

KEY WORDS:

Children, Play, Nearby Nature, City

Cities for Children

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Tekton: Volume 10, Issue 2, December 2023, pp. 08-14

ABSTRACT

This essay advocates for children's play spaces as India urbanizes and its cities expand. Play is developmentally important, and the physical environment can enhance or constrain opportunities for children to engage in playful activities. The child's evolving sense of self comes from her ability to explore and build. Outdoor play where children can come in contact with nature, has therapeutic benefits as well. Children's rights to play should be taken into account in designing a child-friendly city, both at the micro- and macro-scale.



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Introduction

India's urban population is estimated to be 675 million (43.2% of its total population) by 2035 according to United Nations Habitat's World Cities Report. This will increase to about half of India's population living in cities by 2050.¹ Children will form a large demographic--about one third of the urban population—and their needs have to be met with in planning for this urban growth. A tremendous shortage of urban housing is projected, especially in metro cities, destinations of millions of rural migrants in search of economic opportunities. By 2030 around 25 million affordable housing units for economically section sections and low-income groups will be required. Much of this demand would likely be met in building high-rise and high-density housing wherever land is available, mostly on the urban periphery. Of particular importance in this scenario is how public spaces will be designed, since they are used by children intensively in and near residential neighborhoods. Public spaces will also form the urban structure of the expanding city and their quality will determine to what extent it is child friendly. Children's access to open spaces could decline in high-rise housing, thus affecting the quality and extent of their interaction with the outdoor natural world. This will have negative consequences for their mental and physical health. Play is crucial for children's emotional, social, cognitive and physical development and especially important is contact with nature in this process. Outdoor play in natural surroundings has far reaching benefits for encouraging exploration and discovery, fostering a sense of well-being, and feeling connected with the natural world.

Landscapes of Play

The configuration of the physical environment allows or limits the kinds of activities in which children can engage in and this interaction with the physical environment is crucial for their motor, cognitive, and emotional development (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). The child assimilates new knowledge from her experiences into organized patterns of thought and behavior known as schemas. The schemas are updated with new experiences resulting in a higher level of cognitive functioning. Learning is therefore an interactional dynamic process characterized by stages in which development of the child's abilities derives from accommodation to new challenges in the physical environment. Much of this interaction is in the form of play. The impulse to play is innate and is fundamental to the health and well-being of children. Children will play anywhere and everywhere, and the kind of play they engage in is impacted by their environment. They can convert almost any activity into playful behavior and create their own play spaces, improvising with whatever is available. Children begin engaging in constructive play along with symbolic or fantasy play once they are three and continue until they eleven or twelve years old. Parallel play or playing alongside others without fully engaging with them evolves into games with rules based upon co-operative and competitive behavior in a group.

Play in the natural outdoors has therapeutic effects by improving children's psychological health and sense of well-being. With the rise in the use of digital devices and lack of access to greenery, children are developing a nature-deficit disorder leading to obesity, problems

with attention, and emotional and physical illnesses (Louv, 2005). Contact with nature reduces stress and promotes healing (Ulrich, 1984). Nature invokes fascination or involuntary attention that diverts the mind from directed attention in focused tasks and has a restorative affect (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) who play regularly in natural play settings have milder symptoms than children who play in built outdoor and indoor settings (Taylor and Kuo, 2011). Access to the natural outdoors has implications for children not only engaging in constructive play but also developing a sense of stewardship towards the natural world. In cities, 'nearby nature' close to living and workspaces is crucial in providing this much needed connection (Kaplan, 1992).

During their middle childhood, from five to eleven years, children universally create special places such as dens, forts, playhouses (Sobel, 1990). These special places are children's organized worlds or 'microspheres' giving them a sense of agency and control. They foster the evolving sense of self in being able to shape the world that is continuing source of empowerment and motivation later in life. Favorite places of childhood, when recalled in adult life in environmental autobiographies, were found, molded, or constructed--acts of appropriation and place-making to express an emerging self, separate from parents and families (Marcus, 1992).

According to the theory of loose parts formulated by Simon Nicholson (1972) it is the ability to manipulate their physical environment that makes children's play creative and imaginative. Children invent play with loose parts, that are 'found' materials, not necessarily toys, with no defined purpose and therefore can be used in multiple ways. Thus, any setting with a wide variety of loose parts gives children the opportunity to explore, discover, and innovate. A manipulable and explorable physical environment can also provide emotional security and aid in developing a sense of personal identity. Trees, small bodies of water, and undulating natural terrain with a variety of climbing surfaces are opportunities for inventive play whose pleasures far outweigh from that obtained by playing on manufactured play equipment.

Children's preference for the natural outdoors has been documented in many parts of the world. Roger Hart's (1979) seminal study of children's 'phenomenal landscape' in rural Vermont in North America revealed their intense, fluid, and intimate encounter with it. Robin Moore (1986) found in his studies of children's play in England that their favorite places were the natural landscape when they gained freedom to explore on their own and their activity range extended as they grew older. *Growing Up in Cities*, a UNESCO project directed by the late Kevin Lynch (1977) in Australia, Argentina, Mexico, and Poland concluded that the most important places for young teenagers were urban interstitial spaces, so called 'wastelands' that they could use for adventurous play with their friends. A follow up project in the 1990s in eight countries including England, Norway, India, South Africa, and the United States, in addition to the original sites, showed the importance of vacant land for exploratory and creative play although parks were also valued for active play and meeting friends (Chawla, 2015).

Children's place-making with found objects happens regardless of context –urban or rural, natural or built environments. Children in low-income urban neighborhoods in Vadodara and Mumbai have been found to play in spaces not specifically designed for it such as construction sites, parking and other paved areas, abandoned buildings, and near railway tracks (Oke, Khattar, Pant, and Saraswathi, 1999). However, they are much more engaged with the natural landscape in a rural environment as Sinha (1989) discovered in doing a comparative study of children's play in an urbanizing village, Ujariyon, on the outskirts of Lucknow and a new low-income housing colony coming up in its proximity (Figure 1). Rural children's environmental knowledge was richer and their values deeper as a result of many more interactions with the physical environment. The rural landscape was in a sense their playground and they mentioned as many as thirty-five environmental settings including orchards, fields, open spaces, ponds, and the graveyard. Trees were an integral part of their games. Their intense use of the landscape was reflected in their maps which showed these natural settings as well as salient features of the sacred landscape drawn pictorially such as *dargah sharif*, *idgah*, *mazaars*, and *masjids*. Children in the housing colony, on the other hand, reported using only twenty places among which markets, parks, and *chaurahas* dominated. Their favorite place was the *bazaar* which had many things for them to buy but no place to make their own. Their maps showed major landmarks to be electric poles, trees, temple, and a hospital. They reported not being allowed more than one or one and a half hours to play indicating the emphasis on school and homework. Girls in both the village and housing colony mentioned fewer places than boys and were observed playing in courtyards and in alleyways and streets close to their homes due to parental restrictions on their movement.

A Child-Friendly City

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizes childhood as separate from adulthood with special rights to grow, learn, play, develop, and flourish with dignity. It is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history; 195 countries including India are State Parties to the Convention, thereby accepting obligations and responsibilities for ensuring the full development of every child including her right to play.² Planning the 21st century Indian city therefore entails that children's rights be kept in focus in designing public open spaces. Urban design can be based upon evidence-based research on children's preferred environments as well as an understanding of socio-cultural norms for socializing children. At the local (micro) level in residential areas and at the city-wide (macro) level, children's play needs can be met by ensuring they have safe access to the outdoors. In densely built urban areas, 'left-over' spaces are premium spaces for children's play and can be preserved. Children can be the largest group of users of open spaces within housing clusters (Marcus, 2003), especially since private open space is minimal in high-rise housing for low income and economically weaker sections. This shared open space can have natural areas where children can climb trees, dig in the earth, build forts, splash in water, and play hide-and -seek. The entire landscape can become a playground for them instead of limited opportunities to play on a few isolated pieces of equipment which fall into disrepair without regular maintenance. The urban periphery may have

extant features such as remnant tree groves, ponds, creeks, *maidans*, local shrines, historic building relics etc.; these can be incorporated in site planning for new development as interesting and diverse play spaces for children.

At the macro-scale the city can be an educational environment for children, fun to explore and learn from, instead of an intimidating and dangerous place as it is usually perceived to be (Southworth, 1990). Public spaces accessible to children and teenagers can form the connecting ligament between neighborhoods separated by high-speed traffic roadways. Children's activity range expands as they learn to bike; bike paths and tree-lined footpaths can link home and school to public transit nodes from where teenagers can take the train/bus to safely travel on their own. *Nalas* and creeks can be reclaimed to become blue greenways with trails connecting the city to its natural hinterland. City level large parks and riverfront development can have ecological learning zones to observe and learn about local flora and fauna. Museums, art galleries, heritage and religious complexes can have spaces and programs designed for children to learn about history, art, and culture. Thus, the city can become a child friendly learning environment. ■



Figure 1: Children playing in Ujariyon, Lucknow (photograph taken by Author, 1987)

Notes

¹ <https://unhabitat.org/wcr/>

² <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>

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