, not compatible with social workers providing intense guidance for children, as this would only disturb the children's creativity at play and their self-realization." Michael Paris responded, accusing the CDU of "destroying progressive educational work by withdrawing financial assistance." Inhabitants of the district simply laughed at the idea of using pensioners on the adventure playground, or so the annual report prepared by the full-time playground manager Hartwig Wendel read. The CDU's motion was eventually rejected.

One year later, the CDU led by Walter Wallmann had won an absolute majority in the March local elections, and the CDU members of the local advisory council tried once again to scupper the project. This time, they argued that paying a social worker from tax money was not appropriate as the association sought "to politically influence the children who play there on the basis of Marxism". Youth work hitherto provided in Frankfurt, they claimed, was "one-sidedly Marxist", and the municipal grant should be chopped from 82,100 to 35,000 deutschmarks. Since the SDP and the Liberals (FDP) still had a majority on the local advisory council, the motion was again rejected. Many of the other non-profit organizations in Riederwald had sided with the adventure playground, and the news broke just in time for its barbecue, originally planned to be held with the members of the local advisory council, District Chair Heide Jost, and many representatives of the association as an image promotion and protest event, which thus turned into an evening of celebrations. Nevertheless, the wind had changed in local politics.



Older boys liked to gather round the bonfire.

On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the playground, which the association marked by printing a brochure that included the statutes and the overtly political preamble, the CDU councilors in the City Council tabled an official question for the Municipal Administration: Did the latter consider it correct that, at a playground designed for all children, "the support staff sought to indoctrinate them with a view to undermining our social system?" And whether it could be certain that children whose parents did not wish their children to be exposed to socialist indoctrination could use the adventure playground without being affected by this. Otherwise, the municipal grants provided should be withdrawn as swiftly as possible. A statement by the executive officer responsible, SPD member Martin Berg, who pointed to the "independence of organizers" as per the Youth Welfare Act, did not satisfy the Municipal Administration. CDU City Treasurer Ernst Gerhardt believed, given the association's objectives, it had exceeded the "scope of tolerance", according to which as many children as possible should be able to use a facility receiving support. What counted was whether the association was indeed educating according to socialist standards.



Bonfires forbidden" was declared in 1979.

At short notice, the then CDU party member who headed the Municipal Human Resources Department, Wolfram Brück, was instructed to formulate the response to the CDU enquiry on behalf of the Municipal Administration. He wrote that the commemorative treatise might suggest such a thrust, but that there "is no confirmation of such a thrust in the practical support work provided". Should there be any doubts, he continued, the Municipal Administration would review the grants. The report was approved by a majority vote. The organizers of the adventure playground had survived to tell another tale. "We had it in black and white that we were too dumb to realize our concept in line with our intentions," jokes Michael Paris today.

Abenteuerspielplatz – the first five years

Meanwhile, in the space of only a few years the facility had developed into a fixed institution in Frankfurt. The children often headed there straight after school, did their homework in the cabin they had built, and then enjoyed playing together and building things until early evening. For their parents, the adventure playground became a place where they knew their kids were well looked after. In 1977, the facility remained open all year round, even though the uncertainty over grants and financing meant that fewer staff had been hired as a precautionary measure. It only closed each evening when darkness fell. In the winter months, the staff and two primary school teachers financed by the Labor Office offered additional homework support for pupils in grades one to five in order to support disadvantaged children, and the idea was also to encourage the pupils to help one another and to identify possible learning weaknesses and solve difficulties "in a climate of willingness to help and understanding". "After the three years – the period during which the Labor Office posted the teachers to us as part of a job-creation scheme – we did not receive follow-up funding from the city, which is why we then had to discontinue this service," reports Michael Paris.

On the occasion of the 5th anniversary, the association arranged two days of celebrations, commencing with a flea market and barbecue evening on Saturday, July 8, and continuing the next day despite heavy rain – with a tram ride and a kids' party featuring games booths and a balloon-flying competition. With the guest performance at Theater am Turm featuring a decidedly controversial play on "We don't talk about that", addressing sexuality and the body, the association once again proved that it championed a progressive ideology. Around 150 children and young people joined in the celebrations, and 60 of them even overnighted in tents on the grounds.



The kids protested on an old fire service truck on Paulsplatz.

Instead of ideological discussions, what then followed were difficulties with the city administration, a "continuation of the political debate with different means," as Michael Paris puts it. The Parks & Gardens Department forbade the use of the permanent bonfire site as of March 1979, stressing that it had never given verbal approval for it in the first place. A treehouse erected in one of the forest trees years before was also pinpointed for demolition. "Police officers patrolled the area on an almost daily basis and asked whether we had complied with the directive, Michael Paris wrote in a newspaper article. At the same time, the City Press and Information Office had just used the adventure playground and an image of the treehouse and the bonfire square as advertising in the city's new image brochure "18 bis 35 – Frankfurt für junge Erwachsene" (Frankfurt for Young People).

An application for a grant from the State Youth Office for a total of 15,000 deutschmarks, destined to pay for some of the staff, was held up on a desk in the Parks & Gardens Department for three months before being forwarded to the state authorities. Moreover, the key to the gate to access the grounds was withheld even though the association had police authorization for delivery trucks and vans to access the site, Paris reports.

In July 1979, shortly before the next vacation program was due to start, the SJD organized a protest in front of Paulskirche with two former fire service vehicles and corresponding leaflets opposing the closure of the bonfire site. For this, at least, a solution was found: The association was allowed to apply to the Department of Public Order for a permit. Even with this rough wind in their faces, the Abenteuerspielplatz team was not deterred and went from one success to the next. The vacation activities increasingly attracted kids from other parts of town, and as well as building huts and enjoying the mud and games, during the vacation they were likewise able to build a ropeway, an oven, and join a photo group. Lunch was also provided for about 40 kids each day. The winter program was similarly expanded and included museum visits and trips. Homework support was provided regularly for between ten and 15 children whose parents were at work, partly with the support of teachers at Pestalozzischule, who felt the service was a meaningful addition.

Even in the early years, the playground team also had to contend with problems, for example when the cabins and huts built by the children were damaged or torn down outside opening hours, meaning children lost interest in continuing their building projects. Things also got stolen, and there were tough conflicts between young people and children. Discussions with parents of more difficult youths proved unsuccessful, with some having to be banned temporarily from the grounds. The team also often found their work difficult due to a lack of staff. "This case also clearly shows that pedagogically supportive work is only possible if you have a large enough team," the annual report states.

The first ten years and the battle to survive

The next jubilee year was just around the corner, but the association saw no cause for celebration; once again it was fighting for survival. The Youth Department had resolved in 1983 to pay equal-sized grants to the organizers of the adventure playgrounds, namely Riederwald, the Jugendsozialwerk, and the Elterninitiative Sachsenhausen. For the adventure playground in Riederwald, that meant funding was cut by 7,000 to a total of 70,000 deutschmarks, which put the winter program with trips and museum visits at risk.

Looking after infants - for a while

In the first few years, the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association was like a family for Michael Paris, but in 1980 he started a family of his own with the birth of his son Patrick. At the time, he was working full-time as SJD District Managing Director. Since some of the couples with whom he was friends also had children, they had the idea of setting up a nursery for one- to three-year-olds under the aegis of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association. Ellen Berg, who was one of Michael Paris's friends, took charge of it as part of a sandwich course, and the day nursery opened on February 9, 1982. At first, seven infants were "regulars", but other parents in the neighborhood were also interested. In order to be able to accept more infants, the friends' project had to be put on a professional footing, so a room was found in Riederwald, on the corner of Schäfflerstrasse and Raiffeisenstrasse. The association assigned Petra Heckler to take care of fitting it out. From 1990, a childcare unit for three- to six-year-olds was added. There was no other comparable service in the district, so there was high demand, as the press reported. "At peak times, there were about 30 children in the nursery. When my two sons moved on to school, we passed the responsibility for it on to other parents and a new association", remembers Michael Paris.



The first children's culture festival was held to mark the association's 15th anniversary.



A riot of color at the children's culture festival.

The municipal grant had been cut in preceding years anyway, from 92,500 deutschmarks in 1981 to 86,000, and then to 77,360. "Since, at that time, we were not able to generate any revenues ourselves from running the playground, we were 100-percent dependent on grants, meaning that cuts of ten percent really hurt," says Paris. All that remained was to cut expenditure. An internship which, in prior years, enabled social education graduates to do their one-year practical work was simply abolished. That left the person in charge of the playground and two slots for people performing social work in lieu of military service, which was not enough to guarantee year-round activities. For the first time, the adventure playground closed during the winter, meaning no homework support or recreational activities could be provided either. In the fall of 1983, it was not clear whether the association would be able to re-open the playground in March of the following year. "Back then, we struggled for funding every year. That only changed once we were eventually able to earn our own money with the playmobile."



The staff continued to think up new ideas for the vacation program at the adventure playground, such as a circus, building a block cabin, a theater stage with backdrops that the municipal theater had jettisoned, and even a vegetable patch. In 1985, thanks to funding from the Labor Office, an additional educationalist was hired. Another was expected to drive the adventure playground to other districts of town on an automobile trailer – the playmobile was born.

A playhouse for Riederwald

Initially, only a construction site trailer had been available to house the staff and materials at the adventure playground. Over time, it was replaced by prefabricated garages and a container, but by the mid-1980s these were also pretty decrepit, so a new building was needed. A permanent playhouse would mean the adventure playground could operate in winter, too, or so the association realized, and planning commenced in 1987. To mark the 15th anniversary of the facility, the idea was to build it in the summer of 1988 at a cost of 200,000 deutschmarks. Initially, the Youth Department rejected the concept, but a little later Michael Paris at least managed to get agreement from the State of Hessen that it would cover one third of the costs.



Breaking ground for the playhouse.



In 1991, Hans Eichel, as Minister President of the State of Hessen, was present alongside Michael Paris and City of Frankfurt Cultural Mayor Linda Reisch to welcome guests to the festival.

On May 16, 1989, the "Wäldchestag", a large children's culture festival, was held in Frankfurt to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the association and also five years of the "Red Falcon" playmobile. The event, featuring music, theater, and clowns, attracted 3,000 visitors, as did the attractions of the playmobile, the booths presenting SG Riederwald and Bernemer Käwwern, and a staff member disguised as a red falcon, who ran around the Riederwaldwiese meadow. It was the right moment to present the model of the playhouse, designed to resemble a circus building by Paris's wife, architect Kerstin Richter. It was to have masonry walls and a roof made of zinc sheeting, with glass to provide lots of light. The interior was to be about 100 square meters in size and have wooden paneling. To finance it, the association sold small playmobile models at the festival for ten deutschmarks each, with three deutschmarks going into the playhouse kitty.

At the local elections at the beginning of the year, the CDU lost its majority after 12 years in office. The association hoped that the new Lord Mayor Volker Hauff and the Social Democrat-Green coalition on the City Council would enable construction of the playhouse and provide more funding for staff. While building permission for the structure was approved, as Paris told the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper, in April 1990 Green Party member Tom Königs, who was then head of the Environment Department, The association hoped that the new Lord Mayor Volker Hauff and the Social Democrat-Green coalition on the City Council would enable construction of the playhouse and provide more funding for staff. While building permission for the structure was approved, as Paris told the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper, in April 1990 Green Party member Tom Königs, who was then head of the Environment Department, intervened. Since the playground was in a nature reserve, nothing could be constructed there, he declared, and said that a permit by way of exception would only be forthcoming under certain conditions: The playhouse could not be a permanent structure, so it had to be built of wood. The association was hardly enthusiastic, as it feared someone might set the playhouse alight. Huts and the wooden pirate ship had already fallen victim to arson on the site. "In the 14 years since we started, we had seen four mid-to-severe acts of arson on the playground," Paris stated back then. He nevertheless agreed to have the architect's plans revised.

"My son experienced his very first bonfire here, aged three and a half. I enjoy taking my guitar along, and we then play music round the fire. We're here at least once a week. It's like a village, and you make new friends here."

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The pool with the homemade bridge system.

John Leicher at the tools issue desk and a visitor getting water.

The children's culture festival became a permanent fixture and is celebrated every year on Wäldchestag in Riederwald. By contrast, the playhouse became something of a permanent construction site. Not until 1992 was Michael Paris at last able to present the plans to the local advisory council responsible and state publicly that the financing of what was now 350,000 deutschmarks had been secured. The city provided a grant of 220,000 deutschmarks and paid off the rest in installments. Construction was set to commence in February, but groundbreaking did not start until mid-March. The pace then picked up: In April the topping-out was celebrated, and the building was complete by summer. It was not officially opened with a children's festival until the following April, when the new season started.

At the end of the day, it was built of stone. "We opted out of a timber building because of the risk of fire," Michael Paris explains. The final result was an octagonal building some 7.5 meters high with a wooden roof and glass bricks – and it stands to this day on the playground and is of course painted in the association's colors, red and yellow. It houses storerooms for materials, toilets, a childcare room, a kitchen where everyone cooks and bakes together, and a large common room.

The playground today

To this day, the adventure playground is in a process of constant change. Huts are being built, others torn down. The pirate ship, once constructed with great effort, grew rotten and was taken down. A new one is already being planned. Experimenting and trying new things is welcomed. The 30-meter-plus Bobby car track is used so intensively that it has to be renewed every two years. The tree that held Frankfurt's longest ropeway, which went right across the square, also had to be felled, as its roots were dead. The rope will in future be attached to a metal post. Where in winter there is plenty of mud to mess around in, there's a shallow swimming pool in the summer thanks to piles of hand-filled sandbags, where the kids can have fun and cool down. Two young colleagues from the playmobile unit have purpose-built a slide that runs down into the pool. To this day, it's hard to protect the grounds at the weekends, although they're surrounded by a fence and railway sleepers. "When, last Monday, we arrived at the grounds, somebody had kicked the pool to bits, and this was the second time it's happened," says site manager John Leicher, who finds such behavior utterly incomprehensible.

Fortunately, the treehouse labyrinth is just as it always was. Four towers and a bridging system were constructed by the big and small master builders and clad with boards so that you can run along narrow pathways, some of which end suddenly. "The kids love to race through them and squirt each other with water pistols." And just as much, they enjoy sitting around the bonfire, which is lit almost every day on the bonfire site in the middle of the grounds, except in high summer when it's too hot and dry for it. It's the meeting point for everyone when there's campfire





bread being handed out, old nails need to be reforged, or the steam cannon is revved up. At the back of the garden, the high-octane master builders have constructed a large bridge system. "They were so ambitious, as they wanted their bridge to fly over another one," Leicher explains. They therefore built their structure three-to-four meters up, including the protective railings. Not exactly a simple project, and it goes to show just what young master builders can create when they team up. Immediately next to it is a wooden bus that the kids have also covered in boards and painted yellow so that it resembles an American school bus. "The kids sit in it and dream up their own worlds," comments John Leicher. "I drop in now and again and ask to see their driver's licenses."

Training

For years now, the association has been training people in the social welfare professions. The adventure playgrounds offer an opportunity for sandwich-course internships or a year-long traineeship as part of the qualifications to become a social worker or social educationalist. "In the past, we regularly had students doing their practical year with us, as the University of Applied Sciences explicitly addressed the vocational field of adventure playgrounds. Today's students do not even know we exist, so we need to do more advertising," Michael Paris states. Moreover, the association can also train people in event management or commercial administration. "That said, we never actively tried to attract interns, usually they simply come by and apply." Just under ten young men and women have thus trained at the association. "Today, they're all event managers. To date, we've only trained one commercial administrator." At present, the position is vacant.



Children present what the found on the grounds as part of a panel.





Gingerbread house and the Pow-Wow Festival

"When children play, it is often not without a purpose; rather, it is an attempt to imitate and understand the adult world in an imaginative way that benefits kids."

The stage on which the big adventure playground Halloween party is celebrated each year was built by one young man doing his social service in lieu of military service. The small gingerbread house was also built for Halloween; today, bereft of its colorful decorations, it somehow looks like a church. The blood-curdling stage show for Halloween with 30 actors, kids and adults, attracts several thousand visitors each year. On offer are a ghost train, a huge bonfire, a monster relay race, the labyrinth, a monster disco, and even graveyard decorations with skeletons, gravestones, and two genuine old coffins.

The only event that is bigger is the Pow-Wow Festival, which has also been held for many years. "I wanted us to be more visible in the district," says Michael Paris, which is why the festival was located in Riederwald's outdoor swimming baths, and to this day the participants attend traditionally in the costumes of indigenous peoples. After all, a pow-wow is a people's festival held by Native Americans and has a tradition that goes back over a century; there's lots of singing and dancing, honors are bestowed, and key family events are celebrated. "Since John Leicher is himself of Native American descent, we continue to celebrate it and show his culture our respect," emphasizes Michael Paris when responding to public reservations that children shouldn't wear such costumes any longer.

At the adventure playground, great importance is attached to cooking and baking together. There's the kitchen in the playhouse for precisely this purpose, and funds come from the "Educational lunch" project introduced by the City of Frankfurt in 2009. Naturally, there's a great vacation program, be it at Easter, in the summer or the fall. In the woods in Riederwald, there's an annual tradition of collecting trash, with more than 100 big and small trash collectors usually taking part. There are also the trips together, most recently to the "Indianer-Hotel" in the Rhön. "In 1990, we did a canoeing trip on the Lahn River and overnighted on islands or in yacht clubs," John Leicher recalls. "Or we headed to Seligenstadt by bike, but the kids no longer manage that."





The goulash stove in Riederwald. The 50th anniversary was duly celebrated in 2023.

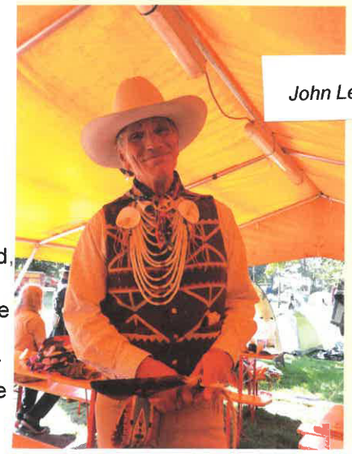
The adventure playground attracted almost 18,000 visitors in 2022, a good 14,000 of them kids. While they once first came when aged six or older, these days younger children also come to enjoy themselves accompanied by parents. In 2022, more than a quarter of the kids were in the under-six age bracket. There are almost as many girls as boys, with 60 percent of them coming from Riederwald and the remainder from other districts of town or from outside. It is not only individual kids who come to Riederwald, but also entire schools from Frankfurt and the vicinity, even from as far afield as Aschaffenburg. "Definitely at least 15 each school year," Leicher estimates. Children's birthday parties are increasingly being celebrated here, and for some time now, companies have also liked to use the adventure playground for a "social day". "Sometimes it's a blast, and the groups build amazing things. Or we once had a pharma corporation with 50 people from all over the world coming here, and it was great to chat with them," Leicher says. "But sometimes we have 20 people from a bank here, and they don't even know how to hold a hammer. And once there were bankers who, instead of cooking with the kids at noon, dialed up a catering service with all the frills."

„I grew up in Riederwald“

Noah grabs his water pistol and squirts John Leicher. “C’mon, play with me,” he demands, and waits for a response, while Leicher’s T-shirt gets ever wetter. The manager of the adventure playground doesn’t react and simply holds his gaze. Not until the water is running down his pants does he suggest to the four-year-old that maybe he could first check out the bonfire, and John will be along in a moment. Such attacks certainly don’t fluster John Leicher; he’s experienced so many of them. After all, he’s been manager of Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald for more than 20 years, and he’s been linked to the facility ever since it opened 50 years ago.
Leicher was a member of the very first team that was on site to welcome kids to the new grounds in the summer of 1973. Back then, it was all pretty much improvised: no toilet, no water. The electricity needed to drive the pump for the large bouncing cushion had to be obtained via extension cables from the nearby kiosk. Yet the playground became a great success all the same.
“I grew up in Riederwald, and as a kid I played in the forest here,” he recalls. Back in his teens, he met Michael Paris at the youth club. They’re the same age. When Leicher heard of Paris’s plans for a playground, he thought they were great and was ready to help out. For five years, he thus worked as an education assistant and completed his social service in lieu of military service at the playground. Then SJD Sub-District Chair Christian Tschierschke took him aside and made him understand he needed to graduate in social education if he wanted to work for the association in the long term. John Leicher headed straight to evening school to study for his high school graduation certificate and then attended the University of Applied Sciences.

Trips to the USA, where his father lived (a GI who had come to Frankfurt and then returned home when John was not yet one year old), various jobs, and a year’s internship at the Riederwald youth club meant that it was not until 1990, meaning more than ten years later, that he returned to the adventure playground. He initially only worked part-time. “But I soon noticed that it wasn’t enough to allow me to work effectively.” He signed on for more hours and in 2002 was appointed manager of the entire facility.

Leicher is at the tools desk, handing out shovels and buckets to two eight-year-olds. On the shelf behind him there are hammers, nails, and saws for the kids. If they want to borrow something, they have to leave a deposit with him. Over the last 50 years, the kids’ needs have hardly changed, he says. “They still find the best thing of all is to bang their own hut together, to climb, to make a bonfire, experience something in nature, and keep moving.” Today, kids need to learn to stop looking at their smartphones now and again. “During COVID-19 in particular, they were hardly ever outside, so they have forgotten what it means to play together. Now, we have to start by showing them how to.” At least, that is the case with groups, perhaps less so with the regular kids. Originally 80 to 100 kids aged four to 17 regularly came to the adventure playground; today, he says, the figure tends to be around 50. More childcare centers and nurseries are now visiting on day trips. But the kids still love to build things, including 11-year-old Adam, who built his own hut in the Easter and summer vacation a few years back, complete with the fit-out. “If younger kids came up to him, he explained to them what he wanted and then let them join in.” Leicher proudly shows how Adam even built a secret room with a door you don’t notice at first glance.



John Leicher has Native American roots.

Leicher loves to let kids simply get on with it. He wants them to learn to be independent and responsible for themselves. He provides help and orientation only when he's needed, he continues. In all the many years he's worked here, nothing really dramatic has ever happened, he explains. Not that this should be taken to mean John Leicher never raises his voice. There are definitely firm rules that apply here, such as clearing up the kitchen together after cooking or baking. "We show our fellow humans and nature respect. And the children accept that. You just have to make it clear to them that this is our home. They'd never use bad cuss words at home, for example, would they?" What irritates Leicher more is the over-abundance of parents on site, a relatively new phenomenon. "In the past, only the kids came; we are a kind of island in the forest that can easily be reached on foot. We've also always been a kind of safe haven, a substitute family. These days a lot of parents show up, and that influences how the kids play."

Nevertheless, he believes that many more districts in town should have adventure playgrounds. In Riederwald, where there are many single parents or parents who are at work all day, the concept has functioned really well. Many families have longstanding ties to the facility; some granddads who once played here now bring their grandchildren along. Some even remember Leicher – the "Indian" as they liked to call him. When he tells the kids about his Native American roots, they listen intently. "My grandma on my father's side was a Choctaw from Mississippi," he narrates, something he only recently found out. His ancestors' culture is something he has long since brought to life on the adventure playground. When an eight-year-old found a dead buzzard on site one evening a good ten years ago, Leicher suggested that the bird be called back to life the way his ancestors did it, and the children danced in a circle around it – the Pow-Wow Festival was born! It is still celebrated today, and the children dance in Native American costumes round the fire – even if some members of the public now view this critically. John Leicher sees things less in black and white: "We're showing our respect for these people and their dances. These aren't simply costumes; each is tailored to the personality of the particular dancer."

John Leicher is actually well past pensionable age, having celebrated his 65th birthday two years ago. "I'm a pensioner in full-time employment." The kids don't care. "You grow with the task; at the beginning you're a big brother, at some point a dad, and today I'm simply a granddad." Letting go is something he finds difficult, as the adventure playground is his family. "The idea was that I would be able to hand things over to someone else, but that hasn't worked out," he comments. John Leicher therefore intends to continue as long as he's fit, but as of next year will work one day less a week. Then his second passion awaits him, his motorbike.

The bright red playmobile

Two-year-olds tend to come to Heideplatz when the playmobile stops there on Wednesday and the asphalt is turned into a play street for a few hours. They learn to bounce on the bouncy castle. Hardly does Valentin, the education team member, indicate that everything's ready than five pairs of shoes are to be found on the mats in front, and the girls and boys they belong to are busy clambering onto the castle. Malia is too small for that and simply gets lifted up to it. For Marten, who is soon to turn two, it is his first contact with the castle. He still finds bouncing a bit difficult but clearly has a lot of fun falling over on a soft surface. Kian (5) and his two year-old brother Nikan aren't up there for long. The two prefer to use all the different vehicles that the two team staffers Valentin and Oliver have extracted from the playmobile. Wherever you look, kids are buzzing around the street with tricycles, Bobby cars, scooters, small pedal cars, or bicycles, as the road is closed to traffic. Kian and Nikan are riding a tricycle tandem together, even if the bigger of the two has to do most of the pedaling and soon gives up. He then joins Valentin to play with a tennis ball attached by a rope to a pole, which you can send shooting round by hitting it with a wooden paddle.

Play street

Each year from March to October, come Wednesday afternoon at 2 p.m. the crew of the playmobile on Heideplatz unload the street blocks and, once all illegally parked cars have been towed, turn the road into a play street. The kids can now make the street their own again until 6 p.m. In densely populated districts such as Nordend, there's a lack of outdoor play spaces, and it was this that prompted the City of Frankfurt to take part in a model project funded by the federal government and entitled "Networked Play and Encounter Spaces" back in 2008. For six months over the summer, different street sections were blocked off on three afternoons a week. "It soon transpired that without some animation the children and parents did not start occupying the street space," Michael Paris reports, and for that reason the municipal authorities commissioned the association to send its playmobile to the respective district. The federal government financing ceased after two years, however. "In the third year, parents appeared before the City Council and complained that the playmobile was not visiting." This persuaded the local advisory council to put up the money the following year. "Since other social welfare institutions were also asking for funds, after two or three years only one playmobile went out." What remained was the play street on Heideplatz, which, despite the project's longstanding success, is still the only one in Frankfurt. "If you bear in mind that there are 150 play streets in London, then we really ought to hope that this model also soon takes off in Frankfurt and other large German cities."





Playing in the street is really popular.

The staffer shows him how best to hold the racket. "Yep, you got it, great!" – he earns a lot of praise. Kian's mum watches and keeps an eye on toddler Nikan. She comes here regularly, she says, after picking Kian up from the nearby childcare center.

The small red bus on Heideplatz is one of the 25 registered playmobiles that stand in the depot on Schielestrasse in Frankfurt's Osthafen district. The association has rented part of the heritage-listed former gas works, and from there the vehicles regularly set out for districts of Frankfurt and sometimes further afield. They offer kids aged two to 14 all manner of fun close to home – albeit only for a set period of time. The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association is the largest playmobile operator in Germany. "In fact, there's probably not a larger one in Europe or anywhere else in the world for that matter," comments Michael Paris. There's great demand for them in Frankfurt. "For a September weekend, we could easily send out ten playmobiles at once," he says. "We just don't have enough qualified staff and volunteers to handle that sort of deployment."

"We use our mobility to make offerings available to everyone close to home and in line with their particular skills and abilities. The kids can decide for themselves whether and how they participate in the activities, programs, and projects."

What is now one of the most important pillars of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association started out small, with an idea from a TV series and a furniture trailer. The first playmobiles rolled around West Germany in Berlin, Cologne, and Munich at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s. The heyday of playmobile start-ups was in 1979, which the UN declared the "International Year of the Child". The initiators of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association also looked at the idea of using vehicles to get toys to kids instead of the other way round. What prompted the purchase of the first Riederwald playmobile, however, was something else. The association found itself repeatedly organizing children's festivals off-site, for example for the SJD's "Children's Day" or the City of Frankfurt Open Day, so Michael Paris thought about getting a vehicle to transport all the toys and equipment. "I thought back then it would be really practical if I could put everything that we needed for a children's festival in a car." So how would that work? A furniture company who advertised its services on TV using a furniture trailer gave him the idea. He phoned around and found out that the trailers were made by a company in Biberach in southwest Germany. Paris contacted the firm and ordered an identical trailer, albeit in bright red, because it was meant to become just as popular as "Das feuerrote Spielmobil", the "fiery red playmobile" from the TV series that ran in the afternoons on the ARD channel from 1972 to 1981.





The playmobiles in the warehouse at Osthafen.

"I first had to get used to the fact that suddenly kids were playing on urban squares that were usually the preserve of adults." The association has contributed significantly to

KARIN GUDER (GRÜNE),
ORTSVORSTEHERIN IM NORDEND

The trailer came with a price tag of about 20,000 deutschmarks. The association raised donations and also received a grant of 5,000 deutschmarks from Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk. Another 5,000 deutschmarks were promised by the "Ein Herz für Kinder" association, which had been founded in the late 1970s by Axel Springer and the "Bild" tabloid. "Our board had fierce debates over whether we could accept the money from an association run by Bild-Zeitung," Paris recalls. But eventually it was accepted. The State of Hessen subsidized the purchase of a VW microbus that could pull the trailer, and again donations were raised for this, among others from Frankfurter Sparkasse. And thus the first playmobile came into being and was baptized "Red Falcon", in keeping with the association's history. Thanks to a Labor Office job-creation measure, a female educationalist was hired for three years and traveled with the vehicle.

The association's ability to combine adventure playgrounds and a playmobile under a single roof was quite unusual, as the relationship between the playmobile movement and the adventure playground initiatives in Germany was fraught from the outset. One major criticism asserted by the adventure playground movement was that the playmobiles were only ever at a particular location for a short time and that the children and young people were thereafter left to their own devices again. By contrast, the adventure playgrounds provided year-round educational support, and their advocates were convinced that they therefore brought about a change in behavior among regular attendees and favorably influenced the kids' personal development. The playmobiles, meanwhile, did not allow for steady educational work with youngsters.

Michael Paris was always adept at presenting the adventure playground publicly in a favorable light and found a solution to this, turning the competition between the two concepts into a win-win situation. He sent the playmobile out to various locations, while at the same time using it to advertise the







Like the "fiery red playmobile" on TV (left), the Frankfurt playmobile drove out to the kids.

playground: "We resolved that our playmobile would originally only drive to districts adjacent to ours." A radius of about five kilometers was therefore chosen for it, and at the end of a 14-day run of play sessions there was always a trip with the playmobile to the Riederwald adventure playground in order to show the kids that they had the opportunity for creative play there all year round. In the first few years, the vehicle thus headed to the districts of Fechenheim, Seckbach, Bornheim, Ostend, and Bergen-Enkheim.

The "Red Falcon" made its first stop in the summer of 1985 on the green central reservation in North Fechenheim between Birsteiner and Wächtersbacher Strasse, "a socially troubled quarter". What the trailer offered the kids there was quite something: The staffers brought out badminton sets, balls, handicraft kits, crayons and paints, face paint, and musical instruments, not to mention wooden skis you could only use as a pair moving in time, and toys that tested dexterity such as wheelie boards. Another highlight was the simple plastic sheeting that, with a bit of soap and water, turned into a slide. "Old typewriters made a big splash back then," Michael Paris recollects. And in the early years, there was also a roller slide that is still part and parcel of every playmobile fit-out. Moreover, the idea was for the vehicle to be a mobile activity center where children could explore interests like theater, circus, fairytales, fairs, pirates, or knights in armor. Compared to the situation today, back then things were pretty idyllic, he remembers. "As a rule, about 30 to 50 kids flocked to the playmobile. The two staffers could then conduct all manner of creative activities with them, such as making plaster masks. Nowadays, so many kids come running that the two tend to have their work really cut out for them." He points out that really a third staff member is urgently needed now.

The association was not initially expecting other children's organizations to ask to rent the playmobile. "Suddenly, people from other associations came up and asked whether they could have the playmobile for a children's party," Michael Paris explains, and of course he again came up with a solution: "I soon realized that such deployments at the weekend would require an extra staffer. So the associations had to pay us a fee." Thus began the playmobile operations for profit. As early as 1985, the association rented out the bus and trailer for the first time. "From then on, it took on a life of its own." As a happy side-effect, the association was at long last able to make money and no longer depended entirely on grants and donations.

The history of playmobiles

The first "traveling playgrounds" set out on their missions around West Germany in the early 1970s. In 1970, the very first adventure playground opened in West Berlin's new housing estate, and it was there that the "Bollerwagen" campaign also started, which featured a mobile library of play equipment. In Munich, art educationalists presented a playmobile concept for the first time at a conference and launched a model project to coincide with the 1972 Olympics. In Cologne, at that time the "Juppi" mobile playground was launched. The highpoint of new playmobile initiatives was in 1979, which the UN had declared the "International Year of the Child". The first playmobiles mentioned were out and about as early as 1949 in Australia, and later in the United States and Sweden.

Nationwide, there are now about 300 playmobiles, Michael Paris estimates. In the State of Hessen, publicly supported vehicles are on the road not just in Frankfurt but also primarily in Kassel and Darmstadt. Both were inspired by the Riederwald association. There are similar initiatives in many countries the world over, in the US and Australia, in Japan, Hong Kong, India, and in many European countries. The type of playmobile varies, some are erstwhile construction site trailers or municipal buses, others are flatbed trucks or even cargo bikes. They drive at specific times to green zones, playgrounds, schoolyards, or other public outdoor spaces and thus take their play equipment to where the kids live. With their help and that of the trained educationalists who staff them, it is possible not only to reconquer play spaces that were lost to the spread of cities, but also to foster children's mobility and creativity.

The Red Falcon is not alone

In 1986, the playmobile was to play a special role. After the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl in late April, playgrounds closed in many parts of Hessen. The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association resolved to keep its grounds open and to close only the sand and mud pits. During this time, the playmobile was in especially great demand, with its trailer bringing a world of play to children in the various districts. That year, a total of 2,623 kids used the playmobile, which made stops at Atzelbergplatz in Seckbach, in the Huthpark, on Lasallestrasse in Riederwald, in Fechenheim, on Beckerserlen Strasse in Enkheim, on Am Erlenbruch, on Harkortstrasse, on Ketteler Allee, at Bürgerhaus Bornheim, at Nußbaum, and finally at Merianplatz in Nordend, so the annual report states. The staff dreamed up a different theme for each playmobile stop. Nevertheless, the CDU in the relevant local advisory council filed a motion that same year to cut the grants for the playmobile again, arguing that it was an "education measure clearly informed by party politics". The SPD and the Greens rejected the motion, as they held a majority. And they chose the right project. In subsequent years, the playmobile became ever more popular. In 1989, it attracted over 4,000 children aged four to 14 across a total of 16 stops, to which the vehicle headed once every two weeks.

To mark the 15th anniversary of the adventure playground and as the playmobile turned five, Michael Paris publicized the association's plans to run additional playmobiles, too. The services offered in the district by the "Red Falcon" and a municipal playbus were not enough, he argued. He also insisted the grant to the association be upped from 92,500 to 150,000 deutschmarks to provide funds for a second full-timer. He mooted the idea of opening schoolyards, so that playtimes could be hosted there in the afternoons. This was consistent with one of the association's main objectives; namely, to make Frankfurt a "city for playing everywhere", not just for kids but also for adults and the elderly.



Popular among young and older kids: the bouncy castle.

Financing the idea was not easy, however, even if, as of 1989, a Social Democrat-Greens coalition under Social Democrat Lord Mayor Volker Hauff held sway in Frankfurt for the first time. "To acquire additional playmobiles, I had to enter politics myself," he states, looking back.Michael Paris joined the Social Democrats as a school student in 1972 in Riederwald. After moving to Bornheim, in 1990 he was elected city councilor and thus became a member of the Youth and Social Welfare Committee. Among his party colleagues, he henceforth championed the Frankfurt adventure playgrounds, of which there were already at least half a dozen round town, managed by various institutions such as the Municipal Youth Department, the International League, the German Boy Scouts Association, and a neighborhood initiative. "What I got approved first was for all adventure playgrounds in Frankfurt to get an additional paid full-timer," he says. At Riederwald, there were thus two full-timers at work thereafter. One year later, Paris also succeeded in getting the city to put up 500,000 deutschmarks for three more playmobiles. One was to be managed by the Youth Department, the other two by the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association. As a result, in 1991 two brand-new red playmobiles went into operation there. The idea of painting them red had been kept – among other tings





The playmobile has something for everyone.

because Michael Paris had heard of a marketing study by a US fast-food chain that the colors red and yellow most appealed to kids. The vehicle's red sides henceforth boasted words in yellow. To this day, the two colors stand for the association and all its activities.

Since the association now had three playmobiles to use, it became possible to service locations outside of eastern Frankfurt. At the insistence of City Councilor Michael Paris, schoolyards were opened in the afternoons so that the new vehicles had new ports of call, too. From then on, each year three playmobile tours were scheduled: one planned by the association, another another to respond at short notice to demands from children and the local communities, and a third "schoolyard tour" that changed destination each week and was run in collaboration with the Municipal Schools Department.







Roller slides and the skater half-pipe remain great attractions.

"States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."
Art. 31 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In addition to the two playmobiles, funds sufficed to acquire two additional trailers. The idea was to dispatch two playmobiles with a trailer each. "These could be opened out, and if it rained a dozen kids could shelter under the canopy." Moreover, the association used the remaining 40,000 deutschmarks to have the same company build it a skatemobile: The new attraction was eight meters long, 2.5 meters high, and just as wide, and it was Germany's very first mobile skateboard track. It was inaugurated in October 1991 on Konstablerwache. The slightly reduced-scale halfpipe was destined to be used not just by professional skaters, who immediately found all manner of aspects of the mobile unit to complain about – but also by younger kids who wanted to learn to skateboard under the professional eye of staffer Jochen Vesper and his team.







The City of Frankfurt playbus was assigned to the association in 1998.

At the official opening, the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association completely wrongfooted then SPD Lord Mayor Andreas von Schoeler when, in the presence of some journalists, he courageously stood on a skateboard – and promptly fell off. The commensurate professional, he smiled and shrugged off the sudden nosedive.

Seasoned skateboarders then showed how you could whizz up and down the halfpipe on a board. They jumped, complete with board, over the upper edge (at 1.6 meters) onto the track, gained momentum on the way down, and flourished with a kick-turn at the opposite end, which meant turning 180° in the air before landing. In the winter, the halfpipe was located in Riederwald. From 1992 onwards, it was put on an adventure playground trailer and toured various districts of town, including as far afield as Zeilsheim. To this day, the trailer includes ten skateboards for kids to borrow, protective gear, and even a mini-workshop. It takes only 15 minutes to ready the halfpipe for action.

Demand grows

In 1992, the City Council put up additional funding for three budgeted jobs so that each playmobile had its own full-time staffer. Unexpectedly, a few years later the fleet was expanded. When the Youth Department was unable to secure financing for the staffer of a vehicle it had purchased in 1991 because a job-creation measure for a social worker position fell through, the City of Frankfurt assigned the vehicle in question to the association. "In 1998, they sold us the yellow van with the trailer for one deutschmark. Thus, from then on, we were Frankfurt's sole playmobile operator," comments Michael Paris. Soon, an old ambulance and a 1965 fire service vehicle that had been decommissioned (a legendary Opel Blitz), complete with a water cannon for the summer, joined the fleet – although they subsequently proved prone to needing repairs.



The three playmobiles acquired in 1991 and the trailers remain in operation to this day, albeit not every day of the week. "They really need to be replaced," Michael Paris reports, and there are several reasons why. First, the vans can only be driven round town under special permits, given their exhaust emissions; second, younger team staffers are not allowed to drive the 3.5-ton vans using their normal driver's licenses. To date, municipal funding for replacement vehicles has not been forthcoming. Although the association generates additional revenue through the general operations and outside rental of the playmobiles, the money is not enough to procure three new vehicles, Paris emphasizes. This means that alongside public funds, the association is also dependent on donors and sponsors. These tend to be Frankfurt companies who are long-term partners supporting the association.

Inside a playmobile

A playmobile is stuffed full right to the roof with all sorts of games and equipment:

THE SHELF: In each playmobile, there's a small shelf at the back for juggling kit, bats, a slackline for balancing, small street signs for the Bobby car track, crafts and painting utensils, kids' face paint kits, the pieces of homemade board games, tools, street chalk, and even a wooden railway.

BOUNCY CASTLE: The standard fit-out includes a four-by-four-meter bouncy castle. If a large throng of kids are expected, a second one is taken along, too.

ROLLER SLIDES: These are very popular but only fit in the larger vans and trailers.

AIR-HOCKEY PITCH: Because it is so large, it gets transported in a special holder under the roof.

STILTS AND STANDS for "ball on a string": They fit in a special mount on the sidewall.

VARIOUS VEHICLES: Bobby cars, scooters, walking bikes, rickshaws, and pedalos

WAKE-, SNAKE- AND SKATEBOARDS

GYM MATS

BOARD GAMES

LEGO BRICKS: several sacks full of giant Lego bricks and a tarp to place underneath them

GIANT MIKADO STICKS

HOCKEY STICKS

FIRST-AID KITS and ice packs



Most of the playmobile team are volunteers.

Demand in the city's districts for the playmobiles has grown steadily in recent years. Originally, about 20 children headed for the vehicles to play each time the red van pulled up, but now the figure is more like 100 or more. In addition to the four full-time staffers in the association's playmobile unit, with the city paying three of the salaries, there is a traineeship offered for events management students. Until 2010, the playmobile team received regular support from young men doing social service in lieu of military service, and now young people on the Federal Volunteer Service scheme can help out with the playmobiles. The playmobile team is backed up by about 100 volunteers, some of them students of social work and education.

Welcoming displaced people

In 2015, in the wake of the "refugee crisis", almost one million people arrived in Germany seeking shelter. The children in particular had suffered traumatic experiences and therefore needed a space where they could play and perhaps more easily process what they had been through. The Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der mobilen spielkulturellen Projekte (Federal Working Party for Playmobiles) therefore launched a project on behalf of all playmobiles in Germany: "Welcoming culture – Playmobiles for Displaced Persons Camps", and it received three million euros over three years in funding from the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth. Playing together was meant to familiarize the children with life in Germany, help them learn the language, and bring them into contact with children from the neighborhood. The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association got involved, and its playmobiles were soon heading for the relevant displaced persons hostels in Frankfurt.



A bouncy castle with a climbing section is also deployed with every playmobile.

> "I love the idea of creating a large playground for kids right in the heart of downtown."
>
> Visitor at the fun day on Hauptwache.

"Back then, we actually had three helpers on each van," Michael Paris recalls. "We headed for the various hostels once a week," Sabine Dier adds. "And we were very careful in our choice of personnel. Mutual understanding proved straightforward, and the kids were always grateful that they could play." Instead of driving onto the hostel grounds, as had originally been planned, the association selected a lawn nearby. "Then kids from the local community could also join in," Michael Paris explains. Demand from the hostel managers was intense. The 2015–6 campaign was a success, and in 2022 funding was once again forthcoming from central government, so the vehicles were able to head for the hostels where Ukrainian refugees had been housed.

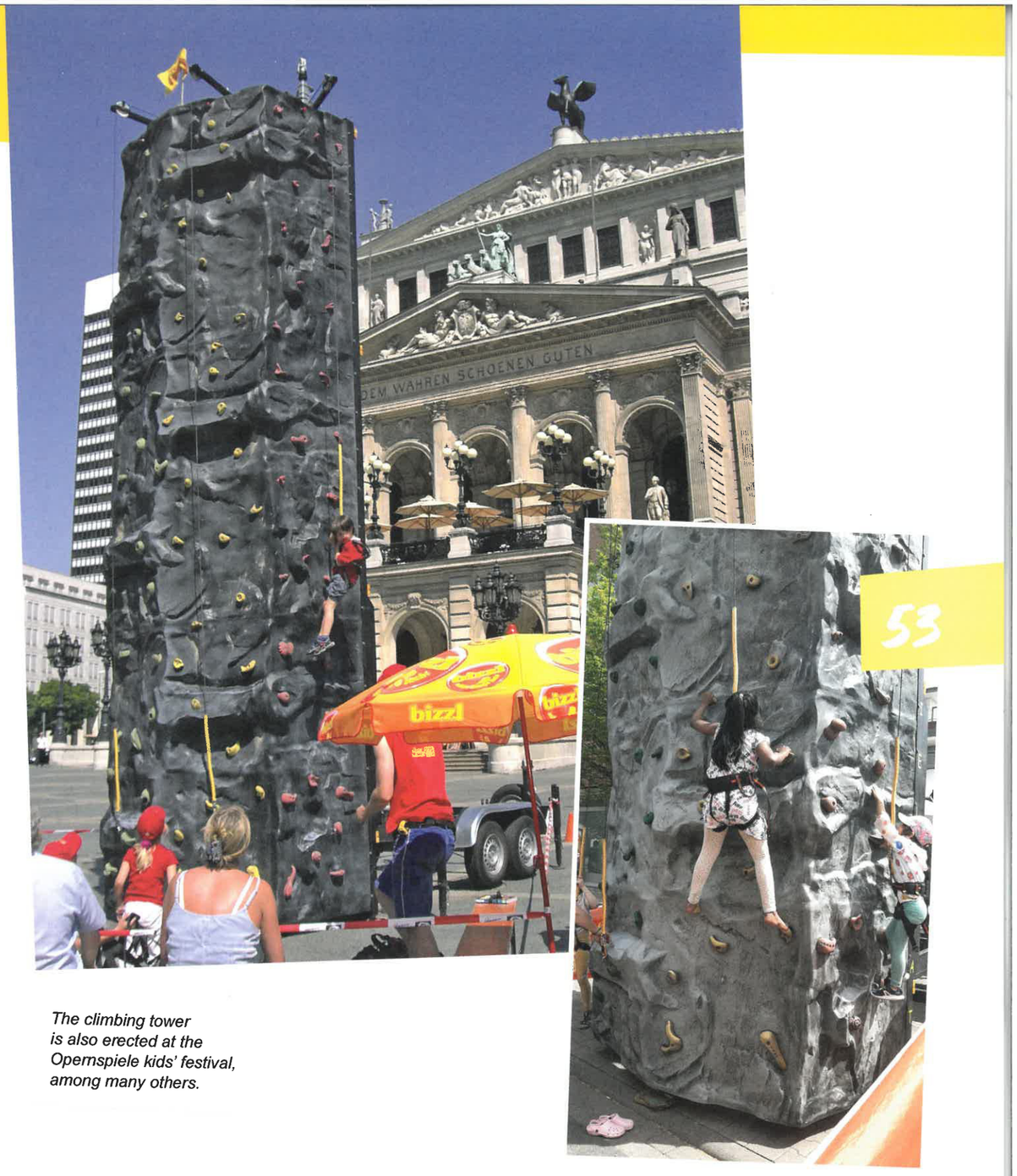
Much more than just scheduled stops

The playmobile unit has long since gone beyond merely managing the vehicles and arranging the rounds driven by the SJD and its successor organization. Gradually, it has taken on many other tasks, starting with the Mainspiele and Opernspiele fun festivals during the summer vacation and extending to the four boats that are now part of the fleet. These are on the river not just during the Mainspiele but also ship the little pirates across the water during the Harbor Pirate events. Then there is a myriad of smaller and larger family and fun days, be it in Louisa Park, in Riedberg, or at Nordwestzentrum, not forgetting flea markets, the children's Mardi Gras, a reading day, the children's song concert, the children's mile during the Museumsuferfest, cookie baking sessions during the Christmas season, and many other things that bring joy to the children's hearts. Some of these offerings can already look back on a long tradition. The children's Mardi Gras in Riederwald, for example, was one the very first festivals per se. "As early as 1970, the district SJD group organized it at the Bürgerhaus, and responsibility subsequently passed to the adventure playground", Michael Paris recalls. Up until the outbreak of the pandemic, it took place

every year at Pestalozzischule. In the first few iterations, 70 children and their parents came, but the figure later soared to 300. The association hosted a children's Mardi Gras in other districts of town, too, such as in Bornheim and Bockenheim. Most recently, around Carnival Monday there were five events attracting a total of 3,000 visitors that required organizing. As a result, someone floated the idea of arranging something even larger on a city-wide basis. "We considered hosting a children's Mardi Gras at Alte Oper on Carnival Monday. They'd have provided the building free of charge, but the staffing costs were simply too high," Paris says. Chance provided a helping hand when the association received an enquiry into whether it could help out at the children's song festival at Saalbau Bornheim. This evolved into the children's song concert with Fredrik Vahle, which to this day leaves children's eyes gleaming and has since moved to the Gesellschaftshaus at Palmengarten. Since 2016, the association has also held the children's Mardi Gras there. And because demand is so great, there are now a total of five events straddling three days. At the end of the 1990s, Gerd Eifert, a longstanding member of the playmobile unit, approached the association chairperson and suggested that Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald should participate in the annual carnival parade. Michael Paris loved the idea. He contacted a toy equipment maker with whom he had links, which produced a large fairytale castle as one of the items of equipment it offered. "We loaded it onto a trailer, and it traveled along behind us in the parade. It was then that I noticed all the kids lining the street knew us, and it was simply great advertising for us." Since then, the association has taken part in the Carnival Sunday parade each year – with one or two playmobiles and a float of its own driving round town, and then on Carnival Tuesday it goes out a second time and heads through "Klaa Paris".

Climbing tower instead of rockets

The climbing tower was always one key attraction at the early major fun days – eight meters high and, typically for the association, homemade.
"I'd been hunting for one for ages, because climbing was coming into fashion," Michael Paris narrates. Uwe Tisch, one of the staff doing his social service, designed the half-pipe in Riederwald as early as the 1970s. Since he was also a passionate climber, Paris asked him about 30 years later whether he could create an artificial climbing facility. Uwe Tisch initially considered using readymade climbing modules that he could stack on top of each other and fasten to a frame.
"The problem was that it would have taken too long to put it up," Paris explains.
"So I had the idea of using something resembling a miniature rocket launcher based on a hydraulic lift. A company in Poland built it for us for about EUR 33,000." In the summer of 2002 the tower with its four climbing sides in red and yellow was officially inaugurated. The hydraulic lift and assembly took only 30 minutes.
Kids using the system are automatically secured and simply float slowly downwards if they slip when climbing.
At the premiere for the Opernspiele kids' festival, the association was informed it had to have a construction manual for the tower, something the Polish company had not provided.
"For that reason, the tower was not allowed to be used for three years, until a civil engineer had completed a report on it." There is now a new model of the climbing tower with walls that look like cliffs, and it remains a huge crowd-puller at the big fun days.



The climbing tower is also erected at the Opernspiele kids' festival, among many others.



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Playing on Hauptwache: The association has proved that it's possible.

One mega-event the association holds, and in which all the adventure playgrounds participate, is the big fun day that takes place for World Children's Day on the Sunday after September 20 on the large meadow in Günthersburgpark. The playmobiles bring along everything the warehouse has to offer. About 2,000 kids have fun in the park and are delighted by the bouncy castle, the climbing wall, and the merry-go-round.

To mark the 25th anniversary of their initiation, in 2010 the playmobiles hit the very center of town. The red vans grouped in the middle of Hauptwache to offer children an opportunity to play there, too, and to increase public awareness of the association still further. The colorful tent canopies and balloons in front of Katharinenkirche could be seen from afar. Since then, every year on an autumn Saturday, the association hosts a children's event there, complete with a bouncy castle, roller slides, etc., and thus makes its red-and-yellow logo that bit better known. For some years now, the playmobiles have been seen as far away as Berlin, where the children's offering from Frankfurt is a fixed element of the annual Hessen Festival held at the State of Hessen Representation there. The red playmobile is one of the representatives of the State of Hessen's diversity and at the same time familiarizes the 2,000-odd guests with its virtues.





Be it in Berlin or in the Römer City Hall – the playmobiles are everywhere.

Furthermore, the playmobile also supports the adventure playground festivals, such as the children's culture and Pow-Wow Festivals in Riederwald, the St. Martin's Day bonfire in Güntersburgpark, and initially the Westerparade and now the Spring Festival and Magical Lights Otherworld at Colorado Park. Since 2005, the flea market for children's clothes and toys on the first Saturday after the summer vacation has attracted hundreds of parents and children to Günthersburgpark. Because the younger visitors also want to have fun, of course, the big red van is always at hand. At Saalbau Bornheim, the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association and its playmobile unit run a flea market with about 160 stands once in the spring and once in the fall. "We now have to raffle the tickets, as they would otherwise be so oversubscribed," Paris says. Given such high demand, July last year saw the launch of an additional flea market for kids' clothes and toys – on the carpark at Hessencenter. "That's the way we've always done it, start off small and then consistently expand the service."

Fun days and festivals such as the Easter market at the Uhrtürmchen in Bornheim or the Grosses Spielfest fun festival in Louisa Park, which today attracts some 4,000 visitors, are also now permanent fixtures in the calendars of kids and parents in Frankfurt. The latest addition came in 2019 with the Christmas market for children in the Römer City Hall's Ratskeller, where almost throughout the pre-Christmas season kids could enjoy baking cookies, decorating gingerbread, and having a go at arts and crafts.

The Corona pandemic was a tough period for the adventure playground association as far as the events were concerned. Many large events like fun days or flea markets, the St. Martin's Day bonfire, or the Christmas market were simply canceled. Instead of the otherwise customary 200-odd rentals of the playmobiles by other clubs or groups, it only hired the vans out 14 times. The playmobile crew used the time to mend bouncy castles, convert cars, or get the boats river-worthy. "Financially speaking, it wasn't so tough for us because the COVID-19 support program meant we could keep going, and the city maintained the grant so we could pay our staff. But it was very tough on the kids," Michael Paris emphasizes. Things took off again with renewed verve in 2023. Now, year after year, the staff at the playmobile unit and the 100 or so volunteers make sure that an estimated several hundred thousand children in Frankfurt and the vicinity keep on having boisterous fun, being creative, meeting up, and playing together.

I walked as much as 14 or 15 kilometers a day.

When Sabine Dier applied to the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association in 2006 at the age of 26, the playmobiles were something completely new to her. "I come from the Saarland region and studied business administration on Lake Constance. My focus was on event management, and I worked a lot at the Freizeitpark Ravensburger Spieleland theme park," she recalls. She'd specifically heard about the Mainspiele and Opernspiele events and so applied for a job in Frankfurt, even though she hadn't really concerned herself with children's education before then. But it was one of the best decisions she ever made, she says, and she went on to head up the playmobile unit for no fewer than 14 years. In spring 2019 she handed in her notice, quite simply because her life had changed – in fact, she is now the proud mother of two.

She had various functions at the association, and her tasks went well beyond planning events such as the Mainspiele and Opernspiele and the annual two playmobile tours round town. "There was a lot of HR planning required for the various sessions. For the Mainspiele alone, I was deploying 30 people at once." She also had to keep an eye on the vehicle pool, especially which vehicles needed to be repaired or taken to the car wash, and when. Once the pirate ship was purchased, it too needed maintenance – not to mention that Sabine Dier faced the tall task of finding staffers who had a license to pilot a boat.

And there was plenty more to do: "We were forever having to refill the toy bins in the playmobiles ready for their next tour. I ordered craft materials and kept an eye on what needed to be replaced or repaired. We needed to have stuff for younger and older kids on board, as that ensured the older ones could burn off some energy." The old typewriters that the kids once all loved, for example, were at some point abandoned in favor of new attractions. "Often, staffers contributed. We had one female colleague who was brilliant with face paint, so we took face paint along on the vans." Each staffer could implement their own ideas in this regard, be it playing a guitar or building toys, she says. "If an idea didn't cost too much, then the corresponding equipment was purchased and the plan realized." That was another reason, in Sabine Dier's opinion, why many staffers who started out doing their social service or as trainees with the association remained loyal to it and either later worked on an hourly basis or as volunteers. As head of the unit, she introduced staff training sessions at the beginning of the season. "Everyone can get to know each other, learn first aid and how to set up the roller slide." Today, the team also goes to meet staff working on playmobiles elsewhere in Germany. Every three years, it also sends staff to the world conferences of the International Play Association.

The contractual arrangements for private playmobiles rented out to companies or clubs did not land on Dier's desk, but it was she who provided advice and did the initial negotiations. And if larger events were involved, she was always on site, for example at the Mainspiele or Opernspiele or at the fun days in Nordwestzentrum. "I was the focal point, saying what would be set up where, and I was available to troubleshoot." She was sometimes present at Nordwestzentrum for three days in a row, for 14 to 16 hours each time. "That was a lot of fun, we were a well-rehearsed team. And it was something special to drive through the mall with the climbing tower. But it was tough, too. I covered 14 or 15 kilometers a day, three days back-to-back, after which I was exhausted."

She still remembers many of the sessions, a few of them simply because they were so unusual. At the May 1 cycle race classic "Eschborn – Frankfurt", for example: "The organizers had hired a playmobile with a huge bouncy castle, among other things. On the day, though, no one could tell us where we were supposed to inflate it, so we put it in the middle of the road because we thought that if we waited for the road to be closed we wouldn't be ready on time." Suddenly, the police arrived saying they had to have right of way. "I retorted, 'impossible', and simply redirected the police cars. Afterwards none of us could believe the cops had gone along with it."

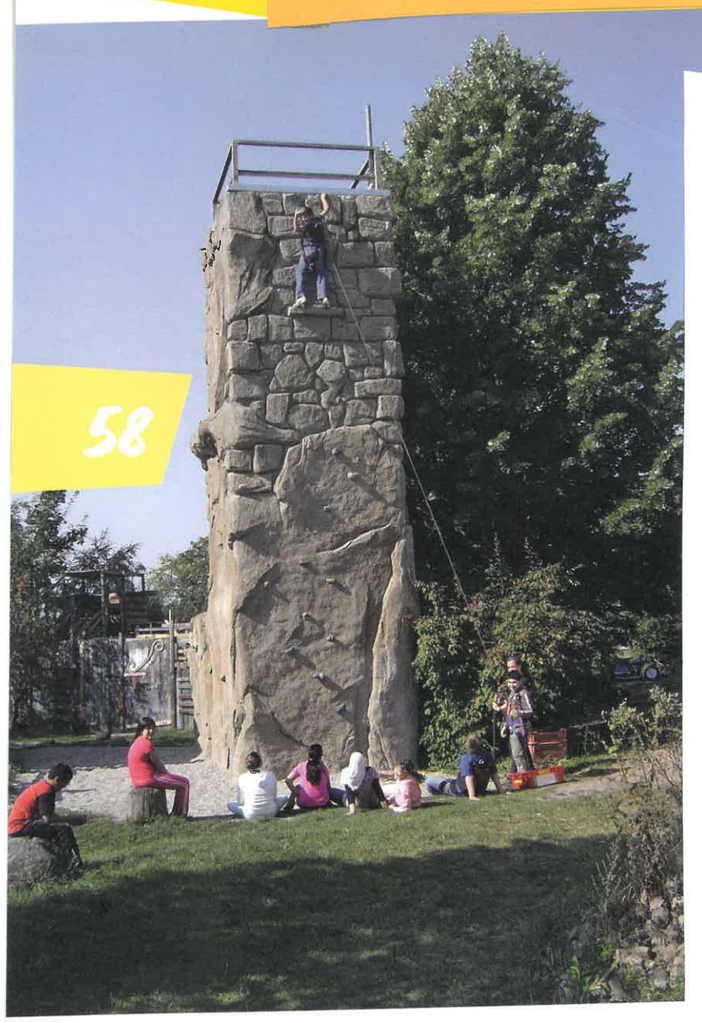
On other occasions, Sabine Dier found herself involuntarily at loggerheads with the police. At the Opernspiele in 2002, the association had set up the brand-new climbing tower. Thirty kids stood in front of it wanting to use it, while a guy from the Municipal Building Supervision Department complained that the installation manual für the tower was not available and therefore insisted to be closed."I'm not about to disappoint 30 kids," Sabine Dier said – and promptly refused, whereupon the guy called the cops and tthreatened to have her arrested. City Councilor Paris managed to save the day, arranging for a civil engineer to check the tower the next day, who then confirmed it could be used. It took three years to retrospectively compile an installation manual for the tower.



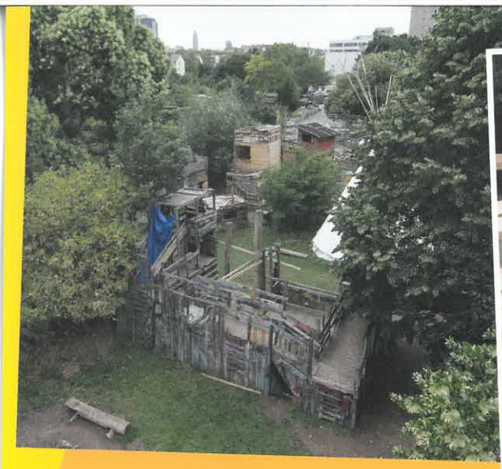
Sabine Dier at the Mainspiele fun festival

Finding compromises was also one of Sabine Dier's key tasks. If it wasn't the police, then it was passers-by who had to take a short detour to walk round the Opernspiele field and promptly complained, or the Municipal Environment Department who, of all people, wanted to take samples from the Lucae Fountain in the middle of the event and therefore tried to cordon it off. Equanimity was one of the most important qualities for her work. "Where kids are playing, things are always going to happen. But thus far, all the injuries have been minor," she comments – be it the wasp that stung a kid's tongue, or an accident on the bouncy castle when two kids collided, or the child who cut their foot in the fountain. Even bones got broken. "We repeatedly had to call the first responders. At the beginning you think 'OMG', but you slowly get a handle on things." Often the same kids popped up the next day to show everyone their plaster cast. "They then simply carried on playing using the other arm."

Günthersburg adventure playground



Peace on Earth – that was one of the wishes that the younger visitors expressed at the SJD stand on Römerberg on World Children's Day in 1991. Fewer cars, no dogs in the sandbox, and a large playground downtown were also high up on the list that was posted on a large panel. And then came an adventure playground in Günthersburgpark: It was put in place that same year, albeit as a provisional structure.
As early as 1989, the City Council with its new Social Democrats-Greens coalition had resolved to expand the Günthersburgpark northwards by a good eight hectares. To that end, the municipal gardening facilities and the workshops of the City Parks & Cemeteries Department were to be closed. The goal, among others, was to expand the offerings for play, recreation, and relaxation, with a playground first on the agenda for development. The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association championed setting up a second adventure playground in town there, and the local advisory council supported the idea.
At the same time, the association opted for practical persuasion: In April 1991, it sent one of the playmobiles to Bornheim and for ten days offered the first play and games services on site, in keeping with the notion of "We'll build the adventure playground ourselves." During the Easter vacation, local kids got out the hammers and nails and built huts to really underscore what they wanted. Between 90 and 120 children were there each day, showing how great the demand was for more children's play areas in Bornheim and Nordend, as the SJD's Ruth Janzing stated at the time. Once the first proposals for the park expansion were on the table, there was a public citizens' forum to discuss it. One point of criticism: Too little space had been assigned for its use by kids.





The first huts for the adventure playground.



A tour of the site with Head of the Municipal Environment Department Tom Königs led to a final decision. Königs assured everyone that an adventure playground would be built, confirms Michael Paris, who was city councilor for the Social Democrats at the time. A total of 4,500 square meters would be set aside for this, and during planning it was included in the second phase of the competition tender. Initially, in summer 1991 a temporary structure was erected spanning about 1,000 square meters on the "Blood Meadows" – a section of the grounds on Schlinkenweg outside the park that in 1970 had been designated for a ramp for the future city autobahn, but had since been used by hobby footballers. A construction site trailer, a portable toilet, a large bouncy mattress, and wire fencing all around marked the burgeoning site. There was no cash for extra toys, and the site was simply "operated as an additional playmobile", Michael Paris said back then.

At that point, he still hoped that the real adventure playground would be built directly inside the park, meaning it would be closer to the childcare centers and schools. "We could have used the buildings housing the workshops of the City Parks & Cemeteries Department, as they were completely functional and would have been suitable." However, the winning competition entry by architecture practice Stöckli, Kienast & Koeppel for redesigning the park placed the adventure playground on the extreme northwestern edge of the expansion zone. "There was a site visit by the City Council Social Democrats, who eventually voted in favor of the playground being placed off-site," reports Paris, who suspects that Tom Königs in particular had probably not wanted a "disorderly playground" in his new park. The City Council then eventually resolved to have a new playground built, and the "Blood Meadows" remained its home. "I would have preferred a more central location not off to one side. It was an empty piece of grass with two football goals that we then had to completely redesign."





Inaugurating the Günthersburg in September 1992.

60

And that is exactly what the adventure playground team then did. With the first timber delivery on August 15, 1992, the association set about realizing the first playing and climbing structure on the barren meadow – there was not even a fence, let alone a connection to the water mains or the power supply. A freight container served to store tools, and a carpentry company provided the nine-meter-wide and five-meter-high basic frame of the "Günthersburg", which became the calling card of the playground. Children were then allowed to use boards to design the outer cladding as they saw fit. Hardly had the press reported on the new adventure playground than it was truly overwhelmed by groups from childcare and infant-care services. The wooden Günthersburg sprouted turrets, walls, and roofs, and at one time a dungeon. Less than six weeks later, on September 21, 1992, the edifice was officially inaugurated with a party. The children had made lots of flags and colorful signs to decorate it, and a theater group staged a medieval program for the event.

A playground for the future

Together with neighbors and students of garden and landscape architecture, the three staffers at the playground (Reiner Falk, Hagga Bühler, and Martin Gralki) and the kids devised a model of what the adventure playground of the future would look like: A bonfire site, a permanent house, lots of trees, places where you could hide, a garden, and space to build huts all featured in the plans. Gradually these ideas were realized, starting with a large adventure mound that was created in 1995 with heaps of earth from the northwest corner of the grounds, as well as a fence round the site, after which came planting season. All the shrubs planted had to be non-toxic as far as possible and instead bear edible fruit. Over the years, an avenue of apple, cherry, and pear trees took shape. At the entrance, a school garden was laid out for IGS Nordend but was subsequently taken over by the adventure playground. "They realized that for one double lesson a week, what with getting to the site and back to school, there simply wasn't enough time to look after it properly," explains Reiner Falk, who managed the site for many years. Then a linden tree was added, as well as a walnut, which has since self-seeded round the grounds, and a black elder. The latter, along with the redcurrants, raspberries, and kiwi plants, provides fruit each year that can be turned into marmalade, jelly, juice, or cakes in group activities. The sticks from the hazels are as cherished as the hazelnuts because they are ideal for making campfire stick bread. And the ribwort on the meadow is still used today for its curative properties, soothing any minor wounds.

"I think it's great that it exists. Although you're in the middle of town it's like an oasis of calm – including for the kids."

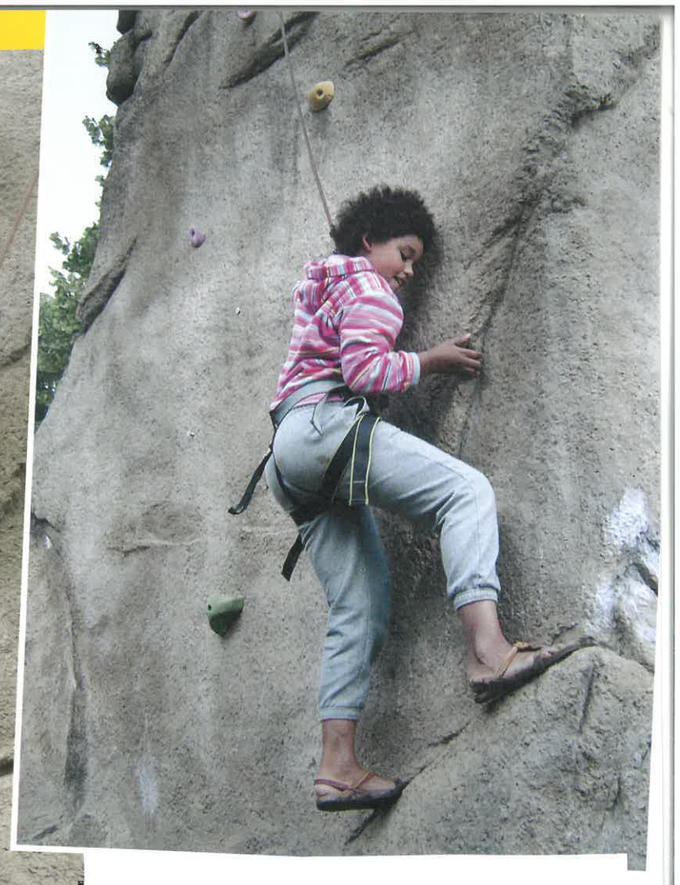
SANDRA (45)



Close to the garden, a sports and games zone was created in the middle of the grounds, while in the rear section more work was done on the huts. Initially, each day up to 200 six- to 14-year-olds flocked to Schlinkenweg. In that first year, however, the gates to the adventure playground had to close in mid-November when the contracts of the three social educational workers came to an end. At first, it was unclear how things would go; moreover, the Municipal Administration had resolved to cut the original grant of 160,000 deutschmarks to 120,000 deutschmarks, one quarter less than that of the other adventure playgrounds. As of April 1993, things continued all the same, and with the association's mobile skateboard halfpipe, an additional attraction was on offer. But it was the hut-makers who were busiest. After only two weeks, the first delivery of timber had already been used up, Hagga Bühler told the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper. And Reiner Falk underlined the importance of the playground specifically for the big city, as children and young people were becoming ever less likely to join clubs.

Alongside the customary hut-building projects, young visitors were also always able to try out other handicrafts and art skills. Creating things from soapstone, alabaster, and wood (key fobs, necklaces, gifts for parents, or talismans) is a firm favorite. In a wooden lean-to, stonemason Simon Vogt offers a one-week vacation course three times a year, where the kids choose their own motifs that they then chisel out of tufa.





The climbing tower is one of the adventure playground's attractions.



Constant change

Like all adventure playgrounds, the one in Günthersburg is constantly changing. In the first few years, a palisade fence was put up, the posts placed in ditches dug as much as two meters deep. Climbing options and battlements were erected, but so were artistic carvings that decorated the playground. The one or other relic of that time has survived, but the rest of the posts have since rotted and been replaced. The first Günthersburg castle is also no longer standing, and even its successor has already been supplanted with a new one. "On average, the buildings last eight years and then they have to be rebuilt or converted," Reiner Falk explains. In 2000, the City of Frankfurt grant was increased, and the nine-meter-long stainless-steel slide was installed on the mound of earth. Two years later, the grounds were hooked up to the public sewage system.



The playground is open even in the snow.

The climbing tower is also durable; it was completed in 2001. "We watched the children in Nordend and how they play. They were no longer able to climb, so back in the early days we came up with the idea of a climbing tower," Falk says. All generations love climbing, but the intention was not to create a climbing wall, but rather a building in its own right: "A real tower, almost like a castle and therefore in keeping with the name of the place." The question was: How to build such a structure without the costs skyrocketing? At a festival with the playmobiles, Reiner Falk spotted a shipping container and things fell into place. For the special structure, one container lay on its base, with the second one stood next to it on its end, and a specialist company then reinforced them with internal struts.
Another company, this time from Berlin and a specialist in prefabricated housing blocks, then cast it in concrete: "A total of 50 tons of concrete, 22 tons of which we then removed by hand with trowels, modelling the seams and stones," Falk remembers. The ten days of hard work evidently paid off. Many people could today be forgiven for thinking the tower had been erected by masons. Reiner Falk only felt a little worried on the day of the official inauguration, September 12, as the team celebrated the opening of a tower just one day after 9/11 of all days."

Even now, you can step inside the climbing tower, and from the top you get a great view out over the city. It's very popular among visitors to the grounds, and a climbing course that is regularly offered also attracts people who've never dared to go climbing before.
Since 2007, two additional containers have provided space for the office and for the tools, balls, and toy desk. The children have to put up a deposit, but can then borrow anything they need for play or to build something. Since 2009, there's also been a large stage on the grounds where music, theater, and acrobatic performances are held. And kids can play basketball directly behind it. There's a giant swing hanging from one of the tall trees, for which two long ropes were thrown over a thick branch, a plank fastened between them, and it was ready to go. "You can really forget life when swinging, and the parents love that, too," Falk explains. Alongside the climbing tower, in recent years various options have been created for hand-over-hand rope walking or for balancing: There's a wobbly bridge made of Robinia wood, and the latest feature is a climbing world with nets, twisting ropes, and boards.



The tools issue desk has a lot to offer.

Come and tell us, what you want!

Participation is a major priority at the adventure playgrounds. The team feels it is crucial to address the children's needs and preferences, and for that reason children's assemblies are held on the grounds regularly before the vacation to poll opinions. The kids can also participate in planning and holding the assemblies, and they likewise lead and moderate the assembly. All children aged six and up can then contribute ideas and wishes for the shape the vacation program should take and discuss them. The educational staff stay in the background and write the minutes, while parents and relatives are welcome to attend but are not allowed to influence the proceedings.

The party zone is located at the western end of the grounds, protected by a walnut tree and a canopy. Children's birthdays and school festivals can be celebrated here – or, if the weather is colder, in the Schwedenhäuschen. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was even a school enrolment party held here for Merianschule. "The demand keeps on growing, and we're not even an event location. The original idea was for the kids who come here anyway to be able to hold parties here," Michael Paris states. For a good five years now, school classes have also been able to use the grounds for "green" lessons. Learning to identify plants, digging up earth and sowing seeds, and encounters with earthworms also encourage kids to discover things for themselves. The project has been a great success, as Falk confirms.

Soapboxes, St. Martin's Day bonfires, and animals

As was the case with the Riederwald adventure playground, in the Nordend district, too, Michael Paris saw it as crucial that the institution present itself to the locals. To this end, the Günthersburg team resorted to lost or forgotten kids' games, and the idea arose of organizing a soapbox derby. This kind of race for kids first saw the light of day in Oberursel im Taunus, where such events were held as early as 1904 and 1907. The trend for organized "soapbox derbies" was also something that came to Germany from the US after World War II. "We found out that Comeniusstrasse is a historical racetrack where Adam-Opel AG held soapbox derbies back in the 1950s," Michael Paris comments.





Party zone on the ground and a soapbox race out front.



Thanks to support from Dachverband der Seifenkistenrennen, the adventure playground organized its first race in Wetteraustrasse in 1995. "One of the spectators had himself raced down Comeniusstrasse in the 1950s in a soapbox," Reiner Falk recalls. The event swiftly morphed into an ever larger and more professional spectacle for the whole district, which is why it soon took place on Comeniusstrasse. Kids from all over Germany signed up to compete, and even some from neighboring countries. "Our own facilities and the official rules of the Dachverband meant we were able to hold recognized preliminary-stage races for the German Soapbox Race Championships," Paris says. The races were hosted for ten whole years, but the positioning of hundreds of straw bales along the route and all the organization spelt a lot of work each time round. By contrast, for the spectators the fun of watching the soapboxes whizz by was short-lived. Given the amount of effort required, the idea was abandoned in 2006.

"My daughter Emilia already had a booth on the flea market, and we also attend the St. Martin's Day bonfire. What they are doing is fantastic. Hopefully the adventure playground will last forever. It thrives on the people who do their bit for it."

KATHRIN (48)



Thousands flock to the St. Martin's Day bonfire in the park.

66

By contrast, another highlight of the adventure playground exists to this day. Since 1997, the St. Martin's Day bonfire has been lit in Günthersburgpark on November 11 each year. The adventure playground staff had the idea of burning all the bits of old timber that were no longer being used on site, and in 1996 the first bonfire of this kind was lit on the adventure playground. So many people – and above all children with little lanterns they had made themselves – came to watch it "that the fence bent," Paris recollects, so the event was moved to the upper meadow in the park. A horn quartet from Frankfurter Musikschule provided musical accompaniment, there was non-alcoholic punch for the kids, hot apple wine, sausages, and hot chestnuts. Today, the evening in November usually attracts about 4,000 spectators. One year, some of the kids who regularly used the adventure playground performed the story of St. Martin with shadow puppets. In 2023, the brass band of Bornheim Protestant parish appeared for the first time, setting the perfect musical tone for the celebrations.

Since 1998, the flea market for children's clothing and toys has attracted parents and children alike to the park on the first Saturday after the summer holidays. It was another idea that stemmed from Günthersburg adventure playground, and initially there were about 50 stalls or blankets on which kids sold the toys they no longer wanted. In 2007, the "Kinderkram" market attracted over 500 flea-market stands, and now the figure is about 600, with the private stalls located along the pathways. "Our original idea was for kids to sell the stuff at the stands themselves, but now you mainly see the stalls manned by adults." Because it's been so successful, since 2004 there have been additional opportunities to sell children's attire and toys privately – at "Kindersache(n)", held in the spring and in the fall at Bürgerhaus Bornheim, usually with around 160 stalls each year.

In the early noughties, the adventure playground's menagerie expanded. Originally, five pet rabbits had been procured for the indoor adventure playground on Riedberg, but it closed down in the summer of 2004. The animals therefore moved to Bornheim, where they were welcomed with a small hut and a spacious outdoor pen – to which they were carried every morning. "The kids were utterly thrilled," Reiner Falk remembers.



Flea market for "kids' stuff" in the park.





The rabbits in the playground are lovingly cared for (above). At the Easter market on Bergerstrasse, the Easter Bunny distributes eggs and the kids can make their own wooden bunnies.



Supporters were found to feed the animals, and names were chosen. To this day, they are a great crowd-puller among the kids, but in the fall of 2019 they sadly fell victim to arson. One of the two containers, between which stood the rabbit hut, was set on fire by unknown arsonists and burned to the ground. Nevertheless, an adventure playground without rabbits was now inconceivable. "We therefore raised donations, in fact no less than 7,000 euros," Falk narrates, meaning new animals could be purchased. Today, two rabbits still hop about in their outdoor pen during the day. The regulars among the children are allowed to help feed them and clean out the hut. As at Riederwald, the Günthersburg adventure playground association is also active in the Bornheim and Nordend districts. As members of the two local non-profit umbrella organizations, the team takes part in the St. Claus market on upper Bergerstrasse and in the Christmas market on Glauburgplatz.

"The Günthersburg is unique. It offers children and young people free outdoor space and provides unique learning and sports services. With the expert support available, children can build, work in the apple orchard, or sculpt, and much more besides. The Günthersburg is part of Nordend."

KARIN GUDER (THE GREENS),
CHAIR OF THE NORDEND DISTRICT



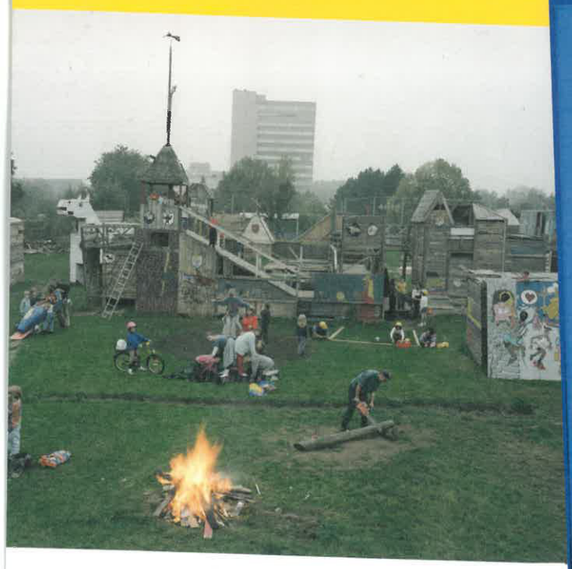
Posters were made campaigning for the playground to be preserved.

In 2006, the pre-Easter spring festival was taken over from the local commercial association and now takes place on Bergerstrasse as the Easter market, including an outsized Easter Bunny that distributes Easter eggs. For some years now, the adventure playground has been one of the favorite floats during the Bernemer Kerweumzug parade in August to mark the start of the Bernemer Kerb festival. Initially, the children and team simply walked along in the parade, but adults then started pulling the kids along in handmade soapboxes. The first float was a knight's castle the kids built, then a pirate ship. "Taking part is always a highlight for the kids. They get an opportunity to ride on the float and thus experience the parade from a special perspective," Reiner Falk reports.

Construction plans threaten the playground site

The adventure playground has long since grown accustomed to the fact that the site is not located directly inside Günthersburgpark but somewhat to one side. For almost 30 years now, the team has worked with the kids to design the grounds the way they wanted, but on several occasions municipal politicians have put the site up for grabs. First, the adventure playground was repeatedly threatened by a project associated with the Federal Transportation Routing Plan, with the idea being to build a link between the A66 autobahn in the west and A661 in the east of the city. The link would not only be routed along a tunnel under the city ring road, but also over the site of the adventure playground. In the course of the 1990s, however, municipal politicians changed their minds about the project, and federal government eventually discontinued the planning.

In February 2011, shortly before the local elections, the threat became more tangible. The then Conservative-Green coalition on the Executive Council resolved that a preparatory study should be conducted on a new residential quarter between Seckbach and Bornheim. In this "Ernst May neighborhood", just short of 4,000 new apartments would be built. By covering over the A661 autobahn at the relevant point, traffic noise would be reduced and a link forged between Huthpark and Günthersburgpark. The plan envisaged an "Innovation Quarter" boasting 1,500 apartments directly abutting Günthersburgpark. Since the four-story buildings would border on the adventure playground, the planners initially proposed relocating the playground to a site nearby. The City Planning Department even had the idea of moving the adventure playground to the Bad Vilbel city limits, Paris recalls, meaning 30 years of work on the site and close to where the kids lived would have been obliterated.



The facility has come under threat on several occasions.

"Greenery is not a purpose in itself; it's there for people," Reiner Falk suggests, and to this day does not understand how the planners could even think of wiping away the adventure playground. In 2017, the urban and landscaping planning competition was won by a proposal called "Die Günthersburghöfe", and the plans became the subject of extensive public debate.
The future of the playground remained unclear and was not mentioned in the land use plan, the association's managers complained. In 2019, Falk launched a petition, collecting signatures all over town against it being relocated.

What happens in the world does not stop at the gate

Many visitors to the adventure playground enthuse about it being an oasis, but current affairs in the world do not stop at the fence. That is as true of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in April 1986 as it is of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first year of the latter, the playground closed down for two and a half months, after which a hygiene concept was put in place for the young hut builders. Since February 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused uncertainty among parents and children alike. "We responded swiftly and found out as much as we could about what was happening," Reiner Falk and his colleague Jana Stefani report. They chatted a lot with the older kids. "At that time, we tried to calm them and distract them for a few hours at least from what was happening by involving them in arts and crafts activities." Since then, Ukrainian and Russian children have come to the playground with their parents. "At the beginning there were language difficulties and fear between the children and the adults," Falk recalls. But together we were soon able to overcome the hurdles and integrate the kids through crafts, playing, and building. A solidarity campaign for people in Ukraine (hearts were made from wood, decorated with short messages, and hung up on the grounds) helped people process what was happening. At the initiative of one family, a "Ukraine jour fixe" was established to bring displaced persons and Frankfurt families together at one table. More than 60 Ukrainian mothers and their children attended, and they "really blossomed", Falk says.



The kids fought for their playground – and won.



The adventure playground must stay!

A total of 8,000 signatures were collected online and through various activities. Posters were hung up, and flyers and little pennants distributed proclaiming "The adventure playground must stay". "In June, we held a children's assembly with 300 visitors as a protest; kids took the flyers back to their childcare centers, and some placed tables and benches in front of the door and asked passers-by to sign the petition," the then playground manager remembers. The impact on public opinion was not long coming. Local advisory council no. 3 sided with the association, as did countless citizens. Michael Paris received verbal confirmation from the city's policymakers that the adventure playground would not be moved: "Representatives of the CDU, SPD, Greens, and FDP told me the adventure playground would not be touched," he states. The new coalition that entered the City Hall in 2021 changed the planning objectives for the project anyway, and it is currently on ice.

"Here, we were always free to do stuff that we couldn't do at home – climb trees, mess around with hammers and saws, and make any number of new friends in the process."

A VISITOR WHO HERSELF ONCE VISITED THE ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND REGULARLY



The adventure playground celebrates its 30th anniversary.

Michael Paris remains vigilant. "That can change swiftly if there is a different majority in power in the City Hall." One positive side-effect of the headlines on the adventure playground was that "visitor numbers almost doubled the next year," Michael Paris says. The site has since celebrated its 30th anniversary, and in August 2022 there was a festival with a reception attended by city councilors, members of the local advisory council, and children's affairs officers. Kids who had once used it themselves came to the adventure playground at Günthersburgpark with their own kids. With its 3,500 square meters, it is the smallest but most frequented of the association's three adventure playgrounds, seeing up to 150 visitors a day and an annual total of around 12,500 in 2022. Educational institutions make ever more frequent use of the adventure playground, Falk notes, and adults with infants increasingly drop by as the kids can play there in a protected environment. The grant of 130,000 euros is nowhere near enough, as costs have surged, Michael Paris insists. When the facility started 30 years earlier, the grant was 125,000 deutschmarks. For years now, Paris has been campaigning for the site's footprint to be doubled, since only then will the adventure playground be able to develop new things for the kids, Falk agrees. And Michael Paris adds: "In Nordend there are so many kids, the birth rate is the second highest in Germany after Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, so we could definitely do with having more space for them to play." Now that the plans for a new neighborhood have been shelved, the adjacent former yard of the Municipal Road Building Department, located to the west of the adventure playground, would provide plenty of space.

Portrait of Reiner Falk

Gardener, construction worker, social worker



Reiner Falk on a carnival float.

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Reiner Falk points to the apple trees, the linden tree, and the walnut. He knows every tree at the Günthersburg adventure playground, and most of them he planted himself, with the exception of the walnut, which self-seeded. He can likewise tell lots of stories about the wooden castle, the climbing tower, the fence, and the other buildings on the site. And for the projects he didn't work on physically, he at least helped with planning. A qualified social worker, he was on site from day one, initially as a trainee. Originally, Falk trained as a toolmaker and worked in the trade for a while, but he noticed it was not for him in the long term as he missed being in contact with people, he says looking back. He performed his social service in lieu of military service at the adventure playground in Nordweststadt and realized that the job was far closer to what he wanted.

"I then knew that I wanted to work on an adventure playground, and so I studied social education," he says. In his first two years, he took all the courses relating to work with children and young people, and his graduation project focused on the options for play available to children in Nordweststadt. While still a student, he worked at the facility at Günthersburgpark as an intern and stayed on after graduation. With his colleagues Hagga Bühler and Martin Gralki, he put a lot of effort into developing the site and designing the playground.

There he became a gardener, a construction and a social worker all rolled into one. In the early days, the three went out to schools to show kids what fun it can be to do crafts outdoors and learn about nature in the process, he recalls. "That was exactly what I wanted, so for 30 years I fulfilled my dream in my work," he says now. And of course, what he means first and foremost is playing with the kids, but the freedom to realize his own ideas also played a role. "The creative scope the job offered was expressly expected of me." He was thus able to realize his ambitious idea of constructing a climbing tower several meters high. With the skills from his prior job, Falk also converted a tool press into an apple press for the playground. He took training courses, acquiring a chainsaw license and learning how to prune trees. What's more, he also came up with some events ideas, such as the flea market in Günthersburgpark. "Where else can you contribute such ideas?" he comments, still full of enthusiasm.



Reiner Falk and Mascot Franki represent the association at a protest march by charities calling for more funding.

Work at the adventure playground has changed over time, he says. Children nowadays have far less free time, do a full day at school, then do sports, piano lessons, etc. “You hardly see kids outside messing about. They can only make friends within a very small circle of kids: “In fact, most now come to the adventure playground in closed groups. There’s no sense of commitment anymore. There was a time when kids spent every day of the vacation building a hut, furnishing it and making curtains. These days, they don’t have that endurance.”
Moreover, parents today tend to be older and more concerned about their kids, no longer allowing them to go to the playground on their own. “We lend out toolboxes to kids aged six and upwards. Then we head out with them and show them how to build things. These days we take the parents along so they can build stuff together.” All too often, a smaller child gets plopped on a lap while doing craft work, and mom ends up doing the handiwork.
Reiner Falk has met even the severe changes of recent years with a smile. “You need to be open to change yourself and to make the best of things,” he comments. “It’s still crucial that there are places like this.”
Since March 2023, he’s had to learn to let go of his life’s work. After more than 30 years, he retired as manager of the site. “I don’t find it that difficult. I’ve arrived at a point where there’s nothing here that I can take further. Now my successors can pursue their ideas, and I’m looking forward to seeing how the adventure playground changes as a result,” he says. Even if he only drops by to see his Günthersburg now and again, he still has one wish for his life’s work: that the adventure playground stays standing where it is for many years to come – “and if possible, with a larger footprint”.

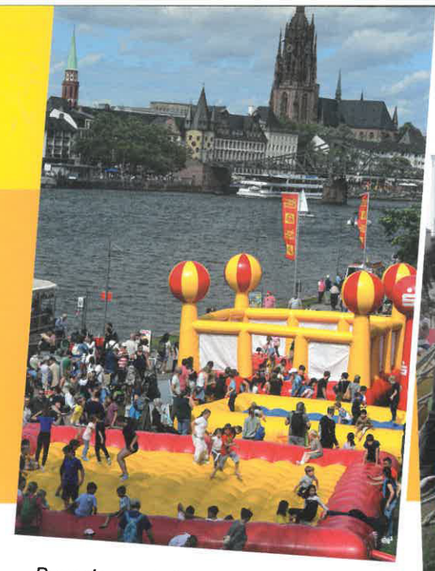


Playtime in the center of town

Riding the merry-go-round at Alte Oper.

Today, the Mainspiele and Opernspiele are the largest children's events during the vacation in the Rhine-Main region. About 45,000 children and young people come flocking to the two each year. The staff of the playmobile could not have imagined for one moment that this would be the case when they started developing the idea of the Mainspiele back in summer 1992 while out on a trip together at the Frankfurter Mainfest. It was the team's first major joint project, since those responsible for the then three playmobiles had thus far had little contact with one another, meeting only briefly at the warehouse when loading up their vehicles for the day. That was why they wanted to try their hand at doing something together. They had also noticed that during vacations only half the children came to the playmobiles' stops because many were on holiday. The idea was therefore to offer a joint playtime jamboree precisely during that period.

There was no need to expend a lot of effort looking for a site. "That day, we were sitting on the riverbank and looking straight at the Sachsenhausen riverside, at a large empty meadow," Michael Paris recalls. Bringing life to the riverside was something that would benefit the city, he thought, and this was before there was any talk of redesigning the southern riverbank for recreational purposes. The Parks Department initially provided space between Untermainbrücke and Holbeinsteg. "It was too small from the outset," Paris remembers. Nevertheless, in the summer of 1993 three playmobiles pulled up there, and for the first time the six staff offered a vacation program for Frankfurt's kids. Paris reckons about 100 promptly turned up.





Bouncing and climbing on the riverbank is something special.

were an explicit part of the package – among other things, they could mess around under mattresses. Then there was a theater everyone could join and an old circus truck with musical instruments for kids to try out. One night, the kids could even stay over in a small group of tents right by the river.

The association's own "Red Falcon" ship embarked on its first pirate mission on the Main. The association had purchased it in 1989 in order to get playmobile sets to the city districts along the river, a plan that was hard to realize, and so it now entered its new role – fulfilling its destiny, as it were. Moreover, the association collaborated with numerous other institutions. Members of the fishermen's guild, for example, took kids for rides on the Main in their boats and explained to them all the different fish that lived in it. The Frankfurt Port Authority also made its boat available to show kids the port facilities and how they were used. The Frankfurt Fire Department presented ist large fireboat, and it wasn't only the kids who were thrilled when, at the end of ist run, it halted mid river and began shooting water from all its cannons and jets.

"A summer without the Mainspiele is not a summer!"

CATRIN, FRANKFURT-MIT-KIDS.DE

In addition, the firefighters demonstrated how they rescued people from drowning, and some of the huts the kids had built were filled with smoke to demonstrate how people could be saved from burning houses Once a week, the kids were even allowed to ride on the water police's speedboat on the Main, and there were tours in the Police Department's bus for convicts and trips to see demonstrations by the police dogs unit.



The first Mainspiele between Untermainbrücke and Holbeinsteg.

In this context, some commercial play equipment makers made their products available free of charge for kids to try out. The kids were able to use them during the Mainspiele, and they then made proposals for how they could be improved. This collaboration gave rise, among other things, to the "Water Fun Feature Riederwald", which later went on the market.

The crowds flock to Opernplatz

The concept of bringing new life to the Main riverside was a success. Each day, hundreds of kids played on the grass while their parents watched or took a break at the coffee stand. Originally planned for the full six weeks of the summer vacation, the Mainspiele only took place for three weeks because the meadow was then needed for the Museumsuferfest. A substitute site had to be found. "Why not centrally downtown, where otherwise it's only the rich and beautiful who spend their leisure time?" Michael Paris asked himself – and the Municipal Administration supported him.

The convoy of toys, games, bouncy castles, tools, and face paint headed for Opernplatz square for the rest of the vacation – the Opernspiele festival was born.

It seemed obvious to continue at both locations the following year, which meant financing was needed. "We had raised some 30,000 deutschmarks from sponsors for the jubilee program, which was tight, and I estimated about 50,000 for the follow-up," Paris, at the time city councilor, narrates. First up, he needed to get his Social Democrat colleagues' support. "But I knew that after protracted discussions politicians rarely cough up the full sum, so I applied for 100,000 to be sure." As a city councilor, he was part of the meeting at the retreat that debated the different items on the agenda and waited tensely for the decision to be announced. Things turned out differently: "Our item on the agenda was addressed straight after lunch. No long discussion, the application was simply approved, and suddenly we had 100,000 deutschmarks to play with," because the Greens, as coalition partner, also approved it. With this comfortable cash cushion, Michael Paris was initially able to acquire new play equipment for the event each year. "After the euro was introduced, the amount was 50,000 euros, which was a little tighter." The Mainspiele and Opernspiele fun festivals took place in 1995 between Eiserner Steg and Untermainbrücke, where they are still held to this day. Back then things were more relaxed, Paris says. "Each day about 100 kids came down to the riverside. There were a few tents, handicrafts, play equipment, face paint." There were also still boat trips on the "Red Falcon" (which was built in 1966, originally as a ferry between Fechenheim



The vacation fun festival moved on from the Main riverbank to Opernplatz.





The "Red Falcon" remained in operation as a pirate boat.

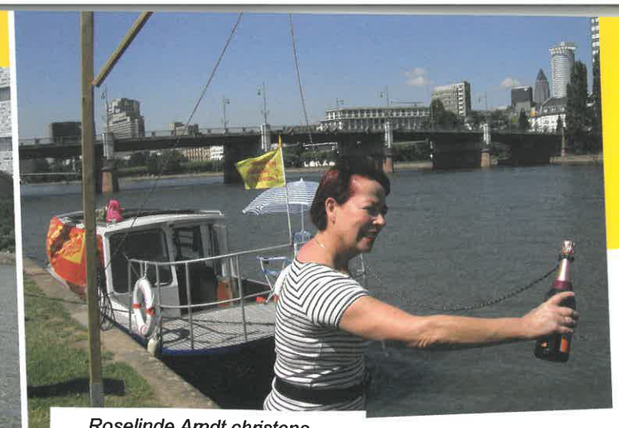
and Offenbach's Bürgel district, and was later run by Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung to take water samples and used by a private individual who then sold it to the association). In the early days, the kids boarded the "Red Falcon" to enjoy a two-hour leisure trip. There was also far less going on the riverbank back then, Paris recalls, so the kids were able to simply skateboard between the occasional passer-by.

Research ship and police siren

Since 2020, a new speedboat financed by sponsors has joined the fleet – with a top speed of 70 kmh. Nine meters long, it can seat 25 people. It was christened the Jolly Roger in honor of the skull-and-crossbones flag, although Michael Paris also skillfully used the name at the christening to express his sincere thanks to the two individuals who donated it. For "Roger" is composed of the first letters of the name of Robert Restani, CEO of Frankfurter Sparkasse, and of Gerhard Grandke, President of Sparkassen- und Giroverband Hessen-Thüringen, who together put up 50,000 euros

For the boat. Michael Paris also emphasized that "the new boat is marvelously suited to our purposes because the kids can sit up front on the benches." He's already wondering about having another boat built for the association, visually complete with a mast and flag, to eventually replace the old pirate's boat. He shouldn't have too much difficulty finding sponsors for it. When the boats put to shore in winter, they lodge in the old boathouse of the water police in Osthafen, which the State of Hessen gifted the association.





Roselinde Arndt christens the fire service boat with the name of her deceased husband.

At the Mainspiele, children aged three to 13 can now have fun at around 25 different play stations. These range from the traditional roller slide, climbing boxes, and bull riding through to the play tent with new painting and handicraft activities each day, as well as the “cleanest sand box in town,” as Michael Paris gladly proclaims, since it gets covered with a tarp each evening. There’s something for everyone. Ten-year-old Linus is trying out the climbing tower for the first time and is very proud that his aunt and uncle are
watching how he skillfully moves upwards. The family traveled in from Seligenstadt and uses the Mainspiele as the right event to balance going to the museum together. It gives Linus and his brother Mats a chance to really let off steam before the family heads home. Hanno (9) has opted for the T-shirt workshop. He comes to the Mainspiele each year with his mother and sister, and this time he wants to have a T-Rex emblazoned on the front of his T-shirt. His little sister opts for a butterfly. The staffer at the stand tells Hanno exactly where they should put what color on the shirts, and then the new items of clothing are hung up to dry. Until then, Hanno’s off clambering on the neighboring bouncy castle.In order to do justice to the educational side to the adventure playground, too, kids at the Mainspiele can learn how to use a hammer and nails. In 2023, the playmobile staffers built a replica of the Paulskirche spire from planks, and it was there that the City of Frankfurt celebrated 175 years of the National Assembly that year. The young visitors were able to bang in boards for the walls
and went about it with great fervor. Anyone who prefers to try their luck each year with a single flick of the wrist can commit 50 cents to the wheel of fortune and perhaps win something: a T-shirt or a gym bag, or crayons, or an ice-lolly. Nowadays, there’s a bistro with countless chairs and tables under the trees offering respite, and there are cold drinks, French fries, sausages, and even ice-cream to cool off.

Harbor Pirates

The boat trips during the Mainspiele were so popular that the association resolved to also offer them outside the summer vacation period. 1997 saw the birth of the Harbor Pirates where, for several weeks before or after the State of Hessen summer vacation, kids were able to don black bandanas and eye-patches and board a boat already made-up as pirates. And they still can, as the Harbor Pirates have long since become a cherished institution among kids in the region. The trip starts at Lindleystrasse in the Osthafen port and sails as far as Eiserner Steg before turning back. Since 2008, the port management company (Managementgesellschaft für Hafen und Markt – HFM) has supported the activity, providing a mooring in the port free of charge and also covering the costs of repairs. The kids only have to pay to hire the lifejackets that are mandatory on board. And for a few more euros, they can buy a souvenir pirate T-shirt in black or pink and a pirate pouch. The ship now runs for the junior Harbor Pirates for five weeks in the summer, between four and six times a day. Around 5,000 kids come aboard each year.



The Harbor Pirates have been crossing the Main River since 1997.

"I think it's great that in summer the Main riverbank becomes a playground. There are not many other play areas around there, and actually it should be a permanent fixture."

JULIA (45)

Most of the riverside facilities are free of charge. A small fee has to be paid only for the three bungee trampolines, for kids' face paint, and for painting T-shirts in the creative workshop. Only high-grade theater face paint is used, which is more expensive but better quality, is how Paris justifies things. "And a bungee trampoline costs 20–30,000 euros to buy, so we can't then make it available free of charge." The City of Frankfurt grant for the Mainspiele, which runs seven days a week from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., has remained at 78,000 euros for many years. Much of that is payroll costs. "The costs today are double what they once were. Without sponsors, we'd have long since had to close down."



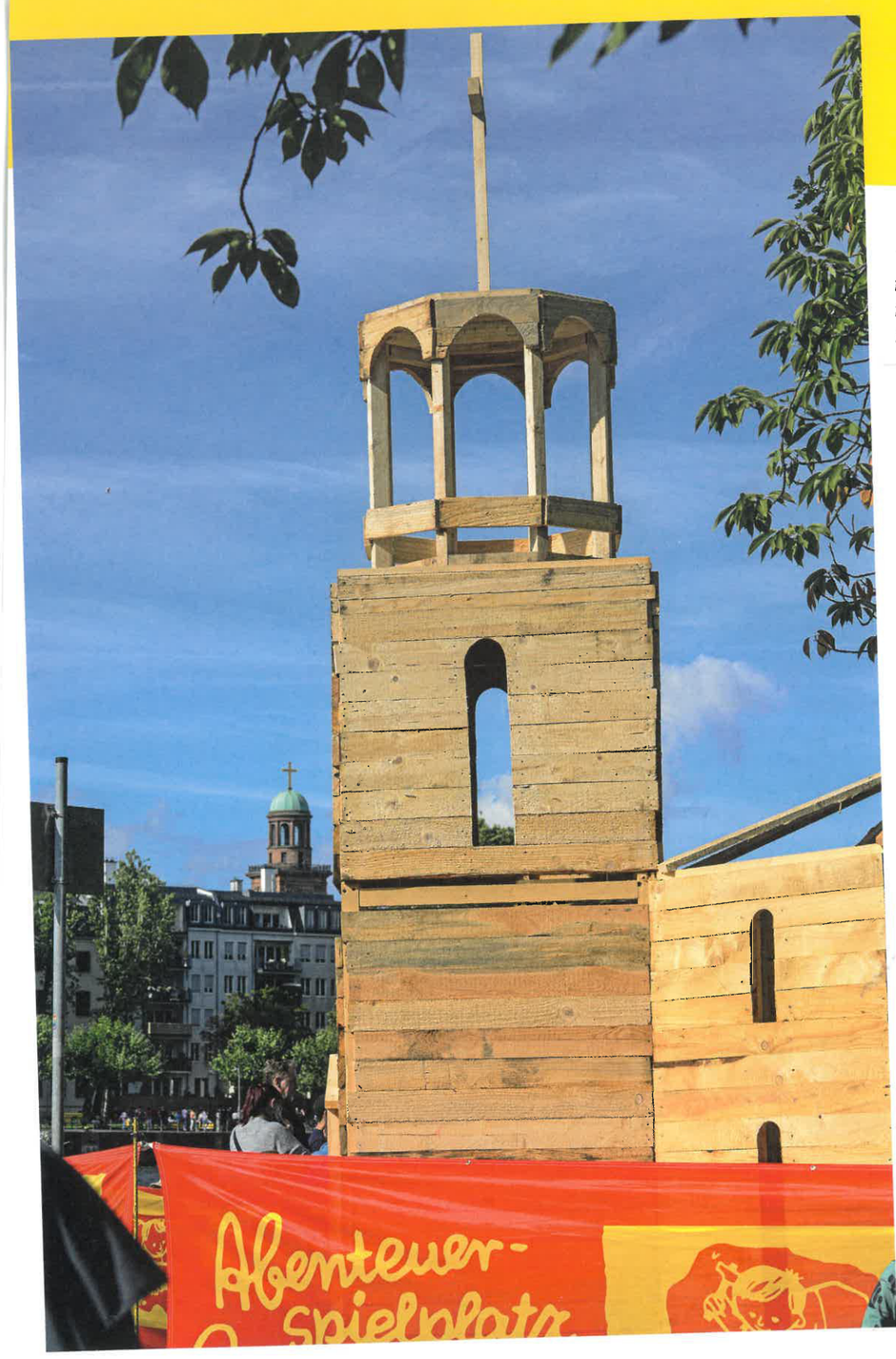




Each year, the Mainspiele really pulls the crowds.

Unlike the first few years, many people from outside Frankfurt now avail themselves of the Mainspiele services. The walls with information and the brochures are no longer just in German, but also in English, Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Turkish, and Spanish.
Over the last 30 years, the public has become more diverse, Paris says: “Alongside many German and foreign tourists, families come to us from all over Hessen, from Mainz to Würzburg and from Giessen to Heidelberg.” At most, half the visitors come from Frankfurt, he estimates. Even a member of the Saudi Arabian royal family has attended the Mainspiele.
That said, there are many loyal local kids who have been faithfully attending for years.
This time, 17-year-old Nadia is helping out with the kids’ face-paint stand. She’s an old pro, despite her tender age.
“I was 11 when I started helping out. I’ve played here since childhood,” she says. Her home is only five minutes away from the riverside, and she used to really love the bungee trampoline back then, she remembers. Then she found out how thrilling the boat rides could be and helped out there, too. Her 17-year-old colleague Oana nods in agreement. She’s been coming along for ages, too, because she loves working with kids. “I also like the fact that so many of those who work here become friends,” she says

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The Paulskirche in the background and the wooden replica the kids built.







Face paint, digging, or the bungee trampoline, there's something for everyone.





Mini fair ground

Merry-go-rounds, big wheels for kids, and snack booths have been part and parcel of the Mainspiele for a good 30 years now. It all started in Riederwald, where Roman Willeführ, who ran the adventure playground, marked its 20th birthday with a merry-go-round. Back then, the engine failed, Michael Paris remembers. "The parents ended up pushing it, but they did so with gusto, I must say."

Because it was so well received, the association chairperson decided to book Roman Willeführ for the Mainspiele, too. He duly arrived with the merry-go-round, and later with two of them, and he now erects an entire miniature fairground. "Back then, his son René was four or five years old. Today, he runs the pancake stand." Unlike most of the offerings at the vacation event, the children have to pay a few euros to use the merry-go-round, etc. The long queues at the weekend show that this hardly deters anyone. The miniature fair also relocates to the Opernspiele.

Having started out with six staff running the entire vacation event, it now requires about 35 trained helpers on site, ensuring that everything goes smoothly and none of the kids hurt themselves. "Visitor numbers have increased tenfold since the early days," Paris says. At present, around 25,000 children flock to the riverside event each summer. Meaning the helpers have their work cut out for them. In the early days, a child drove into the Main, Paris recalls. "He was fine, though, as the river is only about a meter deep at that point. Since then, nothing like that has happened again." Not that this means parents can sit back and relax completely; they continue to be responsible for keeping an eye on their kids, even if trained staff are on site, so the organizers emphasize.





The helpers rarely get a chance to catch their breath.

"You can spend all day at the Opernspiele, right in the middle of town, and you can try out great pieces of equipment that otherwise cost a large amount of money to use."

HANIFE (54)

Abseiling in front of the opera

The offerings are similar, but the atmosphere on Opernplatz is different. "About 20 percent fewer kids turn up than down at the river, and frequently it's families from Westend and the vicinity," comments Daniel Kempgen, who was head of the playmobiles for two years and thus also responsible for the Mainspiele and the Opernspiele. Now and again, you see a mom in a twinset and high heels or a dad in a business suit, who've just finished work in a bank or law office and are accompanying the kids straight afterwards. "Some of the bankers just come to watch at lunch time. Back when we still had a basketball court, they even joined in." Another difference compared to the Mainspiele: While the fun down on the riverside meadow is outdoors under the open sky, the kids on Opernplatz, and above all in the adjacent Taunusanlage, are protected by the tree canopies. The Lucae Fountain and the Marshall Fountain on the grounds were appropriated by the kids from the outset; they used ready-prepared drainpipes and buckets to create water speed tracks, or used the roller slide to go careening into the water, or rode around on it in tiny boats. The bouncy castle is a must, just as there's always been a creative corner for painting and handicrafts. While in the first year the event was restricted to Opernplatz, the very next year it already extended down into the park, and it has stayed that way ever since. One special attraction in the early years was provided by the then managing director of Alte Oper, Christopher Hunt. In 1996, he opened the doors of the concert hall so that children could abseil off the balcony of the historical building down on to Opernplatz. Back then, the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association was also permitted to deck out Alte Oper with Opernspiele banners.





One year, the kids even built a half-timbered house.

That's no longer possible; instead, an inflatable gateway directly at the subway exit bearing the association's logo beckons all passers-by from afar. On the square, kids shoot about on all manner of different vehicles, in the Lucae Fountain the sailors among them have fun buzzing around on small hand-driven boats and inflated rings and scream for joy when they get too close to the "waterfall" in the middle. The climbing tower in the background is always under siege. Two girls with tiger faces are walking down the central path. "Once the face-paint colors for the unicorns have been used up, then it's tiger-time," declares Daniel Kempgen with a laugh. There's plenty of hustle and bustle at the roller slide, too, down which generations of kids have whizzed in small boxes. Larger kids aged 11 and upwards can enjoy the Aerotrim, a sphere on three axes originally developed for astronauts that allows them to move in any direction by shifting their weight.

A bungee trampoline and a bull-riding device are likewise essentials. And the tower of crates, up to eight meters high, where you have to add crate after crate as you climb, attracts not only peak performers but also countless spectators. Smaller kids simply have fun on the bouncy castle, in the sand box, in the ball pool, or with the outsized Lego blocks. The ice-cream seller who has erected a sales kiosk at his old van has been located at one and the same place on the square for over 20 years. And the association's toilet truck is also at hand. There have even been famous visitors to the Opernspiele: In the early years, Hollywood great Anthony Quinn turned up with his kids. "The staff were so astonished, they even forgot to take a photo," Michael Paris quips.



Small visitors really love the roller slides.

"It's really something special that these things are all for free. My kids loved being able to splash about in the Opernplatz fountain."

DANIELA (40)

One goal of the Opernspiele is also to show that even downtown it is always possible to let kids play, he suggests. Where there's a will, there's a way. "Half of the two-seaters we use there were donated by a local citizen," he notes, emphasizing how many people support the idea. That said, from the outset there were opponents of the summer offerings for children on the city's most fashionable square. In the fourth or fifth year of the Opernspiele, a member of the Municipal Administration for the conservatives tried to prevent the events taking place. He evidently hadn't counted on Paris being a PR pro. "I immediately told him it was a bad idea to cross swords with kids or animals during the summer when there are fewer headlines," Paris recalls. He issued a press release, and the media in Frankfurt promptly responded. "A total of 32 articles ran, and all of them, including that of the more staid F.A.Z., sided with us." The Municipal Administration member hurriedly backed down. A few years later a renewed attempt was made, but after "deep discussion" it again went nowhere.

Major events, such as the public viewing sessions during football World Cups, have repeatedly put the children's events at risk, but it has usually proved possible to reach some kind of compromise. "Politicians have often found out I am not a pushover," Michael Paris says with a laugh. To this day, he is forever engaged in minor battles with the administration if, suddenly, the delivery vans for the wine festival (which takes place at the same time) are parked on the Opernspiele site or the striking entrance with the logo is pushed to one side to make way for a vintner's benches. Again, a compromise tends to be reached. "It annoys me, though, that to this day we are still having to defend children's rights in Frankfurt," Paris comments.

Double the number of visitors

The COVID-19 pandemic hit kids especially hard, and not just in Frankfurt. The association felt it was therefore all the more important to offer them a summer program, meaning the period was not such a bad one for the Mainspiele and Opernspiele, Michael Paris says, looking back. This was because, at a time when all other events were being canceled, he had the courage to give the Mainspiele the go-ahead for summer 2020. The thinking was clear: Since all playgrounds and the childcare centers and schools had been locked down from February through to the end of April/early May, children really needed to get out, move, and have fun. He discussed the idea in depth with the responsible executives in the Municipal Administration and above all the Municipal Health Department, and asked exactly what could prevent the event from taking place.



With the Aerotrim, you can even stand on your head.



The fun took place even during the pandemic, although people had to keep their distance.

"The Mainspiele are simply great and indispensable for small children."

ANNIKA (53)

All oft he various facilities were put to the test. "We found solutions for everything and, among other things, disinfected the equipment; we installed ten disinfection stations, distributed flyers with the rules on how everyone had to behave, and registered all visitors." Given how serious things were, it still took a long time before the permits were forthcoming. The staff were filled with hope – and fear – and only one and a half weeks before the Mainspiele were due to open permission was granted, so they were then really under pressure to set things up in time. The decision was taken to prolong the Mainspiele so that it ran for six full weeks, and not to hold the Opernspiele. This time, the grounds straddled both sides of the river between Eiserner Steg and Untermainbrücke to create a greater distance between the facilities. For example, the climbing tower and a helter-skelter were on the northern side, but were not much used because, as Paris recollects, having to go the whole way over the bridge was a step too far for many kids. The northern side was therefore abandoned after a fortnight. The association also avoided any of the facilities where there was close contact, such as the face-paint stands. Children aged six or over had to wear masks over their mouths and noses, as did their parents or carers, and that included on the pirate ships. There were two desks at the beginning and end of the grounds on the Main meadow where visitors had to register. A total of 50,000 plastic bracelets in seven different colors were produced for this, and each child and parent had to wear one – one color for each day of the week. "I also bought 100 lever-arch files to store the registration sheets."

At first sight, this entailed considerable extra costs, but it also offered a decisive advantage, Paris says. For the first time, the organizers were able to say exactly how many children took part. In the first few weeks it was just 100 kids a day, but in the summer of 2021 the figure surged. "We found out that the number of kids attending the summer fun festivals was actually double what we had earlier assumed and communicated." Because although COVID meant almost no childcare or kindergarten groups could attend and there were hardly any tourists given the travel restrictions, in the summer of 2021 approximately 45,000 children registered in the space of the six weeks. Frankfurt had thus created something really special in Germany in the year of the pandemic, Paris points out: "It showed that social-welfare aspects and children are especially important in this city, and that even in such a difficult year the inhabitants and families in the city had not been forgotten."



In the fall, the bouncy castle was inflated in front of Katharinenkirche.

The pandemic also provided the association with a key insight: "It was clear that all the facilities only attracted half the numbers of prior years, from which we could deduce that normally 70,000 children take part in the summer activities. If you add one adult accompanying each child, the grand visitor total is 140,000. A figure of 200,000 is more realistic," Paris concludes. This gave him an even stronger reason to employ more staff. That wasn't easy at such a time, however. The adventure playground has since been urgently seeking school or college students or other people interested in education work who want to help out as a summertime job or at the weekends.

Fall vacation fun at Hauptwache

In order to offer kids greater opportunities for playful fun during the pandemic, the association had the idea of holding a city fun festival for two weeks in the fall – right in the center of town. Back in 2010, to mark the 25th anniversary of the playmobiles, Michael Paris had kicked off the fun festival on Hauptwache "as an advertising event for people who weren't yet familiar with Riederwald adventure playground," as he puts it. Since then, it had been held each year on a Saturday in the fall. Now, for the first time, the playmobiles were to occupy Hauptwache for the entire fall school break. Taking its cue from the Mainspiele, there was lots on offer: a bungee trampoline, a tubing track, a bouncy castle, the climbing tower, bull-riding, a roller slide, and handicrafts activities. Once again, all visitors had to register, and hygiene measures were implemented. For a fee, everyone got a bracelet allowing them to use all the facilities free of charge. Despite a few rainy days, in total more than 4,000 kids flocked to the festival. "I would have liked to continue with it, but we didn't get permission the next year," Michael Paris reveals. Since then, it has been held as a one-day event called "Spielstadt Frankfurt" – with a special attraction in 2018: "During an audit, we noticed we did not know exactly how many roller slides we owned. One of the staff suggested we place all of them next to one another in a line on Hauptwache to check whether they were all functional." The result: one day suddenly 13 roller slides stood in a line on Hauptwache – it looked spectacular, and the kids were thrilled.



Portrait: GERD EIFERT

A man for all seasons



His realm begins in the large hall on the grounds of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association in Frankfurt's Ostend district. In the front, bouncy castles, trampolines, and other equipment stand awaiting deployment at the next fun festival. In the rear section of the hall lies Gerd Eifert's own personal playground. His main tools are located here: his band saw, welding kit, router plane, and jigsaw. Eifert is a qualified carpenter – and not just that: At the adventure playground he's the toy equipment maker, games educationalist, repairman, playmobile driver, boat captain, and essentially first port of call for anything and everything.

He's worked for the association since 1996. Back then, having been briefly unemployed he was hired as a carpenter. He had just finished half of his training to become a master carpenter and had already passed his exams in education and vocational practice. At the adventure playground he lacked the opportunity to build his master's piece, but he liked the place so much that he preferred to discontinue the course rather than quit the job. What he did get was the opportunity to train on a sandwich course in educational play, and he never regretted the decision. It also brought him private happiness: It was at one of the Mainspiele that he met his now wife. They've now been married for almost 20 years and have a daughter.





Gerd Eifert gets stuck in everywhere – be it the bouncy castle or the pirate boat.



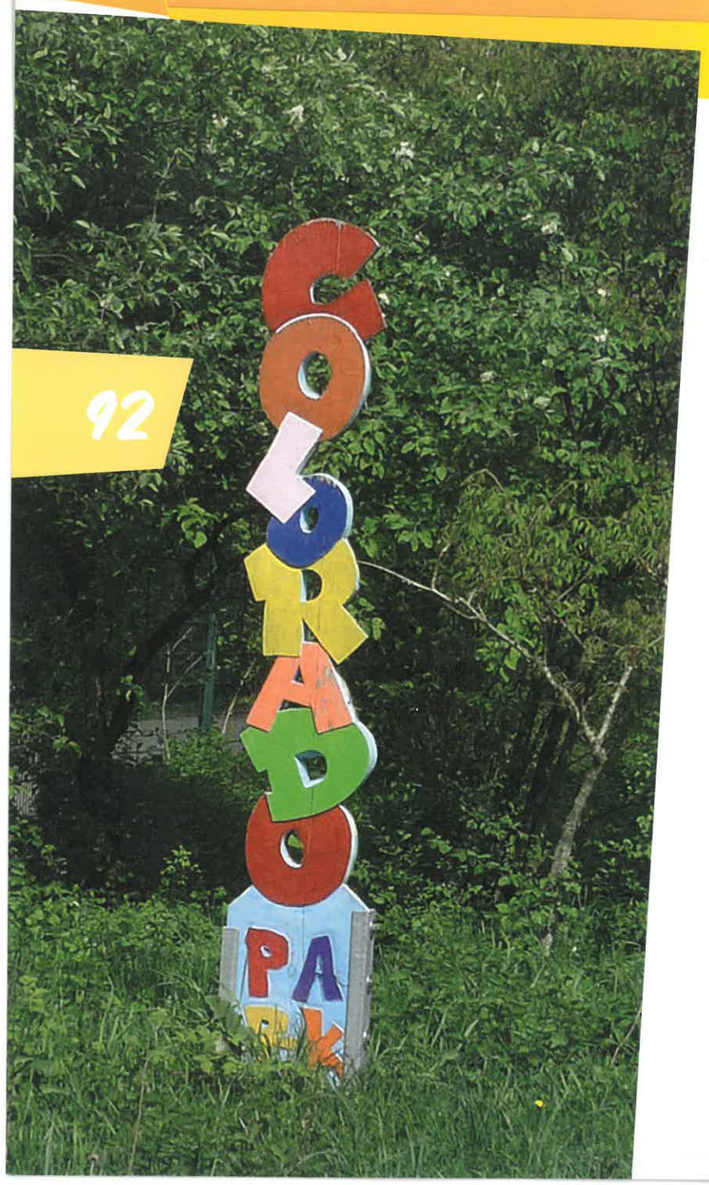
To mark Gerd's 25 years of service, association chair Michael Paris officially presents him with a gift.

In his first year at the adventure playground, he spent almost all his time building play equipment. He was basically "on call": If someone said, "Build us a large 'four in a row'", then Eifert grabbed a large back panel and some struts, and over the years perfected the concept. Today, kids can play tic-tac-toe on the back of a large "four in a row". He redesigned the classic ball on a string using a really high pole, which expanded the radius for the ball to fly round. "We've got the huge version in three playmobiles," he says proudly. Virtually everything that brings a shine to the eyes of kids during fun festivals or when the playmobiles drop by has at some point rested in his hands. Because where kids play a lot, things get broken or need maintaining or lubricating. In 2017, he also converted the association's own pirate boat. Since then, the "Red Falcon" has not only had a new name – it is now called "Hook" – but, with its new mast, lookout, and skull-and-crossbones, it also fits visually much better with the stories of Captain Hook and Jack Sparrow.

Nowadays, Gerd Eifert often doesn't have the time to develop new games in his workshop or even repair things. Priorities have changed, as the staffing level has dropped and there are more tasks to perform. In the past, the St. Martin's Day bonfire in November was the last event of the year, and he'd have peace and quiet in the workshop until March 1. Today, there's the Christmas cookie tour, the Christmas market, and the year begins with the carnival event. Gerd Eifert is now a permanent member of the playmobile staff as well, on the 3.5-ton truck that more or less no one else can drive. "And I have to load all the vehicles ready for the weekend runs. For the large fun festivals, I handle the power cables. At the moment I'm busy preparing the Christmas cookie tour and will then handle the driving." The constantly changing requirements are also what make his life interesting. And for all the overtime, special tasks on the spur of the moment, and people who don't always sympathize, he finds consolation in the glowing eyes of the children," he says. "It's the kids that give me all the energy."

Wild West in Frankfurt





Colorful wood carvings like the cowgirl are the trademark of Colorado Park.

Colorado Park is a fixed institution in the district. Since 1997 children from Ginnheim, Dornbusch, and elsewhere have been able to let off steam, clamber, and build at the adventure playground. It has arisen on old sheep grazing land that locals had simply turned into a dog toilet. During the first few days, Hagga Bühler, the longstanding manager of the adventure playground, was constantly having to change shoes as he kept treading in dog turd, he recalls. “The ground was covered with wild blackberries. We spent weeks clearing it with machetes, and then stamped the ground down so kids could play here and build their own huts,” he commented in an interview to mark the park’s 20th anniversary.

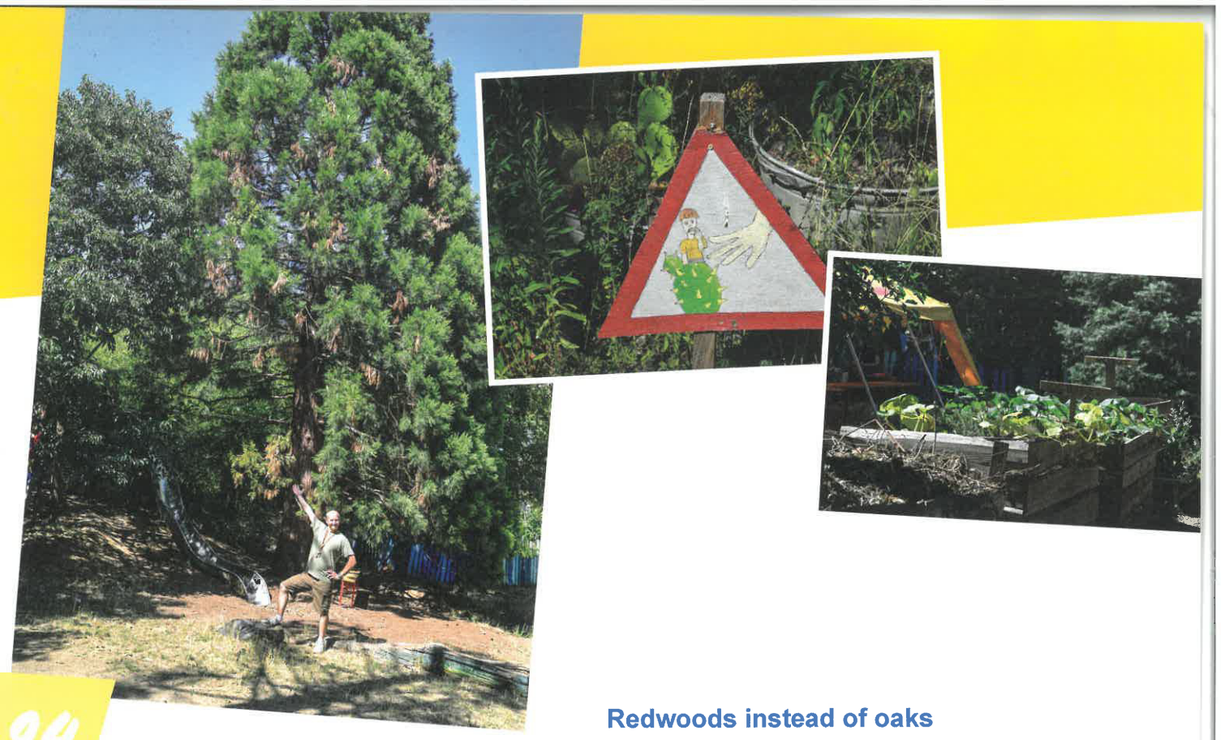
The fact that children can play here at all stems from a historical turning point. In the 1990s the US Army personnel withdrew from Frankfurt, abandoning the Platensiedlung, their housing area on the edge of Ginnheim and Dornbusch, and the apartments that had been home to about 60,000 US citizens around Raimund- and Platenstrasse were soon rented out. Many families moved in, but there were few



The first huts for the Wild West town were swiftly built.

opportunities for kids to play. The Municipal Social Welfare Department therefore approached the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association and asked whether it would be prepared to set up an adventure playground in the neighborhood. "The request was timely, since we were contemplating expanding anyway," comments Michael Paris. The wasteland site on the corner of Paquetstrasse and Raimundstrasse was ideal. Within the space of three months, the association's team had created a space where children could play, try things out for themselves, and make friends. Management of the 8,000-square-meter site, which was only gradually enclosed by a fence, went to two social work graduates, Beate Eichler and Hagga Bühler, who moved there from the adventure playground at Günthersburg. Both set themselves the goal of also using the adventure playground to foster links between the new neighborhood and the old existing district of Alt-Ginnheim. Moreover, together with other institutions in the district, the adventure playground would serve to counteract a social flashpoint arising between Ginnheim and Dichterviertel.



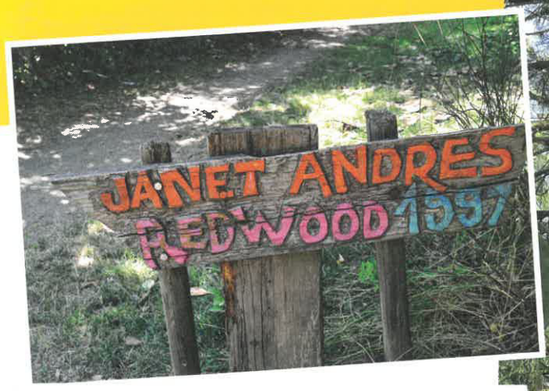


The redwood trees tower over the grounds.

To this end, the large strip of wasteland was destined to become something special. Hagga Bühler swiftly devised a concept that reflected the history of the place where members of the US military had lived for 50 years. It is not only the name Colorado Park, alluding to the state in the US whose name means “colorful” in Spanish, that points to this. Indeed, like young American settlers, the first visitors set about developing the site and gradually urbanizing it. They created a Wild West town with its own main street. Along it, huts, a saloon, a jailhouse, and a sheriff's office were erected. The ballroom is still standing and is used for birthday parties. Instead of enjoying the mud of a shallow pond, the kids started prospecting for gold. Instead of barbecue sausages, they lunched on baked beans. And they celebrated Halloween well before the October hype spread to Germany.

Redwoods instead of oaks

The flat grounds soon had a new look. Paths and even power lines were brought in, and the staff installed them. The earth excavated from the new residential site on Riedberg was used to create a long hill, with several hundred trucks of earth deposited. From the path on the crest, you now have a great view out over the entire grounds. The brook in the canyon was expanded in 2004 to form the Mississippi. Some fathers waded in and dug a channel lined with basalt paving stones that had been part of old Frankfurt road tops and were thus likewise recycled. The helpers also built a waterfall. The following year, a nearby dogwood thicket and the massive roots had to be removed to stop it spreading, whereupon the 20-square-meter ditch was turned into a pond for dragonflies one and a half meters deep with a shallow-water section and a small island. Rare water plants were introduced, along with fish, newts, frogs, and now and then even ducks. Today, this water world is a real crowd-puller at the adventure playground, and older children love helping tend the pond.





Consul General Andres planted the first redwood.

The greenery was likewise meant to fit the American atmosphere of Colorado Park. The then US Consul General, Janet Andres, marked the opening of the playground by planting a sequoia on the Governor's Square in the middle. At the time no taller than one of the youths wandering around the grounds, it is now a good 25 meters high. Subsequent Consul Generals added two more redwood trees, but the idea was to cover the entire grounds with appropriate trees and bushes. Hagga Bühler therefore asked the botanical gardens for help and was gifted about 150 different North American plants, which he then transported in the trunk of his Opel Kadett to the playground site, where they slowly but surely turned the place into a green oasis. To this day, bald cypresses and silver maples, American linden trees, witch hazel, and western red cedars have flourished here.

Sculptures and magical lights

Hagga Bühler was not only manager of the adventure playground for many years, but also remains a sculptor who has made his art part of his work. Many of his sculptures, such as the cowgirl "Big Sister", which became a calling card as a symbol of "girl power" are to be found around the grounds. Bühler also encouraged the young visitors to make their own wooden sculptures, and Colorado Park became a center of sculpting in the city's children's outreach program. Many of the results now stand on the grounds, from the dark-skinned "Sterntalermädchen", who raises questions about Africa, to the "Stinktierhaufen" (pile of skunks). What is so special about these sculptures, which are some 2.5 meters tall and carved from boards of Douglas fir, is that the motif on the front differs from that on the back.





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"I think it's great you can borrow stuff. I chose a paint box and helped paint a wooden hut."

MARYAM (6)

One sculpture boasts a saber-bearing pirate throwing a sawfish over his shoulder on one side, and on the other, with the same outlines, a princess who lifts a nymph skywards. In the course of a year, the sculpture workshop usually turns out hundreds of name plates, soapstone figures, and other artworks. The work is not just fun but can have a therapeutic effect: One example is a group of teenage girls, who made a soapstone teddy bear to decorate the grave of a friend who had died of bone cancer.

Many of the projects were jointly devised. People agreed that Colorado Park simply had to have a totem pole, and about 170 kids and young people spent the summer vacation carving a six-meter-long tree trunk, using indigenous themes from Canada, such as a beaver, a buzzard, and a mother crow and its child. In 2001, it was erected with a ceremony led by Canadian totem-pole artist Ed E. Bryant from the Tsimshian tribe and crowned with a thunder bird who has protected the grounds ever since.

Through Bühler's artworks, the adventure playground association has made its presence felt at many places round town. In 1996, the "Park Gates" were put in place at Nordpark Bonames. Meanwhile, at the Opernspiele the kids crafted three powerful wooden stelae: The first of these oak trunks was carved in 1995 under the careful eyes of Hagga Bühler and sculptor Dirk von Manteufel. In 1999, the Monument to the Solar Eclipse was added – it shows a Hound of Heaven darkening the sun, which has been skewered on a high-rise. In



Wood carvings
wherever you look.



The large book at the social welfare office advertises Colorado Park.

2004, the third stelae followed, and all three were stood in the Taunusanlage park close to the Marshall Fountain, although they were taken down by the Municipal Parks Department in 2018 because they no longer stood steady. To mark the 300th anniversary of the foundation of Alte Bethlehemkirche in Ginnheim, in the year 2000 the adventure playground sculptors gifted the parish an Angel of Bethlehem carved from old oak, which was erected outside the church. After ten years, the wood had started to crack and the colors had faded, so Hagga Bühler and a team of kids arrived to restore the angel. On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the foundation of Colorado Park, the staff and the children together painted a large plastic book. As a kind of permanent ad brochure, it was stood on the grounds of Dornbusch social welfare office. Hagga Bühler retired in 2017, and since then the sculpture workshop in Colorado Park has played less of a role, with the kids now increasingly crafting things with leftover pieces of wood.

Bühler's colleague Beate Eichler was a theater educationalist and likewise brought her professional experiences to bear in the adventure playground. Acting and dancing thus became another focus of the educational work there. Eichler, who retired in 2018, had a large stock of theater props and costumes and encouraged kids to dress up and wear masks. Teams also banded together to sew additional costumes, craft props, and design stage sets. As early as 1998, when hardly anyone in Germany gave it much thought, Halloween was already celebrated in the park, with Eichler and the kids together inventing the "Magical Lights", a journey into a shadow world for which everyone teamed up to prepare a mystical spectacle. Some kids remained faithful to the project for several years and together formed the expert core of the troupe. The festival took its cue from an old Irish-Gallic belief that during the first night of winter the borders between this world and the "Otherworld" become blurred and dissolve. For this reason, on the evening of October 31, they celebrated the "Samhain" festival. To this day, at the beginning of November the "Magical Lights Otherworld" rules over the adventure playground, with elves, witches, wood spirits, fairies, and gnomes holding sway. Then the hats the children make for themselves are illuminated in a ghastly vein, the bats dance in the trees, and ghosts grin through the windows. A storyteller at the bonfire tempts the children to listen, and wherever you look small monsters pop out of nowhere.

Jimmy Jolley

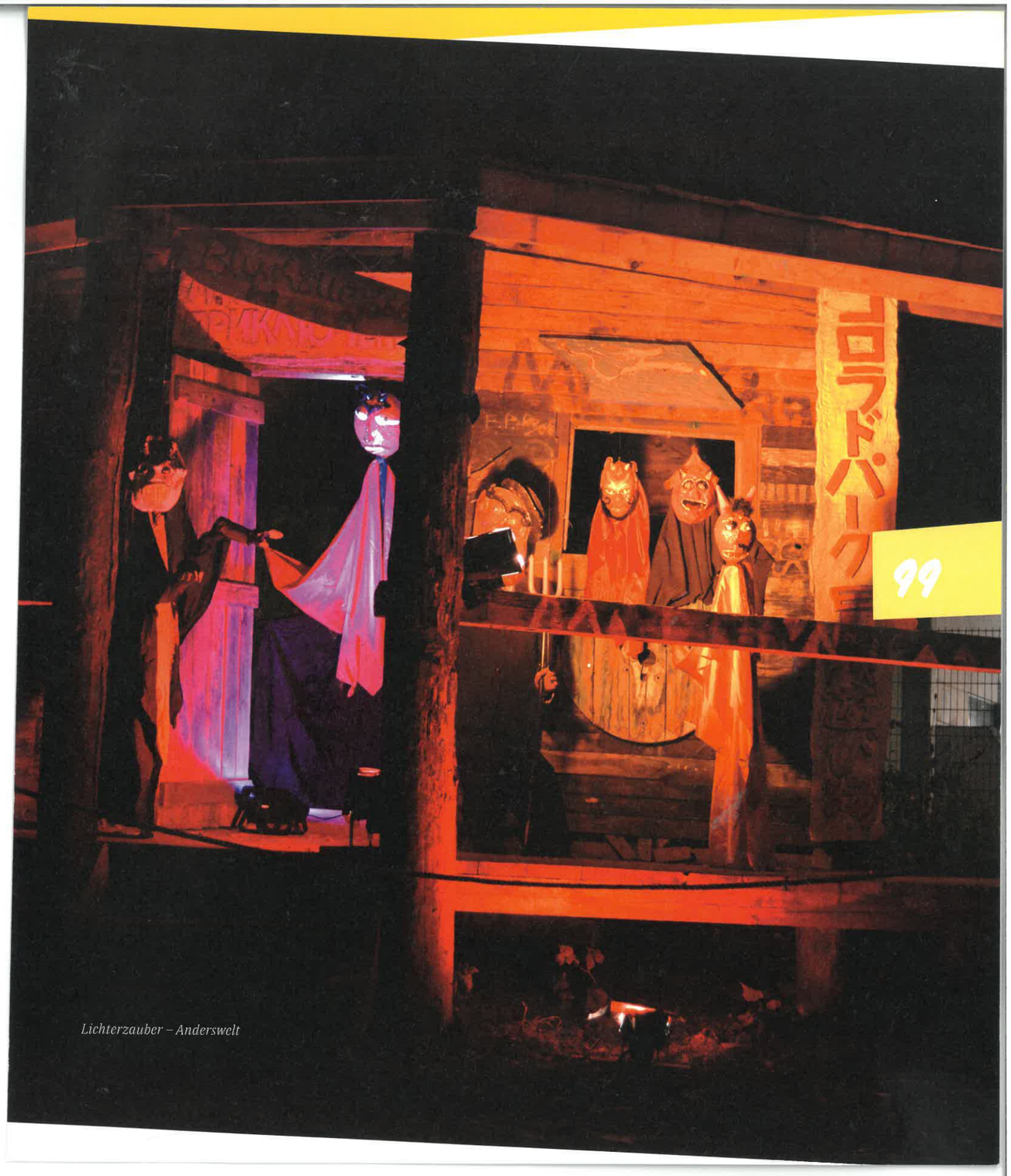
He was a globetrotter when it came to playground construction. Texan Jimmy Jolly, whom Michael Paris got to know at an IPA convention, visited the adventure playgrounds in Frankfurt several times. He initially drove a playmobile for three or four months, and "he later spent three months helping set up Colorado Park," Michael Paris remembers. Jolley also introduced the idea of playmobiles to Hong Kong. He cut a truly impressive figure for the kids: Tall, always wearing cowboy boots, with a long flowing beard, a Stetson, and a large belt buckle, and a connoisseur of rum, he died on May 31, 2001. In his memory, the association created a monument for him in 2005 with the help of Hagga Bühler, who sculpted a pelican cut from an oak trunk. It was erected with a commemorative plaque next to the tire-swing and the South Seas drum that Jimmy Jolley had himself made when working on site in 1997. It now stands next to the Colorado Park stage which was recently named after him.



For one whole week, the staff and kids work on decorating, designing, and readying everything for the festival. A real favorite is the flaming finale by antagon theaterAKTion, which usually incorporates its huge animals on stilts and a fire show. "In the Corona year 2021 the festival had more than 3,000 visitors, and on one occasion the queue went almost the whole way round the site," reports Michael Paris. In 2022, on the 25th anniversary of he festival, well over 1,000 children attended accompanied by adults.

Steamship, coaches, etc.

Ever since its foundation, Colorado Park has been in a process of constant change. The huts in the Wild West town, which the kids are forever changing, tearing down, or rebuilding, have over time been joined by a three-story wooden Mississippi steamboat complete with paddlewheel, which people love using for celebrations, children's birthday parties, or school group outings. It has been repaired on several occasions and is now undergoing restoration as the wood has rotted in places. And for the last few years another vehicle has attracted the kids' attention: a real, bright red stagecoach. "It originated in the Post Museum, which bequeathed it to me. I used it for an election campaign when I ran for lord mayor," Michael Paris remembers. Right next to it, children can be whisked away not only by a vehicle of their imaginations, but also by their own two feet: On the plot that originally housed a temporary office container, a rollercoaster was built in 2018 that ran along the ground. The trucks race along tracks but need to be driven by foot-pedal power. For all the effort involved, the kids love it, comments Holger Wiegel, who is currently manager of the Colorado Park facility.



Lichterzauber – Anderswelt





A day in Colorado Park

At 10 a.m. the staff of the adventure playground sit down for the daily meeting. They then set about doing office work and making preparations – for example cleaning rooms, pruning bushes and trees, and carrying out repairs. At 11 a.m. the gate to the grounds opens, and the first kids and groups of children arrive. At this point, the tools issue desk needs to be manned, the water installations switched on and, if possible, a bit of gardening work done. At the latest by 1 or 2 p.m., there tends to be so many kids on the site that the staff have their hands full looking after them, initiating games, supervising activities, conducting one-on-ones, or simply playing with the kids.

Half an hour before the playground closes at 7 p.m. (or 6 p.m. in the colder months), everybody joins in clearing up the site, and all the tools and games are handed back in. Then staff must complete the log for the day: This records how many kids came, what they did, whether anything of note happened, and what the weather was like.

Fire show accompanying the Magical Lights.

At the back of the grounds where there's shade, the younger visitors were given a little pony ranch of their own, with painted teepees decorated with boards and several wooden horses. Saddles and bridles can be borrowed from the tools issue desk. And, of course, the kids came up with their own name for the place, as a decorative wooden sign stating "Honey Pony Ranch" now declares. A little further down are trees and bushes that were planted a good 25 years ago and are now taller than any of the staff. It is there that the sound-and-senses forest was installed. Countless branches have animal figures hanging from them, as well as wind chimes made from old bowls and bits of tools. In the middle of it all, visitors will suddenly come across a rocket that could have come straight out of a TinTin comic. They can clamber up it and from the top whizz down a long roller slide. It originally stood on the indoor playground on Riedberg, and after that closed it relocated to Dornbusch.





The Honey Pony Ranch and the bakery.

In 2008, a few hands-on dads carefully built a bakery, complete with a pizza oven. To that end, they sawed more than 1,000 roof shingles from old boards and painted them, forming the side walls from clay. They also used clay for the spherical oven, which can be used for baking pizzas, cakes, bread, tarte flambée, börek, or other concoctions, and boasts an iron oven door and an extractor pipe. It was inaugurated in a special ceremony in 2011 and successfully passed all its tests. Right next to it stands an old East German Army field kitchen that Michael Paris purchased from the Red Cross in Hanau. "We use it to make rice pudding or chili sin carne," he says.

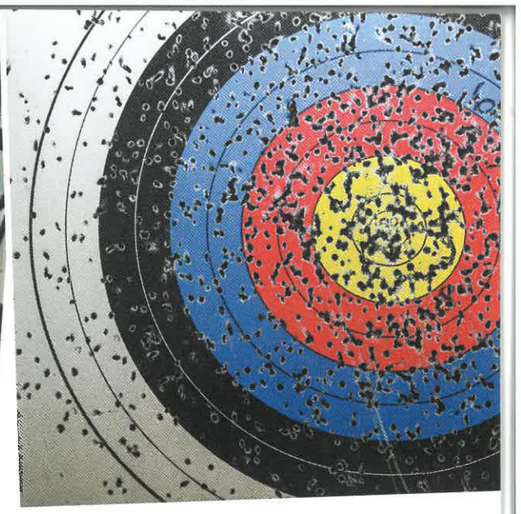
Another special feature at Colorado Park is the archery range. It was installed in 1999 close to the entrance, with the idea being that it would help kids learn to concentrate. "They can blow off steam here and, exceptionally for the playground, there are strict rules in place," says Hagga Bühler. They originally shot at a straw target hung seven meters away, and thanks to the building's structure with double walls, no arrow could fly out oft he range. The archers were always supervised and received instructions, with some scoring real successes. "Because at such a range, even a skinny kid can often beat the 'big-mouthed bros'."

"We're here for the first time. It's great and a little unlike any of the other playgrounds. It is pretty exotic that kids simply grab a hammer and go to work."

STEFFI (40)

In 2018, the range had to be torn down as the wood was rotten and there was a real danger it might collapse. And space was needed for the new container house. A total of four containers were assembled and clad in wood; in the lower two containers there's a large common room for the kids, and above it is the kitchen and the office.





The staff were really put through their paces while it was being built, however: The old container had to be emptied before the new ones could be put in place, and in the interim everything was housed in the stage wagon pulled by the playmobile, which then stood as a temporary structure on the grounds. The team recall the logistical feat of clearing everything out in such a way that the normal open operations could continue with the children, including the vacation program. "With a lot of patience and humor and the occasional desperate hunt for something, we got through our everyday work and kept the chaos in check."

For a few years, the old bows from the archery range were the only things left over from that highlight. The kids mourned the loss of the facility, and some built their own bows and arrows from sticks and string and shot at a carton filled with old blankets. That was never going to be a long-term solution though, which is why the Archery Range eventually returned in 2022, this time in the rear section of the grounds. In the space of only a week, staff and their younger helpers built a new range, and now the old bows and a few new ones are back in great demand among the kids. A member of staff always attends, for instance social educationalist Jancita Elsheimer. She makes sure that 15-year-olds Louis and Ahmed hold the bow correctly and that their friends remain behind the barrier. Younger kids are forever wanting to try their hand, too, she says, even four-year-olds. "Some of the children learn it super-quick; I'm sometimes quite amazed how smoothly it all goes, it took me a lot longer to learn it."

In 2016, Colorado Park had to forfeit a bit of land when the nearby Franz Böhm Vocational School was enlarged. In return, the adventure playground was hooked up to the toilets. Only in this way was it possible to incorporate another special feature: a disabled toilet, for which the hut with the toilets' entrance was made wider and a ramp installed. Shortly thereafter, the Günthersburg adventure playground gained one too. Colorado Park was also outfitted with a swing for wheelchair users, something that can also be found in Riederwald. They're built like a boat swing into which a wheelchair can be wheeled. "If there's no wheelchair user there, four or five other kids can use it together."



It's not only older children who enjoy the archery range.

"I was five when I first played here I liked painting and collecting nails. Now I help out and earn my pocket money that way."

HAYAT (14)

On behalf of the Municipal Department of Parks, in 2018 the trees on the grounds were all registered, and they have since been regularly checked. To this day, botanic specials such as the Sassafras tree and the catalpa make the adventure playground an extraordinary piece of parkland. The list with the great plant names inspired a few kids to create their own nameplates for the respective trees using some boards and paint. In a specially created "kids' garden" they were able to get to work with trowels themselves. All the greenery also encourages them to observe nature, be it a newt in the pond or larvae on the surface of the dragonfly pond. Insect protection fences that the kids help to install ensure that young visitors learn something about protecting biodiversity and gain an ecological awareness. The fruit trees on the grounds are also very popular. The cherry tree is a climbing paradise as climbers are rewarded with a harvest of tasty fruit that can be turned into jam. In keeping with the playground's name, three Colorado pines from the Spessart now stand close to the entrance. In July 2023, an additional redwood was also planted.

How kids play when they have free rein

At the adventure playground there are ample options to create something spontaneously, and not just by building huts. It's a long list, and there are no limits to the imagination. This is only a brief selection of what happens during a single year: potato printing, dressing up, digging for gemstones, building caves in the Grand Canyon, building furniture, racing bikes, hiding in the dense shrubs, circus games, building racing cars, digging mud, nailing competitions, collecting dandelions, throwing horseshoes, making jewelry from wooden discs, paper-gluing artwork, making piggy banks, bird boxes, wooden swords and little ships, spray-painting, braiding friendship bracelets, making Easter bouquets with twigs, flowers, and bits of nature, studying insects through a magnifying glass, and making treasure boxes from old cigar boxes or art objects from stone, feathers, bits of wood, or maybe branches, seeds, leaves, and nuts. With their parent's permission and with supervision, children may even work with power tools. Wearing protective goggles, work gloves, dust masks, and ear protectors, they then feel like the pros.





Kids can observe newts and dragonflies at the pond.

International visitors

Compared to the association's two other adventure playgrounds, Colorado Park is the most international. "Every second person comes from a different culture," Hagga Bühler points out. Colorado Park therefore makes an important contribution to integration. "We have a strong social mix here, too. Some visitors come from the well-off Dichterviertel; others are latchkey kids from tougher backgrounds." Moreover, the manager was insistent from the outset that here girls with a migration background who otherwise rarely come into contact with tools have an opportunity to use power jigsaws if they so wish. "They develop tremendous craft skills." Particularly popular are small animal sculptures that can be cut out over the course of one or two afternoons. "Some of the sharks, cats, or owls now hang in rooms in Bolivia, Iran, Sweden, or Senegal."

In a multicultural city like Frankfurt, the objective was also to provide "intercultural learning". As early as 2011, Colorado Park also looked to Africa for the first time, and that continent's great diversity was integrated into play. Kids joined in cooking meals with African influences, printing and dyeing fabrics using batik, making bead jewelry and toys inspired by Africa, and rehearsing dances to African rhythms. In 2014, Colorado Park teamed up with an association from Cameroon to host an African children's festival on the last day before the summer vacation – complete with drumming workshop, dances, typical dishes, and a participatory theater from South Africa. There was also a discussion on "what young people all over the world dream about". Until a few years ago, the festival was a regular item on the program and enjoyed by countless guests.

The adventure playground team has repeatedly interacted with kids in the neighborhood. In fall 2015 when the adjacent sports hall of Franz Böhm School was used as emergency accommodation for displaced persons for the first time, the adventure playground held a huge welcome party at the initiative of a solidarity network in which local residents also participated. From 2016 onwards, many families were lodged in the sports hall, meaning the helpers there regularly visited the adventure playground with their under-six charges to get the kids out of the confines of the emergency accommodation. Contact with local kids arose as a matter of course, the adventure playground team recalls. In the mornings, a former teacher who lives in the neighborhood provided German lessons at the playground for a group of displaced women. A refugee from Afghanistan who had trained as a craftsman took care of renewing the roof of the bakery. Even after the sports hall reverted to its original purpose, in 2017 some of the displaced children still frequented the adventure playground.



Since 2014, there has been an African children's festival.



The Western parade went round the district.



Western parade

Like the other two adventure playgrounds, in line with the association's mission, Colorado Park also sought to be visible outside the grounds and throughout the district. For that reason, shortly after opening it arranged a Western parade in keeping with its theme, dedicated to the culture of native Americans and the first settlers there, with several other associations also taking part. "Around 700 participants paraded round the district, some in old US cars, with the former US Consul General leading the way in a convertible; it was a colorful picture to behold," remembers Michael Paris. Organizing the parade required a lot of effort, however, and attracted ever fewer locals. "There were maybe 300 or 400 spectators lining the streets, too few given the effort involved." After three or four years, the adventure playground therefore discontinued the parade, but it has continued the subsequent bonfire on the grounds, which now takes place in early May as a spring festival. Traditionally there's an outdoor flea market between the huts, too, where



the kids can bang together their own sales desks. There's also dancing on the stage, and storyteller Rudi Gerharz serves up stories from the Wild West. More than 3,000 visitors attend the party, Paris estimates, half of them children. With the "Magical Lights Otherworld", the adventure playground also attracts the same number again. For years now, the playground has hosted a total of around 12,000 children on the other opening days, as Colorado Park is open all year round.



"My daughter was one year old when we came here the first time. She was able to climb up things at a relatively young age, and I really wanted that for her as it gave her self-confidence. That way, she learned to know her own limits."

LUISE (30)

Only during the COVID-19 pandemic were the kids not able to turn up as usual. On March 16, 2020, Colorado Park had to close for a total of 14 weeks. It was not able to open again until the beginning of the summer vacation, and then only under a strict hygiene regime. There was a check on the gate, where kids had to provide contact details and disinfect their hands. Inside, everyone initially had to wear masks where it was not possible to maintain a distance of 1.5 meters, but that swiftly changed. For all the restrictions, that year 7,000 kids still managed to use the adventure playground.



Candy fell from the sky to mark the jubilee.



Michael Paris with
Brad Halvorsen, son
of the "Candy Bomber".

In 2022, there was once again a good reason to celebrate: Colorado Park turned 25. The kids prepared a stage program for a large party, ran the juice bar for the guests, and organized games. Michael Paris had dreamed up something special for the occasion, too. In memory of the famous "Candy Bomber" Gail Halvorsen, who during the Berlin Airlift in 1948–9 dropped little bags of candy over Tempelhof Airport and who had died a little earlier, Paris had prepared a 15-meter-high lifting crane. From there, he had little bags of candy rain down on parachutes just as the Candy Bomber had done more than 70 years earlier. At the same time, the new container building on the adventure playground was named after the former US Air Force pilot. A large poster with his photo decorates the outside wall. "I once met Gail Halvorsen in person at an event at the Airlift Memorial at Frankfurt Airport, and he really impressed me. After his death, the CDU suggested the city name a street in Frankfurt after him. I thought that'll take at least ten years to become a reality, and that's why I paid tribute to him immediately on the playground," Paris reports. One year later, when Frankfurt celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Airlift years, Halvorsen's five adult children visited Colorado Park together and went on the record as saying: "Our dad would have loved the playground. He'd have had a lot of fun here."

Artist and Buddy



Hagga Bühler im Colorado-Park.

Hagga Bühler loves to refer to Colorado Park adventure playground as “a magical world for kids”. A world where all the kids learn together and from one another, and where coolness and arrogance are left at the gate. For 20 years, he made sure that the kids could just enjoy themselves on the grounds. He teamed up with them to design the grounds and consistently realized his concept for an American adventure playground. He retired in 2017, but his wooden sculptures are merely the most obvious reminder that he was here, along with the American dogwood that the neighborhood association planted to bid him farewell and all the other plants from North America that Bühler, with his passion for plants and the longstanding support of the botanical gardens, then planted around the grounds. You can still feel his and his “spirit” all over the place.

It was by no means clear at the outset that it would become a magical world for children. Digging in the dirt on what had been a grazing meadow for sheep with a chemical toilet and a few huts: That was what greeted Hagga Bühler when he started working at Günthersburg adventure playground, which he helped develop from 1992 onwards. He didn’t like the fact that five years later he had to start out all over again in a new district, but he was tenacious and together with the kids created a miniature paradise between Ginnheim and Dornbusch. As an artist he kindled their creativity, and as their buddy “Hagga” he gave them a lot of slack while also teaching them fairness and setting the rules if they wanted to work with tools, and he swiftly made the grounds an indispensable part of their lives. “My greatest educational success was that I didn’t see myself as an educational missionary. I wanted to give the kids a few square meters that they could experience for themselves, their little Frankfurt, where they could do what was otherwise not



Hagga Bühler started out at Günthersburg Park.



Reiner Falk, Hagga Bühler and John Leicher had supported Michael Paris from the beginning (from left to right).

llowed," he quips today. And it wasn't only the kids who enjoyed the latitude, "but also women in headscarves who would otherwise have been stuck indoors and were able to sit outside in this leafy setting."

It was also a woman whom Bühler had to thank for his "dream job". Way back when, she played with the stonemason, wood sculptor, and guitarist in a punk band and told him there was a job opening in a similar playground in Nordweststadt. He worked there for eight years before switching to the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association, going on to manage first the Günthersburg and then the Colorado Park adventure playgrounds.

Today, the man from south Germany who arrived in Frankfurt as a 19-year-old to study social work at the University of Applied Sciences has retired to a place close to Würzburg, where he can devote more time to sculpting. On several occasions he has been nominated for the European Craft Award for Wooden Sculptures, which he won in 2013. He believes his farewell from Colorado Park happened at the right moment, as it was the end of an era defined by the Youth Movement of the 1980s. With today's over-regulation of so many aspects of life, the anarchic-educational element is increasingly being lost, he feels. "For me it was a stroke of good fortune that I was able to help set up such an exemplary institution in Frankfurt, one that then gained firm recognition nationwide," he says now. And part of that involves his own life's work changing after he bowed out, he insists.

Onward to new worlds



In 2003, the kids on Riedberg got to hammer away.

110

A planet under the roof

The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association doesn't only work outdoors, proving so in 2003 when it founded the first hall-based playground in Frankfurt. The "Adventure Planet" quite literally catapulted play services in the city into a new dimension. Across more than 1,500 square meters covered by a roof, there was energetic play such as a bouncy castle or trampoline, a miniature railway that drove through a real pine forest, bull-riding, an Aerotrim, and of course the obligatory roller slide, this time starting from a majestic rocket. A huge sandpit was also at hand along with large games of skill, a reading corner, and a creative zone where children could paint, do arts and crafts, and try face painting. A café with snacks and drinks was likewise part of the setup. The association staffed the hall in Riedberg for five years before it had to be cleared, as construction work was scheduled to start on the site.





A colorful world of play arose beneath the roof.





Climbing and table football were also on offer.



The idea of an “amusement park” under a roof originated in the English-speaking world, where it tended to be found in malls. In Germany, the first indoor play facilities arose in the 1990s in North Rhine-Westphalia. The end of the Boris Becker-driven tennis boom at the end of the decade left a lot of tennis halls standing empty that were then converted into indoor playgrounds. The association in Riederwald also heard of the idea. “I thought having indoor facilities in winter was great, but it was all too commercial for my liking. We wanted an educational concept rather than kids having to slot a 50-cent coin into a machine at each play station,” Michael Paris recalls.

First of all, a partner had to be found. Hessenagentur, at the time still Forschungs- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft des Landes Hessen, was busy marketing the new estate being developed on Riedberg at the beginning of the new millennium, and it was clear that many families and their children would move there. The new facility was thus intended to function both as an ambassador and as a publicity measure for the new neighborhood, with the aim of appealing specifically to families as potential new tenants and buyers. Since a former indoor riding arena already standing on the grounds was made available by Hessenagentur free of charge, the Abenteuerspielplatz association was swiftly able to set up temporary operations in it using the play equipment it otherwise didn’t need in winter.

Bobby car duel

Each year, to mark the re-opening of the Adventure Planet, the association came up with something special. On October 1, 2006, it was a Bobby car race. To this end, a course was laid out in the hall on which kids aged eight and upwards could race the toy cars round at up to 30 km/h. And needless to say, Michael Paris himself didn't shy away from taking to the wheel. He challenged the then Municipal Administration for Personnel and today's Minister President of the State of Hessen Boris Rhein to a duel. At the time, both were considered promising candidates in the forthcoming elections for lord mayor, Paris for the SPD, Rhein for the CDU. They both handled the circuit well on their unusual vehicles, but Paris was a tick faster. A return match was planned for a later date, or so the papers reported, but it never happened.



Below left: Michael Paris (l.) and Boris Rhein (r.), today's Minister President of the State of Hessen.

The first day of play during a fall weekend in 2003 was an immediate hit: "A thousand people showed up out of nowhere; it was brilliant," remembers Paris. Given the strong appeal, the Adventure Planet opened the following winter every weekend from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening. In 2004 the SPD party group on the relevant local advisory council described it as a success story with visitor numbers constantly growing, but complained that up to 160 cars from outside the estate parked all over the place.

To maintain operations and above all pay its staff, the association had to charge an entrance fee as it received no public grant for the indoor playground. For inhabitants of the new Riedberg estate, entrance cost EUR 2.00, for everyone else, depending on their age, it was EUR 2.50–4.50. The Adventure Planet experiment ran with great success for two years, but it did have its down sides. The former riding arena was not insulated, and two thirds of the building had no real floor. The soil was covered by padding made of mulched tree bark but not insulated, and essentially caused a lot of dust. Despite the fan heating installed, the hall never reached a pleasant temperature in winter, and anyone needing to use the container-based toilets that the association had likewise procured had to brave the rain and cold.

In order to keep the Adventure Planet within the district, which had gradually attracted 15,000 inhabitants, Hessenagentur proposed re-erecting the hall in an improved, insulated version elsewhere on the outskirts of the new neighborhood at the sports and recreation grounds





Giant Lego and roller slide.

earmarked in the plans. There, the indoor games hall could have operated all year round, complete with an outdoor area. What was lacking to realize the plans was approval from the City Council to set up the hall on the sports and recreation site at a cost of EUR 2.8 million from the urban development budget. The City Council debate on the matter was fiery to say the least. The one parliamentarian considered the entrance cover charge of up to EUR 4.50 as too high and rejected any municipal grant, while another criticized the fact that the services did not correspond with the envisaged sports uses. The plans for re-erecting the hall were eventually abandoned, and in 2007 the Municipal Administration made it clear that it intended neither to finance building the new hall for the Adventure Planet on Riedberg, nor to assume investment or operating costs.

During this time, the association continued to use the old hall and turned it into a popular venue for children's birthday parties. Families were able to reserve tables specially that were decked out festively for the occasion. "Some weekends, we had as many as 40 children's birthday parties at once and ended up having to put up a tent outside," Michael Paris remembers.

"I like the rocket best."

EMIL (4)

The Adventure Planet chapter came to an end in March 2008. "Construction work still hasn't taken place on the site, incidentally," Michael Paris comments, slightly resigned. Today, Riederwald adventure playground still features on Riedberg whenever the playmobile stops there, or during the Christmas season when it visits all the districts in town as part of its cookie baking tournament. Since 2016 it has also held a fun festival there, attended in 2023 by around 1,500 kids. "Given the huge success in 2024, there'll be one in June and another in September."



The association intended to open its fourth adventure playground in Oberrad.

For a long time, the Adventure Playground then hosted pop-up events indoors at Nordwestzentrum – most recently six times a year. And Michael Paris is not one for giving up easily: His desktop has long since featured plans for a new non-profit indoor games hall. "It could be realized swiftly and bring the Adventure Planet back to life," he says, noting: "Since 2021 birth rates have picked up in Frankfurt again, so the municipal authorities shouldn't readily refuse to support such a challenge."

And yet another adventure

The association's next adventure started in 2010. For some time, children and parents in Oberrad had wanted an adventure playground for children aged nine to 15 in the district. Children were regularly having to play in the street, and the odd window had fallen victim to a football. With the support of Jugendcafé and Gruneliusschule, they got the backing of the local advisory council, which from 2009 called for the playground to be built. The Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association supported the project as of the very next year and developed a concept to operate it. The Municipal Administration eventually made available a site measuring slightly less than 500 square meters north of Grazer Weg, along with EUR 20,000 for a fence and to ready the place. Yet the tight budget at that time meant the municipal authorities did not want to provide any additional financing for educational staff. "All in all, it was a difficult project and the wind in our faces was rough," Michael Paris says. At the end of the day, in 2013 Sozialrathaus Sachsenhausen put up project funding of EUR 30,000, enabling the association to realize the adventure playground at least on a temporary basis.

The opening was scheduled for May 28; Gruneliusschule students helped design the grounds and with their parents staffed an information booth advertising the new service. The Municipal Department of Parks had soil samples taken, and the findings, announced a fortnight before the opening, revealed high concentrations of fertilizers. "As it turns out, these kinds of deposits are to be found throughout Oberrad," Michael Paris informed the press back then. Cleaning up the soil would have cost about EUR 30,000. "And the project was temporary anyway, since we had only secured financing through to the fall vacations," explains Paris. Meaning it would not have been worthwhile decontaminating the soil. The hunt thus began for a new location.

The search took time because other sites also had similarly contaminated soil owing to the many years of fertilizer being used in Oberrad. It was no longer feasible to open ready for the summer vacation, but finally, a site of about 400 square meters was found "An der Goetheruh", close to the Scheerwald Forest Playground. There, at the edge of the woods, the soil findings were better,



The kids likewise built the entrance gateway themselves.

and after the end of the summer vacation in Hessen, on September 10, 2014, the Oberrad adventure playground opened for business. On average 20–40 children came with accompanying adults. They built huts together, prepared meals, sat by the bonfire making campfire bread, and found out all about how humans and nature interact. Supervised by an educationalist, an entrance gateway and a long line of huts were installed, while a construction site trailer served to house the tools issue desk. Local schools and childcare centers frequently visited the playground.

On December 31 the adventure playground then closed, since the Municipal Administration had not earmarked any funding for it in the budget for the following year either. By means of petitions, a protest march through the district, and support from the local advisory council, parents in Oberrad advocated continuing the project and went looking for sponsors. The Adventure Playground reopened in 2015 from February to the end of March, but 1,000 signatures on the petition and all the committed effort were to no avail. In early April, the association had to down



A kiosk they built themselves

The staff's project report outlines how the children used the site: "A hut they had built was converted into a kiosk by a group of six children in the seven-to-11 age group. A boy who came by every day had the idea for it." Since his parents said they would provide apples and pears for them, he proposed selling them at the kiosk, "and giving the revenue to the adventure playground to support its continued existence." The children took responsibility for the project and arranged the opening times and sales at the kiosk themselves. "The kids took this project very seriously; they designed the hut lovingly and professionally with shelves, tables, and benches. The team grew together and structured the pending tasks completely themselves, and the hut became a central port of call for the other kids, too, who liked being there."



In Oberrad the kids enjoyed making campfire bread by the bonfire.



On Riedberg, the children set up their own vegetable patch.

tools and return the keys to the ground. "The children had come, and for them the adventure playground was a success. But the municipal authorities were not willing to provide an annual grant and thus enable the service to be provided permanently," Michael Paris regrets. Initially, Caritas took charge of the grounds and offered a weekend and vacation service. The idea was to arrange for people to pick up the key to the grounds and use them without any staff being required. That did not go well for long, as soon no one really felt responsible for the grounds, the newspapers reported. "The project was then swiftly discontinued," Michael Paris narrates. "It was sadly only a short chapter."

On Riedberg, the association also tried to erect an adventure playground next to the hall for a summer. Children had built huts and laid out a vegetable patch. "Back then, there were no inhabitants so we had no one to lobby on our behalf for long-term funding." In Bergen-Enkheim and at Rebstock, the local advisory councils had both considered setting up an adventure playground. "There was not enough momentum behind plugging the idea, and efforts have sadly not been successful so far," comments Michael Paris with regret.

From Riederwald out into the world

The association's adventure playgrounds are all increasingly attracting international visitors. In particular, the Mainspiele and Opernspiele fun festivals are regularly attended by children and parents from all manner of countries and cultures, who strengthen the association's reputation by wearing the T-shirts with its logo all over the world. In some countries, the Frankfurt adventure playgrounds have been a well-known institution for years anyway, since Michael Paris took to the international stage at an early date. As early as 1977 Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V. joined the International Play Association, or IPA for short, which was founded in Denmark in 1961. It globally champions the right of children to play. "I attended a Socialist Youth League



International IPA members during preparations for its 2005 World Conference.

The IPA World Conference took place that year in Berlin.

seminar in Paris. The General Secretary came from Sweden and doubled up back then as chair of the IPA," Paris says, explaining how it all came about. Only a year later and he was busy attending the first IPA World Conference in Ottawa, Canada. Among other things, in the mid-1980s he campaigned with the IPA for the United Nations to include the "right to play" in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Later, he chaired the German section of the IPA and from 2005 to 2008 was president of the IPA itself.

The international association has members from some 40 countries and holds its conference every three years in a different city. Michael Paris has frequently attended, for example in Sweden, Japan, and Australia. "We all visit various institutions locally, and the trips always gave me many insights into the culture of play in other countries," he says, looking back.



The plaque is in memory of Jimmy Jolley, who was also an IPA member.



Michael Paris presents the games equipment together with Eduard Hechler (on the left), head of section at the City of Frankfurt, and two members of the consulate.

He has also banged the drum for the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association in Frankfurt's twin city Philadelphia, as well as in China and Hong Kong. And interested parties from other countries have often visited the Frankfurt adventure playgrounds, among them Texan Jimmy Jolley, to whom Colorado Park has since erected a memorial.

The grounds in Riederwald had been in existence for less than ten years when, on August 5, 1982, the association received a delegation of nine professors and university staff members from Tokyo. The IPA had once again brokered the contact. Michael Paris was on hand in Frankfurt to welcome the Japanese on their tour of Germany, and he accompanied them as they visited some of the five adventure playgrounds in town, including the new playground in Palmengarten so they could see a playground where there were no educationalist staff. A member of the Municipal Youth Department explained the city's playground development plan, and Paris also used the out-of-the-ordinary visit to make it public that five playgrounds with educationalist staff was completely inadequate in a city like Frankfurt. By comparison, Hamburg had 15 publicly financed playgrounds. In particular, he said, there was a general lack of playgrounds downtown.

Once again thanks to the IPA, another colleague from Japan toured Frankfurt. Hitoshi Shimamura was regional IPA representative for East Asia, and in the 1980s he took a close look at Riederwald adventure playground, returning again later to visit Colorado Park. He worked for several adventure playgrounds in Tokyo and Kawasaki, founded the Tokyo Play Organization, and is now director of the Japan Adventure Playground Association. "He learned quite a bit here, I believe," comments Paris.

In 2006 the IPA, at the time under President Michael Paris, gifted Frankfurt's twin city Guangzhou in southern China a specially produced eight-by-eight-meter piece of play equipment which was designed to resemble the Römer City Hall. The ARD TV channel's "lottery fairy" Franziska Reichenbacher had won EUR 40,000 in a celebrity quiz on TV and had donated it to the IPA. Paris had the idea of taking a little piece of Frankfurt to China, but unfortunately the wood used to make the unit did not tolerate the subtropical climate and became so rotten that the playground had to be taken down in 2019.



Michael Paris in
Guangzhou in front
of the Römer playframe.



The playmobile visiting Lisbon.

It was not just Paris who took the adventure playground out into the world. In January 2008 Sabine Dier, as manager of the playmobiles unit, and Hagga Bühler, manager of Colorado Park, represented the association at the IPA World Conference in Hong Kong. While walking through Kowloon Park, the sculptor discovered a magpie among the many subtropical birds there. An information panel explained that the magpie was a symbol of good luck for the Chinese. The bird inspired Bühler to carve a magpie girl from linden wood that was well over one meter high. In 2013, he was awarded the European Crafts Award for Wood Sculpting from among 39 pros and 16 burgeoning artists. The award included a touring exhibition and took him and the magpie girl from Karlsruhe to Saxony and even to the European Commission in Brussels, Belgium, where they are no doubt now well aware of Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V.

The playmobile travels to Asia

In 1991, the playmobile toured internationally for the first time. The Red Falcon morphed into the Spanish "spiel movil". At the time, the State of Hessen wanted to woo Murcia in Spain as a new partner region, and Jugendring Hessen formed the vanguard sent to make first contact. "As chair of the SJD, I went along for the ride and became friends there with the chair of the Socialist Youth, Angel Lozano," Michael Paris remembers. Together, they devised the idea of deploying a playmobile in Murcia for a whole month – and thus, for the very first time in Spain, the Red Falcon took to the road in Murcia on November 4, 1991. By this time, the season for play and thus the playmobiles was well over in Frankfurt, whereas in Murcia the weather was still good enough for kids to play outdoors. Two adventure playground staff members traveled down to Murcia and together with their Spanish colleagues encouraged kids in the city and in surrounding towns such as Cartagena, Yecla, or Cieza to have fun. "We ran the project three times, and it was a great success. Our staff toured the Spanish villages for four weeks on each occasion, and some mayors even invited them to dinner – providing plenty of wine."



The Frankfurt playmobiles also head out well beyond the city.

In 1999, the playmobile headed even further southwest. That year, the IPA World Conference took place in Lisbon. „So we drove there in the playmobile and entertained kids once on the outskirts of Lisbon." One of the playmobiles traveled to Luxembourg. "We're really popular there, and the city has booked us often." Michael Paris likewise recalls deploying the skatemobile in Vienna, albeit more because of the memorable drive there: "In Bavaria we were stopped by the cops; they'd never seen a van like ours before."

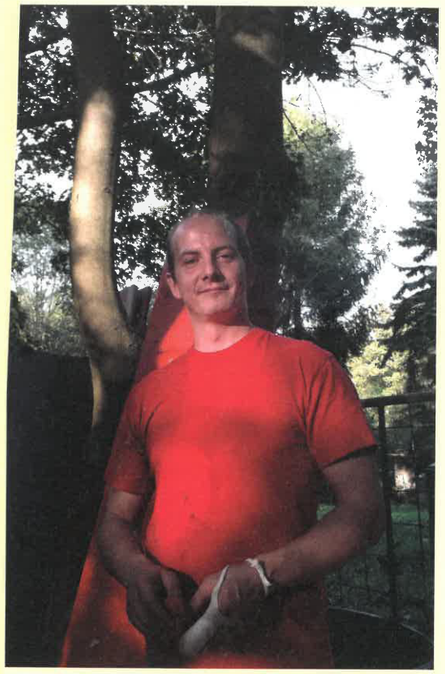
It was Texan Jimmy Jolley who exported the idea of playmobiles as far afield as Hong Kong in the 1990s. Having crewed briefly on one in Frankfurt, he went to Hong Kong and took the concept with him. For the IPO partner organization, the Playright Children's Play Association of Hong Kong, he fitted out a playmobile like the ones used in Frankfurt.

A few years later, Playright invited Michael Paris to give a series of lectures in Hong Kong. "My audience took lots of notes," he remembers. "When, two years later, I was there again to prepare for the IPA World Conference, I met a department store owner who had attended my lecture." She invited him to the department store and proudly showed him that she had built a perfect replica of the Frankfurt playmobile, which was parked on the roof where the kids could enjoy using its facilities. "It really looked like one of our vehicles had driven there – even the colors were copy-perfect," Paris reports. The idea of installing an amenity like this for children in a department store was something he gladly imported to Frankfurt on his return, but no department store was willing to finance such a service for kids.

The association continues to support the idea of taking playmobiles out into the world. The playmobiles team could thus well imagine, for example, interacting with the many Frankfurt twin cities going forwards. There have already been talks with Philadelphia, Paris says. And there's great interest. The City of Prague, meanwhile, wants to build an adventure playground. "When I heard that, I offered the University of Prague whatever support I could give them." And since Frankfurt recently resolved to twin with the Ukrainian city of Lemberg/Lviv, there are again opportunities for collaboration. "I know the Mayor of Lviv, and perhaps we can do something for the children there. Sending a playmobile there is also possible, even during the war."

Portrait: HOLGER WIEGEL

Nothing for the unimaginative



Holger Wiegel underneath one of the redwood trees.

Holger Wiegel knows all of the association's adventure playgrounds. In 1999, he signed on in Riederwald and with the odd interruption worked there for ten years as one of the staff. In 2003, he switched to the Adventure Planet on Riedberg – the only indoor playground. Then followed eight years at Günthersburg adventure playground, with a brief excursion to Oberrad, until in 2018 he was made successor to Hagga Bühler as manager of Colorado Park. And it's clear that it's his "dream job". "Every day I come to work with a sense of joy," he says, and talks enthusiastically about the 30 to 50 kids who now form the hard core of visitors attending the Dornbusch grounds. "Some only come during vacations, like 12-year-old André, our little engineer."

For him, it simply goes without saying that he lets André or one of his buddies borrow the grinder or the orbital sander, "with all the protective gear, of course." Holger Wiegel himself trained in a trade, as a painter and lacquerer and then as a bicycle mechanic, and he then ran his own cycle store. A serious cycle accident turned his life upside down, and he had to rethink what he was doing. He started with a year of voluntary social service at the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association "It was so much fun that I said: I'm staying."

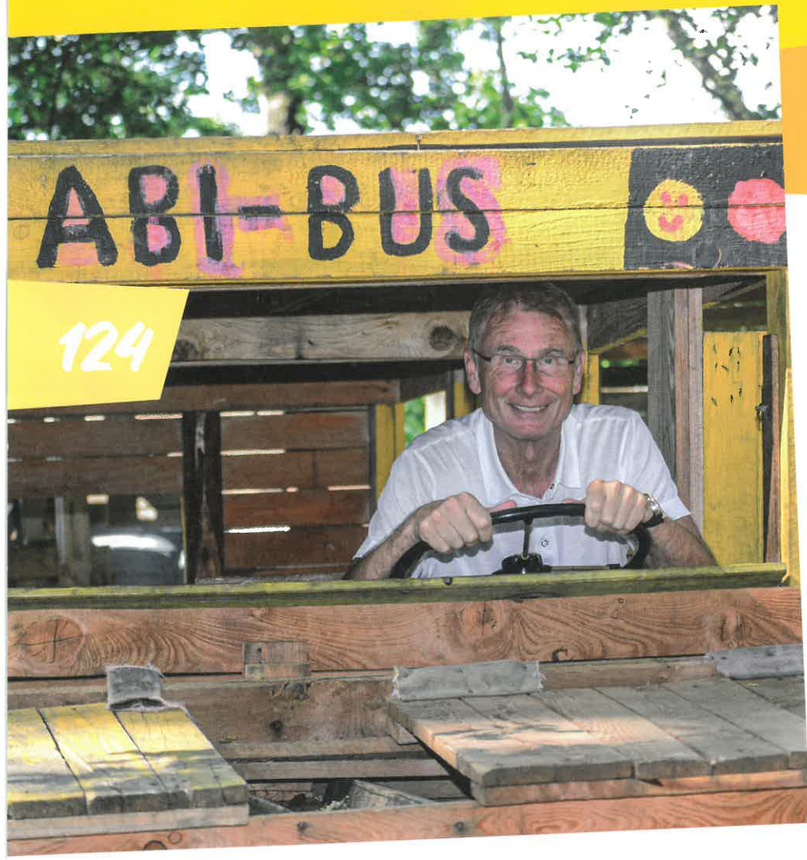
At Colorado Park he's in charge of everything, even the trees. "Reiner Falk at our Günthersburg site showed me how to prune fruit trees." And he's also brought his own ideas to bear in the design of the park, for example with the Mississippi steamer that is soon to be rebuilt. "The boss has never said no," is how he describes what the system means to him. Yet even under such conditions, nowadays it's difficult to find new staff who are a good fit for the adventure playground.



Holger Wiegel and social educationalist Jancita Elsheimer manage Colorado Park together.

Wiegel also thinks it's a shame that patterns of play in Colorado Park have changed. "The original idea was for kids to play without their parents. We have parents who moved about freely here as kids but today no longer let their own kids come here without them." Which is at odds with the idea that it's key to let kids get on with it, so that they can enjoy being creative. "The unimaginative among them won't have fun here," whereas, if they develop their own ideas, Holger Wiegel will certainly back them up. "If the kids say they want to build a tunnel in our Grand Canyon hill, then we'd do it." Perhaps that would be a way to start changing things from the ground up, because the adventure playground is starting to look its age, and, as Wiegel says: "It's high time for something new!"

The adventure playground of tomorrow



The man behind the wheel: Michael Paris in the wooden bus at Riederwald adventure playground.

"I made the name Riederwald known internationally as a part of Frankfurt."

In April 2024, Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald e.V. turned 50. The small association in Frankfurt evolved over time into an SME with annual sales of EUR 1.3 million and 15 full time staff members. From the very beginning, it has been associated with one name in particular – that of Michael Paris. Now 69, he is the founder, association chairperson, chief manager of play, fundraiser, advertiser, and, not least, advocate for children in Frankfurt. After 50 years, he looks back on his life's work and also forward to the future:



The association chair is also along for the ride on the carnival float.

You have now been managing the association, which has developed so successfully, for a full 50 years. What makes you especially proud?

Of course, I didn't manage it all on my own. I'm really proud that I always managed to find staff who themselves had great ideas and helped move the association forward. You need a good feel for things to select the right people.Added to which, I'm proud of the fact that throughout that time we have never had economic problems. We've always been very creditworthy. We haven't accumulated debt. Of course, we always need more money in order to realize more things. We still have plenty of ideas, but the staff have never had to worry that their salaries wouldn't be paid. I've always said to them that they should tell me their ideas, even if realizing them might cost money. Nothing is impossible. If it's a matter of EUR 10,000, then we first need to decide whether we wish to run with the idea, and then we can see whether we have the money or can raise it somewhere. That's how, thanks to generous sponsors, we managed to acquire a new boat for EUR 100,000, for example. Now needless to say, that didn't happen the very moment the old boats went belly-up; it took a couple of years. But at the end of the day, I always find sponsors.

Furthermore, I've managed to get Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald known worldwide. I've presented it every three years at the world conferences of the International Play Association, of which we've been a member since our inception. And in this way, Riederwald as a district has likewise become known far beyond the region. And I think there's no one in Frankfurt under 50 who hasn't heard our name at some point. We print 5,000 T-shirts a year, so there are kids wearing our logo everywhere.

Recently, two Asian girls sat at the airport wearing T-shirts with the logo as they waited for their flight home. In my office I've got that Henry Ford saying tacked on the wall, and it's one I really subscribe to: "Stopping advertising to save money is like stopping your watch to save time."

Why is advertising so important in your opinion?

In order to make us better known, obviously. Which is why, for example, during the carnival parade we distribute little pennants to kids who line the route, because they then wave them when the next float with our logo drives by. I carefully consider how to ensure the name of our adventure playground association remains constantly present in the public mind and what each individual measure can achieve. I don't want us to survive solely on municipal grants. We get about EUR 700,000 in such grants, but we raise about EUR 500,000 ourselves . And if we want sponsors to donate, we need to do a good job at advertising. For that reason, we no longer photocopy our annual report, but have it printed and bound. Our staff also contribute to our advertising and are forever coming up with ideas. Whereas originally we used postcards to advertise, we now produce little brochures because one of the staff said that advertising needs to fit in your shirt pocket. And another staff member noticed, when I made the brochures for the four games seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter) that they shouldn't all look the same, as things might get mixed up. Which is why the covers now have different images to fit the respective season.



Michael Paris drove round on his own locomotive for his election campaign.

You managed to successfully establish the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association in Frankfurt having started it when you were very young. How did you have the self-confidence to organize it all?

I think I inherited that energy from my granddad. My parents divorced and I grew up without a father, so my grandparents played an important role in my life. My granddad was a real organizer in Riederwald. He was a member of the Volkshaus Riederwald association and, among other things, succeeded in getting the facility rebuilt after it had been destroyed in the war. He organized the Riederwald fair and took me along. He had a gift for getting all manner of things free of charge. I later copied my granddad's approach and knew from an early age how you needed to go about it, and I continue to do things that way to this day. Sometimes it's a disadvantage. I repeatedly hear city politicians quip that there's no need to give Michael Paris any money as he'll raise it elsewhere. That really gets my goat.

In your opinion, what is the importance of the association's work for the city today?

Today, in an age where we lack skilled labor, we are a real plus for Frankfurt, particularly as regards families wishing to relocate here. We define a large portion of the playtime opportunities for kids in the city, from the adventure playgrounds to the fun festivals during vacations, through to the services the playmobiles provide in the districts. Few other big cities have such a comprehensive range on offer, and politicians tend not really to appreciate this. And there's ample scope for improvement, too. Particularly in Nordend, for example, with all its families, more needs to be done. Our Günthersburg adventure playground is much too small. Frankfurt has 450 public playgrounds, but they should not be confused with adventure playgrounds staffed by educationalists. And often there's not even the money to repair the usual playgrounds.



Michael Paris with Benjamin Opel a longstanding playmobile volunteer.

Sadly, in Frankfurt the focus is not on kids, although it should be. In Berlin, even if it's a lot larger, there are at least 30 staffed adventure playgrounds, while in Stuttgart, as a comparably sized city, there are 23. And as the financial metropolis, Frankfurt is hardly Germany's poorest city, so there should be more adventure playgrounds here too. And given that there are 40 districts in town, three playmobiles is likewise too few.

What is particularly lacking?

The recognition that children in the city play an important role. For instance, we once deployed our playmobiles on a tour of schoolyards, for which I personally managed to get approval for the schoolyards to stay open in the afternoon. Someone in the Municipal Schools Department then asked the schools whether they were interested. He produced a schedule, and we then sent the playmobiles out. Usually, there were more schools than we could service. The advantage was that schoolyards are a well-protected space inside cities, and most kids can get there themselves. But in many schools, there's no longer a live-in janitor, so each time a playmobile was due someone had to go to the school to unlock the gates and then lock them afterwards. That costs a relatively small amount of money, but it's a sum that wasn't in the budget. The Municipal Administration member in charge of social welfare said the sum could not be absorbed, so we discontinued the service. When it comes to culture, by contrast, the City of Frankfurt is quite happy to spend more than it has budgeted.

Children are always treated as a subordinate concern by the politicians and the administration. I am forever receiving communications from the municipal authorities, for example recently saying that we would not be able to hold the 30th Mainspiele on the customary site, as this was going to be closed off for the UEFA European Football Championship. Now that makes me angry. We've held the event for 30 years, it attracts more than 50,000 visitors each year, so would it not have been possible to talk to us first and try and find a solution? Instead, we just get fobbed off, and above all the children get ignored! I then have to become their champion, and I know how to defend my interests. Of course, we found a solution. But you need the champion, because in our society children's rights still get trampled underfoot. That's not the case in other countries.



The then Frankfurt Lord Mayor Petra Roth (CDU) also championed the adventure playgrounds.

You said that three playmobiles for the 40 districts in town is too few. Would "play streets" not be a meaningful way to support your own services?

Play streets would indeed complement the playmobiles well. I would say that a play street is the second-best solution after schoolyards, but it does mean really re-designating the street. The temporary play street we set up in Nordend has been difficult, though. For 15 years now, we have excluded traffic from the street for one day a week. Now there are signs pointing this out, but it's easy to overlook them if you aren't a local. And if you regularly have to have ten cars towed away before you can start then it may be a great show for the kids, but during that time they are not out playing. And the locals who can't access their garages are likewise not happy about it. It's an option, but it needs to be a play street all week long to be a protected space.

Is the educational concept devised by the SJD for Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald back in the day still relevant today?

The idea informing our project 50 years ago was that by organizing supervised games we could raise a new kind of person. That is something that you can't completely realize of course, but parts of it you can. If we look at the children who come regularly, then the respective educationalist can indeed achieve something. That person talks with the kids, explains the world to them. In the course of playing, they learn to be considerate along with other social skills. What's more, opportunities for play or knowledge that have seemingly been lost can be rediscovered, such as how to use a hammer, nails, and other tools. What child otherwise learns how to saw through wooden planks these days? My granddad once showed me how, down in the cellar, but that hardly happens nowadays. A few years ago, we even had cabinetmakers from North Hessen come and show the kids at the Opernspiele how to build a half-timbered house.

Adventure playgrounds per se are a product of large cities. In rural areas you don't need this kind of concept nearly as much, because there are lots of options there for kids to discover stuff themselves. An urban environment, meanwhile, which kids can hardly adapt to their own devices, cries out for such playgrounds. Adventure playgrounds are therefore essentially an artificial product, as the city no longer affords kids opportunities for personal development in the same way.

"There needs to be more outdoor spaces for children in Frankfurt, wherever possible. Be it an adventure playground, a children's farm, or 'just' a space where you can experience nature for yourself."

WILLY JUCH, ARBEITSKREIS DER JUGENDFARMEN UND ABENTEUERSPIELPLÄTZE IN HESSEN



Advertising the Opernspiele 2006.

Would you say you have realized the association's objectives?

The association always had the idea of creating a city in which all generations can play. This means that downtown squares or spaces can be used that are otherwise not intended specifically for kids. We made some headway here – for example with the Opernspiele. Who would have previously thought that children would end up paddling in the fountain there. That triggered fierce debates, city councilors even decided they should try and ban the Opernspiele. Which just goes to show how it sparked a discussion about the public realm.

As regards the Main riverside, I am convinced that we were the ones who prompted such extensive use of the southern section. It was only because we organized a fun festival that people discovered the recreational qualities of the space. And if I drive somewhere with the playmobiles and a street gets blocked off for me, then it's an opportunity to create a play street because we demonstrate that it can be done. You see, people can be shown that change is possible. The play street in Nordend that started out as a two-year trial project has now existed for 15 years, and that, too, is a success. It was the parents who demanded of the local advisory council that the service be maintained, and parents and young local politicians from other districts have already expressed the wish to have something similar in their own neighborhoods.

In your work for the association, what was the greatest failure?

I did not manage to turn the successful indoor playground at Riedberg into a permanent facility. That irritates me, because it wasn't my fault; it was down to political reasons. Certain people didn't want me to succeed out of envy that I was achieving things there, too. Sometimes it can be

"If the adventure playgrounds could be linked to the 'right to all-day care', then we'd really help kids. Otherwise they are 'locked up' all day in school, or so I tell teachers."

WILLY JUCH

a disadvantage being a politician; after all, no one can seriously oppose a project like that. There was a recognized need for it, and it would have been possible to put a good educational program into practice in the hall long-term. Hessenagentur really supported us, made the land available, and wanted to finance the construction work. In 2005, the contract had even been drawn up, construction plans were done and dusted, and kitchen plans compiled – for a plot of land that remains wasteland to this day. Over time, around 400 children celebrated their birthday parties in the indoor playground. Some city councilors proposed having a commercial service provider run the place, but in my opinion that would not have been sensible: A commercial service provider would have charged higher entrance fees and would have relied on automatic equipment in the hall, instead of someone trained as an educationalist looking after the kids. The end of the story is that nothing has happened – it's a real shame.

How have play and the games in the adventure playgrounds changed over the 50 years?

The basic idea 50 years ago was that an adventure playground would be a free space for kids, and adults would stay away. Kids would be able to try their hand at things, supported by the social workers on site. That has definitely changed, probably because kids now get mollycoddled. Mothers are now older on average and worry more about their children. For that reason, children are no longer allowed to climb trees for fear they might fall. There are studies from the United Kingdom that show that the radius in which a child is allowed to move has shrunk by almost 90 percent over the last 30 years. As a six-year-old, I cycled with a kid of my age from Riederwald to Bischofsheim – quite unthinkable today.

Kids no longer come to the adventure playgrounds on their own. And parents often bring smaller siblings along, too, because they feel the playgrounds are a safe space. But they are not actually conceived with two-year-olds in mind. And then they meet friends there who only have small kids, so suddenly you get ten buggies standing on the square. If the older kids start building a hut, the moms then complain that the hammering's too loud and is stopping the babies from sleeping. Recently, a ten-year-old wrote me an email complaining that mothers at Günthersburg adventure playground were changing their babies' nappies and he was not allowed to continue hammering. Now, that's sad. Only the other day, a mother wanted to forbid a child from using a saw because she herself was allergic to the dust.



Michael Paris as a pirate
in Frankfurt's Osthafen,
in front of the ECB building.

So what can you do about it?

It's hard. Some say we shouldn't allow this and should only permit kids into the playground without their parents. Now I find that difficult, because the presence of the toddlers means we are reaching the next cohorts. If we exclude the mothers with the babies, then the question is whether they would even allow their older kids to come to the site on their own. Which means there's not much we can do other than acknowledge the change and prepare more entertainment for the really small visitors, meaning adapt our programs to include them too.

That is true of many aspects. The children who come to the adventure playgrounds are on the whole younger now. A 12-year-old is now too old for the toys from the playmobile and tends to live in a more adult world. That has to do with the fact that, if only through their use of the media, children become adults faster. At our Christmas market in the Römer, it is now four- and five-year-olds who come along to bake cookies. That means our target group now starts with the one- to two-year-olds and stops at about ten. And there's another change you can see in the kids: They no longer stay with one and the same thing for as long. In the past, our regulars spent 14 days working away building a hut. Today, they lose interest after a day.

"If the adventure playgrounds could be linked to the 'right to all-day care', then we'd really help kids. Otherwise they are 'locked up' all day in school, or so I tell teachers."



A pirate boat made of wood formed the association's carnival float one year.

Originally, we also allowed children who were regulars at an adventure playground to celebrate their birthdays there. Word got round, and the team now struggles to handle the volume of enquiries. We've already started charging a fee, but that hasn't stemmed the flood, because at EUR 50 we are still comparatively cheap. This year we had as many as 40 phone enquiries a day at one of the adventure playgrounds, which is why we no longer accept phone enquiries. The parents have to drop by and pay on the spot. That guarantees us a little certainty, because of course people have registered and then been no-shows. We need to accept this as a fact and adapt accordingly.

Are there new projects you want to realize?

We of course keep pace with the times and try and modernize our vehicle pool. Our first electric playmobile, financed by Sparda-Bank, has just been delivered. It cost no less than EUR 20,000 more than our diesel van. Since the playmobiles only drive round town, range is not an issue, but it wasn't that simple to find a vehicle that could take all of our kit. Which is why the new vehicle is on probation, as we need to see whether it is practical or not. We also want to continue using the old pirate ship because it's simply so beautiful, and we want to fit it out with an electric engine. That'll cost EUR 30,000, a sum that has been made available by Sparkassenverband Hessen-Thüringen together with Stiftung der Frankfurter Sparkassen.

What would you like to see in the future?

That people, in particular city-dwellers, show more understanding for children of course. To be very specific, I do have an idea for this: We would like to create an experience-nature space. For some time now, that's been an issue among the grandchildren of the adventure playground generation in Germany. The objective is to create a natural space where children can move around without there being dangers and which gives them multiple opportunities to develop through experiencing nature. It would feature hills, tree trunks, brooks, or a pond where they can play and run around, meadows or plant beds where they can experience nature and protection of biodiversity, and quiet zones. What I have in mind is to establish this kind of experience-nature space on one of the planned zones at the Günthersburghöfe by way of an interim use. It's bound to be another decade before something gets built on the site, and it's already a space where potatoes and pumpkins are being grown, so a fence could be put around it and you wouldn't need to do all that much. The children could discover nature on the wasteland or simply play hide-and-seek. Unlike the adventure playground, there wouldn't be any large-scale educational program, and we wouldn't have the staff for that anyway. You can of course create a space like that anywhere in Frankfurt. What's so appealing about the site in Nordend is that it is located in the heart of a densely populated city and children can reach it easily.

And then there's another site at a high-profile location that could be meaningfully used for an interim period: the Signa-Holding grounds on Opernplatz – the company recently filed for bankruptcy. It is highly unlikely that construction will start there in the foreseeable future. Instead of opening up the site, covering it with greenery, and leaving it to grow wild, which is what has happened elsewhere, you could put a better fence round it and provide supervision for children to play there. That would really be a great symbol for welcoming children into our downtown areas.

What do you think adventure playgrounds will be like 50 years from now?

I believe these kinds of playgrounds will still exist. In 50 years' time, there will still be a need for places where children can play and develop their capabilities. I also believe that the basic concept of the adventure playground will continue to be valid. Kids will still need to learn how to handle the elements of fire and water, even if they have a smartphone implanted in their arm. In the adventure playground community, there's some concern that going forwards we will see all-day schools, which poses the question of when children would even be able to use the playgrounds. But I want to see how the legislators manage to finance that sort of schooling and where they would then get all the teachers they would need for it. Not forgetting that there's the option of the adventure playgrounds becoming spaces for school lessons – schools already make use of the adventure playgrounds today. So I wouldn't say that adventure playgrounds will become obsolete, but another deciding factor is whether the organizations operating them manage to survive.



Just a brief selection of the many events the association has organized.

What does the future of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association look like?

It looks good. I have no concerns as regards the management. We have a relatively high number of younger people who work with us, and they can then fill the board. I have greater concerns when it comes to new educationalists to staff the playgrounds and the playmobiles, since it's not easy to find social workers who enjoy this kind of "wild life". We've been hunting for successors for the managers of the Günthersburg and Riederwald adventure playgrounds, for example, for three years now. But working for the public sector does offer greater job security, of course, and our staff have greater freedom in doing what they want to do.

Are you already contemplating retirement?

I'm not yet sure how long I will keep going for. I'll remain association chair until I turn 70, but I don't know whether I want to keep doing this into old age. I definitely want to celebrate our 50th jubilee, though.

Who could take over at the helm of your life's work?

Needless to say, I've been wondering about how things should continue for over 20 years now. I had a full-time career as a politician, and it could easily have involved my assuming a political office for the State of Hessen or the City of Frankfurt, which is why I held talks at an early point in time, but no one wanted to assume overall responsibility. The guys who set up the association with me, namely John Leicher, Reiner Falk, and Hagga Bühler, are my age. For a long time, there was no one in sight who wanted to take on the challenge. And, of course, I also thought of my family. I always included my own kids in the discussion. My now grown-up daughter Paulina has enough to do, with her architectural practice and her lectureship at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, but she still compères the five children's carnival events. Madeleine, who is now 15, has already been on stage alongside her. My son Christoph is a master baker, captains the boat during the Mainspiele, and in the Christmas season makes masses of dough for our cookie baking sessions. My eldest son Patrick managed the Adventure Planet on Riedberg back in the day. He was a member of the board for 16 years and most recently vice chair of the association. I would have liked hìm to succeed me as chair, but he died suddenly in 2023, so we need to rethink.



Nothing would be possible without the staff and countless volunteers.

So what might your retirement look like?

The association has given me a lot in life, for which I am most grateful. I can apply myself fully, from educational ideas right through to managing a business enterprise. I can lend my creativity full rein by devising ad campaigns, and I was also able to travel abroad a lot, banging the drum for the adventure playground, meeting people from all over the world at the events, and learning a lot for myself and for the association. It is a great job, and one I can determine myself, meaning I don't even know what a hobby is, because my hobby is thinking about all the things you can realize on behalf of the Abenteuerspielplatz Riederwald association. What would I do during retirement? I already take regular vacations. I have also wondered whether I should perhaps take on other tasks. I should actually be actively looking for young people and focus on training the younger generation in order to secure the future of the adventure playgrounds. There was a time when there were two lecturers in social work at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences who included adventure playgrounds in their curricula. As a result, we had a lot of students on one-year placements. Today, the students at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, assuming they are not from inside the Rhine-Main area, barely even know the adventure playgrounds exist. We need someone to address the subject again at the university level – now that would be a great task.

Portrait: MICHAEL PARIS

„For me it was all just like a game!“



Michael Paris

On the wall next to his desk hangs a portrait of Willy Brandt, not to mention one of Marilyn Monroe. No doubt the young Michael Paris, who was born in 1955, was a fan of both. Like Social Democrat and German Federal Chancellor Brandt, Paris began his political life in the Socialist Youth League. After school, two of his fellow students at the all-day school on Bornheimer Hang took him along to a meeting at Jugendhaus Bornheim. At the time, Paris lived with his single mother and his grandparents in Riederwald. “For two whole years, I walked from there to the SJD in Bornheim, but then I got fed up with it,” he remembers. So while he was still only 15, he and ten companions in arms simply set up their own SJD district branch in Riederwald, and he was elected chair. He traveled to national and international SJD meets that decisively influenced him and brought him into contact with people who remain his friends today. At one of the meetings in the early 1970s, he heard about the idea of adventure playgrounds, unaware at the time that this would shape the course of his life. He resolved to set one up in his home district of Riederwald. And this time, his role models were Willy Brandt but also his grandfather, who was one of the most active citizens in the neighborhood.

After the association was set up, Riederwald adventure playground swiftly took shape and consumed all of his free time, with the result that the SJD district group gradually fell apart. Even before graduating from high school, he already had his first employees at the association. “I had to do the bookkeeping and write the pay slips,” he remembers. By contrast, he readily admits that he did not devote as much attention to his studies, namely law and sociology. He performed his social service in lieu of military service, initially at Bürgermeister-Gräf-Haus. Then he became his own boss, as he was able to fill the first social service position attached to the adventure playground. He was subsequently appointed to the full-time post of district managing director of the SJD and continued to head the Abenteuerspielplatz association on the side. “I had a separate drawer for it in my office desk,” he recalls. However, with the inauguration of the first playmobile in the mid-1980s and the opening of the second adventure playground, this time in Nordend in 1992, the association simply became too large. “For that reason, I resigned from the SJD position and arranged financing for a managing director for the association, a post I then assumed. The Labor Office provided a secretary for two years under a job-creation scheme.”



The association chair tests the roller slide himself.

In parallel to his job, he was a member of Frankfurt City Council, where he likewise advocated for the rights of children, including for the foundation of a municipal children's desk, and he also helped reanimate the Stadtverband der Vereinsringe (Federation of Municipal Non-Profit Organizations) and initiated the twin-city partnership with Philadelphia. Politically speaking, Michael Paris had less luck: Despite street election campaigns he financed himself and the classic Social Democrat poster campaigns (he had joined the party in 1972), and although he returned good results, he typically fell slightly short of his goal. From 1999 to 2003 he was a member of the State of Hessen Parliament, and he became a member again in 2008, having won his constituency outright. Yet the failure to form a minority government led by Andrea Ypsilanti led to new elections, and he lost the seat. In 2012, Paris sought to become the SPD candidate for the elections to Frankfurt's lord mayor, but he lost to his rival Peter Feldmann in the primary by a mere 149 votes. One year later, he again sought election to the state parliament, but he just lost out to a party rival once again, despite being the favorite. He then campaigned as an independent in the federal elections in 2013, whereupon the SPD suspended him after he had been a member for more than 40 years.

Three years later, he ended his political career. At that point he had been a member of Frankfurt City Council for precisely 19 years, 11 months, and 26 days – exactly two weeks too little to be granted the honorary title of City Elder.

Today, alongside his work as association chair, Michael Paris is active as a diplomat and represents the Republic of Tanzania in Hessen. In Frankfurt and the Rhine-Main region, he is known above all as the man who has championed children and their needs for 50 years now. "For me it was all just like a game!" he quotes when asked about his life's work, paraphrasing Albert Einstein. And with amazement, he continues: "I organize fun festivals – what's so great about that? Sometimes I think anyone could do it, but clearly not everyone can."

The author



Sabine Börchers lives and works in Frankfurt. An author and freelance journalist, she has spent many years writing about the city and the people, for example about the Palmengarten. Her books “101 Ausflüge ohne Auto” and “Routen der Freiheit” (both published by Societäts-Verlag) have made her known to a far wider audience.

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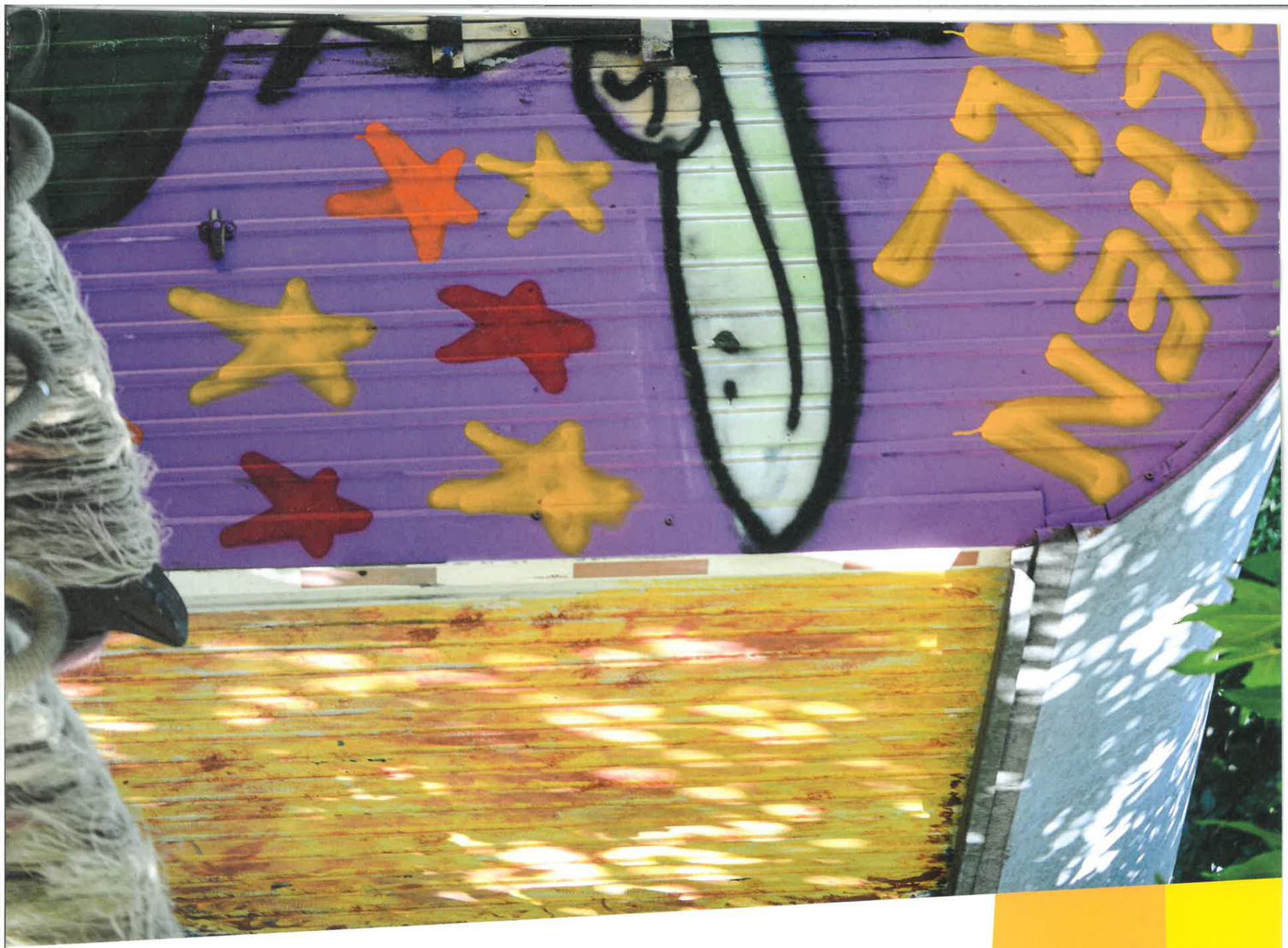
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