

## Cities Want Young Families to Play and Stay

By ANNE MARIE CHAKER



Oklahoma City's Thunder Fountain *Carl Shortt Jr.*

Doug and Maureen Towne, who live in Phoenix with their children Autumn, 10, and Ben, 2, have long toyed with the idea of moving to the suburbs. Doug works in nearby Scottsdale. Maureen drives back and forth from the Scottsdale school where Autumn will be entering fifth grade. A move, says Ms. Towne, is "definitely tempting."

But for now they are staying put. One factor: plans for a \$118 million redesign of the Margaret T. Hance Park, which is near their home. There will be a beer garden and restaurant; an 800-foot zip line for adults and children; splash parks with fountains for kids to cool off; and "playscapes" such as climbing walls with rocks and boulders. "If we stay, I know it's going to be great," Ms. Towne says.

About a decade ago, the so-called creative class of 20somethings fueled the revival of urban centers by settling in downtown areas mixing condos and coffee shops. Now, as millennials and other urbanites have children, their needs are changing. Cities want to hold on to them by becoming more "playable," for both children and adults.

For decades, cities "relegated kids to the playground and said, 'We've done something for you,'" says Darell Hammond, chief executive of Washington, D.C. nonprofit KaBOOM!, which consults with city officials on promoting and preserving play. "The whole city should be a playground, and play should happen everywhere."

That means not only building more parks and bike paths but also incorporating the ideas of "fun" and "play" throughout a city, whether it is musical swings downtown (Montreal), a hopscotch crosswalk in an arts district (Baltimore) or camp sites on a city lake front (Chicago).



The proposed 'Cloud' structure in Phoenix *Weddle Gilmore/Imelk*

As children age, families are less likely to live in cities; 42% of married couples whose youngest child is less than one year old live in city centers, according to an analysis of Census Bureau data by Joe Cortright, principal economist for Impresa Inc., a consulting firm based in Portland, Ore. That figure drops to 28% when the youngest reaches age 10.

The main culprits: concerns about safety, the lure of more space and the poor perception of urban schools, according to a 2008 report published by CEOs for Cities, a national network of over 600 urban leaders. But, the report adds, "Cities are becoming more vibrant and livable."

Oklahoma City is remapping the city in its \$1 billion bid to engage families. It is replacing a 4.5-mile stretch of highway that once awkwardly divided the downtown with a pedestrian- and bike-friendly "boulevard," which will accommodate four lanes of motor-vehicle traffic. The project also incorporates a new 70-acre park with a great lawn, a lake and a 380-foot long pedestrian overpass that connects the north end to the south portion of the park.

The city's 17-acre Myriad Botanical Gardens got a makeover, too, with the addition of a high-tech sound-and-light splash fountain for children. There also are a children's garden with arts-and-crafts programs, a stage for plays and concerts, a dog park and a skating rink. The project, parts of which are still under construction, will be finished entirely by 2021, the mayor's office estimates.

Mayor Mick Cornett says the plan "will increase our chances of holding on to the millennials when they're into their 30s," says Mr. Cornett. Real-estate demand downtown has already increased, he says, and a new elementary school is opening this month near the new park.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced a plan in 2012 with the goal that by 2017 every city resident will live within a 10-minute walk of a park or playground. Last year, he announced an initiative called Chicago Plays! with the goal of rebuilding or refurbishing 325 playgrounds by 2018. The price tag: \$37.5 million.



A new playground in Chicago *Brooke Collins*

Chicago is also building ambitious new parks and green spaces. "The 606"—whose name is a nod to the ZIP Code Chicagoans share—is an unused rail line that is being transformed into 2.7 miles of elevated trail for bicyclists and pedestrians. Slated to open in 2015, it links five neighborhood parks, an observatory, art installations and an event plaza for outdoor movies and concerts.

Another project in Chicago is Northerly Island—nearly 50 acres of lake front once home to a small airport, then a parking lot. It will provide landscaped paths, boardwalks and bridges where the public can enjoy views and wildlife amid prairie and wetland plantings. The project will also include camp sites for children who sign up for park programs.

Quality schools still rank high on the list of priorities for families considering whether to stay in the city, Mr. Emanuel says. But street life and the vibrancy of urban living also are important. "People feel isolated in the suburbs," Mr. Emanuel says.

Cities have every reason to want professionals to stick around. As people age and have children, their value to communities grows, both in spending power and taxable income, says Candace Damon, vice chairman with HR&A Advisors, an urban-development consulting firm based in New York. Average income for householders from ages 35 to 44 is 28% higher than for those ages 25 to 34, according to Census Bureau data. In the quarter that ended June 30, 60.2% of 35- to 44-year-olds were homeowners, compared with only 35.9% of people under 35, according to survey data from the Census Bureau.



A hopscotch-themed crosswalk in Baltimore *Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts*

As people age and have children, Ms. Damon adds, they also tend to care more about their community. "People don't get civically engaged until they are relatively settled in their personal lives," she says. "They care about schools, they worry about potholes and the ambulance going too fast." If cities don't retain that 30-and-up demographic, "then you don't have people who are going to care and ensure they remain good places to live."

HR&A consults with dozens of cities a year, and Ms. Damon has noticed one element increasingly featuring in park design: German-style outdoor beer gardens. In the past year, a half-dozen parks she has consulted on have placed beer gardens at or near the top of the list of things the community wants, she says.

Ms. Damon says a beer garden is a playful element that isn't focused on children—but doesn't shun them either. Designs have included nearby play equipment, enough open spaces for running around, and low-key snacks and finger foods. "It's about creating a space where adults can gather with children, without having to be solely focused on taking care of the kids," she says.

Some cities are relying on small, whimsical touches to change the urban landscape. In Baltimore, the nonprofit Office of Promotion & the Arts commissioned three artists to come up with alternatives to utilitarian stripes for three crosswalks in an arts district. Paul Bertholet, a local muralist, designed a "zipper" crosswalk for one, Graham Coreil-Allen, a public artist, created "Hopscotch Crosswalk Colossus" at another, and a monster character will be installed in the fall at a third, according to a spokeswoman for the office.

The crosswalks tell visitors "we are kind of funky and fun, we try not to take ourselves too seriously," says Bill Gilmore, executive director of the Baltimore Office of Promotion & the Arts. Nodding toward a nearby urban rival, he adds, "We're not Washington, D.C."

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