



Swing set that encourages socialization and eye contact. The playground is over 20 years old and the swing set is the same, with some minor repairs made along the way.

Playground Equipment with a Heart for Children's Play

A group of 11 landscape architects and one interior architect traveled to Germany to learn more about outdoor play and playground equipment, and to get better acquainted with the manufacturer Richter Spielgeräte. The trip went to idyllic Frasdorf at the foot of the Austrian Alps. This Bavarian village is home to Richter, where playground equipment in wood is produced and shipped to projects all over the world.

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The Nordic supplier of playground equipment, Stiliom, organized and led the study tour. The three-day trip took place in mid-May, with participants from Sweden and Norway. In addition to the architects, the group included four representatives from Stiliom and myself from Park & anlegg. From Munich, we traveled two hours south by bus to the small

village of Frasdorf, with its alpine houses, local bakery, lush gardens, and the charming hotel Landgasthof Karner, where we stayed. A central part of the village is also Richter Spielgeräte's production facilities. Frasdorf is surrounded by farmland, small villages, and a chain of majestic alpine peaks to the south. During two full days, we attended lectures on

play and playground design, learned about Richter's history and philosophy, visited their workshops, and went on site visits to playgrounds in both Frasdorf and Munich. Along the way, there was also time for participants to try out the Richter playground equipment firsthand.



1. Tour participants test water play at the playground in Frasdorf. **2.** Julian Richter talks about the properties of wood in one of the workshop halls. **3.** One of Richter Spielgeräte's bestsellers is the sculptural and stylized farm animals. **4.** Playground equipment is being constructed here for construction phase two of the "Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Playground."

The philosophy behind

Richter Spielgeräte is a family business, now run by second-generation CEO Julian Richter, since its founding in 1967. The company's philosophy can be traced back to Julian's grandmother, who ran an orphanage in Hamburg after the war. She observed, and became deeply engaged in, how children develop through play. She saw how they created their own little play spaces between bushes and trees, and how they used natural materials such as gravel, cones, stones, and bits of wood as a basis for free play. The idea that children should be able to play freely, based on self-directed activity, became the foundation of Richter's philosophy.

The company is built on strong expertise in both woodworking and knowledge about play. Many of the craftspeople come from the region and bring with them long traditions in carpentry and

timber construction. Management and staff also have extensive insight into the significance of children's play and how best to facilitate it. In addition to producing playground equipment, Richter also designs playgrounds, with a focus on inclusive and developmental play.

Their products are designed to offer children genuine physical and mental challenges, for example by allowing them to test and master activities involving a certain level of risk. The aim is to create installations that can be used in many different ways—ideally also in unplanned and spontaneous ways. Inclusivity is also a key value: Richter strives to create free and enjoyable play experiences for people of all ages and abilities.

A carpenter's workshop on a grand scale

Richter Spielgeräte's production facilities do not look like a modern factory. At first glance, it feels like time has stood still



Cross-section of a European larch trunk. Julian Richter explains how this type of wood behaves and how they take this into account when developing the playground equipment.



1. Large trees on the premises characterise the Richter Spielgeräte production facility. **2.** Lecture on creating inclusive and developing play environments by Harry Harbottle, consultant on play and safety at Richter Spielgeräte. **3.** Peter Heuken explains the properties of the falling sand. Richter always uses natural materials as falling surfaces, made of wood or stone. **4.** One of many cabinets and shelves with tools.

since the 1960s. Playground equipment is made in traditional workshops, filled with the atmosphere of long woodworking traditions. Rough carpentry and fine detailing happen side by side in a series of large workshop halls. On closer inspection, however, modern tools and equipment are also present alongside traditional hand tools. It is clear that wood is at the heart of production—both in how trees are integrated into the outdoor areas and in the deep respect shown for the material inside the workshops.

Most of the timber used is European larch, supplied by a nearby Austrian sawmill. The trees grow slowly and are harvested selectively in mountain areas only a few kilometers away. During the tour, Julian Richter explained that their approach to woodworking is based on how the material behaves over time—wood is a living material that naturally cracks as it ages. Most of their products are made in

untreated, or only lightly treated, timber. Larch (*Larix decidua*) develops a beautiful silver-grey patina and is highly durable thanks to its dense grain and high resin content.

Richter makes a virtue of highlighting the organic, imperfect character of wood as a design feature. Knots, irregularities, and natural variations create details that spark children's curiosity and sense of discovery. It was remarkable to think that this "carpenter's workshop" produces equipment for playgrounds all over the world—from the enormous Gathering Place in Tulsa, USA, and the prestigious Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Playground in Kensington Gardens, London, to countless neighborhood playgrounds worldwide.

Durability in both equipment and workforce

Environmental awareness and pride in high quality permeate Richter's production. Their equipment is designed to last, with a well-established system for maintenance and spare parts. For Richter, the value of durable, functional products is more important than releasing new and "exciting" designs, which is why their product catalog changes little from year to year. The same classics remain, used in countless variations.

Many landscape architects approach Richter with requests for customization. While this is possible, Julian Richter emphasizes that such adaptations require significant additional work in terms of time, materials, and testing. Every adjustment must go through the same extensive safety and quality assurance processes as their standard products. He therefore encourages designers to carefully consider whether customization is truly necessary.

Walking through the workshops, we saw a highly diverse workforce, also in terms of age. A positive work environment is seen as essential, and Richter actively strives to create an inclusive, enjoyable, and developmental workplace. Staff turnover is very low—many employees have worked there for decades. Julian Richter believes this is partly because employees are given responsibility for entire processes, from raw timber to finished equipment. This creates ownership and pride in the final products, making work both meaningful and enjoyable.

Time to play!

Peter Heuken, a wood engineer and Richter's director of special projects worldwide, has been responsible for landmark projects such as Princess Diana's Memorial Playground since 1992. A leading expert in play and playgrounds, he has deep insight into how environments can be designed to support children's development.

On guided tours of playgrounds in Frasdorf and Munich, featuring installations from different eras, Heuken explained how to design spaces that welcome all age groups. With his long-standing passion and experience, he shared practical advice—how playgrounds can



Perhaps the most important sign for a playground is the requirement to remove bicycle helmets before playing. The playground equipment is not designed for helmet use and life-threatening situations can occur if children get stuck due to their enlarged heads.

provide spaces for teenagers to socialize, how furniture should be arranged for diverse users, and how play environments can stimulate children's curiosity. He also discussed how safety can be ensured through conscious design for different ages and skill levels. Heuken encouraged

us to play on the equipment ourselves—and joined in with ease and enthusiasm.

Over the course of three days in Bavaria, we learned a great deal about play and the design of play environments. The company's snail logo turned out to be a fitting and symbolic representation of Richter Spielgeräte's thoughtful and enduring approach to playground design.