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Reimagining the Playful, Healthy and Sustainable City

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The homepage of UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative is dominated by a photo of a young child playing on a playground swing, in the warm glow of the sun's rays.¹ The prominent use of this evocative image shows how the provision of better places for play is often seen as a central part of creating more inclusive urban environments. A city where children can play freely is positioned as a tonic for urban ills, including individuals' lack of exercise, poor health and restricted mobility, through to wider collective maladies including traffic congestion, pollution and social fragmentation. The intention here is not to necessarily dispute this wider assumption. Instead, this essay critically questions whether the children's playground, with its fencing, swings and roundabouts, is a useful prescription for these ills. Here I argue that a greater understanding of the historical development of the playground – and the changing conceptions of healthy urban playfulness that have shaped its form and function – can contribute to more genuinely sustainable urban environments for the twenty-first century.

While the climate emergency makes this an ever more urgent objective, the anxieties about children's place in the city have a long history with an enduring impact on the form of the urban environment. From the nineteenth century parks movement through to the utopian ideals that shaped garden cities, historians have shown how health and nature have inspired urban and social reformers.² Creating healthier urban childhoods has also been an important motivation for a range of actors, with lasting consequences for public space and conceptions of play. The present-day promotion of child friendly cities can be a route to more inclusive, healthy and sustainable places. However, we need to move beyond rigid conceptions of what this means, particularly the idea that segregated spaces for play, in the form of equipped and fenced playgrounds,

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1. 'Child Friendly Cities Initiative', UNICEF, <https://childfriendlycities.org/> (accessed 29 Nov. 2022).
 2. Clare Hickman, 'To brighten the aspect of our streets and increase the health and enjoyment of our city', *Landscape and Urban Planning* **118** (2013): 112–19; Karen R. Jones, "'The lungs of the city': Green space, public health and bodily metaphor in the landscape of urban park history", *Environment and History* **24** (2018): 39–58.

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are the best or only option. The rest of this essay briefly explores the history of the segregated playground, before considering alternative approaches that sought to create a more equitable place for children in the city.

VISIONS FOR PLAY

Since the mid-nineteenth century, there have been attempts to improve urban childhood through changes to the design and layout of the urban environment. Central to these ideas and actions has been an assumption that changing the form of the city can bring about both improvements in childhood health and benefits for wider society. Today, the children's playground represents the material culmination of debates about how best this can be achieved, and such spaces tend to be characterised by a boundary fence and manufactured equipment. While these playgrounds might seem like the natural and obvious place for children to play, they are in fact the product of nearly two centuries of discussion about the relative significance of nature, health, technology and commerce in shaping play-space provision. The discussion here will highlight three underlying themes that have informed these efforts in the past. Initially, the essay will show how segregating children and their play from the hostile urban environment was seen as the best route to childhood health, before exploring alternative approaches that have largely, although not entirely, disappeared from public space, including training children in urban survival skills and reclaiming streets for play. The intention is to show that there are alternative possibilities, rather than necessarily to promote their adoption today.

The most enduring conception of a child friendly urban environment is one where childhood health is improved through designating specific spaces where children are meant to exercise or play, apparently safe from the perceived and real dangers of the street and wider city. Some of the earliest public parks, notably in 1840s Manchester and Salford, included specific amenities for children, but these were far from central to the design of such spaces.³ Instead, children were largely expected to follow their parent's lead in genteel perambulation and instructive engagement with curated forms of nature. For late nineteenth century playground advocates, such as the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (1882), creating a child friendly city meant making space for smaller public parks, close to the homes of the urban poor. Garden gymnasiums provided a designated place for children to take part in structured forms of exercise, with gymnastic apparatus segregated by age and gender and laid out alongside trees, shrubs and flowers. Early twentieth century playground proponents, such as the philanthropic industrialist Charles Wicksteed, may have emphasised the freedom and excitement of adapted fairground rides

3. Samuel J. Hayes and Bertie Dockerill, 'A park for the people: Examining the creation and refurbishment of a public park', *Landscape Research* (online first 5 Nov. 2020): 1–14.



Figure 1. Children's playground, New Street, Upton-upon-Severn (Geograph Britain and Ireland: Bob Embleton).

as the route to childhood health, but the underlying assumption was still that children should play in the playground rather than the wider urban landscape.⁴ Straightforward to purchase, manufactured equipment came to dominate playground design across the UK in the first half of the twentieth century, while horticulture was increasingly pushed beyond the boundary fence. Even the fiercest mid-century critics of this conventional approach to play provision, such as Marjory Allen and Mary Mitchell, rarely questioned the principle that playgrounds were necessary. Instead, they felt that better designed play spaces, particularly those that facilitated child creativity and interaction with nature, were the best way to promote healthy child development within the public realm.

Common to all these reformers of urban childhood was a sense that designated spaces for play were the best solution to creating a child friendly city. They might have differed significantly in the way they imagined playgrounds should be designed and the social function they might perform, but they implicitly agreed that a child friendly city was one where there were segregated spaces for children to play. However, this apparent continuity masks other attempts to adapt the urban environment that were arguably less successful.

4. Jon Winder, 'Revisiting the playground: Charles Wicksteed, play equipment and public spaces for children in early twentieth-century Britain', *Urban History* (online first 2021): 1–18.

Although not widely adopted in Britain, they nonetheless provide useful context for present day debate.

For a handful of local authorities in the mid-twentieth century, creating special places where children could learn the skills required to navigate the wider urban environment was a potential alternative. Rather than assuming that children needed to be entirely segregated from the wider city, attempts were made to create spaces where children could develop the skills needed to survive on the streets. In 1930s Tottenham, north London, park superintendent G.E. Paris created a 'model traffic playground' in Lordship Lane Park. Laid out with a mile of miniature roads, pavements and pedestrian crossings, the traffic playground mimicked the wider urban landscape. Play equipment was positioned so that children had to cross the diminutive roads as they moved from the swing to the slide, while friends in model cars or on bikes emulated the traffic that could be expected beyond the park. As part of a wider drive to educate children in road safety, similar traffic playgrounds were created in Dundee, Scunthorpe and Salford. Such spaces implicitly acknowledged that it was unreasonable to expect children to solely play in the playground, but also recognised that something might be done to prepare children to use the wider city in a safe way. However, while the traffic playground positioned the wider city as a threat, it placed responsibility on children, rather than challenging an increasingly automotive society and its consequences for the use of public space.

In contrast, another approach to creating a more child friendly city, which required adults to adapt their behaviour rather than children, was the contemporaneous campaign for play streets. First promoted in the UK by Salford's Police Chief Constable, Major C.V. Godfrey, a designated play street was closed to motor vehicles after school when children were most likely to be playing outside their homes. By 1929 over one hundred streets had been treated in this way in Salford and in 1938 the Street Playgrounds Act enabled other local authorities to follow suit.⁵ By 1950, seventeen local authorities across the country had also created play streets. Rather than creating remote spaces where children were meant to play, play street advocates acknowledged that it was almost impossible to train young children to safely interact with motor vehicles and that the city needed to be regulated in response. In designating play streets, there was a tacit acknowledgement of children's lived experience and the realities of urban life. But for advocates of the traditional playground, including the interwar National Playing Fields Association and equipment manufacturers, it was 'obvious that it is not desirable to create in the mind of any child the impression that a street is a natural or proper place for play'.⁶ They actively campaigned against the creation of play streets in case it diverted attention or

5. Krista Cowman, 'Play streets: Women, children and the problem of urban traffic, 1930–1970', *Social History* 42 (2017): 233–56.

6. 'The use of closed streets as playgrounds', *Playing Fields Journal* 3 (2)(1935): 35.

resources away from the campaign for increased playground provision. When combined with more significant social changes, which saw an increasingly widespread acceptance that streets were for cars rather than people, the designation and enforcement of play streets declined in importance in the later twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

Today's playground represents the success of a particular vision of children's place in the city, one predicated on the assumption that the problems of the urban environment could be dealt with by creating dedicated and segregated spaces for safe and healthy childhood play. However, implementing this vision came at the expense of making the wider urban environment an inclusive space for children and adults alike. In highlighting just two historic examples of alternative ideas and actions, this essay has sought to show that the playground is far from the natural or only approach to creating child friendly cities. Space limits coverage here, but further examples are evident in, for instance, the experimental design of public space in some British new towns, the writing of post-war anarchists and the work of architect Eldo van Eyck in Amsterdam.

To create playful, healthy and sustainable cities for the twenty-first century, we need to move beyond simply designating specific spaces for children to play. Campaigners and advocates are already promoting more child-centric approaches to urban planning and play streets are once again being promoted in towns and cities across the UK.⁷ These are essential first steps in acknowledging that the playground is not the only – or necessarily the most effective – solution. However, for the time being, the children's playground remains firmly embedded in public space, professional cultures and popular consciousness. If we are to create more inclusive and sustainable urban environments, we need to critically engage with what it means to create child friendly landscapes and move beyond prescriptive approaches to urban play. A greater understanding of the assumptions and values that informed earlier attempts to create public spaces for children is essential in this work.

7. Alice Ferguson, 'Playing out: A grassroots street play revolution', *Cities & Health* 3 (1–2) (2019): 20–28; Tim Gill, *Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities* (London: RIBA, 2021).