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Solvitur Ambulando: It Is Solved by Walking

Megan Dickerson
meganlucia@gmail.com

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“Public space, in its very existence, is a risk.”¹

“The failure of an urban environment can be measured in direct proportion to the number of ‘playgrounds.’” (Mattern)

Two women and three boys await the school bus on a January morning in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury. The boys map the sidewalk with their bodies—sidestepping the curb, repelling off the fence, transforming index fingers into laser guns that make tinny “pew-pew” noises. This sidewalk is not a playground, but it is grounds for play—play that is improvised, responsive and largely unnoticed by the adults in the space.

If play is understood as an attitude of mind or disposition that does not end in childhood,² then it certainly does not cease when a child leaves the playground gate. After years developing play spaces for families at Boston Children’s Museum and in these neighborhoods, I argue that the children’s typical transitional spaces may offer far more affordances than the playgrounds developed by adults. In other words, I argue that professionals in the world of “play provision” would do better to focus our energies on safe walking paths to school than the development of play spaces—valuing *solvitur ambulando* (“it is solved by walking”) over the playground.

In the 21st century, dominant city planning and play provision in the United States continues to focus on localized play, in the form of children’s access to schoolyards, playgrounds and parks. Darell Hammond was inspired to create Kaboom!, the non-profit that builds playgrounds in what they term “play deserts,” when he read a story in the Washington Post about two local children who suffocated while playing in an abandoned car because they “didn’t have anywhere else to play.”³ In presentations about Kaboom!, Hammond shows a “before” photo of a site that would become a playground; in it, there are car tires, piles of wood and other debris. It looks similar to images of early adventure playgrounds.⁴ The “after” photo shows predominately yellow and red molded plastic play equipment, with the ground covered in woodchips; it resembles most descriptions of what is commonly called the KFC playground, standing for Kit, Fence and Carpet.

To understand this type of localized “KFC” playspace, we must understand that the development of the American playground took place during the late 1800s and early 1900s, during a significant wave of immigration from Europe to America’s large cities such as Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Playgrounds were developed by white activists as antidotes to the streets where children played; they were then used as

tools of control and assimilation. Particularly in Boston, where the American playground movement of the early 20th century gained steam,⁵⁻⁷ school and playgrounds have been “essential institutions in the effort to increase the community’s power over individual conduct and discipline.”⁸ In the context of city rhythms, playgrounds closely resemble playpens—a place to safely plant children while adults go about the rest of their business in their intent.

One hundred years after the playground movement brought adult-designed play spaces to American cities, Sue Palmer’s book *Toxic Childhood* brought a new childhood-in-crisis model to a popular audience in the UK, producing and reinforcing a deficit model of children as over-stressed, over-tested, unhealthy, obese, materialistic and emotionally under-nurtured. The book, like Hammond’s call to arms to build playgrounds, positioned childhood as something to be fixed. The progression of “childhood-in-crisis” seems almost systematic: first, a “profound transformation in the economic and sentimental value of children”⁹ led to the invention of modern childhood in the late 1800s, positioning children increasingly as “anchors” of their parents’ identities.¹⁰ Second, “terror talk” increasing in the 1970s caused adults to fear abduction and stranger danger, localizing danger to “out”: outside the home, in public space.¹¹ Finally, Palmer, Hammond and others work to combat the “play deficit”³ with solutions that may deny children’s social agency and lay the blame for their apparent deficiencies, again, on adults. “Childhood in crisis” is self-replicating, and if its solution is viewed as a KFC playground, then it can be profitable as well; playspaces all over the minority world look like cousins, in part because the equipment comes from a small number of manufacturers.¹² These KFC playgrounds conceptually bind children to a specific space and perhaps limit their autonomous ranging.

Contributing to the shifts in children’s spatial ranges has been the “process of individualization,” in which place-based support networks have diminished due to an increasing focus on self-reliance; blame for any child’s injury associated with risk often falls not on the community, but on the individual adult caregiver.¹³ American adults engage in lower levels of organized sports;¹⁴ parents who do have more connections with other adults in their neighborhood tend to support and encourage their children’s autonomous use of public spaces for play and mobility.¹⁵ The “privatization of play”—including the late 1980s invention of Discovery Zone and other indoor, paid playspaces (children’s museums included)—comes in partial reaction to terror talk; attempts to “democratize fear”¹¹ make it appear that all parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, are good parents if they

appear fearful. The fear of adults is the “most potent force that prevents parents from allowing their children the freedom they themselves enjoyed when they were young.”¹⁶ However, in neighborhoods where the danger does not present itself as openly as Roxbury, fear may take on the character of dread, where the “horror is subtle and lingering,” as in a film like *The Sixth Sense*.¹⁷ Though parents may acknowledge that the actual risk of a child being abducted is below 65 percent,¹⁰ the dread of potential abduction (and, possibly, exposure as an incompetent caregiver) remains high. A parent in Valentine’s study sums it up when he recalls hearing television accounts of what Katz¹¹ calls “terror talk,” and thinks, “That could be me.”¹⁰

In the boys’ neighborhood of Roxbury, where street violence is the “surcharge of living,”¹⁸ playing in the street includes very direct dangers, and those direct dangers edit children’s mobility. A week later, a block from where the observation with which I opened this article took place, a 13-year-old boy on his way to choir practice would be shot in the stomach by a gang member from a rival neighborhood. The boy survived, but the shooting tipped off a winter-long gang fight. Post-shooting, parents limited children’s spatial ranges in the neighborhood’ according to an informal interview with Dymond Peebles (2013). Ministers, many who attend regular Boston police briefings in order to provide weekly violence weather reports to parishioners, recommended that parents pool resources and pick up children from school rather than allow them to walk alone.²⁰ If adults misjudge the level of street risk, the blame often falls on the adult¹³ but the punishment falls on the children of the neighborhood in the form of a contraction of privileges: “The freedom to walk around is a guide to the civilised quality of an urban area. But for these young people, the freedom to walk around defines the limits of their world.”¹⁹ To some extent, “[i]t is an irony of urban development that children in many of the world’s poorest neighborhoods 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... the irony remains that opportunities for play do not necessarily improve with what we commonly call ‘development.’”²⁰

When adults recall their favorite places to play as children, they often describe not playgrounds but the “places forgotten by planners”²⁰—the alleyways, sidestreets, and affordances overlooked by adults. New research, some using an Ecological Systems Model and some funded by anti-obesity initiatives,²¹⁻²³ has urged a less adult-centric approach to urban planning by looking more closely at the transitional spaces children use to travel between home and school. Combining the place-based approaches of Whyte,²⁴ the critical urban pedagogy of Kozol²⁵ and

Freire,²⁶ and work that frames neighborhood violence as a public health issue^{27,28} could move discourse around children's play provision more towards what Gruenwald²⁹ calls a "critical pedagogy of place" or, to use the words of Horton and Kraftl,³⁰ "geographies of learning." Networked neighborhood initiatives that increase children's mobility and effectively produce resilient individuals and families have the potential to produce changes in the ecology of the neighborhood, leading to improvements in adult residents' sense of control over key areas of their lives³¹ and "friendship with place."³²

The play thinker Colin Ward³³ quotes Hermann Mattern as saying, "The failure of an urban environment can be measured in direct proportion to the number of 'playgrounds.'" Children themselves are remarkably capable of making "the best of a bad job," as evidenced by children's circumventions and reinventions of poorly designed play yards.³⁴ However, a more holistic view of play and its dispersion throughout and impact on every space comes down to the simple need to acknowledge human connections and encourage more walkable, playable sidewalks and transitional spaces, in spite of (or in the face of) potential risks. A shift in adult affect from what I have called the "playspace ethos" to a more holistic view of playfulness in shared space will be challenging, as playgrounds and playpens have much in common and are both of use to the adult, mainly as a physical representation of the adult desire to offer children time and opportunity to play while retaining the safety of and control over those spaces.³⁵ If adults who make planning decisions begin to see play as dispersed and omnipresent and allow children to develop a form of territoriality, appropriation, and personalization of space through mobility and autonomous play in public and semipublic places, the benefits could be significant on a mega-scale of community change; through this practice, "... a good 'antidote' is created for fear of crime in adolescence."³⁶ Perhaps better connections would also alleviate the parental fears that inspire stricter control of children's mobility.

Of course, this is not an either/or case. Playgrounds can be efficient meeting grounds for a neighborhood's children and the adults who care for them; I am by no means advocating for their wholesale eradication. However, given playgrounds' historical rootings as *playpens*, the gated KFC playground begins to seem a bit outdated – to borrow from John Seely Brown,³⁷ they are steamships in places where we now need kayaks in order to navigate complex, interconnected waterways. All neighborhoods-- but particularly those where violence ticks like a metronome behind the din of the street-- require complex play solutions that go beyond the chain-link fence of the neighborhood park. Beyond the

red herring of the playground, 21st century “planning for play” must involve trust, loosening of the reins and a more inclusive, empathetic understanding of children’s play needs and desires. “Kids can walk around trouble if there is some place to walk to and someone to walk with,”³⁸ but, if we are to take a truly holistic approach to playfulness in neighborhoods, we might focus less on playgrounds, and more collectively on cultivating safer sidewalks.

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