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What the UK can learn from the Netherlands | Microclimate & play space design

By Chris Robertshaw

Designing play spaces with microclimate as a core component is critical as rising temperatures and more extreme weather increasingly affect the safety, comfort, and usability of outdoor environments.

Integrating trees, shade, planting, and climate-responsive materials helps create cooler, healthier, and more resilient spaces that support children's wellbeing, encourage longer outdoor play, and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

All images:
Vondelpark, Amsterdam & Calverley Grounds, Tunbridge Wells
Image credits: EDLA, Boer Play & Tunbridge Wells Council

The highlight of EDLA's recent study trip to the Netheland was the visit to Vondelpark, Amsterdam and specifically the highly successful and much loved 'Canopy Walk' play space from Boer Play. The imaginative and exciting play space is an excellent precedent for designing play with microclimate in mind and to maximise all year round use.

The existing tree canopy and natural landscape within the area are integrated as as part of the play experience itself, rather than treating planting as a separate feature. The play space including large scale towers, rope walks, basket swings and a whole host of other elements are embedded seamlessly within a mature treescape. This provides extensive natural shade, helps to reduce surface and air temperatures during warmer weather and creating a more comfortable environment for longer periods of play, even through the winter.

Rather than relying heavily on exposed rubber surfacing and standalone equipment, the design incorporates natural materials, elevated walkways, and landscape integration that helps to minimise heat absorption and allow air movement through the site.

The trees also help filter wind, improve air quality, and create a calmer sensory environment, contributing to both thermal comfort and wellbeing. By using canopy cover as functional infrastructure, the play area demonstrates how microclimate-responsive design can support climate adaptation while also encouraging imaginative, nature-based play. It was noticable even on a sunny spring day the temperature contrast between the play area and open lawn spaces beyond, something which in the height of summer would no doubt be extremely welcome!

The project reflects the broader Dutch approach to playground design, where trees and landscape are considered essential components of the play environment, shaping how spaces feel, perform, and are experienced throughout changing seasons and weather conditions.

The UK in comparison is generally considered behind the Netherlands in addressing microclimate and tree canopy coverage within playgrounds because of differences in planning culture, design priorities, and attitudes toward risk and public space.



In the UK, playground design has traditionally focused on equipment provision, safety compliance, and maintenance efficiency rather than environmental performance.

Many play spaces have been developed through standards-led approaches that prioritised clear sightlines, impact surfacing, and minimising liability risks. Trees were often seen as obstacles or maintenance burdens due to concerns about roots, falling branches, leaf litter, supervision, and long-term upkeep costs.

As a result, planting was commonly pushed to the edges of playgrounds instead of being integrated into the core play environment. This has produced many spaces with limited canopy cover and high exposure to heat-retaining materials such as rubber and metal.

The Netherlands, by contrast, has a stronger tradition of landscape-led and child-centred urban design, where public spaces are planned more holistically. Dutch cities tend to treat trees and green infrastructure as essential urban systems rather than decorative additions.

Playgrounds, such as the 'Canopy Walk' are more frequently designed as part of wider green networks, with trees used strategically to provide shade, regulate temperature, improve biodiversity, and create more immersive play experiences. There is also generally greater acceptance of managed risk in children's environments, allowing natural elements such as trees, varied terrain, and planting to play a more active role in play.

Another key difference is the Dutch emphasis on climate adaptation and spatial quality in urban policy. The Netherlands has been proactive in responding to urban heat and environmental pressures through integrated planning approaches, including canopy targets and green infrastructure strategies. In comparison, the UK has only more recently begun to prioritise urban heat mitigation and microclimate design within public realm and play guidance. Funding and governance structures also contribute to the gap. UK local authorities often face tight maintenance budgets and fragmented management responsibilities for parks and play areas, which can discourage ambitious tree planting schemes. Dutch municipalities typically invest more consistently in high-quality public realm design and long-term landscape management.

As climate change intensifies, this difference is becoming increasingly significant. The Dutch approach demonstrates how integrating tree canopy and microclimate considerations into playgrounds can create cooler, healthier, and more resilient spaces, while many UK playgrounds are still adapting from older, equipment-focused models toward more climate-responsive design practices.

The UK can move toward more climate-resilient play spaces by shifting from equipment-focused playground design to a more landscape-led approach that integrates trees, shade, planting, and sustainable materials from the outset.



'Canopy Walk' Vondelpark, Amsterdam - Using natural materials to create boundaries and edges
Image credit: EDLA

Prioritising canopy cover, solar orientation, and microclimate analysis within design standards would help reduce overheating, mitigate Urban Heat Island effects, and create more thermally comfortable environments throughout the year.

Greater consideration should also be given to the thermal performance of materials, evapotranspiration cooling from vegetation, permeable surfaces, blue-green infrastructure, and wind buffering to improve both environmental performance and user comfort in changing climate conditions.

Moving forward will require closer collaboration between local authorities, play designers, landscape architects, and organisations such as RoSPA to demonstrate that more naturalistic playgrounds should not be feared, but can safely provide richer play value, greater biodiversity, and healthier environments for children. Designing with canopy density, species selection, and long-term maintenance in mind can ensure trees function as essential climate infrastructure rather than decorative additions.

By learning from European examples such as the Netherlands, the UK has an opportunity to create play spaces that are not only safer and more inclusive, but also environmentally resilient, ecologically beneficial, and adaptable to future climate pressures.



'Canopy Walk' Vondelpark, Amsterdam - Using natural materials to create boundaries and edges
Image credit: EDLA



Calverley Grounds, Tunbridge Wells - A precedent of designing play spaces with microclimate and integration of planting in mind
Image credit: Tunbridge Wells Council

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