

Child-friendliness in design: can design and architecture lead the way?

**PLACES TO GO CONFERENCE
LONDON, 20 MAY 2008**

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The state of play: in practice

- Children are becoming more obese and less active
- Children are still leaving school with insufficient skills, qualifications and job aspirations
- Parents are often working long hours and do not have time to accompany/entertain/encourage their children to play
- Parents are reluctant to allow their children the kind of freedom they had at the same age due to perceived dangers
- Many playspaces are inaccessible, poorly maintained, dirty or threatening to children
- Children have not tended to be a priority when planning

The state of play: in theory

- childhood and youth is an absent presence in recently published anthologies of Urban Studies
- urban geographers have engaged little with theoretical and methodological debates about children's and young people's geographies
- Concept of the child-friendly city has only really been developed in last 10 years

Risk, play and growing up

Compared to the countryside, cities are perceived to be more fraught with risk for children.

Yet risk-taking is part and parcel of every play experience, and if it is not, then the child will be bored and find other ways of satisfying their curiosity.

Worse still, curiosity can be stifled at a young age by the absence of any suitable play

Simulated risk, play and growing up

Today's children growing up in the developed world are experts when it comes to simulated risk: this is what the world of computer games offers them.

It is also an unstated aim in many design proposals for the real world where children are concerned.

Yet studies have shown that when children's play has an element of danger it is more 'healthy' than

The Child in the City: 1978

In his seminal text *The Child in the City*, published in 1978, Colin Ward sought to "explore the relationship between children and their urban environment" and to speculate "about the ways in which the link between city and child can be made more fruitful and enjoyable for the child and the city."

The child in the city: 2008

SPG/GLA: 'If children and young people are to have the chance to play out in the fresh air, to be physically active and to meet with friends and peers, then they need space out of doors that offers free access. Gardens and private outdoor space, while valued by some children, do not offer them the space, freedom of mobility or range of activities and social contact they need and want.'

The child in the city: some questions

How do we define 'free access' for today's children?

Is there any such thing as 'free range children' in our towns and cities?

Where are the situations where we can allow children to play in an unstructured and unsupervised way?

When can we allow children to encounter danger in order to learn?

The Child in the City: some answers

Nils Norman, 2005

Homerton City Playscape,
Hackney

Types of play

'An important distinction to be made in playground terminology is the contrast between 'fixed play' and 'free play'.

The notion of free play allows for diverse groups of children to meet and play, facilitating integration between children of different economic and ethnic backgrounds and making uniquely diverse social spaces. Equally, 'a terrain vague' means many things to many children...'

Materials for play

‘Water and fire are two elements that are essential but sadly becoming less common on the UK’s adventure playgrounds... □ Literally anything that seemed usable was brought back to the playground as a resource. This form of urban recycling was an important part of the adventure play aesthetic. The aesthetic continues today though the practice has become more regulated. Structures were at first more makeshift and adaptable and gradually the more popular structures have become permanent features.’

Designing space for play

SPG: 'A good space for play does not happen by accident. Success is a matter of securing enough physical space in the right locations, understanding user requirements, designing and creating spaces that attract and engage children and young people, and ensuring appropriate long-term management and maintenance.'

'playability'

*'Playability is about including **everyone** in the community when designing a playspace. It means opening up playspaces to children with a wide range of abilities and to parents and other caregivers with disabilities who want to be with children in the playspace.'*

- Ontario Parks Association

Delft Manifesto on a Child Friendly Urban Environment, 26 August 2005

1. Guarantee ample playing and walking space in front of every house, protected from the dangers of motorized traffic.
2. Re-design all residential streets without ample sidewalks, curbing the actual speed to max 15 km/h, and stimulate and facilitate car free housing projects.
3. Fix the standard speed limit in urban areas at max.30 km/hr. Re-design these streets, wherever necessary, to curb speed and enhance crossability
4. Ensure adequate and safe crossing points and separate bike lanes for all roads with a speed limit of max. 50 km/h or more and prioritise bicycle lanes over parking space.
5. Define for each neighbourhood, a minimum street surface for child play, similar to parking standards.

Delft Manifesto on a Child Friendly Urban Environment, 26 August 2005

6. Enable children to reach independently all important public places (schools, shops, playgrounds, sports facilities, library, etc.) and make their environment child friendly.
7. Train and test primary school children in practical bicycle and traffic skills.
8. Develop a transportation plan for each school, showing safe routes to school by means of walking, biking or public transit, providing sufficient space for parking bicycles.
9. Give special attention to air and noise pollution caused by traffic.
10. Systematically include children and parents in the evaluation of local traffic safety and the development of transportation improvements that support children's independent mobility.

Child friendly by design: my top five

1. Better legible surfaces: shared surfaces that work
2. More safe routes: reduced speed limits; railings; cycle lanes not on the road; good lighting; more crossings
3. Easier wayfinding: maps, markings and locator devices that children can understand
4. Wider range of places to go 'off script': ie beyond LAPs LEAPs, NEAPs and into unstructured open space
5. Greater emphasis on active participation and imagination in playspaces: eg kids' market places, City Farm, urban fishing, climbing, cycling, nature

One final thought...

If we'd asked children about all this what would they have said?

Is there too much emphasis on sensible, robust, sustainable detailing?

Given the choice between a LAP or a wood, a LEAP or a beach, what would they choose?