



## Home, Interrupted

### Rain, Rain, Go Away. New York Kids Are Trying to Play

Across New York City, concrete and asphalt are being torn out of schoolyards and replaced with rain-absorbing surfaces to make them more climate-resilient. The redesigning of playgrounds in immigrant neighborhoods offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rethink how kids in the city relate to the outdoors. Producer Aria Young, an immigrant journalist from China, explores the recent transformation of New York City playgrounds to respond to the climate crisis and what it means for children's play.

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**Iggy Monda:** Back when I was a kid in school – I'm talking about elementary and junior high – there were two things that I sat at the edge of my seat for: the end of school bell... and recess.

Now, I grew up in New York City, and went to an Upper East Side Manhattan school that didn't have a playground or a schoolyard or anything. All we had was the literal street.

I was lucky outside of school, though. I lived right next to Central Park. I had a place to be free outdoors. But not everyone in this city gets a park to live by or a playground to play in – at least one that's not broken down and flooding.

**Iggy Monda:** From Feet in 2 Worlds, this is Home, Interrupted, a series where we explore the links between immigrants and climate change. I'm Iggy Monda.

New York City is the largest public school district in the country. And now more than ever, kids are facing an outdoor play problem because climate change is making outdoor spaces harder to use.

On today's episode, Reporter and Producer Aria Young visits schoolyards in New York to see how the city is responding to these concerns and asks what is the future of outdoor play for kids when climate change has now introduced itself to the mix.

**Aria Young:** Close your eyes and picture childhood. When you were a kid, what was it like to go out and play? Did you climb a tree in your backyard? Or run around barefoot on the grass? Or maybe even build a treehouse?

If you are a kid growing up in New York City today the place where you play might look something like this:

**Dyonis Díaz:** There's pit holes, like, in the ground. There's cracks where anybody can slip and fall. There's one major, what's it called, like a monument of the yard, and it's the handball court.

**Aria:** Dyonis Díaz is vice president of the student council at Orchard Collegiate Academy, a public high school in Lower Manhattan. I met Dyonis in his school yard. He's 17 years old, has curly hair and wears glasses and camo pants.

I came to visit because I heard their school yard would soon be renovated, but I didn't expect it to look like this: two aging basketball hoops sit on roughly 24,000 square feet of blacktop.

**Dyonis:** We need more activity for the kids, to, you know, play their sports, play their games.

**Aria:** Two sides of the yard are connected to the gray school building, the other two sides are lined by metal fencing next to city streets. Four shabby benches spread out along the wall. There is nothing to play with here except maybe a freestanding wall in the middle of the yard that they call a handball court. In fact, it looks more like a parking lot than a school yard. As we stood in the lot, car horns honked right outside the fences every few minutes.

Dyonis told me that the kids at his school deserve better. They deserve a place to make memories outside.

**Dyonis:** And that's what the image just comes to your mind when you think about, like, an actual schoolyard. And when you look at ours, it kind of just falls out of place.

**Aria:** The play area at Dyonis's school is fairly representative of most New York City public school lots. They have little to no equipment, and are usually made of gray concrete or asphalt. It's hard to associate this place with the innocence of childhood.

The school shares its grounds with an elementary school and a middle school in a complex called Corlears. So kids of all ages have to crowd into this grim, colorless outdoor space.

Dyonis is on the school volleyball team. Oftentimes, the team has to share the indoor gym with other sports teams. But when the teams have conflicting schedules, like if there's a basketball game or soccer tryouts, Dyonis's team ends up having to practice outside in the yard.

**Dyonis:** That didn't really go out too well because there's not too much that you can do without the actual net and the set-up of the volleyball court. So yeah, it was pretty underwhelming to have to share the gym and this yard without the proper equipment.

**Aria:** 15-year-old Na-Jaya Dunlap is another volleyball player at the school. She says that when students practice in the yard, they are prone to injuring themselves.

**Na-Jaya Dunlap:** When you come outside, you're limited to working on certain skills. If you want to become a better diver, you can't dive on concrete, so it's very dangerous. Or if you want to practice serving, there's no net out here to serve over, so it's really difficult.

**Aria:** Besides not having proper equipment, climate change is making the situation even worse. If a kid can easily scrape their knees on a dry concrete playground, a wet, slippery one in the rain can be even more dangerous. And if you've been paying attention to New York weather lately, it's raining more than ever before.

**ABC:** Two months worth of rain falling on the city in 24 hours, causing severe flooding in some areas.

**Aria:** Since SuperStorm Sandy in 2012, New York has seen more rainy days due to climate change. New York schoolyards are not designed for wet weather. Corlears is located right by the East River, on the edge of Chinatown. When it storms, the yard can be practically underwater. It's becoming a more and more common problem for Corlears students. Here's Na-Jaya.

**Na-Jaya:** When it does rain, the water will sit there like in the corner in the pool, it'll be there for maybe weeks. Like it takes a really long time to just dry or go away. In the corner there's this spot where like water just kinda gathers, and it just sits there in a pool because there's no drain over there. So that's very dangerous as well.

**Aria:** Rain isn't the only climate-related problem these kids have to worry about. Summer sun and New York City concrete can be a dangerous combination.

**Na-Jaya:** And then when it is hot, there are obviously like no trees around anywhere. So there's no shade or anything. And it's just, it gets really bad.

**Aria:** Concrete and asphalt overheat easily and create what are called urban heat islands. In extreme hot weather, a concrete playground can be as much as seven degrees hotter than a nearby area. Now imagine what that feels like to a child who's even closer to the ground than adults. Without trees nearby, the scorching ground can feel like the game "the floor is lava" in real life, not the fun kind. During heat waves, the high temperature of the playground can even cause heat stroke.

New York City public schools serve over 1 million students, that's more than the entire population of San Francisco. But as extreme weather occurs with greater frequency, New York children are struggling to find somewhere outdoors to play.

**Assiatou Diallo:** I have English. We're taking a test right now.

**Aria:** I have English. We're taking a test right now.

**Assiatou:** I have English. We're taking a test right now.

**Aria:** Assiatou Diallo is another sophomore at the school. She's 15. And climate disasters are no news to her. In the summer of 2023, the smoke from Canadian wildfires blew over to New York and turned the sky orange.

**CBS:** Those fires so intense they can be seen from space! The smoke blanketed the city this morning, covering landmarks. City leaders say the air quality has not been this bad since the 1960s.

**Aria:** Assiatou remembers that day, when school was interrupted by the disaster outside.

**Assiatou:** We couldn't go outside, we had to stay inside that day, not a lot of people started to come to school, we had to go home with masks. A lot of afterschool activities were canceled and everyone had to go straight home which was kinda depressing because those are the things we look forward to after school.

**Aria:** I remember seeing the horrible pictures of the city's orange sky, only I wasn't there. I was back home visiting my family in Shanghai where I grew up. When I was 15, climate change wasn't something I worried about. It surprised me to think that these New York kids have to think about the ground being too hot or their school being destroyed in a hurricane. Being born and raised in Shanghai, I had a childhood drastically different from theirs.

**Luis:** Action.

**Aria:** 好, 孙伟彬的先生 - 孙伟彬先生的风筝要放起来啦! (Okay. Sun WeiBin's - Mr. Sun WeiBin's kite is going to take off!)

**SM:** 要和别人的交织在一起啦! 他的风筝要和别人的交织在一起来! (渐弱) 一个是有生命的眼睛, 一个是无生命的风筝。(Is going to be tangled - his kite is going to be tangled with another! One is a living eye, the other is a lifeless kite.)

**Aria:** That was a day in 2009, my best friend's dad took us to a local park to fly kites. We filmed ourselves commentating on his dad's kite flying, narrating to the camera that the kite had been tangled with another.

**SM:** 讲台词。(Say your line.)

**Aria:** 在这个时候, 我们的孙- (Right now, our Mr. Sun—)

**Aria:** That day is one of my most precious childhood memories.

Like most families in New York, I also grew up in a small two-bedroom apartment in Shanghai, so my home wasn't always the most fun to play in. My fond childhood memories come from being outside, in the city.

I played in neighborhood playgrounds, town squares, community parks... the school yard wasn't even a term we used in Shanghai because our schools would usually have a gated campus with more outdoor space than buildings. My middle school had red brick walls, a track field with basketball courts, plenty of trees everywhere, a bike shelter, a garden with cobble stone paths and a vine covered archway. That's just a normal public school in the inner city.

**Girl 1:** 站住, 这妖精! 啊- (Stand still, you demon!)

**Girl 2:** 没有没有没有! (No no no!)

**Girl 2:** 袁融你快了! (Yuan Rong you're too fast!)

**Aria:** Although I struggled with the Chinese education system in many ways, the physical campus was where I started to become my full self. The playground was where I

rehearsed sketches after school and discovered my passion for theater. The basketball court was where I got competitive in games and made friends with boys. In the garden, I started writing a sci-fi novel with my best friend. The benches on campus were the keepers of my many teenage secrets. I couldn't imagine who I would be today without the physical outdoor space that shaped my childhood.

Standing in the Corlears schoolyard now as a young adult, looking at the bare walls and steel-wire fences, I wonder why these kids couldn't have what I had. Why are so many schoolyards in New York cold and gray and parking lot-like?

To find out, I got in touch with James Trainor – he's an art and architecture historian who's working on a book about the history of playgrounds in New York. He told me about Robert Moses, the parks commissioner of New York City from 1934 to 1960.

**James Trainor:** Robert Moses was the most powerful person in New York history, who wielded power and never held elected office.

**CBS:** Robert Moses, whose very enemies would say that he more than any other person, is the man who built New York.

**Aria:** During his time, Moses built housing, parks, bridges, highways, beaches and 658 playgrounds. He changed the entire landscape for children and families in New York. But the problem was, Moses didn't like kids.

**James:** He saw these playgrounds as sort of like lobster traps. For example, in Central Park, he intentionally built the playgrounds right around the periphery of the park. For the reason that he wanted to protect the park from children. So, he put them around the periphery so they would catch kids before they could get too far into the park. He was worried about things being destroyed by children, mainly, not what happened to children.

**Aria:** That's the principle that most New York playgrounds were initially built on: to exhaust kids of their energy rather than to help them grow. Moses intentionally made playgrounds out of asphalt and concrete so children couldn't dig. He designed play equipment to be scattered in different corners of a playground like a factory assembly line, so kids would each stay in their station and mind their own business. Once you walk onto a Robert Moses playground, you immediately know where you are. And schoolyards like Corlears' are influenced by his design. James told me about the time when he was injured on one of those playgrounds.

**James:** my accident was running across an expansive asphalt through a sprinkler. While another kid was running, doing exactly the same thing from the other side, we didn't see each other and he was about three feet taller than me. So, I landed on my head and ended up with like six stitches in my scalp. So, that wasn't fun

**Aria:** The boring and dangerous playground model was part of Moses's legacy. Another was using design to reinforce inequality.

In the '60s, New York experienced a wave of immigration after Congress passed a new law that made it easier for non-Europeans to immigrate to the U.S. But because of intense discrimination, many immigrants had to take low paying jobs and families often had to live in poor, over-populated neighborhoods, like the Five Points in the Lower East Side, not far from where Corlears is located.

As Robert Moses was building the city's infrastructure, he designed New York so that these low-income families and racial minorities wouldn't have access to certain places. For example, when he was developing Jones Beach, a massive seaside park on Long Island, he intentionally put in highway overpasses that were too low for buses to go under. That was a way to keep out families who couldn't afford cars.

The 658 playgrounds that Moses built were predominantly in middle class or affluent neighborhoods. On the other hand.

**James:** The number of playgrounds that he built in Harlem in three decades, were by most accounts two. The same number in Bed Stuy, which at the time was the largest community of African Americans in New York City and in the country.

**James:** So he was profoundly racist, that's been quite established, if you read his writing.

**Aria:** The Lower East Side, the neighborhood that Corlears is in, is surrounded by public housing projects. 31 percent of its population are immigrants. The Orchard Collegiate Academy itself has predominantly students of color and 81 percent low-income students. I asked Na-jaya what she thinks of the block.

**Luis:** I would say that it's not as well kept or well maintained as a lot of other places that I've personally seen.

**Luis:** I feel like in neighborhoods that are, like, wealthier and stuff, they do have more access to different places or just better maintained places than in neighborhoods that are poorer.

**Aria:** Half a century after Robert Moses, New York is still struggling with infrastructure inequity. Underserved neighborhoods face a severe shortage of playgrounds. Many kids live in what the city considers "playground deserts," where there are no playgrounds easily accessible to them from their home. As of 2019, Brooklyn is the most underserved borough, with only 8 playgrounds for every ten thousand children.

And now, the threat of climate change is making matters worse. Without climate resilient schools and playgrounds, extreme weather will affect marginalized communities even more. Playing is something we all do as kids, but even playing is a privilege for many in New York.

**Iggy:** So, what kind of future should kids expect when it comes to the outdoors? Following the break, reporter Aria Young takes a look at how New Yorkers are addressing the shortage of outdoor play spaces, and also making those spaces more resilient to climate change.

This is Home, Interrupted. We'll be right back. Don't go anywhere.

**Ad Break**

**Iggy:** Welcome back to Home, Interrupted from Feet in 2 Worlds. Before the break, you heard about the sad state of many New York City schoolyards. The cracks, the constant flooding, the prejudiced designs from a man who didn't care for children. While this has been a reality for many years, climate change has put a spotlight on the state of outdoor play. But as reporter Aria Young discovered, the city's kids – including the ones you heard in the first act – are taking matters into their own hands.

Aria: So where's the volleyball court?

Dyonis: Dead center.

Assiatou: And we have a basketball court over there.

Aria: The Corlears school complex is about to get a new playground, and kids at the school, Dyonis, Assiatou and Na-Jaya, are helping to design it.

Dyonis: There's going to be trees also within like each corner, each section of the different courts. And pretty much around the whole yard.

Aria: Corlears' concrete lot is in development to be transformed into a fun community playground that can withstand climate change. A nonprofit organization called the Trust for Public Land, or TPL, is helping them do this. Since 1996, the TPL has transformed over 220 playgrounds in New York. They design the playgrounds with a committee of students, because who knows more about fun than kids?

Tiffany Briery is the Program Manager at TPL. She works closely with kids of all school ages to lead them through the design process. It usually starts with a big wish list – the kind you'd hear from someone running for class president in the 5th grade.

Tiffany Brier: They might dream big at first and come up with some impractical wishlist items like a chocolate fountain or an ice skating rink. Since parkour has increased in popularity, kids have very much advocated for play equipment that allows them to jump over under have kind of an obstacle course.

Aria: The Trust for Public Land doesn't just want to build new playgrounds, they want students to learn about the climate along the way. During the design process, schools select kids to go through a 10-week curriculum to learn and participate in designing their new yard. So that instead of a Robert Moses lobster trap, the TPL playgrounds are where kids can really go out and have fun. Places that are like what I had growing up in Shanghai ...or maybe even better.

Tiffany: We've had kids in the design process want to make sure that there's backed benches or a space for homeless people to be able to hang out, which you'd think like, from an adult perspective, you see design that's trying to completely exclude that population. So, it's kind of incredible to see a kid's fresh take of what they see the need is in their neighborhood. They've advocated for things like buddy benches where you have a designated place where if you're feeling like you need some quiet time and you haven't been able to connect with other kids, you can go sit on the buddy bench, and then another kid knows that you're open for a chat.

Aria: At Corlears, Dyonis, Na-Jaya and Assiatou are part of the design process. They showed me the same kind of inclusive consideration that Tiffany described. They kept in mind that they will be sharing the yard with younger kids.

Assiatou stood in front of a vision board in the school hallway to show the plans for their new yard.

Assiatou: This is our blueprint for everything we came up with. So our school is very big on volleyball, and other schools are big on basketball. So we incorporated

all these things, including a play set, since we were also dealing with different age groups. We included all these things, but while doing it, we took in consideration of flooding. That's why we added a turf, and where we added a turf near the drainage area.

**Aria:** Flood prevention is a big priority for them since the school is located right by the East River near the floodplain. It was a major reason they were selected for renovation. This is Na-Jaya.

**Na-Jaya:** We did the turf so big because the turf will help absorb the rainwater so that, like, you see how we have the corner is filled with a pool of water. So instead of that, the rain will be absorbed by the turf, and then it'll help the drainage system just work better in general.

**Aria:** The turf field is a permeable surface that can absorb tons of rainwater in a storm. This concept is called Sponge City, where urban spaces use natural areas like trees and parks to absorb water like a sponge. This idea came from China, my home country, where it was first successfully implemented. Cities like Chongqing, Xiamen and Wuhan are all densely populated cities being transformed to act like rainwater reservoirs.

I remember the first time I got on a video call with my American partner while I was in Shanghai. He was amazed by how green the city looked. There were trees everywhere, he said, something he had rarely seen in American cities.

The kids at Corlears are trying to make their school spongier too.

While their playground is currently in construction, just two blocks away is a school called Shuang Wen. Shuang Wen's playground used to look just like Corlears, but in 2019, the Trust for Public Land transformed it into everything that Corlears kids want theirs to be—fun, exciting and standing strong in the rain. I met a boy named Brandon Woo in front of Shuang Wen. He's a part of their afterschool program and is a BIG fan of the playground.

**Brandon Woo:** I went to the playground.

**Aria:** You did? Did you play at the playground today?

**Brandon:** Yeah.

**Brandon:** I slide down the slide.

**Aria:** Was it fun?

**Brandon:** Yeah.

**Aria:** Yeah?

**Brandon:** We slide down the slide like 10 times.

**Aria:** The playground at Shuang Wen doesn't just have slides. It's basically the most colorful school yard I've ever seen. The ground is painted yellow and blue with kids drawings everywhere, trees lining the basketball courts and a soccer field, a jungle gym that a bunch of kids are climbing on, and even a gazebo with a green roof. It's total extreme, even better than the playgrounds I grew up with.



**Adelyn Chang:** I like playing because there's lots of stuff to climb on.

**Aria:** Adelyn Chang is another kid I met outside Shuang Wen.

**Aria:** Do you play every day outside?

**Adelyn:** Sometimes, when the weather is good.

**Aria:** Do you like playing outside or do you like the indoors more?

**Adelyn:** I kinda like the playground more. There's lots of stuff to climb on.

**Aria:** Shuang Wen includes grades from pre-K to grade 8, so kids like Brandon and Adelyn will likely have this state-of-the-art playground for the rest of their childhood. Meanwhile, a five-minute walk away, Dyonis will be in college by the time Corlears' new playground is done. Corlears and Shuang Wen's school yards are not just before and after pictures of a city program, they are could-have-been childhood memories missed out by just two blocks.

I experienced a similar difference when I came to America. At 17, I attended a small Catholic school in rural Pennsylvania. Even though it was nothing like schools in the Big Apple, the lack of outdoor education felt the same. Unlike how I was in Shanghai, I barely spent any time outside during school hours. Our PE class was mostly in a small, sweaty indoor gym. We had no air conditioning and often had to stay at home on extremely hot days.

Talking to these New York kids made me realize how disconnected I've been from the outdoors since I left home. Immigrants like me come to this melting pot of a land in search of a better life, a better education, but living and working in New York now, in my new found home, I deeply miss the greenery in Shanghai, the laughter from my childhood that echoed under the sky, with no roof. I long for that kind of connection now—the pure, soul-cleansing connection with nature that I've lost in this new country.

Assiatou shared with me what the outdoors mean to her.

**Assiatou:** So one thing that I enjoy doing is taking walks with my sister. Yesterday when it was raining, we walked out in the rain. Because staying home all the time and watching Netflix, it gets tired and lonely. And being able to go outside, it's something new and it's exciting. You create memories outside with people and it's better than being inside most of the time.

**Aria:** Construction on Corlears' new playground finally began in February 2024. The students and even their Principal, Miles Doyle, are already dreaming of the future possibilities once the new yard is done. He can't contain his excitement.

**Miles Doyle:** Forget schooling, human beings need to be outside enjoying the natural environment as best they can in an urban setting, full stop.

**Aria:** But Principal Miles also knows that the work doesn't stop there.

**Miles:** This is not just a one-and-done deal, is it? This is not going to solve the climate change. It's not going to solve mental health after COVID, or even the

things that we're now learning about ourselves as human beings, more and more. This is one part of it.

Aria:

At the moment, there is no set date for when Corlears' playground will be completed, so the students' vision has yet to be materialized. After this deep dive into New York playgrounds, I can't help but notice now how many more public schools have playgrounds that look like parking lots and probably won't be renovated anytime soon. The city as a whole has too many competing needs to prioritize its outdoors space. This year, 2024, the city's budget for parks and playgrounds is 41 and a half million dollars less than last year's. Today, less than 1% of the city's total budget goes to parks and playgrounds.

So close your eyes and picture childhood in the future. Will there still be a wonderful blue sky where kites can fly? Or a school garden that echoes tinkling laughter? While the grown ups are scrambling to come up with solutions to the climate crisis, sea levels continue to rise, temperatures still climb, and some children grow up missing out more than others. The cracked concrete grounds can be mended, but how do we mend the childhoods lost in them? Where does the future of childhood lie?

Iggy:

This story was written and produced for Feet in 2 Worlds by Aria Young. It was mixed and mastered by our technical director Jocelyn Gonzales. Quincy Surasmith is our managing editor and Julie Schwietert Collazo was our fact checker. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing, and Shreya Agrawal is our intern. The Managing Director of Feet in 2 Worlds is Mia Warren. John Rudolph is Feet in 2 Worlds' founder and is Executive Producer of this series.

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Home, Interrupted comes to you from Feet in 2 Worlds. Since 2004, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and training immigrant journalists. The Feet in 2 Worlds network includes hundreds of reporters and editors. Some, like me, have been Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

You can find links to additional stories in the series in our episode notes. To listen to earlier episodes of Home, Interrupted, visit [F i 2 W.org](http://fi2w.org). That's F, i, the number 2, W.org.

I'm Iggy Monda, Editorial Fellow with Feet in 2 Worlds. If you like the show, thank you. Please keep listening and please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your stories.

Quincy Surasmith:

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