

# **WILDLANDS FOR CHILDREN: CONSIDERATION OF THE VALUE OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS IN LANDSCAPE PLANNING**

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Landscapes are, in part, expressions of culture and they serve a support for the continuance of particular cultures or subcultures. When one looks closely at variations in landscapes and their different impacts upon children it becomes clear that they serve as important tools in the socialization of children, though neither parents or planners are usually conscious of this. This lecture describes some of the ways the landscape influences children's development and discusses some of the options open to landscape planners for improving the quality of children's environmental opportunity. Particular attention is given to the influence of natural environments, the theme of this lecture series.

Usually landscape planners think of gross motor activity when they think of planning and design for children: running, jumping, swinging, and climbing. This is seen as important to the physical health of children. If one simply reflects upon one's own childhood, however, it becomes clear that this is a limited view. It is equally important to consider opportunities for diversity of sensory experience and aesthetic development; the development of competence and autonomy through freedom to explore and manipulate the environment; cooperation with others; and experience with other living things for their psychological and existential value.

Many of these social and psychological domains can only be satisfied by providing landscapes which children can reach by themselves in their own free time. Richer parents can, to some degree, substitute missing opportunities by driving children to places, but this is a qualitatively different kind of experience which probably has its own negative impacts on those suburban children who are dependent upon this kind of chauffeured recreational provision. For all classes of children, in all cultures, research usually by planners, has found play to occur within calling distance of the home. The two factors which determine whether or not a child can find suitable places to play close to the home can both be seriously affected by planning policy. They are spatial accessibility and the types of physical landscapes available. Because the theme of this series of lectures is the "natural" landscape, I will focus primarily upon the second of these two policy areas after first briefly summarizing the issue of accessibility.

## **1. CHILDREN'S ACCESSIBILITY TO THE LANDSCAPE**

This varies with the different child-rearing practices of parents. These practices are reflections of different personalities and ideologies leading to differences in the degree of freedom, independence and autonomy which parents encourage in their children. Accessibility is also influenced by the extent of such factors as traffic, crime, social and cultural fears. These factors vary greatly and result in dramatic differences in access to the environment according to the sex, culture and income level of a child's family. The type of residential environment (that is, housing layout and landscape design) can also have a marked impact on the range of freedom of movement a child has. For example, in high rise dwellings which fortunately are no longer being built for families with children in Northern European countries it is impossible for children and parents to establish the kind of gradual expansion of children's spatial range through negotiation which one finds in healthy circumstances. In contrast, many suburban housing schemes enable children to have a relatively large range. First, there are the

landscape qualities which combine to provide excellent visual access: mild topography, absence of vegetation other than lawns, and low density of buildings.

Second, there is the relative quiet of the neighborhood which, coupled with the presence of other parents, commonly enables shouting to be an effective means of communication. Third, there are usually a high proportion of families with children. Not only does this mean that any single child need not travel far afield to find playmates but also that the children can operate when necessary as messengers from impatient parents to children absorbed in play some distance from home. A further advantage of “suburban” tracts is that because of the high proportion of families with young.

Children, parents often share the responsibility, implicitly, and occasionally explicitly of watching over children other than their own. This demands little extra effort because children commonly form themselves into small gangs of relatively stable groups of children. An additional factor not related to landscape planning but to housing policy, is that the suburbs are usually culturally and socio-economically homogeneous, removing the factor of social and cultural prejudice which has been found to be so important in parents’ restrictions of children’s movements (HART: 1976; MOORE 1982, in press’). These are just two examples of the influence of planning on accessibility. More important in this lecture for landscape planners is the other half of the question: how do children use the environment and what do they value in it? That is what types of landscapes should be accessible to children. In this respect, we shall see that suburbs do not usually score highly at all.

## 2. USE OF THE LANDSCAPE

Remarkably little is known about children’s use and experience of the landscape; we know more about the ecology of baboons! What little research has been done has been usually limited to survey type observations of where children play rather than asking the children, or detailed observation<sup>1</sup>). (For a rather comprehensive example of such surveys, by the British Department of Environment, see LITTLEWOOD and SALE 1973). These have been able to offer us some useful information about the location of children’s play, notably that very little time is spent by children in spaces designed for them -playgrounds. More detailed studies, involving children, are still quite rare. The first study known is in German (MUCHOW 1933) and is now primarily of methodological and historical importance. I will be drawing from the only other studies I know of, all of them by Americans: SOUTHWORTH (1976), LYNCH (1979), MOORE (1982), and HART (1979). There is, a high degree of agreement between the four of us. In summary, some of the most important points are:

1. A remarkably small percentage of children’s free time is spent in playgrounds. Playgrounds are fine for some gross motor activities and excellent for very young children with their parents, but satisfy none other of the important domains of child development described above.

2. Children use the total landscape accessible to them and so it is necessary to think of them in the design of the entire outdoor physical landscape of residential areas.

3. One extremely important point that planning surveys have failed to point out to environmental designers and planners is the very small scale involved in children’s environmental preferences. In order to plan environments which anticipate the diversity of children’s interests, while at the same time recognizing young children’s extremely limited free range of movement, it is necessary to think of landscapes with much “finer-grains” than the blanket-like suburbs and new towns we have been providing to date.

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1. In investigating place preferences, when interviewed in a traditional manner, children select very different types of places than those selected when they are given the opportunity to lead an investigator to those places. In particular, children identify many more small places valued for particular uses on such “place expeditions” than during the interviews.

4. Commonly the most valued spaces for children are those which have been forgotten by planners and other adults. Ironically, the best landscape for children is often one which has been left to the power of nature. Some of these most valued features are: Water, sand or dirt, trees, bushes, and tall grass, variable topography, animal life “loose parts”, i.e. things to build with “found” resources such as berries or fruits. These are the qualities systematically removed from all new residential areas, even the highly applauded adult-aesthetic New Towns. A most remarkable aspect of these new towns and suburbs is that a central rationale for those persons moving to them is that they are excellent environments for their children!

5. Children place great value in being able to find and make places for themselves (HART 1978<sup>2</sup>). This is a rather radical challenge to landscape planners. It has been recognized to a very limited degree through “adventure playgrounds” but these meet the needs of a very small proportion of children. For the very large number of children living in suburban settings, playgrounds and play leaders cannot be provided in sufficient numbers. A less expensive and in many ways better alternative is to leave “wildlands” that is common land which is not planned or manicured, for children to make into their own play settings.

### **3. NATURE AND CHILDRENS’ DEVELOPMENT**

Many authors and poets have written of the special relationship children have with nature. FROEBEL and other educational philosophers tried to build this into an educational philosophy. What is this special quality? Some say it is an open-mindedness, plasticity, to the world which is the source of creativity found in children, and adults as artists (COBB 1959). Another suggestion is that there is an existential dimension: that children are more interested in the physical world as pre-teens because it is related to their phase of development, that is, they are seeking an understanding of the diversity of the total world, including plants and animals and their place within this scheme (SEARLES 1977). According to this position, teenagers are more concerned with developing a sense of their own individuality and are particularly concerned with other people rather than with the non-human environment. Contemporary social and behavioral scientists usually shy away from discussing the value of nature experiences to child development, probably because of the strong romantic heritage this issue has. This leads them to avoid discussing something which is too difficult for the methods of psychology to handle, anyway. However, one can often observe children in a deep involvement with nature, and intuition alone should tell us this is important.

My own observations are that small ponds are particularly valuable places for the kind of quiet “play” of children alone, described by COBB. One must also adopt, I think, a long-term human developmental perspective: that in order to understand and value our complex, interdependent life on this planet, it is necessary for mankind, and hence for children, to gain a perspective through experience with other living things. Books, films, museums, and even arboretums and zoos are not likely to suffice. Children learn best when they are able to discover things themselves, in their own space and their own time. Present planning policies in North America provide for children many small concrete or bare ground playgrounds, a few large parks, and the occasional trip to a zoo or even a state park or forest. There may well be alternatives. What, for example, would be the value of systematically preserving small areas of residual forest land as common land adjacent to new housing areas, as the fringes of megalopolis expand and its interstices are taken up? What would be the value of truly mini parks in the cities, sufficiently small to be provided every few blocks and colonized by fast growing weeds and trees? What if we attempted to preserve ravines through our cities with a minimum of landscaping? As one suggest these alternatives hosts of problem may be raised, not the least of which are economic questions. But we must consider children in ecological planning for they have no voice of their own.

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2. For some indications of the place qualities valued by children of a British suburban housing estate, see “Place and play: transforming environments”, a film and companion program notes prepared by the author for the BBC Open University Series “Art and Environment”.

#### **4. RURAL, SUBURBAN AND URBAN LANDSCAPES COMPARED**

Rural areas, particularly small rural towns and villages, have most of the physical landscape qualities valued by children, and commonly offer great freedom to explore and utilize these spaces. They even offer gardens for many children - too difficult to provide in urban areas in large numbers for children. But rural children complain of the lack of some of the qualities of city environments: streets or other flat, hard-topped surfaces for cycling and ball games, sports fields and a shortage of other children to play with! But small rural towns are not the kinds of environments landscape planners are being asked to work in. The bigger problems lie in the suburbs and the cities.

Parents in suburban housing areas commonly allow their children to have a larger spatial range of accessibility because these areas are commonly culturally, socially, and economically homogeneous, relatively free from crime, and have a smaller amount of slower moving traffic. However, the landscape is dominated by adults: the water is drained or covered, sand and dirt are covered with carpets of manicured grass, mature trees are removed and replaced with delicate shade trees, topography is flattened, all loose parts are removed, and much animal life is restricted by creating a monoculture of lawns. Once built, most house owners continue this pattern, although in mature suburbs children sometimes manage to find a few overgrown bushes and trees for use in spite of adult restrictions. The snow also brings relief to many suburbs of North America. The recreational spaces provided by planners in these suburbs are usually limited to sports fields and playgrounds.

Both in the USA and the UK, the most valued place to suburban children is “wasteland” which is sometimes accidentally left to nature. (The BBC -film: “Place and play: transforming environments” deals with this theme.) Landscape planners should leave small spaces “unplanned” close to housing areas. These spaces would be neither parks or nature conservation areas but something in between: “common lands” or “wild lands”. This would be a hard thing for many landscape and recreational planners and managers to accept<sup>3</sup>). Attempts could be made to introduce certain species of vegetation. Much of the planning and management of these spaces can be largely left to the work of nature: the danger of turning them into “gardens” is great. Ideally, there would be networks of these spaces: leaving valleys and ravines in new housing areas would be one way of achieving this.

Suggestions for “natural” spaces in urban areas are more difficult primarily because of the high density of the population. “Adventure playgrounds” and “urban farms” satisfy a lot of the requirements but both require management by adults and cannot be provided in sufficient number for easy access by all (Childhood City Newsletter 1978, 1981). Large urban parks are not sufficiently accessible, and in them there are growing fears of crime. One possibility is the creation of small common lands or wild lands next to community managed space, such as a community oriented elementary public school or a community garden. Washington Environmental Yard in Berkeley, California, is a wonderful example of what can be done when a community takes control of some of its own landscape planning (MOORE 1974).

#### **5. FREEDOM TO INTERACT WITH NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS AND THE ISSUE OF VANDALISM**

Children frequently search out natural spaces into which they can penetrate. This is not allowed in parks. Yet children’s interaction is usually gentle, not vandalism, but learning by exploration and experimentation. We need to know more about the ability of vegetation to withstand child impact if we are to create areas with high density of usage. Specific suggestions concerning the scale and distribution of “wild lands” could easily

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3. Since giving this lecture I am happy to have discovered such “wild land” created by planners for a local suburban community in Utrecht, The Netherlands. It is working very well. I am told there is another in Gronin-gen in the north of The Netherlands.

be made after surveying the existing “accidental” spaces in suburban areas and measuring their carrying capacity” for children. It is remarkable that no such human ecological research on children’s impact on vegetation has, to my knowledge, been conducted. It is my informal observation alone which tells me that wild vegetation can handle much higher numbers of children than landscape planners think. Some of the ugliest “play environments” are now being created because of the financial needs of minimal maintenance: concrete and steel sculptural playgrounds which look modern but have none of the qualities described here. In the “wild lands” suggested here, maintenance would be replaced by “management”; an important new job for ecologically-minded landscape planners.

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