

**Myers Kindergarten:  
Auckland Kindergarten Association  
(a garden of children)**



**Figure 1: Myers Kindergarten, Auckland. Auckland Kindergarten Association Archives**

Hidden away in the heart of Auckland's central business district, amidst the concrete streetscape, is a narrow park: Myers park. Running parallel to the upper part of Queen Street, the six acre park is characterised by steep, grassed slopes and canopied with a mixture of large exotic trees. Nestled within the park is the 100 year old, architecturally designed and purpose-built Myers kindergarten building – its name conspicuously inscribed on the building's exterior.

The rich history of the Myers Park Kindergarten includes the commissioning of the kindergarten, the educational philosophy underpinning the centre, and historical controversy. The kindergarten was a bold and inspiring vision for children in the city of Auckland, but not all of the ideas came to fruition, including facilities for deaf and hard of hearing children. Moreover, over the years a number of issues have changed the way the facility is used, safety concerns and declining

enrolments, for example. In recent years the kindergarten has become an early childhood care and education centre (KiNZ in the Park), and the wonderful kindergarten identify established 100 years ago continues.

The park and the kindergarten building were the gifts of a former Mayor of Auckland, Arthur Mielzimier Myers. The latter was gifted by Myer to the children of Auckland and placed in the care of the Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA). Myer's gift enabled the conversion of the Grey Street gully into a public park. It contributed to a larger scheme underway by Auckland Council to improve their civic landscape with public parks and sports grounds.

The park that Myers planned was to be of a different character. It was to be a 'reform park' created specifically as a safe place for urban children to relax and play within a natural setting. Myers found his inspiration in the work of the American Reform and Playground movements. Furthermore, he supported the call for cities to develop children's play policies to protect children's interests, in particular that of urban children living in poverty in overcrowded areas and in need of public spaces in which to play.

This recognition of children's need to play drew also on Friedrich Froebel's work. Froebel legitimised play as the means of stimulating children to express their innermost thoughts, needs and desires in external action. Moreover, the kindergarten building was to have a significant relationship to Myers Park seen effectively as a playground for kindergarten as well as Auckland children where they could observe and interact with nature.<sup>1</sup>

A well equipped and dominant children's playground was designed along modern ideas and special provisions including a paddling pond, sand circle and playground equipment. Duplicated equipment for different age groups were provided to ensure the needs of all children were met. The provision of children's play equipment was a new feature in public parks. Myers paid for

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<sup>1</sup> Myers Park Conservation Plan, Prepared by Jane and Antony Matthews for Auckland City Council, 1998,4

and arranged for appropriate material to be imported from America.<sup>2</sup> The financial cost was considerable.



Figure 2: Children's playground Myers Park. Auckland Kindergarten Association archives



Figure 3: Children's paddling pool, Myers Park. In the 1980s the pool was later filled in and converted to a garden, 'Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 236-7519

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kroad.com/heritage/myers-park/>

The park was officially opened on 28 January, 1915 to a large and appreciative crowd. In his speech Myers deemed that 'it was important for children to develop the all-sided activity of the child.' Thus it was fitting that the park 'should be associated with some institution of a more directly more educational nature which might have the benefit of the park as a playground.'<sup>3</sup>

To create the kindergarten building, Myers worked in conjunction with the architects Chilwell & Trevithick and his sister-in-law, American born Martha Washington Myers (nee Shainwald), who had been involved in the kindergarten movement in San Francisco and was now president of the Auckland Free Kindergarten Association (AKA). The aim of the Association was also built around reform interests. Together they designed a building to be as modern and as safe as possible and to incorporate Froebelian principles – to provide a brighter and more elevating environment that would benefit children living in poverty.

The building, which was to have a strong relationship to the park, was located on the embankment and was in direct contrast to the established urban pattern set back from the street. This gesture was 'consistent with the desire to remove children from street life.'<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the metaphor of the child growing like a plant is seen in the design of the kindergarten. For example, with the use of a green and white colour scheme and the window plant boxes. In addition, the external colours and textures of the kindergarten building were continued into the park's pathway surfaces, and flowerbeds were planted at the front of the building.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Myers Park opened' New Zealand Herald, Volume LII, 29 January 1915,7

<sup>4</sup> Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of,  
By Marta Gutman, Ning De Coninck-Smith Marta Gutman, Ning De Coninck-Smith  
Rutgers University Press, 2008

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thearchitectureofearlychildhood.com/2011/04/birth-of-kindergarten-in-nz-and-of.html>

Kindergarten children were catered in rooms on the ground floor. The classrooms were positioned to give the maximum use of space and to make them as far as possible open air rooms. The veranda faced north to catch the sun. Glassed in, it served as the sand tray room. Also on the ground floor was provision for the training of students to be kindergarteners.<sup>6</sup> A comprehensive contemporary description of the interior reported in a local newspaper reveals the detail in the fittings and furnishings.

A cloakroom is provided, and out of this is a lavatory, where low handbasins are set in, of a convenient height for baby fingers. All the corners are rounded throughout the building and the wall joins the floor with a curve so that no dust can lie either in the corner or near the wall. The windows are three tiered, large and full of light, with power to open each square in different directions, so that always a current of air will flow through, yet no draught be felt. Stores and cupboards are provided to contain the materials used by the children. A specially constructed milk safe for the care of the children's drinks is constructed, also gas stoves to heat the milk, and low sinks for the babies to wash up their own mugs. A bathroom is also present in the new kindergarten, supplied with hot water in case any of the babies should suddenly be taken ill with convulsions, and is fitted with such tiny baths for such tiny people.<sup>7</sup>

However, the new building was not without controversy. Prior to the opening of the building, Anti-German sentiment led to a discussion about whether the name "kindergarten" should be used on the building or even for the institution itself. Myers consulted with key Associations members and the Charirman of the Education Board and upon receiving a resounding 'No, keep the word kindergarten' continued as planned.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> 'A Garden of Children', Auckland Star, 23 September, 1916, 17

<sup>8</sup> Auckland Star July 20 1916, 2



Figure 4: Interior of Myers Kindergarten Building, Opening day 1916, Grey Collections, Auckland Public Library, NZMS1275 (27)

The Kindergarten was opened for classes in October, 1916. This was one month before the official opening in November 15 1916 by the Governor General, the Earl of Liverpool. In his speech the Governor described the children who would use the facilities as those who would 'carry on the good name, work and cause represented by the British flag.'<sup>9</sup>

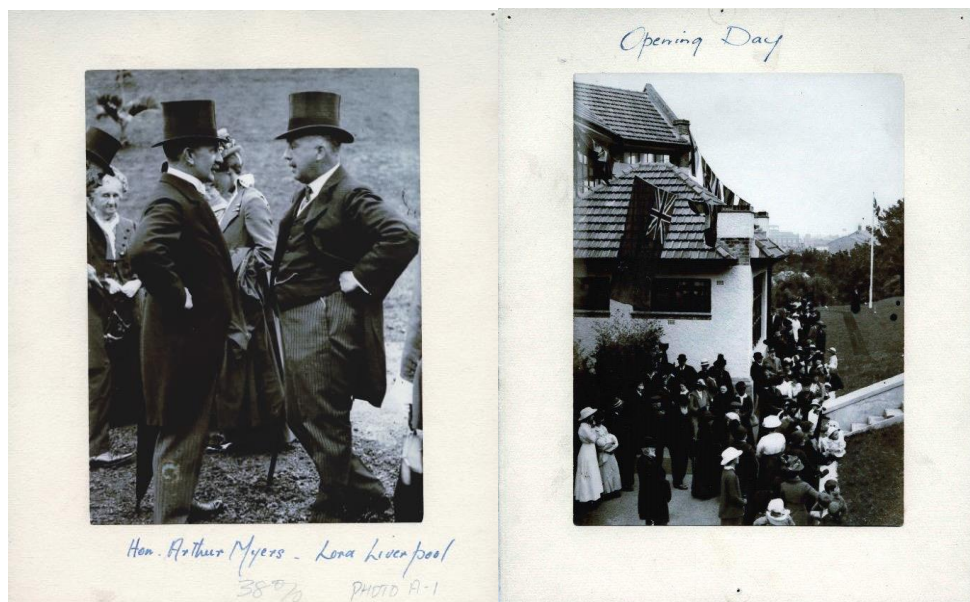


Figure 5: Opening Day Myers Kindergarten, Auckland Kindergarten Association Archives

<sup>9</sup> 'Myers Kindergarten: Opening by Governor'. New Zealand Herald, 16 November 1915, p.9



**Figure 6: Crowds alongside Myers Kindergarten, Myers Park, Auckland. Price, William Archer, 1866-1948: Collection of post card negatives. Ref: 1/2-001646-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22912475>**

Myers Kindergarten soon became the Auckland Kindergarten Association's "showpiece" and Myers' munificence the envy of kindergarten associations without permanent buildings. Christchurch's kindergarten trainer Miss Hull, and council member Mrs Chilton were two of the many kindergarteners to visit. They agreed that Myers kindergarten was 'ideal in every way, the most complete provision being made for the comfort and happiness, not only of the children, but also of the students and the trainer.'<sup>10</sup> What they wanted was to find a 'Mr Myers' (or as Mrs Chilton suggested, perhaps a Mrs Myers), who would do for Christchurch what that gentleman had done for Auckland.<sup>11</sup> Wellington's training principal Miss Riley, having visited, also longed for a 'more commodious and suitable building' and hoped 'a generous donor like Mr Myers would soon come forth with money or land on which to build.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 'Our free kindergartens' *Sun*, 29 March, 1917, 4

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>12</sup> 'Free Kindergarten' *Dominion*, 7 December, 1916, 3

However, not all of Arthur Myers intentions worked according to plan. In recent years the park has attracted a certain degree of notoriety due to a spate of various incidents, especially at nighttime. Over time the playground, that had initially been such an integral component within the park, was reduced in size. For example, the splash pool was emptied and turned into a garden.

Work has since been carried out to raise the profile and safety of the park and to recapture its original charm so that it can once again become a place for friends, families, and visitors to enjoy. Auckland Council celebrated the centenary of the Park with a Festival on Sunday the 15th of February 2015.

Moreover, Myers' claim that the kindergarten would have the park as its playground proved problematic. Kindergarteners responsible for children's safety had to ensure children did not slip away "either down to the high slides in the Park, which were much higher than they are now, or up into Queen Street."<sup>13</sup> As a resolution to this problem, in 1954 the Association proposed the enclosure of a play area in front of the building. Kenneth Myers, son of Arthur Myers, even wrote a letter of support saying his father would have given approval. Half height wire mesh gates were installed to the verandah limiting children's access to the playarea unless supervised by staff. In 1972, the kindergarten's outdoor area was further extended. Such changes, whilst necessary for children's safety and need for outdoor play, have raised other concerns as to the visual impact of the changes on the building within the park.<sup>14</sup>

Enrolments had declined gradually since the 1950s and in 2002 this became a problem that made the kindergarten uneconomic to run. It was decided to close the kindergarten and re-open as an early childhood care and education centre (KiNZ in the Park). Objections were raised arguing that this went against Arthur Myers' insistence that provision should be

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Tunks, Interview Auckland Kindergarten Association Centennial Interviews Reminiscences, 1992

<sup>14</sup> Myers Park Kindergarten Conservation Plan 1998, 57



free for all children. A compromise was ultimately found, the childcare centre opened and the strong presence of children in Myers Kindergarten building continues.

Myers' plan for the upper floor to be used as a school for 'backward children' was short-lived, as the school for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children moved into their own building in 1942. The upper floor was occupied between 1944 and 1958 by the AKA for teacher training purposes and more recently by the association itself.

Today the Myers kindergarten building, together with parts of the park itself, are on the register of the Historic Places Trust. The 1998 Myers Kindergarten Conservation Report stated the building 'appears to have been soundly constructed and has generally been well maintained and is in largely original condition. Changes to the plan of the building have been reasonably limited the ground level bottom floor which maintains a reasonably high degree of integrity.'<sup>15</sup>

In 2016, the kindergarten building that Arthur Myers gave to the children of Auckland and that Martha Myers helped design along Froebelian lines, reached its first century. For 100 years the kindergarten had been in use as a place for children; the only such kindergarten building in New Zealand. The building is now imbued with assorted memories and a strong kindergarten identity that is sure to last as the building enters a second century.

Author Kerry Bethell 2016

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<sup>15</sup> Myers Park Kindergarten Conservation Plan, 57

For more information on the Myers Kindergarten building see:

<http://www.thearchitectureofearlychildhood.com/2011/04/birth-of-kindergarten-in-nz-and-of.html>

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