



Existing Playspaces in Alexandria





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Definition of *Playspace*

For the purposes of this study, a playspace is considered to be a ***playground, facility, or location where elements specifically intended for children’s play are located.*** The goal of the inventory was to identify all of the playspaces in Alexandria that were public or semi-public, indoor or outdoor. By this, it is meant places that are open to the general public at least some of the time, even if they are located on private property. This included playspaces at public parks and schools and some private schools, churches, and other facilities that were open to the public on at least a partial basis. Playspaces at apartment complexes, housing developments, or other locations run by homeowners’ associations or other entities were included if they were generally open to residents on a drop-in basis. None of the playspaces in the inventory charge a fee for use, except two indoor playspaces located in recreation centers. Facilities such as private day care operations, church yards closed to general use, and other areas that were open only to members or a select group were not included.

Evaluating Playspaces

The field inventory and evaluation of playspaces were conducted by playground experts in April of 2011. An attempt was made to identify and locate all of the public and semi-public playspaces within the city limits. Any playspace that met the above criteria was evaluated, whether or not it was intended to serve children ages 2-5. However, since the focus of this study is on playspaces for ages 2-5, some determination of the fitness of the playspace for that age group was needed. This determination was based primarily on the types and configuration of the play equipment and other features found at a playspace. Prior studies in Alexandria had determined the viability of some playspaces for 2-5-year-olds based on the manufacturer’s specifications for the equipment found there. Where available, this was incorporated into the data set. For playspaces where this information had not been compiled, a determination was made on the appropriateness of each component for serving ages 2-5, and this effected a score that was given for each component. The scores reflect whether a playspace is considered to serve ages 2-5 in this study.

Existing playspaces in Alexandria were identified through the use of:

- Aerial photographs of the city taken in 2009
- Existing lists provided by the project partners
- The general knowledge and expertise of the Alexandria Planning Department and the Alexandria Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities



A total of 89 public and semi-public playspaces that fit the criteria for inclusion in the data set were identified. Three of those were eliminated after closer examination. This left 86 playspaces that were ultimately found to be appropriate for inclusion in the study. This number includes all playspaces, whether or not they are appropriate for ages 2-5. The playspaces were further sorted into those appropriate for this age group and those that are not. Of the 86, a total of 67 were determined to be appropriate for ages 2-5.

It is possible that there are playspaces in Alexandria that fit the criteria for inclusion in this data set but that were not found during the process for this study. The methods used to assure a complete count included using:

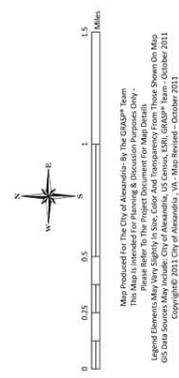
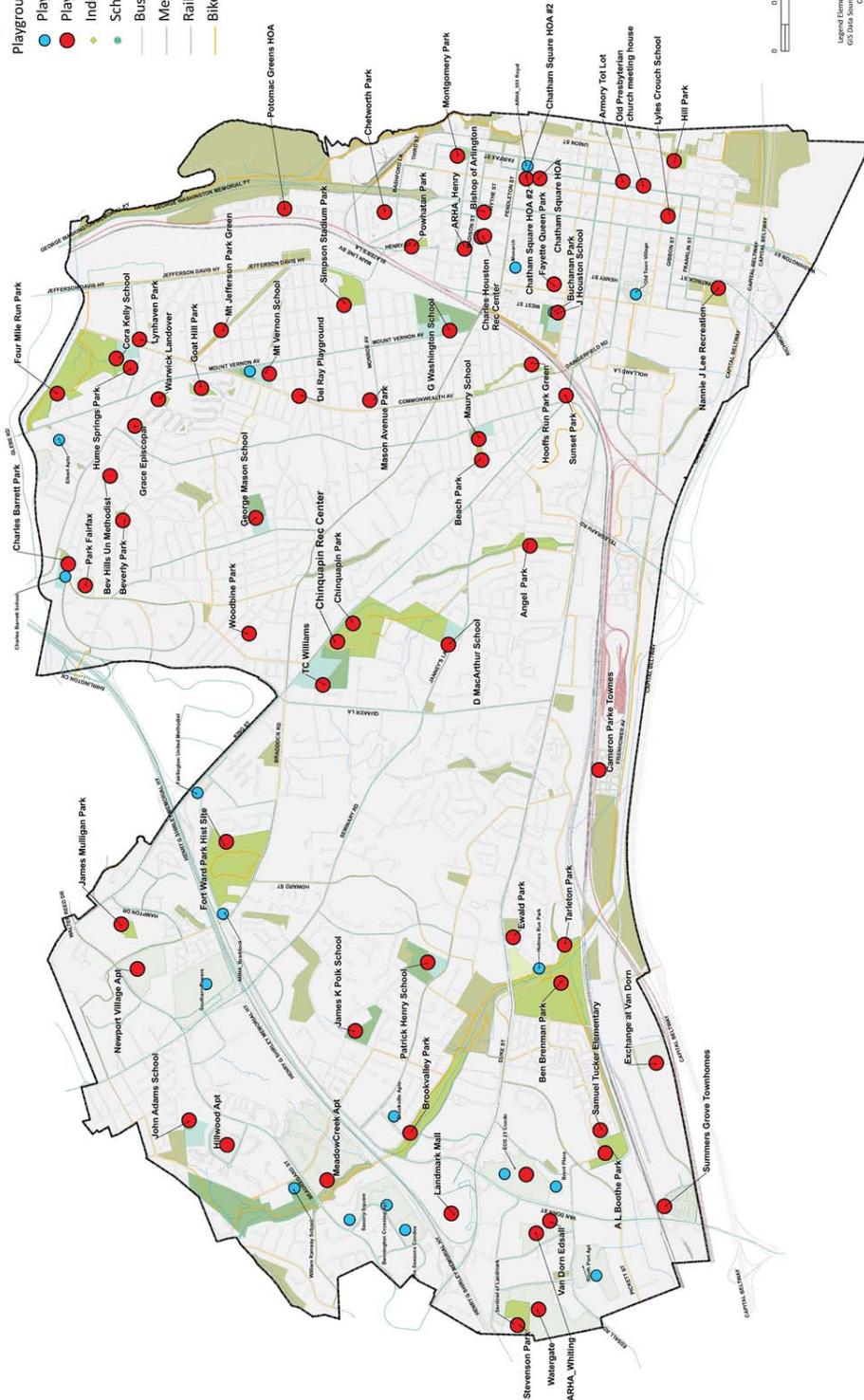
- Existing inventories provided by the City of Alexandria
- Aerial images of the city
- A review of Internet sources such as the Kaboom Map of Play
- The collective input and review by people familiar with the community
- The knowledge and expertise of the Alexandria Planning Department and the Alexandria Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

Based on this, it is estimated that there are no more than four to five playspaces in Alexandria that were not identified and evaluated.





- Legend**
- Playgrounds
 - Play Spaces - General
 - Play Spaces - 2-5 Year Olds
 - Indoor Facility
 - School
 - Bus Route
 - Metro
 - Railroad
 - Bike Lane
 - Church
 - Greenway
 - Park
 - School
 - Recreation Center
 - Other - Private
 - City Park - Other



Map Produced for The City of Alexandria, VA, The GIS Team
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 GIS Data Sources May Include City of Alexandria, US Census, ENR, USGS, etc.
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Map 1: Playspaces in Alexandria Inventoried for the Study





Components of Play

The process for evaluating play opportunities in Alexandria began with identifying the critical components of play, as described earlier, and creating an assessment tool to use in evaluating individual playspaces on their provision of them. Five components of play were identified:

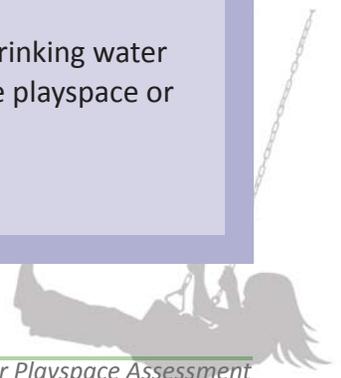
- **Physical Domain**—the playspace offers opportunities for physical activity appropriate for 2-5-year-olds.
- **Intellectual Domain**—the playspace provides appropriate opportunities for creativity, such as movable parts and/or elements that stimulate imagination and make-believe or mental and emotional challenges to the child, such as puzzles, games, and discovery.
- **Social Domain**—the playspace offers appropriate opportunities for children to engage with each other and adults in positive ways.
- **Natural Domain**—the playspace provides opportunities for children to be in physical contact with the natural environment.
- **Free Play**—the playspace offers opportunities for unstructured play, i.e., open areas with appropriate surfacing for running, crawling, and rolling.

Modifiers

In addition to the five components, a set of elements that contribute to making a playspace more inviting and comfortable were identified, with the idea that the presence of these would bring more parents and children to the playspace and that they would stay longer. In that way, the value of the playspace is enhanced, and the benefits it provides are increased. Conversely, the lack of these elements reduces the value provided by the playspace. Because these elements modify the way a playspace is used, they were called *modifiers* for the purposes of the study.

Ten modifiers were ultimately identified and evaluated at each playspace:

- **Open Access**—Can anyone use it or is access limited or restricted in some way?
- **Invitation**—Is it easy to find and welcoming?
- **Ease of Access**—Can people get to it by normal means of transportation, including walking? Is there adequate parking available or a transit stop nearby?
- **Safe Location**—How safe is the location perceived to be?
- **Pleasant Conditions and Surroundings**—How clean, attractive, and appealing are the playspace and its surroundings?
- **Monitoring**—Are there “friendly eyes” on the playspace during normal times of use?
- **Weather Protection**—Is there protection from wind, rain, and sun?
- **Seating**—Is there an adequate amount of comfortable seating for caregivers?
- **Restrooms**—Is the need for restrooms met, either at the playspace or conveniently nearby?
- **Drinking Water**—Is drinking water available either at the playspace or conveniently nearby?





Calculating the Value of a Playspace

For each of the attributes (components and modifiers), a score of 1, 2, or 3 was given based on how the playspace met the conditions of that attribute. A higher score indicates that the playspace provides more value for that attribute. A sample of the field sheet used to evaluate each playspace is shown in Appendix A.

A **formula** was developed to calculate the **value of each playspace**. The formula is a simple calculation that involves adding up the total score for all of the modifiers and multiplying it by the total score for all of the components at the playspace. This yields a value that is the Playspace Score (also referred to as the GRASP® Value in this report) for that playspace:

$$\text{← (Sum of the Modifiers) X (Sum of the Components) = Playspace Score →}$$

Because there were 10 modifiers and five components that could each have a maximum value of 3 points, the maximum score a playspace could receive is 450 points. The 450-point maximum would only be achieved by an *ideal* play space. Such playspaces are rare anywhere, and none were found in Alexandria.

Scoring Results for Components

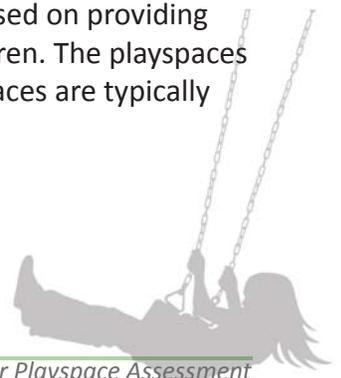
The scores for all playspaces in the inventory can be found in Appendix C.

The highest-scoring playspace in the inventory was found at Charles Houston Recreation Center, which scored 336 points. This is an outdoor playspace, but it is accessed through the indoor center. The center offers good access to restrooms, drinking water, and other amenities that gave it a high value for modifiers.

Next highest was John Adams Elementary School at 297 points. It was the only playspace to score 3s for all five components. However, it scored 1s for several modifiers.

Playspaces that score high for components are most likely to address the full range of needs (or “domains” as explained earlier) for children in the 2-5 age group. Ideally, every playspace would offer the full range of components, but if this is not possible, then it is important that children have access to multiple playspaces that collectively offer the full range of components among them.

Some playspaces may have scored well in one or two domains but not all domains. In general terms, playspaces in the inventory perform well in the Physical and Social Domains. This is because the manufactured play equipment used in most playgrounds is focused on providing opportunities for physical play, including physical play among groups of children. The playspaces also perform generally well in the Free Play Domain because outdoor playspaces are typically located in parks or other places with some room for free play.





The overall performance of playspaces in the Natural and Intellectual Domains was somewhat lower. This suggests that a focus on improving the natural qualities and the intellectual stimulation characteristics of existing play spaces would be beneficial in increasing the overall value of playspaces in Alexandria.

Scoring Results for Modifiers

Playspaces that score high for modifiers are most likely to draw children and parents to them more frequently and for longer periods of time, because they are comfortable to use. The presence of shade, drinking water, restrooms, and other amenities encourages people to come back again and stay longer when they do. This suggests that children using playspaces with high modifier scores are getting the benefit of more frequent and extended opportunities to play. However, modifiers alone do not guarantee that children are getting the full range of potential benefits of play unless all of the domains are represented within the components present at that location. It is important to have a full range of components as well as a full set of modifiers for children to receive the most benefit from play.

The information provided below can be used to get a sense of how well Alexandria’s current playspaces stack up against the criteria used to define a good playspace. Recommendations for improving Alexandria’s playspaces are presented at the end of this report.

The six highest-scoring playspaces for components alone were:

- John Adams Elementary School (15)
- Jefferson Houston Elementary School (14)
- Beverley Park – “The Pit” (13)
- Beverly Hills United Methodist (13)
- Douglas Macarthur Elementary School (13)
- Goat Hill Park (13)

NOTE: Of these six, three are located at schools and are not available to the public during school hours.

The five highest-scoring playspaces for modifiers (i.e., amenities that support the use of play components) alone were:

- Charles Houston Recreation Center (28)
- Chinquapin Recreation Center (27)
- Charles Barrett Park (27)
- Mount Vernon Elementary School (26)
- Ben Brenman Park (26)

Some notable statistics for the modifiers as rated by the playground experts during field visits are shown here (percentages based on 86 playspaces):

- 61 playspaces were rated as feeling **safe** at normal hours of play in the perception of the evaluators at the time of their visit (71%).
- 34 playspaces have adequate **seating** for caregivers (39%).
- 15 playspaces have adequate access to **drinking water** (17%).
- 12 playspaces have adequate access to **restrooms** (14%).
- 12 playspaces have adequate **protection from weather** (14%).

