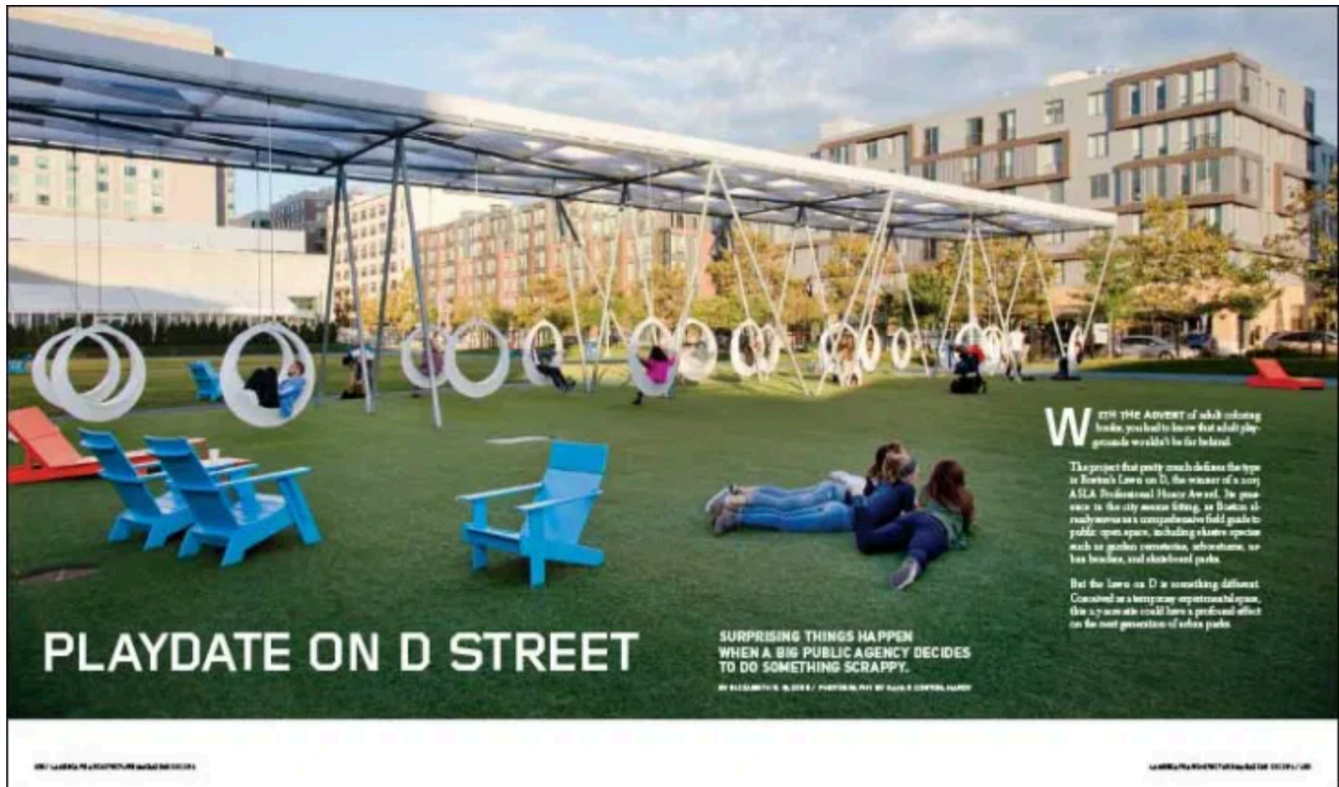


# LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

## PLAYDATE ON D STREET

BY ELIZABETH S. PADJEN, PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAHAR COSTON-HARDY



Surprising things happen when a big public agency decides to do something scrappy.

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With the advent of adult coloring books, you had to know that adult playgrounds wouldn't be far behind.

The project that pretty much defines the type is Boston's Lawn on D, the winner of a [2015 ASLA Professional Honor Award](#). Its presence in the city seems fitting, as Boston already serves as a comprehensive field guide to public open space, including elusive species such as garden cemeteries, arboretums, urban beaches, and skateboard parks.

But the Lawn on D is something different. Conceived as a temporary experimental space, this 2.7-acre site could have a profound effect on the next generation of urban parks.

It's a schoolyard. Anyone who has ever seen a New York City neighborhood playground will recognize it immediately. Flat. Asphalt paving. A fence. A swing set. People playing games. Others hanging back, watching. A couple of authority figures discreetly monitoring the action, ready to jump in if things get out of hand. A big building looming behind it all.

The Lawn on D takes that basic model and amps it up into the realm of urban cool. The fence is not galvanized chain link but black metal mesh—the first hint that a designer has been here. There is, of course, the eponymous patch of green, which is actually both synthetic turf and the real stuff. Asphalt paving has never looked so good, painted bright orange, green, and blue to establish pathways and create patterns that might inspire some spontaneous millennial version of hopscotch. Slick new lighting is suspended overhead—no cobra heads, and no acorn lamps, either.

The schoolyard games have also been bumped up a few notches. Anyone in need of working off a little energy has the choice of ping-pong, bocce, cornhole, or Jenga—nothing that will promote roughhousing or that will require a shower before heading back to the office. The more laid-back crowd can pull up Adirondack chairs.





A selfie on *Swing Time*. Photo by Sahar Coston-Hardy.

And the swing set—oh, the swing set. Designed and fabricated by the Boston architects [Höweler + Yoon](#), it's a usable art installation and, as such, has a title: *Swing Time*. Great loops of translucent polyethylene hang from a frame; embedded within them are LEDs, microcontrollers, and accelerometers, so they glow and change color as they move. Good luck finding a seat on one; this is Boston's proclaimed selfie capital.

Dividing asphalt and turf is an enormous open tent, the sort you might rent for a street fair. Inside, you'll find a food line and tables that appear to have been shipped directly from that New York school's cafeteria.

It's cheap. It's modest. It's ambitious. It's owned by a behemoth of a public agency, but it's one of the coolest spaces in the city.

No one knew it would turn out this way.

In 2010, plans were afoot to expand the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center (BCEC), already one of the largest buildings in New England. At stake was not only the competitive viability of the convention center itself, but also the economic future of a large swath of the Innovation District—much of it still parking lots and the gritty industrial landscape you associate with movies featuring gangsters speaking in bad Boston accents.

“This was not just about making a giant building even bigger,” says Howard Davis, who at the time was the director of capital projects for the [Massachusetts Convention Center Authority](#) (MCCA). More cities were vying for convention business, but at the same time, convention attendees were changing: They were no longer content to sit in dark rooms from 9 to 5, sipping bad coffee from urns in equally dismal hallways. In order to compete, the MCCA knew it needed a destination district, and that its focus would be D Street, the only direct connector between Boston's inner harbor and the South Boston neighborhood beyond, known as “Southie.” A draft master plan was in the files, in need of rethinking in response to new challenges and changing conditions.

Davis began to assemble a team that he describes as “the best and brightest.” [Sasaki](#) was hired as the lead consultant, with principals Fred Merrill as planner and principal in charge, and Gina Ford, ASLA, as landscape architect. Tim Love, an architect and planner at [Utile](#) known for an uncanny ability to devise urban-design strategies grounded in market reality, became a major subconsultant. Soon, another subconsultant joined the team as a public-programming adviser: [HR&A](#), which had prepared the economic feasibility study for the High Line in Manhattan.

The new expansion would extend south of the original convention center, which meant that it would need its own “front door” on D Street. In the meantime, some sort of walkway connection was needed between the original building and two new hotels already in the works on the opposite side of the street.

You can’t build a billion-dollar project without the neighbors noticing—in this case, the residents of Southie, known for their political prowess and long memories. A decade before, they had negotiated concessions from the MCCA as most of the rest of the city looked on in wonderment, given the distance between Southie and the actual convention center site. Now some of those same people were showing up for round two, wondering when they were going to get their promised park.

The “park,” Davis reminded them, was never a park but was an “event space” that would be open to the public. And indeed, an extensive search through pre-electronic records proved him right. The new master plan designated a large parcel for that purpose at the intersection of the original convention center and the expansion, abutting the walkway. There was only one problem: No one knew what to do with it.

The issue was that there was no real precedent for the kind of space they had in mind. Davis convened multiple brainstorming sessions. By now, the team had grown to include Chris Wangro, known for his genius at programming public spaces. The ideas were creative, but there was no consensus. People couldn’t even agree on the best size for the space. And without consensus, Davis knew that committing funds to a permanent public event space posed an enormous risk.

Davis approached Jim Rooney, the executive director of the MCCA, with a proposal. The idea was to ask the board for a relatively modest amount of money to develop the hotel walkway and an adjacent 2.7-acre site (just north of the actual designated event space) as a trial. “I don’t like the word ‘experiment,’” says Davis. “It sometimes suggests you don’t know what you’re doing.” Instead, Davis called the proposal “an eyes-wide-open experiment,” meaning that the team would try out different concepts based on experience and educated guesses, documenting successes and failures and learning how both the public and convention attendees responded. The lessons would then be transferred to the eventual design and development of the permanent site. And in the meantime, the site would start to generate buzz, both for the existing convention center and for the new district. Rooney was immediately in sync; perhaps more remarkably, the board was, too. It approved \$1.5 million for construction and \$1.4 million for programming the first year (not including other operating costs).

“It was the fastest little construction project I’ve ever been part of, and one of the least expensive,” says Ford. Design work began in December 2013, documents were delivered in April 2014, and construction was completed by August of that same year. “Fast and cheap” became the guideline, as the team continued to work collaboratively in order to minimize time lag from decisions otherwise made in isolation. Public bathrooms, they decided, weren’t necessary, as the convention center facilities were nearby. The tent structure could be rented. When the work threatened to run over budget, the team reconvened, slashing costs by “descoping,” with moves such as taking out half the lighting fixtures and cutting the planting. Because the project was temporary, some corners could be cut in construction details (with the MCCA board’s understanding that the project, as built, would not hold up well after a couple of years).

Simultaneously, HR&A and Chris Wangro were lining up the arts, music, and programming mix that would define the space. Wangro dove deep into Boston’s cultural scene to identify events and participants that would give the space a distinctly Boston feel, in line with the MCCA’s mission to promote both convention space and the city itself. Identity and branding became a focus of discussions, as the team recognized that obvious, self-conscious branding would turn off the millennials whose burgeoning presence in the Innovation District was considered a key to success. After a brief flirtation with “Lab on D,” the new space became “the Lawn on D.”





The main tent (at left) includes food and bar service. The smaller tent adjacent to the convention center was added this year for private events. *Photo by Sahar Coston-Hardy.*

It opened on August 15, 2014, and it was a hit. There was no signage, no onsite calendar of events. There was no need. From the beginning, social media was part of the Lawn's essence, boosted no doubt by the immediate success of *Swing Time*, which Love calls "big Instagram bait." But the Lawn's managers kept the good media times rolling with Wangro's program picks: concerts, movies, food trucks, themed weekends, a midwinter festival (featuring a ski hill, fire pits, and an ice labyrinth), not to mention the sheer spectacle of giant inflatable rabbits (a temporary installation called *Intrude* by the Australian artist Amanda Parer) and "Pentalum," an inflatable maze.

With attendance reaching 230,000 people over its 18-month life, it was hard to imagine that the Lawn could ever be considered temporary, even as it approached its designated end in the fall of 2015. But clouds were forming on the MCCA's horizon. Governor Charlie Baker had taken office the previous January and, facing significant budget challenges, soon announced that he had decided to "pause" the BCEC expansion. Politicians understood "pause" as a euphemism for "kill." In the following months, some senior staff left and the governor replaced some board members. By the end of the season, it was clear that there would be no permanent event space to which the Lawn might migrate. Even worse, with a large annual budget of more than \$2 million in a cost-cutting environment, the Lawn itself was in jeopardy.

Hope came a few months later with a proposal from Johanna Storella, the MCCA's chief strategy officer (who subsequently lost her own position in a round of budget cuts). The Lawn, she suggested, could become self-sustaining over a period of three years through a combination of tactics including sponsorships and increased rental revenue. The 2016 season would be the test.

"So, is this story going to be an obituary?"

Katie Hawkes, the operations manager for the Lawn on D, chuckles. "No. It's not an obituary. The Lawn will live."

Under the new operating model proposed by Storella, revenues are healthy and, rumors to the contrary, there are no plans to charge for admission. Last spring, Citizens Bank stepped up with a \$250,000 sponsorship. In return, they have built an ATM kiosk near one entry and have received naming rights of sorts: The MCCA website officially refers to the space as "The Lawn on D Powered by Citizens Bank."

The beloved food trucks have been exiled owing to a contract with a local restaurant group that provides food and beverages with a beer and wine license; the MCCA receives 15 percent of the gross. Food and beverages, together with free games, are now available during special events in addition to prime time: Fridays, weekends, and "bonus" Thursday afternoons and evenings.



With the addition of a small private-events tent accommodating up to 350 people, more than 80 private events have been scheduled this season, including some contracted for use of the entire Lawn. Rates range between \$17,000 and \$25,000 for the whole site. The private tent goes for \$4,000 to \$5,000 for the day, which includes shared access to the public space. “It’s like renting the cabana at the pool,” Hawkes says. Other sponsors have contributed as well, such as the fitness club Equinox, which runs occasional classes at the Lawn. As this story went to press, the *Boston Herald* reported that the \$2.3 million loss in 2015 has been cut to a projected \$250,000 to \$350,000 loss this year.



The Lawn provides a buffer between the convention center and a growing neighborhood of apartments and hotels.  
*Photo by Sahar Coston-Hardy.*

It has been a year of regrouping. Sasaki was brought back earlier in the year to help with capital improvements, most made necessary by the temporary nature of the original work, such as drainage and paving. (The designation of \$500,000 for capital improvements was seen as an early signal that the MCCA was showing long-term support for the Lawn.) Synthetic turf was installed around the cornhole boards and under the swings, where maintaining grass was impossible. “Our relationship with our landscaper has evolved,” Hawkes says. With problems including broken sprinkler heads and damage from staking, her staff has created new client guidelines for private events. Even the swings have been refabricated. The original welded flat-sheet polypropylene was replaced with rotomolded LDPE (low-density polyethylene) for greater durability. The bright-orange custom ping-pong tables have been replaced with gray, more rugged versions made by Cornilleau. The tents, previously rented, are now owned outright. Just this past August, the bocce courts were relocated from the center of the Lawn, replaced by a sand court at one side because of wear on the grass.

Programming has changed somewhat as well, and is now managed in-house. Most noticeable is the absence of the edgy installations. Who doesn’t miss the ginormous bunnies? But with that loss has come some gains. Popular craft brew nights, for example, are sponsored in conjunction with the food and beverage provider. Family events continue to be a huge draw. And for some private events, organizers provide their own attractions—in one case, adult bouncy houses.

The Lawn is touted, and largely designed, as a magnet for millennials escaping offices in the Innovation District. And so it is a shock to discover that it is also a magnet for people who live in the outback—as in Maine, New Hampshire, and the outer Boston ’burbs. On a sunny Friday, the Lawn is hosting an eclectic but unusually cheerful crowd. It has that effect on people.



As part of a regular Friday series, students from the Berklee College of Music are performing in the tent, but no one seems to want to sit inside. There's a group lying on their backs in the middle of the lawn in a starburst pattern; the swings are fully occupied. High school students on a field trip from Maine have decided to spend the day here (so much for exposure to the city's historical and cultural landmarks). Two young women from Hudson, Massachusetts (population 19,000), have driven more than 35 miles just to hang out. One woman drives 15 miles from Waltham every few weeks. She has learned that if she arrives by 11:00 a.m., she can get cheap on-street parking.

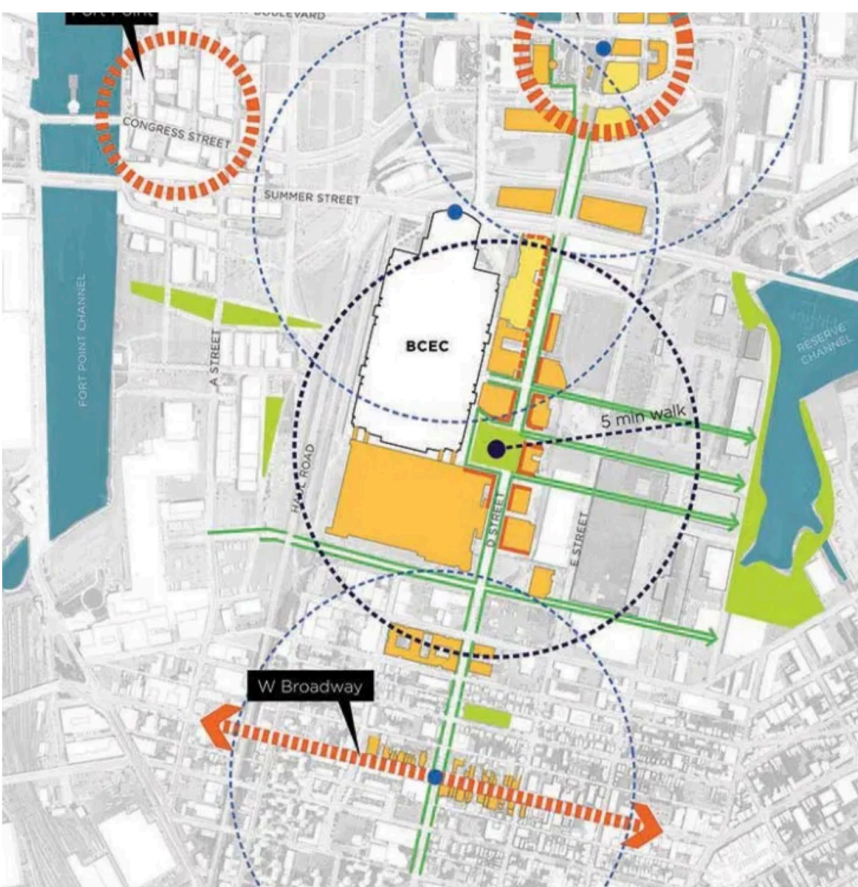
A group has spilled out from the private-event tent. They're playing bocce (later on, they'll be running three-legged races), wearing T-shirts saying "Be an Asset Not a Liability," with the exception of one guy in a button-down oxford, who is obviously already an Asset. At another bocce court, a group of five little boys is playing everything but bocce. Beyond them, a row of baby carriages lines one edge of the low grassy berm surrounding the lawn, which Ford calls "the planted frame." Two young mothers with infants sit on the grass under a tree, one nursing. They are on maternity leave and have walked over from their homes in Southie. They are clearly up-market professionals, and their presence suggests that Southie residents were right to worry about an existential threat to their neighborhood all those years ago. Southie simply misidentified the source of the threat: It was not the convention center, but the millions of square feet of new office space beyond, filled with well-paid workers clamoring for housing.

Two twentysomething guys are sitting in Adirondack chairs sipping beer. One is the anonymous author of the "Only in Boston" Twitter account, [@OnlyInBOS](#), with more than 200,000 followers at last count. He and his friend are perhaps the best example of how nimble you have to be to stay ahead of millennials. Instead of buying lunch at the concession in the tent, they used the [Caviar](#) app to order lobster club sandwiches and calamari, delivered curbside. Total bill: \$63.

Why does it all work? "All the luxury of your porch plus insane people-watching," says Ford. Hawkes extends the porch analogy. "People in the city don't have backyards, and it's a place to bring their family, have some fun, have a drink and eat some food, and just hang outside." She adds that the biggest draws are events that are family oriented but that also translate to millennials.

But if you ask the visitors, one of the first answers you hear is, "It's safe." Visitors also mention the range of ages and the presence of families, which seems to be welcomed even by younger millennials. "I like the diversity," one offers. "You get all ages, right up to 40."

What no one mentions up front is the obvious answer: alcohol. Nowhere else can you hang out in a public park in the city with a beer or glass of wine. Tim Love is blunt: "I'm convinced that without the alcohol, it never would have worked."



Boston context plan. Image courtesy of Sasaki.



Taking in the scene on this Friday afternoon is one couple, a true anomaly. They appear to be in their 60s. They live near Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and drive two hours to a pied-à-terre nearby. They are Lawn regulars. Most urban retirees fetch up in Back Bay or downtown; these two revel in their outlier status. They are known as the old couple in the neighborhood and get instant recognition from the bartender at the local restaurant. They are clearly in love with the city, and it is perhaps that romance that sparks the wife's observation. She sees the Lawn as a continuation of the tradition of private gated garden parks: "It's like [Louisburg Square](#)."

The comment is not a criticism, but she's on to something, one of the underlying tensions of the Lawn. It is both public and private. Sometimes it's maddeningly private.

On a gorgeous summer day, the Lawn is empty, and the gates are locked. The swings sway slightly, as if occupied by fun-loving ghosts. Signs say "Closed for Private Event." A man in shirtsleeves wanders over from the Westin Hotel that is adjacent to the Lawn. He grasps the fence and tries to peer in. The expression on his face could be described as forlorn but is more likely just plain confused.

Hawkes acknowledges the frustration. "One of the biggest takeaways we had from the first season was that the public thinks of it as a park that's available all the time," she says. She works to schedule events for less busy times, and the marketing team focuses on communicating closures through the website and social media.

Of course, a true public park rarely closes for the season, let alone a day. The Lawn is too big, too visible, and too important to be offline for six months as a neighborhood tries to take root around it —not to mention its lack of availability for the midwinter conventioners ranging back and forth like caged bears with cell phones as they gaze at the park outside.

But it's still early days in the life of the park. Greater access might be something that can be worked out once financial security is more certain. Public programming is an insatiable fiscal beast, however, and it is not hard to imagine scenarios that will demand even greater privatization.

Once upon a time, public parks required no programming at all. We have other well-known public lawns, such as the Boston Common and the Mall in Washington, D.C., that continue to thrive under the do-it-yourself approach to outdoor entertainment. Certainly no one has suggested a need for rebranding them: The Lawn on Beacon? The Lawn @ the Mall? The Lawn on D, however, is grounded in a different cultural moment.

Grumpy baby boomers will no doubt point to the Lawn as the obvious response to a generation brought up on playdates and helicopter parenting—a controlled infantilizing of the urban environment. Ford concedes a generational influence in the park's dependence upon social media, and especially in the cultural tendency to measure success by selfies. But she also sees it as a natural outgrowth of recent design responses to the Great Recession, which put the brakes on the proliferation of expensive, highly designed megaprojects such as Millennium Park in Chicago. The lack of capital investment gave rise to tactical urbanism—inexpensive, often temporary initiatives that drew their strength from the sharing economy (evidenced by Airbnb), pop-up culture, and social media. "Now you have the economy coming back," she says, "and you have entities like the MCCA creating projects based on a very different context for tactical urbanism. People are reinvesting again and learning from the guerrilla stuff that was happening in the last decade."

Indeed, there is ample evidence that tactical urbanism has devolved from strategy to style. "Pop-up" itself has become almost meaningless, as when the Harvard Club of Boston lists a "Pop-Up Night" in its regular events calendar—code for a young members' cocktail party.

Love pushes Ford's point even further, disputing the common characterization of the Lawn as an example of tactical urbanism. "It has all the trappings of pop-up," he acknowledges, "but it's just the opposite. You could call it curated open space." He points to the years of planning, the careful programming, the budget, and the absence of spontaneity. The Lawn, he suggests, isn't even in the same genus as most public parks, which are not programmed, minimally maintained, flexible, and, in effect, held in trust for occasional spontaneous use by the public. "The motivations here are 100 percent commercial," he says. "It adds value to the convention center portfolio, it cemented the deal with the hotels, and it generates good PR. But PR is different from why a city has a park system."

It's not hard to identify the challenges facing the Lawn—and they are not all financial. One is the cycle familiar to most designers, who know all too well the accretion of small decisions and apparently minor changes once a project is handed off to staff and maintenance contractors. There's a fine line between the pop-up aesthetic and the just plain banal: the plop dots of Home Depot hydrangeas, rose bushes, and gumdrop boxwoods.

Chasing millennials is like chasing clouds, exhausting and perhaps fruitless. This is a generation exquisitely attuned to manipulation. Those brightly colored Adirondack chairs? Let's give them one more year, at best. Irony doesn't bear up under commodification. The Museum of Fine Arts has just installed a dozen plastic Adirondacks outside its entrance, the equivalent of grandparents on Facebook.

And, of course, there will be competition, as other entities fiddle with the Lawn formula and find ways to skirt the alcohol laws. The Lawn's location has no inherent magic, and other contenders will be only an Uber away. The MCCA will need to work hard to stay ahead of its own curve, or let the Lawn slide into a second life as an exercise pen for bleary conventioners and hotel guests.

Even so, it's hard to imagine that the concept of the adult playground will go away anytime soon. Beer and bouncy houses are just too compelling. Only one question remains: When's recess?

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