

Places in common

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Abstract The recent ‘riots’ or ‘disorder’ should not deflect us from creating a local, shared communal realm underpinned by the value, ‘Children and teenagers being seen and heard in shared public spaces is a hallmark of a society at ease with itself’. The emphasis here is on ‘shared’. This key value is honoured more in the breach than in the application. The local outdoors within social housing estates and regeneration schemes — understood as potential venues for informal, unplanned sociability across the generations — receive insufficient attention. Any attention given is too often governed by essentially negative criteria. Children, teenagers and adults are conceptually hived off from each other. Observation should create understanding of the potentialities inherent in the out of doors. It is out of doors that one learns through experience how values, beliefs and traditions are transformed into ways of life. This is a form of learning that cannot be taught: acts of co-creation across generations.

Keywords: *natural, co-creation, shared space, freedom, play, beside the point*

INTRODUCTION

It is the evening of 9th August 2011, London. I have just returned to my flat after checking whether the ‘riot’ or ‘disorder’ currently being perpetrated by ‘young people’ is heading from nearby Clapham Junction towards the small parade of shops round the corner. It appears not.

But fear is in the air. The corner shop is bringing down its metal shutters. Both the pub across the road and the small local restaurant have closed early. All lights are switched off. The other shops are also closing. My local parade is at once in retreat and on guard, evoking a sense of local solidarity born of fear and bemusement.

The Chambers dictionary has ‘irony’ as, ‘a condition in which one seems to be mocked by fate or the facts’. And so in

what might be considered a virtuoso display of counter-intuitive timing, I turn to share some thoughts about the form and function of the local outdoors and a key value that should inform how it is understood and addressed: ‘Children and teenagers being seen and heard in shared public spaces is a hallmark of a society at ease with itself.’

The hinge or pivotal word here is of course ‘shared’. The aim: to create the conditions whereby the outdoors prompts and allows for informal, unplanned sociability across generations. I am therefore not interested here in structured intergenerational projects, useful though they may be. Nor am I concerned here with destination venues, such as London’s South Bank, arguably an example of good, vibrant, joyful, shared outdoor space.

But the ethos and values implied in

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such destination places seem starkly to contradict the values and ethos that inform the design and management of social housing estates and regeneration schemes. Here the outside receives a more constricted form of attention, the underpinning rationale of which is to a significant extent defensive. In such circumstances, practice bends to accommodate essentially negative criteria, resulting in an outdoors that is over-determined by requirements which include: preventing, or at least discouraging, teenagers hanging around; rigid, formulaic maintenance regimes focused primarily on keeping costs low; adherence to such guidelines as Secure by Design.

Put simply, the outdoors in the social housing/regeneration sector seems rarely to be considered 'as such'. On new developments, the outside is what is left after all other decisions are made: number of residential units; housing density; car parking requirements and so forth.

What one too often ends up with is a patchwork of grassed or paved areas, fenced to within an inch of its life, lacking any sense of coherence and with little or no attention being given to the positive purposes the outdoors might serve.

The prevailing aesthetic in terms of new developments — based on anecdotal evidence and a deal of foot slogging — appears trapped within a minimalistic idiom of flat, surveillance-friendly expanses of hard surfacing, with 'natural' features nodded to rather than embraced. Such spaces can repel the possibility of creating friendly, intimate, want-to-linger places that please the eye, the nose, the ear, that respond to the seasons — that are *alive*.

A WORLD IN COMMON

The local outdoors — its residential estates, its streets — should fulfil the vital function of nurturing informal sociability

across the generations. This is not, in the main, achieved through formal, structured interventions such as lessons in citizenship or, as mentioned above, intergenerational projects. It is more subtle than that. There is a link here, of course, to Jane Jacobs¹ and the humanistic impulse that pulsates within her work:

'In real life, only from the ordinary adults of the city sidewalks do children learn — if they learn it at all — the first fundamental of successful city life. People must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other. *This is a lesson nobody learns by being told.* It is learned from the experience of having other people without ties of kinship or close friendship or formal responsibility to you take a modicum of public responsibility for you'.¹ [emphasis added]

She was speaking, in the American context, about sidewalks or streets. But the general point that she makes is applicable to social housing estates, or should be. But the sort of informal neighbourliness — which is a distinct category not assimilable to, for example, ideas about friendship — which she identifies vitally depends on the local outdoors being a location, a place to be, and not simply space through which one moves to be elsewhere, though it is this too, of course.

Ken Worpole put it well:

'When outdoors nothing stands between us and the world ... When we meet other people in this outdoor world, we are more likely to meet them as free agents and autonomous individuals than we do in the graded and contractual world of institutional or commercial life ... The park and the street give us our freedom, and the buildings, too frequently, take it away'.²

Translated into a set of objectives or criteria, the local outdoors would aim to:

- create the conditions for informal, sociable encounters across the generations;
- legitimise children and teenagers' presence within the generality of shared, communal space;
- provide play and recreational opportunities;
- create 'green', more natural and attractive environments.

In shorthand terms, this might be summarised as the 'village green' approach.

PLAY AND INFORMAL RECREATION PROVISION

Where explicit purpose is considered for the outdoors — putting to one side car parking and the need for walking routes — a primary focus is on the perceived needs of children and teenagers, and these are generally reduced to their need and desire to play, and to participate in varieties of ball game.

Traditionally, the assumptions governing play and informal recreation provision on residential estates have been that it should:

- be limited to designated areas;
- be fenced off, separate and distinct from shared, communal space;
- have no role in engendering a wider sense of neighbourliness, more a 'hiving off' of a segment of the population;
- focus on standardised, manufactured equipment, often in metal, though there are now gestures towards the 'natural', with more extensive use of wooden structures;
- be focused on a particular age range;
- be age segregated within the play area;
- have no seating or free ('slack') space — indeed, seating is too often designed out, not infrequently in response to local consultation.

The net effect of this approach is the

production of unattractive spaces which, by signs and symbols, both implicit and overt, delegitimise the presence of children and youngsters within their wider neighbourhoods.

In other words, there is the tendency to conceptualise outdoor space in a way that fuses the category 'age' with that of 'function'. The conventional idea is that children need designated play areas; teenagers need multi-use games areas or their equivalent; adults need communal gardens and allotments. There is of course some truth in this. When this approach is deployed as a rigid template, however, the effect is limiting, weakening the possibility of nurturing a sense of social ease across the generations. It also produces extremely bad, unattractive, ill-sited play spaces. Too often, developers, registered social landlords or other housing providers focus on mechanistically adhering to a standard or guideline.

The approach taken in at least some 'guidance' is unhelpful. Guidance is always value laden and reflects the understandings, priorities and concerns of the sponsoring organisation or author. It follows that guidance must be viewed critically and not simply accepted as writ to be obeyed or slavishly followed.

Although there has been some welcome progress, it is still too much the case that:

'[Using a formulaic approach] tends to result in children's play being allocated to the more unbuildable parts of housing sites and often ignores the needs of older children, such as teenagers. It can sometimes place the design of play areas in the hands of manufacturers with a vested interest in selling their products. Other European countries have developed approaches which use pieces of timber and different surfaces to create exciting and naturalistic play environments, better integrated with their surroundings than areas of safety surfacing surrounded by dog-proof fences and



Figure 1: Before. Kirkland Walk, Hackney



Figures 2 and 3: After. Kirkland Walk. A PLAYLINK scheme

containing a few pieces of brightly coloured equipment.³

A key aspect of PLAYLINK's work is to create and promote the 'playable' estate, which is nothing more than the micro or local equivalent of the wished-for child (and teenager) friendly city. This aim does not contradict a judgment that, in particular circumstances, a designated play space may serve a useful function. It is more that one wishes to dissolve the standard, rigid distinction between play space and other space.

To anticipate objection: this is not to advocate that all and every space is fit for children and teenagers' free-time use. That would be an absurdity. But what needs to be overturned is the current, default position that children and teenagers only and always need designated spaces for their free-time activities.

A quick word about play, and what it embraces, will be useful. The general perception of play is that it inevitably involves running around, making a noise, using equipment, expending energy, generally 'letting off steam'. Anyone able



Figure 4: Carville Hall Park South, Hounslow: sand, water, seating in unfenced setting. A playable park. A PLAYLINK scheme



Figures 5 and 6: Thornbury Park. Wheel park with seating, provided and bring your own. A PLAYLINK scheme

to remember and connect with their own childhood experiences, however, or simply watches what children and teenagers actually do in their play, will know that the sort of high-energy exuberance described above captures only one aspect of playfulness. Much of the time is also

spent talking with mates, sitting around and, where available, being absorbed by what has been dubbed ‘loose parts’ — sand, water, log piles and so forth. It is difficult to believe that most people do not know this. But if it is known, it has been obscured by what might be

characterised as an institutionalised form of forgetfulness.

We limit and simplify play by creating places where noise and exuberance are the only possibilities, ignoring for a moment the tedium induced by having no choice but to engage repetitively with manufactured, fixed equipment. Play and playfulness draw on a richer palette of behaviours, responses, desires and interests than we have allowed for.

Perhaps what has really been lost among the welter of surveys and consultation exercises is the capacity to observe: observing what adults, teenagers, children actually do in different situations. Notice, for example, the way teenagers in particular seems to be engaged in acts of performance — in the ball court, on the wheel park. Notice, too, the way adults, not least older adults, can quite enjoy performing the role of spectator. But where is the seating to accommodate the informal audience? This impulse towards informal reciprocity — of performer to audience and vice versa — represents but one thread in a potential web of unplanned encounters both within and across the generations.

This takes us back to where this paper began, which was not so much about children and teenagers as such, but about them being viewed and welcomed as co-constructors of a shared world. And here Jane Jacobs' critical insight that there are lessons that cannot be learned by being told has such salience.¹

It is through the infinite number of informal, unplanned, protean, chance

encounters across generations that people learn through experience how values, beliefs and traditions are transformed into ways of life. This type of understanding cannot be taught. It is the difference between being able to recite a moral code and learning to live by one. The content and inculcation of such learning constitute acts of co-creation across generations — it is learning by doing. The task is to create the context within which the habits of a shared civility can flourish.

It is clear and inevitable that the recent 'riots' or 'disorders' will prompt a flurry of national and local policy initiatives. It is almost without question that the initiatives and programmes will display a degree of muscularity generating a perhaps overheated — and contested — rhetoric such that there will be much 'getting a grip' on matters. In such circumstances, the sort of approach spoken of here will appear to many as somewhat beside the point, and certainly too soft-centred to gain any traction in the current environment. It will be thought there are more pressing matters to attend to. But this would be to pursue error.

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