Lima, M. (2013). *Building playgrounds, engaging communities: Creating safe and happy places for children.* Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press. 185 pp.

Review by Jawaid Haider

*I*n a 1996 report titled "Stated meeting report: The Scholarship of Engagement," Ernest Boyer argued that the scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of "the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers, and to our cities." *(p.32)* This simple but thought-provoking concept encapsulates a powerful philosophy on the scholarship of outreach and service-learning as it directly relates to the role and the cultural position the design and engineering disciplines occupy in our communities today. Boyer viewed the design disciplines, especially architecture, as essential to his vision of "engaged scholarship," which, in conjunction with genuine civic commitment, offers infinite opportunities for revitalizing our communities. He would often proclaim, "The future belongs to the integrators" *(Boyer & Mitgang, 1996, p.xiii)*. This simple assertion has profound implications for our cities and accentuates the imperative need for an interdisciplinary approach when planning play and learning environments for children.

With the problems that most communities, particularly urban communities, are facing in terms of crime, pollution, and high densities, traditional play spaces, such as streets and other public spaces, are becoming less and less accessible to children. The world of shopping malls, fast food diners, parking lots—even the way modern society interprets its backyards, schoolyards, multiplex theaters, and amusement parks—does not afford engaging spaces. Today's children and youth have little access to nurturing environments that contribute to creative invention, joyful interaction, self-discovery, access to nature, and cultural enlightenment *(Ataöv & Haider, 2006)*. In this context, play spaces such as thoughtfully designed playgrounds for children can potentially fill a gap by providing enhanced opportunities for play and learning.

Recognizing the critical value of outdoor play in children's lives, Marybeth Lima embarks on the heroic task of designing and building a series of playgrounds for schools with the help of her engineering students in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Known as the Louisiana State University or LSU Community Playground Project, this undertaking had a significant social purpose: to provide chil-

dren in the Baton Rouge public school system with safe and fun playgrounds. Lima presents a compelling case for service-learning in her book *Building Playgrounds, Engaging Communities: Creating Safe and Happy Places for Children*. The book reflects her sincere dedication to helping schools build playgrounds with the active and collective involvement of students in her engineering class, as well as the children who would use these playgrounds. What makes these projects fascinating is her succinct account of the process—from writing grant proposals, fund raising, engaging students, and forming partnerships with local community organizations to involving children in a participatory process of playground design and construction. Her efforts often meet with resounding success despite the odds but also encounter their share of heartbreaking failures that must be overcome.

Lima has a conversational but sophisticated style of writing that would appeal to a broad spectrum of audiences, such as teachers, scholars, and, to a certain degree, designers. Her interest in bioprocess engineering, which encompasses translating the discoveries of life science into everyday products, processes, or systems, and service-learning—a method whereby students engage in serving the community while satisfying the learning objectives of their academic courses—becomes increasingly clear as she describes numerous playground projects. Lima's initial educational goal in teaching a biological engineering course was simple: She wanted her students to engage in designing something "real" and "interesting." Her teaching philosophy is to provide students with "roots" and "wings," which she acknowledges is a two-way street. Her approach emphasizes the diversity of students' strengths, channeling them toward something purposeful and satisfying. The process entails consistent collaboration of different individuals and stakeholders involved in the process.

If play spaces and places are pivotal in children's lives, they must be planned and researched using an inclusive approach. Today, children are not always included in the design and planning of their play places. In the LSU Playground Project, children were empowered by focusing on a particular issue as a group, discussing its meaning and importance for them, and developing solutions for collective action. This approach enhanced children's ability to work together, to build self-confidence, to develop trust in each other, to make decisions, and to take the initiative to create necessary conditions for their actions. As Bartlett, Hart, Satterthwaite, De La Barra, and Missair *(1999)* have asserted, "There are a few simple requirements for young children's play: physical safety, social secu-

rity, diverse and stimulating physical surroundings, the presence of other children, a lack of temporal pressure and the proximity to adults"*(p. 134)*. Lima's approach instilled in her students the need to be inclusive in planning playgrounds in order to promote an understanding of issues relating to children's health and education and their need for play, as well as safe design, through the coalition of various actors in planning, implementation, and management of decisions.

The book demonstrates a deep understanding of many crucial behavioral issues involved in designing playgrounds for children, such as gender differences, children's perception of play spaces or equipment, and their attachment to play spaces they grow up in or have used in the past. One particular example of this sensitivity is evident in the design and construction of the Twin Oaks Elementary School, where an existing dilapidated "gate to nowhere" is retained or transformed into a "portal to anywhere" to respect children's wishes and their long-standing association with their play environment. The students are urged to listen to children's needs, affinities, and creative ideas before translating concepts into physical playground spaces through their knowledge of engineering design. This stress on process rather than only outcome is emblematic of a sound approach to design. Other aspects of design, such as time management, organizational skills, and timely delegation of responsibility, are also indicative of an effective process.

This LSU Playground Project achieved many successful outcomes; however, the approach used in designing and building playgrounds also had some limitations. One issue is an understanding of design in a deeper sense. While the effort of the engineering students in designing and building the playgrounds is certainly commendable, the book places disproportionate emphasis on solely the technical aspects of playground design as opposed to cultural, experiential, tectonic, and visual issues. Given the tight budget constraints, time frame, and the complexity and variety of work involved, this emphasis is understandable. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether students or experts from the design disciplines, such as architecture and landscape architecture at LSU, were involved at any stage of the process. The involvement of these design disciplines could have noticeably enhanced and enriched the quality of design and construction of the playgrounds.

In service-learning projects a tangible outcome to gain the trust of the community is of paramount importance. Despite the lack of involvement of students or experts from design disciplines at LSU, any project with such service-learning outcomes over a time

frame of almost 15 years is undoubtedly commendable. This is even more impressive when there are very few examples in the United States of incorporating service-learning in teaching engineering students. Lima's arguments become even more convincing when viewed against the backdrop of some significant failures in getting playgrounds funded and built. Her resolve to push forward in the face of adversity because, as she argues, "Failure occurs when you give up," is inspiring and an important lesson for students to learn.

The LSU Playground Project created an environment conducive to service-learning and highlighted civic responsibility as an integral part of education by offering students an opportunity to incorporate civic affairs into the curriculum. The project successfully engaged students in community-based research and programs for schoolchildren and teachers. Finally, the project enabled students to design and build playgrounds, albeit with little or no input from design disciplines. As a community playground safety specialist, Lima demonstrates a deep understanding of critical issues. Even though it is an important aspect of playground construction, safety is often viewed in a rigid manner, with unintended consequences for playgrounds. Similarly, Lima points out that many other simple considerations, such as integrating adult caregivers or children with disabilities into the playground design, are often addressed superficially. In short, Lima's personal academic or scholarly interests closely relate to her service-learning strategies.

It may be uncommon for a faculty member to employ service-learning as a means of building bridges between teaching, research, and outreach. After all, service-learning does not have the same prestige in the academy as other scholarly pursuits. This dichotomy that continues to exist between producers of knowledge in higher education and the beneficiaries of knowledge in the community has resulted in a prevailing positivist epistemology in higher education (*Hale, 2008*). Lima's book provides insights into a thoughtful and scholarly approach to critical community problems for faculty engaged in addressing civic problems. Many creative and innovative efforts have come from faculty with civic aspirations who have bravely questioned the current narrow interpretation of what constitutes research and scholarship in academia (*O'Meara, 2012*).

Lima's community work affords a strong sense of support and inspiration for civic agency in the academic world today. Traditional academic culture generally rewards loyalty to a particular discipline at the expense of broad interdisciplinary research. However, universities have recently come under intense scrutiny and sharp criticism from the public. The relevance of research and

scholarship to complex social problems, which invariably demand an interdisciplinary framework, is consistently being questioned. Despite increasing awareness of the need for community engagement, most disciplines have not made substantial progress in this area. Academia needs to change the prevalent mindset about service-learning by encouraging faculty members to enter into partnerships with community organizations and faculty from other disciplines, as well as engage in interdisciplinary endeavors to effectively address complex societal problems. Only then will we be better equipped to continue to develop meaningful criteria to measure the quality of scholarship in all three spheres of faculty involvement—teaching, research, and outreach.

It is indeed gratifying to occasionally find faculty members in the sciences or engineering who have been inspired to energize their research through an engagement component, but the current reward system in institutions of higher learning and universities ties the hands of younger faculty. This system needs to change substantially. Historically, the ivory tower culture in our universities has focused exclusively on discovery, while sacrificing application and dissemination of knowledge. This propensity has prevented many scholars from playing a more socially responsible and economically productive role in society. The current trends, as evidenced through the reward and faculty assessment structure in many universities, do indicate a paradigm shift—albeit a small one—that may eventually have a far-reaching impact. However, this impact will remain minimal unless service-learning is integrated into our modus operandi. Marybeth Lima's book offers significant evidence that can make a difference in legitimizing service-learning or scholarship of community engagement. In fact, it prompts a significant question: Do we really have a choice today?

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About the Reviewer

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