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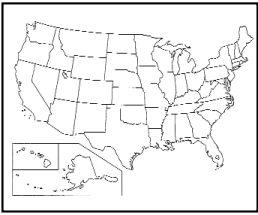
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Containing children: some lessons on planning for play from New York City

Roger Hart

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SUMMARY: *This paper relates the history of playground provision in New York to changing conceptions of childhood, and specifically to a felt need to 'contain' children in order to keep them off the streets, safe from traffic and unsavoury influences – a trend that children have tended to resist. Playgrounds most often substitute a narrow range of physical activity for the spontaneous play in diverse environments that children more naturally crave. Not only do playgrounds fail to satisfy the complexity of children's developmental needs, they also tend to separate children from the daily life of their communities – exposure to which is fundamental to the development of civil society. What is needed, argues the author, is not more segregated playgrounds, but a greater attempt to make neighbourhoods safe and welcoming for children, responding to their own preferences for free play close to home.*

I. INTRODUCTION

THE OPPORTUNITY TO play is a basic right, fundamental to children's development.⁽¹⁾ It is an irony of urban development that children in many of the world's poorest neighbourhoods have more freedom to play outdoors close to their homes than children in middle-class areas of the same cities or in the high-income nations. It is true that they often play in unsafe and unsanitary conditions,⁽²⁾ but the irony remains that opportunities for play do not necessarily improve with what we commonly call "development". As cities develop, there is a tendency for children to be increasingly contained. This paper is written in the belief that local government policies can significantly affect this trend. New York serves as a valuable case study in this regard. Play and recreation have not been a priority here in recent years, but there have been periods when it was taken extremely seriously, especially during the massive waves of immigration. Although New York is a wealthy city, it has always had large numbers of poor families. Today, many children in New York City have no regular safe access to outdoor play places and there are critical inequities in the quality of provision.

This paper focuses primarily on the play and informal games of younger children rather than on the formally organized sports and games of older children and teenagers. No particular age marks this transition; the only principle we need recognize is that children themselves should have choice. The core quality that distinguishes play and makes it

valuable to a child's development is that it is voluntary. A child must be free to play. Much of what adults prescribe or schedule for children is not truly play. Free play has been separated here from the broader category of recreation and sports to emphasize its importance; there is a tendency for city planners and policy makers to think of play as frivolous in comparison to sports and organized games.

II. WHY CITY GOVERNMENTS SHOULD CARE ABOUT CHILDREN'S PLAY

ALTHOUGH POLITICIANS CAN gain considerable political capital from opening playgrounds, play is often trivialized and placed low on the funding agenda of cities.⁽³⁾ Municipal governments usually think of children's play needs as being satisfied through the provision of playgrounds and recreational programmes. New York has been no exception. But ever since playgrounds were first constructed here at the turn of the century, children in this city, as in others, have shown far less interest in them than planners anticipated.⁽⁴⁾ There are two major reasons why play should be a priority for city governments: first, play is important to children's development and, second, free play in public space is important for the development of civil society and, hence, for democracy.

Play is fundamental to all domains of childhood and adolescent development – physical, intellectual, social and emotional.⁽⁵⁾ People tend to value it most for healthy exercise and the growth and development of physical skills. Less obvious is its value for the development of children's understanding and thinking. Children have an urge to explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with their world in order to understand it. This has had important influence on the design of many pre-schools and kindergartens but not much on public playgrounds. The value of play for creativity is also little recognized by those who plan and design public settings. But when adults in New York City recall their own play experiences, they recall creatively adapting the environment to suit their needs – inventing their world. When children have the freedom in space and time to play with one another, they find ways to pass on their culture to peers through games, song and dance, but also to transform it. Creativity, resourcefulness, inventiveness and flexibility are important to all children. Play with peers is extremely important to social, moral and emotional development. In free play, children learn to understand others and to develop skills of cooperation, sharing and caring. Finally, it has long been established that play can offer children a way to establish a sense of control in difficult circumstances.⁽⁶⁾ The important principle is that a setting should allow this kind of play to take place, not that it be planned or scheduled. For this reason, cities in conflict sometimes establish safe play zones for children. Belfast, for instance, has a large full-time staff that helps communities to establish play opportunities for children.

The second major reason that cities should recognize the importance of public play is its relationship to the building of civil society. As will be described in this paper, much of the motivation for establishing playgrounds in New York, as elsewhere, has involved the control of children through their spatial segregation. But this is not an adequate solution for the development of civil society in a democracy. It proceeds from a model of socialization in which civil society is entirely passed down to children, rather than one in which children participate in building that society.

1. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes play as a universal right in art.31: "States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts"; also Hart, Roger (1995), "The right to play and children's participation" in Shier, Harry (editor), *Article 31 Action Pack*, Play-Train, Birmingham, pages 21–29; Bartlett, Sheridan, Roger Hart, David Satterthwaite, Ximena de la Barra and Alfredo Missair (1999), *Cities for Children: Children's Rights, Poverty and Urban Management*, UNICEF/Earthscan, New York/London; and Hart, Roger and Alfhild Petren (2000), "The child's right to play" in Petren, Alfhild and James Himes (editors), *Children's Rights: Turning Principles into Practice*, Save the Children, Stockholm.

2. Satterthwaite, David, Roger Hart, Caren Levy, Diana Mitlin, David Ross, Jac Smit and Carolyn Stevens (1996) *The Environment for Children – Understanding and Acting on the Environmental Hazards that Threaten Infants, Children and their Parents*, UNICEF/Earthscan, New York/London; also see Bartlett, Sheridan (2002) *Children's Rights and the Physical Environment*, Save the Children, Stockholm.

3. For fascinating accounts of how politicians have used the power of play provision as a tool in their campaigns see Caro, Robert (1974), *The Power Broker*, Alfred A Knopf, New York.

4. For an excellent introduction to how children like to use cities see Ward, C (1978), *The Child in the City*, The Architectural Press, London.

5. Bruner, Jerome, Allison Jolly and Kathy Sylva (editors) (1986), *Play: Its*

Role in Development and Evolution, Basic Books, New York; also Sutton-Smith, Brian (1998), *The Ambiguity of Play*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass; and Gorlitz, Ditmar and Joachim Wohwill (editors) (1987), *Curiosity, Imagination and Play*, Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.

6. Erikson, Erik (1969), *Identity and the Life Cycle*, W W Norton, New York; also Schaefer, C (editor) (1993), *The Therapeutic Powers of Play*, Norton, New York.

7. Hart, Roger, Collette Daiute, Davit Kritt, Michaela Rome, Kim Sabo and Selim Iltus (1996), *Child and Youth Development Through Community Participation: A Review of Psychological Literature on the Benefits of Community Participation and Children's Developing Capacities to Participate*, The Children's Environments Research Group, Graduate Center of the City University of New York (www.cerg1.org), New York.

8. McShane, C (1994), *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Children need opportunities to interact with people of different social classes, cultures and ages and to learn how to cooperate with them. When they play together and form groups to engage in different activities, they are shaping culture and building communities. We know from research that friendships are not formed in the cooperative setting of classrooms, but in play.⁽⁷⁾ This issue of play must be added to the other important arguments for why public space is so fundamental to civil society in a democracy.

III. SEGREGATING CHILDREN: THE BATTLE FOR SIDEWALKS AND STREETS

CHILDREN WISH TO explore and experience a wider range of settings than public playgrounds can offer. Rather than assuming they need specific places and specific activities designed for them, the goal should be to establish the conditions within which they can find and create their own play. Children should be able to expand their competence gradually by exploring, playing and experimenting within a diverse physical world. They should be able to extend their social world too, knowing that at any time they can return to the safety of a home base. It is important for city agencies to create the physical environments that enable families and other care givers to offer children opportunities to explore and play freely.

The playground movement in New York City grew, in part, out of concern around the beginning of the twentieth century that immigrant children on the streets risked their health and safety by playing in dirty gutters and on busy streets. The reasons for moving children off the streets were not related to their preferences, however. After the streets of the lower east side were asphalted, traffic speeds increased, and boys spread glass on the streets to stop speeding traffic from preventing their play.⁽⁸⁾ A



The primary motive for the rapid growth in playgrounds was the belief of social reformers that by playing on the streets, children were in danger of becoming a threat to society (photo: The Byron Collection, Museum of the City of New York)

similar problem still occurs today in many of the world's developing cities – a desire by planners to improve the speed and efficiency of traffic without regard to the impact on children being able to play freely close to home.

But fears for children's health and safety were not the only reason for building playgrounds. Like other cities, New York has often developed policies for play and recreation based on its fears for children, but also its fears of children. The primary motive for the genesis of playgrounds was the social and moral goals of the reformers. They believed that children were being inappropriately socialized and were in danger of becoming a threat to society.⁽⁹⁾ Playground were invented as a device for getting children off the street, away from bad influences and under the control of known socializing agents. This is part of a wider trend in Europe and the USA since the nineteenth century to segregate children from the adult world and to stream them into age groups in all aspects of their life.⁽¹⁰⁾ To this day, all over the world, the major rationale that politicians use for play and recreation programmes is that they can prevent violence and crime among children and youth. Not surprisingly, government funding often comes after riots occur.

Some historical commentators have concluded that the reformers were not just training children to be civil but also creating compliant workers out of the teeming mass of human energy on the streets.⁽¹¹⁾ However we interpret the goals of the reformers, they failed because children resisted. Despite significant efforts on the lower east side of Manhattan to get immigrants away from what was seen as the anarchy of overcrowded streets, children preferred to stay there and develop their own games. It is estimated that during this reform period only 20 per cent of the target age group of children were ever attracted to use the playgrounds. Research in many parts of the world has since shown that children prefer not to be isolated away in playgrounds but to be in a closer, interactive relationship with family, friends and neighbours.⁽¹²⁾ One of the most popular play arrangements in New York, still thought of as the quintessential New York play opportunity, is the steps that lead from many houses down to the sidewalk. These "stoops" have been particularly important for girls, who have been expected to stay closer to their homes than boys. Stoop and street games are a primary source of childhood nostalgia for most New York City adults.⁽¹³⁾

Removing children from the streets to prepare them for civil society is diametrically opposed to the views articulated by planner Jane Jacobs forty years ago.⁽¹⁴⁾ In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she argued that children need opportunities to mix with one another where they live. But streets need to be sufficiently safe to allow children to be there, and they are commonly not. In searching for solutions to this issue, we need to remember that the relationship of children to those who care for them is critical. Young children benefit from the attention of caring adults who can maintain continuity of care over time. Their care givers want to know that they are close by. As children grow older, their range increases, but they still need a safe environment that they can explore from a secure social base. Children also need the freedom to find peers and to play spontaneously at all times of day. Relying on public playgrounds too far from family, friends and neighbours becomes a planned affair that does not fit well with this concept of play. The problem of public spaces that are not close to families and safely accessible to children is related not only to the policies of the parks department but also to the more general planning

9. The writings and photographs of one of the most prominent reformers are available in print today: see Riis, Jacob (1892), *Children of the Poor*, Scribners, New York; also the commentaries of Nasaw, David (1985), *Children in the City: At Work and at Play, 1900–1920*, Doubleday, New York; Goodman, Cary (1979), *Choosing Sides: Playground and Street Life on the Lower East Side New York*, Schocken Books; Cavallo, Dominick (1981), *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880–1920*, Philadelphia University Press, Philadelphia; and Cranz, Galen (1982), *The Politics of Park Design: The History of Urban Parks in America*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

10. Haraven, Tamara (2000), *Families, History and Social Change: Life Course and Cross-cultural Change*, Westview Press, Oxford.

11. See reference 9, Goodman (1979) and Cavallo (1981).

12. For example, Lynch, K (1977), *Growing Up in Cities: Studies of the Spatial Environment of Adolescence in Cracow, Melbourne, Mexico City, Salta, Toluca and Warsaw*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass; also Moore, R (1986), *Childhood's Domain*, MIG Communications, Berkeley, CA; Moore, R and W J Miller (1985), "Neighborhoods as childhood habitats", special issue of *Children's Environments* Vol 1, No 4, Children's Environments Research Group, New York (www.cerg1.org); and Chawla, Louise (editor) (2002), *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*, Earthscan, London.

13. Dragan, Amanda and Steve Zeitlin (1990), *City Play*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 212 pages.



Manhattan family sitting on a stoop, 1930 (photo: John Muller, Museum of the City of New York)



Street play in New York City in the early twentieth century (photo: The Bain Collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

14. Jacobs, Jane (1961), "Streets and sidewalks: assimilating children" in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, New York.

15. Van Vliet, Willem (1983), "Families in apartment buildings: sad storeys for children", *Environment and Behaviour* Vol 15, No 2.

and design of housing layouts. High-rise housing is a particularly poor solution for families with children.⁽¹⁵⁾

Over the years, some individuals have acted in ways that support Jane Jacobs' vision of public space that integrates children into their local communities. But the dominant vision behind official public space policy has been a simple-minded belief in segregating children. Whilst this was initially because reformers were anxious to get children under their control, the model of isolated playgrounds has become a norm, simply through bureaucratization. The distribution of the cities' public playgrounds today dates largely from the great building period of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, when there were "playground supervisors" or "parkies" at each site. Today, there is no such paid staff and so most children can only go to playgrounds if an adult or older sibling takes them on a supervised visit. There have, however, been some good experiments to create more integrated solutions. One reason why they have not been broadly adopted is that communities require support in their successful creation and management. A city parks and recreation department could easily provide such support. "Play streets" have been one useful solution in New York to the need for safe areas close to children's homes. The New York City police established the Police Athletic League in the 1920s as part of the movement to get children of low-income families under the productive influence of adults. Even today, on a small scale, play leaders close off streets for part of a day to enable games to take place, and this strategy has reached many children of low-income families right where they live.

Regrettably, there have been few attempts in New York to close streets permanently for children's play. In the Netherlands, by contrast, the



A *woonerf* in Utrecht, the Netherlands

woonerf is a permanent modification that closes off one end of a street to through traffic. This also enables families to monitor the passage of strangers through their territory. Greater safety often contributes a greater sense of community, and families can reclaim the street as public play space for their children.⁽¹⁶⁾ A similar planning concept, called “home zones”, has developed recently in the United Kingdom.⁽¹⁷⁾

New York has also experimented with housing “play courts” and “vest pocket parks”. The early reformer, Jacob Riis, wrote of vest pocket parks in 1897, the earliest days of the play movement. The idea of collaborating with residents to run small play areas in the backyards of dense housing is an excellent idea that did not survive the bureaucratic development of the parks department. Today, there is a playground within each public housing project and these are heavily used because of their convenience. But there is no requirement that private low-income housing offer play resources to children. Hundreds of vest pocket parks were built during Mayor Lindsay’s administration in the 1960s, many of them creative and original. They did not survive because there was no plan or budget for maintenance. So the city was left with the same set of less densely spaced playgrounds it had inherited from the massive building phases of the 1930s to 1950s.

IV. ORGANIZING PLAY

BY EMPHASIZING FREE play, this paper might appear to argue from some romantic position that all we need to do in planning for young children’s play is to leave them alone. Children certainly need the chance to invent their own activities and to carry them out without constant intervention from adults. But there is a need for adults to adopt a supportive role. They should be available nearby as good role models, supplying modest resources for play and responding to any emergencies. Parents, family members or trusted neighbours are not always available to play this role. According to the Playground Association of America, the original purpose of play leaders was to help communities develop recreation

16. *Woonerf*: www.crow.nl

17. For Home Zones: www.homezones.org/links.html; for the UK Children’s Play Council: www.ncb.org.uk/cpc/publications



An adventure play area run by playworkers in a city park in Tokyo, Japan

18. See reference 9, Cavallo (1981).

19. Bengtsson, Arvid (1972), *Adventure Playgrounds*, Praeger, New York; also Benjamin, J (1974), *Grounds for Play*, Bedford Square Press, London; Rudolph, Nancy (1974), *Workyards: Playgrounds Planned for Adventure*, Teachers College Press, New York; and Lambert, Jack and Jenny Pearson (1974), *Adventure Playgrounds*, Jonathan Cape, London.

20. Cooper, Clare (1974), "Adventure playgrounds", *Landscape Architecture*, October.

programmes where they live. But the playground movement quickly became over-professionalized and lost this collaborative community spirit. A number of social commentators have concluded that the reformers who worked on the early playgrounds in New York City were controlling agents who might best be called "play organizers".⁽¹⁸⁾ In contrast, those adults today who recall the "parkies" of the 1940s and 1950s do so with great affection. These were friendly officials who lent out equipment, kept a watchful eye for crime or bullying and were sometimes available with a word of advice. They have now all disappeared in New York, with the budget cuts beginning in the 1970s, which particularly affected the parks and recreation department. At that same time, the cities of northern Europe were developing a new kind of play professional, specifically trained to understand play and its values and to provide material resources that went beyond bats and balls. These "playworkers" provided wood and nails and all kinds of "loose parts" to enable children to create their own settings, called "adventure playgrounds".⁽¹⁹⁾ They also saw to it that environments were safe, well maintained and responsive to the needs of children. A few adventure playgrounds emerged in the late 1960s in New York, but for a number of reasons they never really flourished in the USA.⁽²⁰⁾

Today, with a very limited budget, the city relies on summer youth employment programmes to provide a small number of playworkers. This is a good idea in that young adults are greatly admired by young children. But they work for short terms, have little training and often move around so much that they cannot easily establish the necessary trusted relationships. The problem is also not just the amount of funding available, but its source. The city relies increasingly upon public/private partnerships, and those who have the money determine much of what is funded. Even in well-funded Central Park, private donors want to see their money spent in visible form – on play equipment and benches not on salaries for people who could support a truly rich play environment.

Ironically, whilst there are no playworkers in most low-income housing areas of New York City, there are thousands of private security guards who spend much of their time dealing with minor problems of children

and youth. If they were also trained as playworkers, with some of the resources of the “parkies” of the 1950s, they would no doubt help reduce juvenile crime by offering more alternatives, but might also form an alliance of trust with young people – supporting self-policing by the peers of would-be delinquents. This policy option would be very appealing in budgetary terms.

V. ADDRESSING INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

A TRADITIONAL RATIONALE for siting public play resources has been to redress inequities in access. In the earliest days of the playground movement, this was based on the belief that recreation was needed to keep poor and marginalized groups occupied with healthy activities. It was common to use crime and delinquency maps as the rationale for siting play facilities.⁽²¹⁾ In later years, the city became more concerned with providing recreational resources for all citizens. Also, the need to employ millions of unemployed workers in the 1930s stimulated a massive public works programme that built playgrounds in all New York City neighbourhoods. It became common for communities to object vociferously if their neighbourhood was underserved, and for critical journalists to support them. Playgrounds were an important issue, and politicians responded to such pressures.⁽²²⁾

In the 1960s, the city government again feared that an inadequate park system and too many people on the streets would exacerbate racial unrest. Within the context of the civil rights movement, an independent survey of recreation services was conducted in all New York’s neighbourhoods in 1963.⁽²³⁾ It found that 9 of the 74 neighbourhoods contained 53 per cent of the total park and recreation acreage, and 45 contained only 10 per cent. Research conclusions called for the compensatory development of small parks and easily accessible multiple-use playing areas. Mayor Lindsay introduced a creative programme for building public spaces wherever possible. Again, the motivation was fear, but this time a more enlightened response allowed the public to participate in the identification of local needs and even the building of places for play. Unfortunately, too little thought was given to who would manage all these places.

The 1963 research was an example of the kind of survey every city needs each decade or so. From time to time, independent groups in New York have analyzed conditions and sometimes have been effective in achieving change. But city government has lacked its own systematic programme of research and monitoring. The city carefully monitors the physical quality of play spaces but does little to evaluate whether they are used and by whom. As a result, little is done to maximize provision or to link it to people’s needs. The public can influence what happens to play and recreation areas only through complaints to community planning boards or through the efforts of journalists acting as child advocates. This contrasts with cities in the Netherlands where the number, age and gender of users are surveyed as the basis for planning and expenditure. With the growth of privatization, it is even more important to assess inequities in provision.⁽²⁴⁾ The complex pattern of sponsorship of recreation activities makes even the listing of facilities a difficult task and, currently, there is no systematic way of knowing who is and who is not served. A uniform system of recording and reporting should be in place for all city play facilities.

21. City of New York (1918), *Report of Committee on Small Parks*, City of New York, New York.

22. See reference 3, Caro (1974); also reference 9, Cranz (1982).

23. Community Council of Greater New York (1964), “Comparative recreation needs and services in New York neighbourhoods”, Community Council of Greater New York, New York.

24. Cindi Katz argues that public dis-investment in play is part of a larger retreat from public support for children of the poor in New York, because they are no longer valued as economic resources; see Katz, Cindi (1994), “The textures of global change: eroding ecologies of childhood”, *New York and Sudan Childhood* Vol 2, No 4, pages 103–110.

25. Hart, Roger (1978), *Children's Experience of Place*, Irvington Publishers, New York; also Gaster, Sandy (1994), "A study of an urban community and its children, 1890-1991", PhD dissertation in psychology, The Graduate School of the City University of New York; and Katz, Cindi and Janice Monk (1993), *Full Circles: Geographies of Women over the Life Course*, Routledge, New York.

26. Riddick, B (1982), *Toys and Play for Handicapped Children*, Croom-Helm, London; also Moore R C, S M Goltsman and D S Iacafano (1987), *Play for All Guidelines: Planning, Design and Management of Outdoor Play Settings for All Children*, MIG Communications, Berkeley CA.

VI. GIRLS TOO

THERE HAS BEEN no independent critical analysis of the play opportunities for girls in New York City, although research has generally shown that girls are more restricted than boys.⁽²⁵⁾ Much of this difference is accepted as a norm, unless challenged, although both sexes benefit equally from play. There is a tendency to be more protective of girls and many girls are expected to assist in the care of siblings. Because of these attitudes and assumptions, commonly there are more play and recreation resources for boys. Recreation planners often say they are not sure how to address the needs and preferences of girls. Again, they could do no better than learning to talk with them.

VII. CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES rarely get to engage in free play or unstructured leisure, although self-directed exploration and activities are equally important for their development.⁽²⁶⁾ In the 1980s, city governments in the USA were called upon to make play and recreation facilities accessible to all people with disabilities or special needs. Most cities responded in the simplest of ways by building ramps into parks and playgrounds to make them accessible to children with wheelchairs. But there are many special needs; to respond only to children in wheelchairs is tokenism. It is important to think not only about physical access but also about access to other children. Children both with and without special needs should have access to integrated play. Segregating children damages their social development, creating alienation and fear of people who are different from themselves.

New York City's parks department placed itself at the forefront on this issue by building the Playground for All Children in the borough of Queens. The basketball nets are accessible to children in wheelchairs; slides, swings and seesaws are designed for youngsters without working legs. But more important, a trained staff is explicitly inviting to all chil-



A playworker directed by a child with visual impairment

dren. The availability of trained playworkers has contributed to success in serving thousands of children with visual and hearing impairments, emotional and intellectual difficulties, and physical needs. But this is just one playground for a very large city. All play and recreation designs and programmes should maximize play opportunities for all and minimize the barriers that isolate young people from their peers.

VIII. CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF PLAY SPACES

THE GROWING BELIEF that privatization can replace government investment threatens children's use of public space, which should be inclusive and democratic. It cannot be, if some can afford it and others cannot. In New York City, better-off families send their children to a wide range of after-school programmes and "pay-for-play" places, whereas children of the poor are commonly left with little option but to be isolated inside their homes, watching television. There used to be thousands of play and recreation workers in New York City; now, there is barely a recreation department at all. The absence of caring adults in parks is a major reason why children are not allowed to play in public spaces anymore. Private funders do invest in some public parks, but usually very selectively. For example, the Central Park Conservancy has used considerable private funds to restore this flagship park. It is no accident that it is surrounded by the city's richest homes. Fortunately, Central Park is also a model of broad-based use by people from different groups and classes, but it has not been possible to obtain similar private funding for the play spaces that are so needed in low-income neighbourhoods. If local governments continue to rely on private solutions, they need, simultaneously, to redefine their role. They need to monitor equity in provision and to establish greater support for communities that cannot afford to create the settings their children need.

IX. REMOVING CHALLENGE FROM PLAY ENVIRONMENTS

EVER SINCE THE Playground Association of America was formed in 1907, virtually all public play equipment has been designed to encourage active play. Swings, slides and climbing equipment have often been installed over hard surfaces and there have been many accidents, but not until the early 1970s was playground safety of sufficient concern for the US Consumer Product Safety Commission to create guidelines. Since then, there has been growing public concern about the dangers of play equipment. Approximately 200,000 children are injured in playgrounds throughout the United States every year, about 60 per cent of the injuries caused by falls.

Playground safety should be a concern but not at the expense of the design of interesting and challenging play equipment. What began as a concern for safety has become a paranoid attempt to create no-risk environments. Individuals are no longer responsible for their own actions and lawyers commonly sue for damages from playground injuries; some awards have gone as high as US\$ 33 million.²⁷ Whilst accident levels are high, the level of concern is out of proportion; accident rates for children

27. Wallek, Frances (2000), "History of playground equipment safety" in *City Trees, The Journal of The Society of Municipal Arborists* Vol 36, No 2 March/April.

in their homes are far higher. Physical challenge is fundamental to children's enjoyment of play; it will not be possible to remove this by design. Some children, if not challenged, will find dangerous ways to use playgrounds. Others are less likely to develop the physical competencies that can protect them from injury in some other place or time. Because of children's restricted freedom, playgrounds have become the sole place for many to find opportunities to develop and test their competencies. Obvious hazards should certainly be removed, but the redesign of playgrounds should not lead to the removal of challenge. It is also naïve to think that good play environments can be achieved only through design. Responsible adults also need to be available. They should intervene, however, only when truly dangerous activities occur. Children must learn to manage their own safety by engaging in appropriate risk taking.

The other solution is to think of public play areas more broadly. Play environments could afford opportunities for a much larger repertoire of activities, many of them not at all dangerous: playing in sand, water and other materials; social dramatic play; constructing things with different kinds of "loose parts". During Mayor Lindsay's administration, a number of "adventure playgrounds" were created with community involvement, modelled on the highly participatory play spaces developed in the countries of northern Europe. The city parks department was not enthusiastic for a variety of reasons, particularly because of the difficulty of standardizing maintenance. Nor was it easy to retain such community-designed and built play areas after the 1970s, with the growth of lawsuits over playground injuries. From then on, it was guaranteed that the business of playground design would be led by large play manufacturers, who could afford the insurance liability and the related research and design of very low-risk play equipment designs.

X. DESIGNING FOR ADULT CONVENIENCE RATHER THAN CHILDREN'S INTERESTS

WHEN ASKED TO recall their favourite place to play, adults do not generally describe playgrounds but, rather, the places forgotten by planners.⁽²⁸⁾ Children's playground design has seldom been based on observing or listening to children. Adult theories of what children need for their development have been influential, however. Before the large-scale movement to build public playgrounds, many local efforts were influenced by the newly emerging theories of child development. The playgrounds that resulted were not always as sterile as those we know today. For example, in 1889, two playgrounds built in poor districts by the New York Society for Parks and Playgrounds included not only swings and seesaws but also "...small wagons, wheelbarrows, shovels, footballs, flags, drums, banners and a sand pile."⁽²⁹⁾

But the beliefs underlying large-scale playground development in New York had to do with encouraging healthy physical, social and moral development through activity, teamwork and personal discipline. The emphasis on physical play has continued in public playground design to this day. The few applications of child development theories in the design of playgrounds have been very superficial. For example, in the 1950s, fantasy themes were introduced with such features as rocket ship towers because it was believed this would encourage dramatic play. During the 1960s and 1970s, when creativity was being promoted by toy manufacturers and

28. For example, Ward, Colin (1978), *The Child in the City*, Pantheon, New York; also see reference 12, Moore (1986); and see reference 13.

29. Rainwater, Lee (1922), *The Play Movement*, The Playground Association of America.

adopted by middle-class parents, the designers of some public playgrounds built abstract forms to replace the earlier themed shapes, believing that this would do more to foster imagination and creativity. Unfortunately, the inventiveness lay only with the designer – there were no opportunities for children to modify or move equipment in any way. The adventure playgrounds that appeared briefly in the late 1960s were a significant contrast, but their demise has been described above. Public playgrounds continue to be relatively sterile environments that allow only for running, jumping, climbing and swinging. To support a wider repertoire of play, children need diversity and manipulability in their environment. But it is difficult to create playgrounds with “loose parts” when there is no staff to maintain the environment.⁽³⁰⁾ Playgrounds of fixed manufactured equipment are designed for ease of maintenance, and in response to fears of liability.

Sometimes “protecting children” is an excuse for laziness or for the unwillingness of adults to provide a good play setting for children. Sand boxes are a good example. They have always been popular with young children since the beginning of the play movement. But sand play has disappeared from almost all public playgrounds in New York City – a clear indication of the lack of importance given to children’s preferences. The reason given is the possible presence of animal faeces in the sand. But protecting sand boxes from animals by covering them at night and by periodic cleaning with chlorine and water is not difficult if modest staffing is available.

Children need conditions within which they can direct their own activities as much as possible. Given their limited range, a safe diverse setting close to home is necessary. The natural environment is more diverse than any expensive play equipment. For young children, contact with the natural world is also beneficial for many other reasons.⁽³¹⁾ Instead of single playgrounds within a housing complex, it is possible to create throughout the outdoors a diverse topography, with hills, a diversity of vegetation and different surface materials for children to play with. This fine-grained landscape could be created right outside the doors of children’s homes. Further away, older children would be able to find the open spaces they need to be able to create games.

But this idea of an open recreational landscape no longer seems possible for many countries, given parents’ fears about children’s safety from strangers. Good policing should be a solution but, sadly, not all local governments are likely to feel they can afford this. They will want to continue the easier strategy of containing children within specific areas so that care givers can watch them.

For young children, the use of garden-like spaces for play is a new idea with great potential.⁽³²⁾ There have been children’s gardens since the nineteenth century but they have been solely for educational programmes.⁽³³⁾ The two major botanical gardens in New York City now have children’s play areas, but they charge an entrance fee, a reflection of the privatization of public space. A more useful trend for frequent use by low-income families has been the development of community gardens as sites for children’s “play gardens”.⁽³⁴⁾ Community gardens are built by groups of residents on unused city land to grow vegetables and flowers. They are often special places, reflecting a great deal of community collaboration. Because they are small, there can be many of them and they can offer safe play opportunities close to home. The local gardeners offer protective eyes and serve as excellent non-directive role models in their care and tending

30. Nicholson, Simon (1971), “The theory of loose parts”, *Landscape Architecture* Vol 62, No 1.

31. Hart, Roger and Louise Chawla (1982), *The Development of Children’s Environmental Concerns*, The Children’s Environments Research Group, Graduate School of the City University of New York (www.cerg1.org).

32. There is already a blossoming movement to create green school yards for play and learning: see Adams, Eileen (1990), *Learning Through Landscapes: A Report on the Use, Design, Management and Development of School Grounds*, Learning through Landscapes Trust, Winchester, UK; also Stine, S (1997), *Landscapes for Learning*, John Wiley and Sons, New York; Moore, Robin C and Herb H Wong (1997), *Natural Learning: Creating Environments for Rediscovering Nature’s Way of Teaching*, MIG Communications, Berkeley, CA; and Titman, Wendy (1994) *Special Places, Special People – The Hidden Curriculum of School Grounds*, Learning through Landscapes Trust, Winchester, UK; for a valuable website, see: Learning through Landscapes Trust <http://www.ltl.org.uk/>

33. See reference 32.

34. The Children’s Environments Research Group has been experimenting with the building of “play gardens” within community gardens. See Hart, R and S Iltus (in press), *Play Gardens*, Design Trust for Public Space/Children’s Environments Research Group, New York.



Community-built play area in the Bronx, New York City



Children building a model of their proposed play area in Harlem, New York City

of the gardens and their cooperative management of the space. The gardens are often not formally closed to outsiders, but a limited number of persons have keys and strangers have to introduce themselves. This kind of space is neither truly public nor private; some have suggested the term “parochial space”.

XI. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND MONITORING

THE GREATEST WEAKNESS in the history of play provision in New York City is that government has never tried to find a way of talking with children or even to observe what they like and do not like in their play choices. When parents in a neighbourhood complain loudly, the parks and recreation department listens, but has not thought to make parent or child participation a systematic part of the planning and design process, which has been based almost entirely on the views of professional planners and politicians. Very recently, recreational planners have recognized that if they are to deal successfully with the problem of youth skateboarders and roller blade users, it is a good idea to talk with young people. But this is a response to just one sub-group of young people that city agencies find particularly difficult, rather than a general recognition of the value of collaborative planning and design.

Parks and recreation planners generally see participation as something that gets in the way of rational decision making. There are of course exceptions, with a few planners and designers finding ways of working with communities.⁽³⁵⁾ But the only way participation has been broadly encouraged in New York City parks and playgrounds has been through cleanliness programmes that lend sweeping material and coordinate garbage pick-ups. The parks department has learned from its Green Thumb programme with community gardens how effective participation can be in the management of local public space, but there is not yet an equivalent recognition of the need to support efforts by low-income communities to

35. Hart, Roger (1987), *Children's Participation in Planning and Design: Theory, Research and Practice*, Innocenti Research Centre, Florence; also Weinstein, C and T David (1987), *Spaces for Children*, Plenum Press, New York; Hart, R and S Iltus (1994), “Participatory planning and design of recreational space with children”, *Architecture and Comportment* Vol 10, pages 361–370; and Hart, Roger (1999), *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Children in Community Development and Environmental Care*, UNICEF/Earthscan, New York/London.

provide play opportunities for their children.

We do need to be aware, though, of the limits of community participation. Whilst a great deal of sensitive planning and design can be achieved in collaboration with residents, it is not appropriate for city government to use this as an excuse to avoid its own sustained commitment. For example, as part of the US government's "war on poverty" in the late 1960s, New York City encouraged and supported a great deal of participatory building of small play areas in city neighbourhoods. This was also an excellent opportunity for youth employment training schemes. But whilst it often resulted in innovative and appropriate local facilities, no plans were put in place either for their maintenance or for monitoring their quality and use.

XII. CONCLUSIONS

IT HAS BEEN argued that public play provision has changed in New York according to a changing series of concerns for children and, sometimes, fears of children. Provision has been achieved largely through segregating children into special places called playgrounds, rather than trying to find ways of meeting children's needs close to where they live, in collaboration with their family and community. The perspectives of children and parents have rarely been considered.

Any city wishing to improve its planning of public spaces with children in mind needs to develop and present to the public a clear vision of why children's play is important to its citizens. This paper has suggested that public play opportunities are very important for two major reasons: first, because all children need play opportunities for their full development; and second, because play in public space is important for the building of civil society. At a time of increasing commercialization in play provision all over the world, local governments need to take on the role of monitoring equity in the provision of public space for all children, particularly for families that cannot afford to purchase play opportunities and others who are denied access due to their special needs. NGOs wishing to influence and encourage governments can usefully connect with the newly emerging Child Friendly City Movement and its focus on the creation of housing areas that enable safe play.⁽³⁶⁾ They can also use the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a tool in their advocacy, for it carries clear statements of the rights of children to play and for them to have a say in all such matters that directly concern them.

36. For the International Child Friendly Cities Secretariat go to www.childfriendlycities.org; for the Canadian Centre for Child Friendly Communities go to www.scyofbc.org/cyfc/cyfc.html